



Summer of Play 3-Part Series (Part 3)

BOLD & BRAVE PLAY

RISK, WEAPONS, & DESTRUCTIVE PLAY

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Video

Please review the professional development training video; you will need approximately 60 minutes to complete the training.



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Start



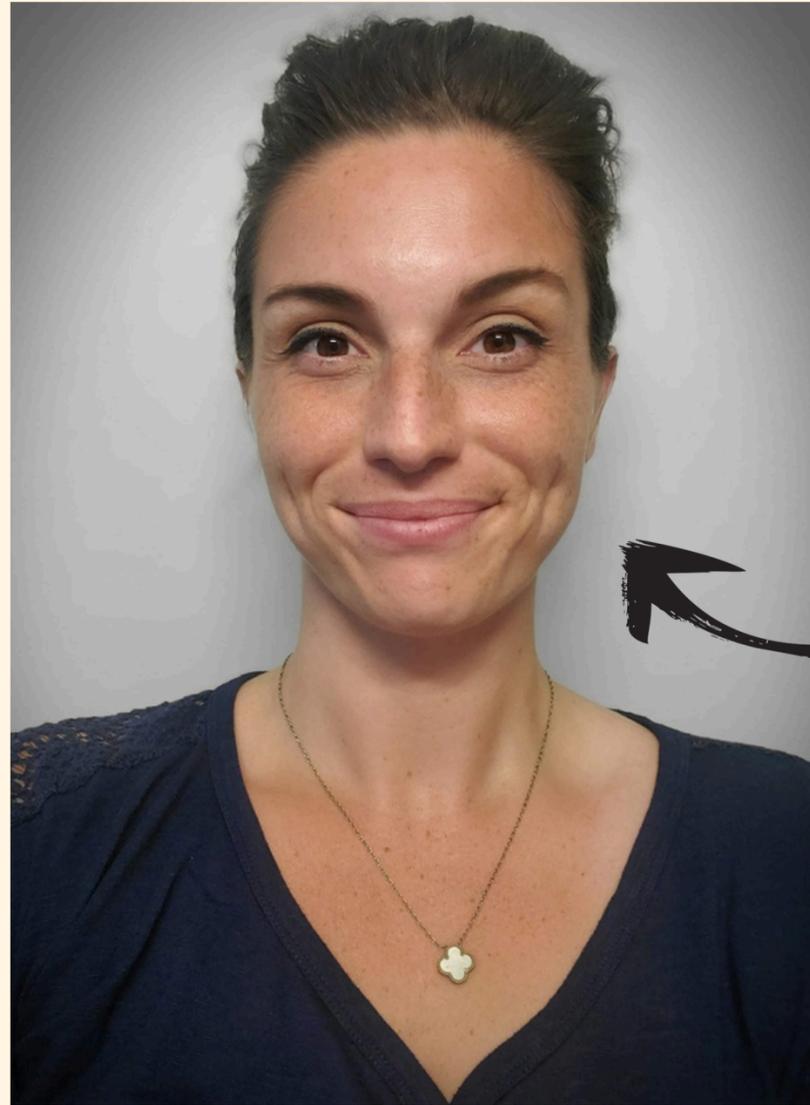
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AND THESE ARE A FEW OF MY FAVORITE THINGS...



THAT'S ME



My web-slinging 6.5 year old daughter



Our cats (Venom & Carnage)

Stephanie Seidler

- Director & Content Creator of WSH
- M.Ed. in School Leadership
- 20+ Years in ECE Field



Creating children's picture books

What is Play?

Play is a self-chosen, self-directed, intrinsically motivated activity through which children explore, experiment, and make sense of the world.

It is a natural and essential way in which children interact with the world, **make sense of their experiences, and develop foundational cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills** (typically utilizing all domains simultaneously).

It's Personalized and Adaptive: Play meets each child exactly where they are developmentally, offering the perfect level of challenge.

It May Look Like:

- **Physical + Sensory** (running, climbing, pouring, squeezing)
- **Creative + Imaginative** (painting, storytelling, pretend play)
- **Cognitive + Social** (building, negotiating roles, problem-solving)

Play is a biological drive (just like sleep or hunger) wired into the brain for survival, adaptation, and long-term well-being. It is the mechanism through which the brain builds intelligence, resilience, and emotional health.



Risky Play

“Risky play can be defined as thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury.” — Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter (2007)

Risk	Hazard
A potential for beneficial challenge that supports growth (confidence, skill, resilience) but carries the chance of a recoverable injury (scrape, fall, mistake, or occasional broken bone).	A hidden, severe, or life-altering danger that can cause harm without offering developmental benefit.
Example: A child climbing a tree—may slip, but gains strength, coordination, and judgment.	Example: A rusted, broken play structure—may collapse, causing serious injury unrelated to learning.
Key Point: Developmental and visible. Adults assess if it's appropriate (height, ground surface, etc.).	Key Point: Unsafe, unpredictable, and often unnoticed. Adults must remove or control it.



Types of Risky Play (Developed by Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter)



Play at Great Heights

Climbing trees, playground structures, ladders, or furniture



Play at High Speed

Running fast, biking, sledding, swinging high



Play with Dangerous Tools

Using hammers, saws, knives, or kitchen tools (with supervision)



Play Near Dangerous Elements

Exploring around water, fire, or rough terrain



Rough-and-Tumble Play

Wrestling, chasing, play fighting, tackling



Play Where Children Can "Disappear"

Hiding, exploring alone or in groups out of direct sight

Benefits of Risky Play

- **Builds body competence:** climbing, balancing, and rough play strengthen muscles, coordination, and motor skills.
- **Wires the brain for judgment:** assessing “how high, how fast, how far” develops decision-making & impulse control.
- **Develops resilience:** falls, scrapes, and even a broken bone teach recovery, adaptability, and grit.
- **Shapes emotional regulation:** managing fear and thrill builds stress tolerance and self-soothing skills.
- **Strengthens social intelligence:** negotiating rough play teaches empathy, reading cues, and conflict resolution.
- **Fuels confidence and self-efficacy:** mastering challenges builds belief in one’s own abilities.
- **Protects mental health:** early risk-taking reduces anxiety and fosters long-term coping strategies.
- **Teaches boundaries:** learning personal limits in play translates to safer risk assessment later in life.





Why Children Need to Fall Down

- **Trains the proprioceptive system (awareness of body position and movement):** The impact of a fall provides feedback to muscles & joints, helping children understand body position, force, & coordination.
- **Strengthens vestibular system (sense of balance & spatial orientation):** Sudden changes in speed, direction, or orientation during a fall refine balance and spatial awareness.
- **Builds resilience:** Falling teaches children that mistakes and setbacks are recoverable, fostering grit and emotional toughness.
- **Improves motor planning:** Experiencing a fall helps children adjust how they move next time, refining judgment and risk assessment.
- **Supports emotional regulation:** Managing the surprise, fear, or frustration of a fall gives practice in calming down and recovering.
- **Develops problem-solving:** Children learn to analyze what led to the fall and strategize safer or more effective approaches.
- **Boosts confidence:** Getting up after a fall shows children they are capable of recovery, which strengthens self-efficacy.
- **Normalizes risk:** Regular exposure to minor falls reduces fear of failure and encourages healthy exploration.

“BE CAREFUL!!!!!!”

Why “Be Careful” Isn’t Helpful...

- **Toovague:** Children don't know what to be careful about (halts action without giving guidance).
- **Creates fear:** Repeated warnings can make children anxious or overly cautious, undermining confidence.
- **Interrupts learning:** Children need to take risks, test limits, and learn from mistakes; constant “be careful” interferes with this process.
- **Shifts focus to danger: Instead of building awareness,** it frames exploration as unsafe, which can reduce curiosity and self-trust.

Constructive Alternatives to “Be Careful”

- “Notice how high you are. What's your next move?”
- “Where could you place your hand for more balance?”
- “How steady is that rock/log under your foot?”
- “Check how close your friend is before you swing.”
- “What's your plan for getting back down?”

These prompts:

- **Build situational awareness (what's around me?).**
- **Encourage self-checks** (how do I feel in my body?).
- **Support problem-solving** (what's my next step?).
- **Reinforce confidence** (I can assess and decide).

Final Pro Tips for Risky Play

- **Guide awareness, not fear:** Use specific prompts instead of “be careful.”
- **Stay calm when they fall:** Overreaction teaches fear; calm builds resilience.
- **Remove hazards, allow risks:** Eliminate hidden dangers but keep visible challenges.
- **Be present, don't hover:** Close enough for safety, far enough for independence.
- **Value effort:** Praise trying and learning, not just success.





Destructive Play

Play in which children intentionally break, tear apart, or knock down objects and materials to explore cause-and-effect, release energy, and learn how things work.

- **Demolition Play:** Collapsing or toppling built structures (block towers, forts, sandcastles) for the thrill of reversal and chain reaction.
- **Deconstruction Play:** Taking apart objects (toys, machines, cardboard creations) to expose inner parts and understand how things come together.
- **Ripping Play:** Shredding, tearing, or breaking apart flexible materials (paper, fabric, leaves) for texture, sound, and release.
- **Impact Play:** Pounding, smashing, or crushing solid matter (ice, clay, etc.) with hands or tools to fragment and transform it.

Destructive play builds strength, problem-solving, cause-and-effect, and emotional regulation while helping children understand how things come apart and, in turn, how they are made.

Creating Space & Opportunity for Destructive Play



Infants (0–12 months)

Purpose: Sensory exploration, cause-and-effect, safe mouthing.

- **Rip & Tear Basket:** Large tissue paper, crepe streamers, & fabric scraps for crumpling, tearing, and dumping.
- **Crunch & Squish Bin:** Edible textures like overcooked pasta, puffed cereal, or soft peas to squeeze, crush, & taste.
- **Paper Crinkle Mat:** A taped-down sheet of butcher paper for crawling, ripping, and crunching sounds.



Toddlers (1-3 years)

Purpose: Whole-body exploration, early tool use, building strength.

- **Box Smash Corner:** Cardboard boxes to stack, climb on, & knock down.
- **Leaf & Stick Crunch Bin:** Natural items like dry leaves, pinecones, & twigs to break & snap.
- **Soft Smash Station:** Playdough or clay to pound, pull apart, & reshape.
- **Ice Smash Bin:** Large ice chunks with spoons or wooden mallets for smashing.
- **Rip & Sort Basket:** Old magazines, cardboard, or fabric swatches to tear or dump out.



Preschoolers (3-6 years)

Purpose: Complex destruction, real tools, responsibility, transformation.

- **Take-Apart Table:** Old toys or electronics with screwdrivers, pliers, & goggles.
- **Hammer & Pound Zone:** Golf tees, clay slabs, or wood offcuts hammered with child-safe mallets.
- **Block Demolition Station:** Build tall towers from blocks or Magna-Tiles to knock down.
- **Smash & Reuse Station:** Breaking dried clay, plaster, or cardboard & reusing fragments in art projects.

Weapon Play

Weapon play is where children use objects (sticks, toy swords, toy guns, or even fingers) to act out stories that involve conflict, protection, and power (it does not suggest play with real weapons).

- **Universal & cross-cultural:** Anthropologists and play researchers consistently document that children across societies create weapon-themed play, even when toy weapons are not provided.
- **Developmentally normal:** Studies distinguish pretend aggression (imaginative, cooperative, negotiated) from real aggression (harmful, coercive). Pretend weapon play is considered a normal aspect of childhood play.
- **Reflections of culture:** Children encounter weapons in stories, media, and daily life (e.g., superheroes, knights, police, hunters), and play is one way they process and make sense of these roles.
- **A tool for meaning-making:** Weapon play gives children a safe, symbolic way to explore themes of power, safety, danger, and justice that they observe in their environment.

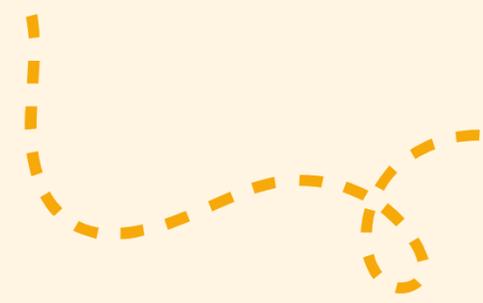


Misconceptions About Weapon Play

- **“Weapon play is violent and harmful”**—Pretend aggression is not real aggression; healthy weapon play is imaginative, cooperative, & consensual.
- **“It normalizes guns and makes children unsafe”** — **Weapon play creates** safe chances to teach empathy, respect, and real-world safety rules.
- **“Children only do weapon play because of media”** — **Weapon play is** universal and cross-cultural; children invent it even without media or toy weapons.
- **“It desensitizes children to harm”** — **Weapon play** involves negotiation, role-switching, and empathy; it builds awareness, not indifference.
- **“With so much gun violence, we shouldn’t allow it”** — **Suppressing** symbolic play doesn’t prevent violence; guided play helps children process and learn responsibility.
- **“Children can learn these skills elsewhere”** — **Other play teaches** cooperation, but weapon play is the channel children often choose to work through power, fear, and justice; banning risks shame and secrecy.



Boundaries with Weapon Play



Clear, minimal rules that keep play safe while preserving imagination:

- **Protect bodies:** No aiming at faces or using hard projectiles.
- **Respect consent:** Everyone must agree to play & stop immediately if someone says stop.
- **Keep it pretend:** No real or lookalike weapons that could cause harm or fear.
- **Safe zones only:** Weapon play stays in agreed spaces with room to move & no fragile items.
- **Adult presence:** Observe nearby and step in if play turns coercive, frightening, or unsafe.

When Weapon Play Is a Cause for Concern:

- Play becomes **aggressive or coercive** (hurting others, ignoring stop signals).
- Scripts are **rigid and repetitive**, focused only on harming without story or negotiation.
- **Other children are consistently scared or excluded** by the play.
- **Play reflects trauma or exposure** (graphic violence, fear of real weapons).

Our worry shouldn't be children pretending with sticks or Lego blasters. Studies show that aggressive behavior in children stems more from environmental factors like stress, trauma, or lack of emotional regulation rather than from engaging in pretend battles. Healthy weapon play often involves cooperation, strategic thinking, & teamwork rather than actual hostility.

Questions? Let's Hear Them!

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NEXT WEBINAR: Loose Parts and Open-ended Materials

When: Wednesday, October 29th (12:00PM EST)

