

We Skoolhouse

The Risk of No “Risky Play”





The Importance of Risky Play in Early Childhood

Risky play is a critical component of early childhood development, offering children the opportunity to explore their physical and emotional limits in a controlled environment. While the term "risky" may evoke concern, it refers to activities that involve a level of uncertainty, challenge, and the possibility of failure, all of which are essential for healthy development. The importance of risky play lies in its ability to foster physical health, emotional resilience, cognitive development, and social skills.



Building Physical Health and Motor Skills

Engaging in risky play allows children to develop their physical abilities. Activities such as climbing trees, balancing on logs, or navigating playground equipment challenge their motor skills, coordination, and strength. These experiences help children learn to assess their physical capabilities, leading to improved balance, agility, and overall physical health. Through trial and error, they gain confidence in their bodies' abilities, which is crucial for lifelong physical activity.

Promoting Emotional Resilience

Risky play is instrumental in helping children develop emotional resilience. By encountering and managing risks, children learn to cope with fear, frustration, and uncertainty. These experiences teach them that setbacks are a natural part of life and that they can recover from them. This process of facing challenges and overcoming them builds emotional strength, self-regulation, and the ability to handle stress, which are essential for mental well-being.

Enhancing Cognitive Development

Cognitive growth is another significant benefit of risky play. When children engage in activities that involve problem-solving, decision-making, and risk assessment, they sharpen their cognitive abilities. They learn to evaluate potential outcomes, weigh risks against rewards, and make informed choices. This kind of critical thinking is foundational for academic learning and decision-making in everyday life.

Fostering Social Skills and Collaboration

Risky play often occurs in social settings, where children interact with their peers. These interactions provide opportunities for children to negotiate, take turns, share ideas, and collaborate on problem-solving. Through these social exchanges, they develop communication skills, empathy, and the ability to work as part of a team. Risky play also helps children understand social boundaries and build trust with their peers.

Encouraging Independence and Risk Management

One of the key aspects of risky play is that it encourages children to take responsibility for their actions. As they engage in activities with inherent risks, they learn to assess situations independently and manage those risks. This autonomy fosters a sense of competence and self-efficacy, empowering children to make decisions and take calculated risks in other areas of their lives.



Risky Play: A Necessity for Healthy Social Emotional Development

Building Emotional Resilience

Risky play helps children encounter and manage emotions like fear, frustration, and excitement in a safe context. By navigating these emotional experiences, they build resilience, learning to bounce back from setbacks and adapt to new challenges.

Developing Self-Regulation

Through risky play, children practice self-regulation by managing their impulses and emotions. They learn when to take a step back, assess a situation, and control their reactions, which is essential for emotional maturity and social interactions.

Fostering Confidence and Independence

Engaging in risky play allows children to test their limits and achieve goals independently, fostering self-confidence. This confidence translates into better social interactions, as they feel more secure in their abilities and less reliant on others for validation.

Enhancing Social Skills and Cooperation

Risky play often involves group activities where children must negotiate, share, and cooperate with peers. These interactions build essential social skills, including communication, empathy, and teamwork, which are crucial for forming healthy relationships.

Encouraging Empathy and Understanding

When children engage in risky play with others, they learn to recognize and respond to the emotions of their peers. This experience promotes empathy and an understanding of different perspectives, enhancing their ability to connect with others on an emotional level.



Healthy Risks vs. Hazards

Understanding the difference between healthy risks and hazards is crucial in creating a safe yet challenging environment for children. Healthy risks are activities that allow children to test their limits and develop critical skills, while hazards are dangers that are hidden or unmanaged and could cause harm without offering developmental benefits. Below is a chart that differentiates between healthy risks and hazards, including examples for each.

Category	Healthy Risks	Hazards
Definition	Opportunities for children to test their abilities and learn to manage risks safely. These are challenges that are visible, manageable, and offer developmental benefits.	Dangers that pose a threat to a child's safety without their awareness. Hazards are hidden, unintentional, and do not offer any benefit to the child's development.
Example 1	Climbing a Tree: Children develop balance, strength, and problem-solving skills as they decide how high to climb and branches to use.	Rotting or Weak Branches: A hidden hazard where branches may break unexpectedly, causing a fall.
Example 2	Exploring Water Puddles: Splashing in puddles can help children understand water dynamics and improve their motor skills.	Deep, Unsupervised Water: A hazard where children might fall in and be unable to stand up, leading to a risk of drowning.
Example 3	Using Child-Safe Tools (Hammers, Saws): Teaches fine motor skills, focus, and how to use tools responsibly under supervision.	Rusty or Sharp Objects Lying Around: Pose a risk of injury or infection if children accidentally come into contact with them.
Example 4	Running on Playground Equipment: Helps children develop agility, speed, and coordination as they navigate different surfaces and obstacles.	Broken Playground Equipment: Could lead to injuries from sharp edges, unstable structures, or exposed nails.
Example 5	Climbing High on Playground Structures: Children build confidence and physical strength by deciding how high to climb, learning to assess their own limits.	Loose or Unstable Structures: A hidden hazard where the structure may collapse or tip over, causing injury.
Example 6	Cooking with Supervision: Using safe kitchen tools (like plastic knives) allows children to learn about food preparation, measurement, and safety in the kitchen.	Hot Stoves or Boiling Water: Poses a serious burn hazard, especially if a child doesn't understand the danger or is unsupervised.
Example 7	Building Forts with Loose Parts: Encourages creativity and engineering skills as children decide how to stack and connect materials.	Heavy or Unstable Objects: Large or unsteady materials that could fall or tip over, causing injury.
Example 8	Jumping from Various Heights: Teaches children to gauge distances and control their bodies when landing, building strength and spatial awareness.	Surfaces Covered with Sharp Objects: A hidden hazard where children could get cut or punctured when landing.

8 Types of Risky Play

There are eight key types of risky play that contribute significantly to a child's development: **Heights, Speed, Physical Play with Others, Tools, Dangerous Elements, Exploring Unknown Spaces, High-Energy Play**, and **Independence**.

Each of these types of play introduces children to different forms of challenges and risks, encouraging them to step out of their comfort zones and develop essential life skills. For example, playing at heights helps children overcome fears and develop spatial awareness, while high-speed play teaches them to gauge their physical limits and reaction times. Engaging with tools fosters fine motor skills and responsible behavior, and exploring unknown spaces cultivates curiosity and problem-solving abilities. Through these varied experiences, children learn to navigate risks, make informed decisions, and build the confidence that will help them tackle future challenges.



Heights: Climbing trees, playground equipment, or any elevated structure allows children to experience the thrill of being high off the ground. This type of play teaches them to judge distances, assess their physical limits, and develop coordination while understanding the consequences of falling.

Speed: Activities like running, biking, or swinging fast expose children to the exhilarating sensation of moving quickly. As they manage their speed, they learn to balance, control their bodies, and anticipate outcomes, reducing the risk of accidents.





Physical Play with Others: Rough-and-tumble play, such as wrestling or play-fighting, involves physical contact that can sometimes lead to minor injuries. Through this play, children learn about personal space, social boundaries, and the importance of empathy and cooperation, all while building physical strength and resilience.

Tools: Using real tools, like hammers, saws, or knives under supervision, involves handling objects that could potentially cause injury. This type of play encourages responsibility, fine motor skill development, and an understanding of how to use tools safely and effectively.



Dangerous Elements: Playing near potentially hazardous environments, such as water bodies, fires, or sharp objects, introduces children to natural elements that require caution. They learn about the power and danger of these elements, as well as how to respect and interact with them safely.

Exploring Unknown Spaces:

Venturing into unfamiliar or secluded areas, like forests, caves, or abandoned buildings, presents the risk of getting lost or encountering unforeseen challenges. This kind of exploration fosters curiosity, problem-solving, and the ability to navigate and adapt to new environments.



High-Energy Play: Engaging in activities that require intense physical exertion, such as jumping from heights, playing chase, or skipping ropes, might lead to falls or collisions. However, these activities build physical endurance, agility, and the ability to recover from minor setbacks.

Independence: Playing alone without adult supervision, whether in a familiar or new setting, carries the risk of loneliness or making mistakes without immediate adult intervention. This type of play empowers children to make decisions, take responsibility for their actions, and develop self-reliance.



Risky Play: Infants



- **Provide Safe Spaces:** Create a “yes” space where infants can explore freely without constant intervention. Ensure the environment is padded and has age-appropriate equipment.
- **Encourage Exploration:** Allow infants to experiment with various textures, heights, and physical challenges under supervision.
- **Observe and Support:** Watch how infants interact with their environment and offer gentle encouragement to help them test their limits safely.
- **Offer Varied Experiences:** Use diverse play materials and experiences to build confidence and physical skills.

What to Do	What Not to Do
Create a “Yes” Space: Designate areas where the infant can explore and engage with materials safely.	Avoid Restrictive Environments: Don't create overly controlled spaces where exploration is limited.
Supervise Closely: Keep an eye on your infant while they explore to ensure safety.	Don't Leave Unattended: Never leave an infant alone.
Encourage Exploration: Allow them to try new things with guidance (when necessary).	Don't Restrict Play: Don't overly limit their exploration due to fear of minor risks.
Provide Soft Obstacles: Use soft blocks or cushions for climbing and exploring.	Don't Use Hard or Sharp Objects: Avoid using objects that could cause injury if they fall or collide with them.
Support Problem-Solving: Let infants figure out how to navigate challenges.	Don't Solve Everything for Them: Avoid intervening too quickly; allow them to work through challenges.
Offer Varied Sensory Experiences: Provide different textures, sounds, and movements.	Don't Overstimulate: Avoid overwhelming them with too many stimuli at once.
Let Them Independently Cruise: Allow infants to cruise and explore on their own without constantly holding them.	Don't Always Hold Them/ Their Hands: Avoid restricting movement by always holding them; let them build confidence in their movements.
Minimize Reactions to Falls: Don't make a big reaction when they fall; let them process the experience and continue moving forward. Only intervene if they are truly hurt and need care.	Don't Overreact to Falls: Avoid showing distress or making a big deal when they fall; focus on helping them if they are hurt, not on their minor tumbles.



Risky Play Materials for Infants

- Soft Foam Blocks: For climbing and building.
- Textured Mats: To explore different sensations.
- Fabric Tunnels: For crawling and exploration.
- Large Soft Cushions: To climb over and jump onto.
- Stackable Cups and Rings: For problem-solving and fine motor skills.
- Water Tables: For sensory exploration and manipulation.
- Pull and Push Toys: To encourage movement and coordination.
- Sensory Bins: Filled with rice, beans, or sand for tactile play.
- Bouncy Balls: For motor skill development and coordination.
- Unstructured Loose Parts: Such as wooden spoons, cardboard tubes, and fabric scraps for open-ended play.
- Outdoor Materials: Tires, logs, and other natural elements for climbing, balancing, and exploring.

Risky Play: **Toddlers**



- **Provide Safe Spaces:** Create engaging, multi-functional play areas with more complex elements. Include climbing structures, balance beams, and interactive play stations.
- **Encourage Exploration:** Offer activities that involve higher levels of physical challenge and problem-solving. Allow toddlers to engage in more adventurous play, like navigating small obstacle courses or using simple tools.
- **Observe and Support:** While supervising closely, give toddlers the autonomy to take risks and explore. Provide support and encouragement while allowing them to lead their play experiences.

What to Do	What Not to Do
Encourage Independent Play: Allow toddlers to explore and engage with challenging activities with minimal intervention.	Don't Hover Constantly: Avoid hovering excessively or interfering too much; give them space to navigate and explore independently.
Promote Independent Movement: Allow toddlers to navigate and move through play spaces on their own, fostering independence and physical development.	Don't Constantly Hold Them or Their Hands: Give them the freedom to practice walking, climbing, running, and balancing independently, without always holding or guiding them.
Minimize Reactions to Falls and Mishaps: Keep reactions to falls and minor accidents subdued; let them process these experiences and get back to playing. Step in only if they need care.	Don't Overreact to Minor Falls: Avoid making a big deal out of falls or mishaps; offer comfort and care only if needed and maintain a calm demeanor.
Avoid Using "Be Careful": Instead of saying "be careful," provide specific guidance and encourage them to think through their actions.	Don't Use General Warnings: Avoid using vague warnings like "be careful" which can create anxiety or distract from learning. Provide clear instructions instead (e.g. "the floor is slippery over here.")
Encourage Risk-Taking: Support their attempts to try new activities and challenge themselves, fostering confidence and resilience.	Don't Discourage Exploration: Avoid discouraging them from trying new things due to fear of failure, minor risks, or getting messy. Encourage a positive attitude towards risk-taking.
Adjust Activities to Their Development: Tailor play activities to match their evolving skills and interests, providing appropriate levels of challenge.	Don't Set Unrealistic Expectations: Avoid setting up activities that are beyond their current abilities, which may lead to frustration or accidents.



Risky Play Materials for **Toddlers**

- Climbing Structures: Age-appropriate climbing equipment with varying heights and challenges.
- Balance Beams: Low and wide beams for balance practice and coordination.
- Obstacle Courses: Interactive courses with elements for climbing, crawling, and jumping.
- Soft Foam Blocks: For building, climbing, and creative play.
- Textured Mats: For sensory exploration and safe landings.
- Interactive Sensory Panels: For engaging various senses and problem-solving.
- Water Play Tables: For tactile exploration and manipulation.
- Pull and Push Toys: To support movement and stability.
- Sensory Bins: Filled with materials like rice, beans, or sand for tactile play.
- Outdoor Materials: Tires, logs, and other natural elements for climbing, balancing, and exploring.

Risky Play: Preschoolers

- **Foster Child-Led Play:** Encourage preschoolers to take the lead in their play, especially in natural settings. Allow them to explore, create, and experiment with minimal adult intervention, trusting their instincts and decision-making.
- **Allow Free Exploration on Playgrounds:** At playgrounds, resist the urge to restrict their activities. Let them run, climb, and test their limits. Encourage them to assess their own capabilities, experiment with heights, and take risks, which builds confidence and physical literacy.
- **Promote Independent Risk Assessment:** Guide children in understanding and evaluating risks by allowing them to make their own choices about what feels safe. Offer support when needed, but allow them the space to learn through experience.



What to Do	What Not to Do
Foster Child-Led Play: Allow preschoolers to take the lead, particularly in nature. Encourage them to explore, create, and engage in play that they direct themselves.	Don't Over-Structure Play: Avoid dictating how they should play or limiting their exploration. Allow them to follow their instincts and interests.
Allow Free Exploration at Playgrounds & Out in Nature: Let children run, climb, and experiment with the world around them. Encourage them to test their limits and assess their own capabilities.	Don't Restrict Movement: Avoid telling them to walk instead of run or not climb "too high." Trust their ability to judge what feels safe and appropriate.
Promote Independent Risk Assessment: Guide them in evaluating risks but let them make their own choices. This encourages critical thinking and self-confidence.	Don't Intervene Prematurely: Avoid stepping in too quickly when they take risks. Allow them to navigate challenges and learn from their experiences.
Minimize Reactions to Minor Injuries: Stay calm and let them assess how they feel after minor falls or mishaps. Encourage them to decide if they're ready to continue playing.	Don't Overreact to Falls: Avoid making a big deal out of minor injuries; this can create unnecessary fear and hesitation.
Avoid Using "Be Careful": Instead of saying "be careful," provide specific guidance and encourage them to think through their actions. Focus on positive reinforcement and problem-solving.	Don't Use Vague Warnings: Avoid using general warnings like "be careful" that can create anxiety or inhibit exploration. Provide clear, supportive instructions instead (e.g. how will you move around the slippery patch of water over there?)



Risky Play Materials for Preschoolers

- Natural Climbing Elements and Materials: Trees, large rocks, stones, and natural formations for climbing and exploring.
- High Climbing Structures: Playground equipment that offers varying heights and challenges for climbing, such as rope ladders and climbing walls.
- Outdoor Tool Sets: Safe, child-friendly tools for interacting with the natural environment, like hammers, screwdrivers, hand drills, and saws for woodworking.
- Kitchen Tools: Child-safe kitchen utensils like knives, whisks, rolling pins, cookie cutters, and small wooden spoons for activities like mud kitchen play or pretend cooking with natural ingredients like leaves and flowers.
- Interactive Water Play Areas: Streams, puddles, or water tables that allow for exploration and sensory play, with tools like sieves, buckets, and small spades .
- Sand and Mud Play Areas: Encourage digging, building, and creative play with sand and mud, using tools like trowels, molds, and child-sized shovels.



3 Notable Studies on Risky Play

- Brussoni, M., Olsen, L. L., Pike, I., & Sleet, D. A. (2012). "Risky play and children's safety: Balancing priorities for optimal child development." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 9(9), 3134-3148.
 - Summary: This study discusses how risky play is essential for children's development, particularly in promoting physical health, emotional resilience, and social skills. The researchers argue that overly protective environments may hinder children's ability to learn risk management and develop confidence in their physical abilities.
- Little, H., Wyver, S., & Gibson, F. (2011). "The influence of play context and adult attitudes on young children's physical risk-taking during outdoor play." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19(1), 113-131.
 - Summary: This study explores the relationship between play environments, adult attitudes, and children's risk-taking behaviors. It found that supportive and positive adult attitudes towards risky play significantly enhance children's engagement in physical risk-taking, leading to better motor skills and problem-solving abilities.
- Søndergaard, K., & Eriksen, K. (2013). "Risky play in education and care: Children's participation and adult supervision." *Nordic Journal of Educational Studies*, 34(2), 149-161.
 - Summary: This study highlights the importance of risky play in educational settings, emphasizing that when adults provide the right balance of supervision and freedom, children can safely explore their limits. The findings suggest that risky play fosters independence, risk management skills, and self-regulation.



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