



The Importance of Risky Play

Risky play is a natural element of human development and is essential for a child's overall development and wellbeing. It is a key part in the fabric of a well-rounded childhood.

Taking risks is innate, it comes from within us all. We are born with it, and children start taking risks when they are babies; when they reach for something, start to roll, crawl, walk, run, and play. Even when they start to mimic our voices and sounds around them, they are taking a risk.

When we look at hunter-gather and Inuit communities the literature often talks about children's instincts and judgment being trusted.[1] It is not uncommon to hear stories of pre-schoolers playing with knives, poking fires or heading out foraging for mushrooms without adults.[2] Maybe western society was like this some time ago too.

Over the past few decades, there have been changes in attitudes toward risky play, which have possibly been influenced by the **Health & Safety culture** that seems to permeate so much nowadays. However this has come about, these changes have impacted how children approach play and risk-taking, which in turn impacts their confidence, physical development and overall wellbeing.

WHAT IS RISKY PLAY?

Risky play is about challenging oneself, exploring something in a new way, or learning more about managing one's safety.

Ellen Sandsetter who is a professor at Queen Maud University College describes risky play as a thrilling and exciting form of physical play that involves uncertainty, and the risk of physical injury.

THE 8 ELEMENTS OF RISKY PLAY

Ellen Sandsetter's research originally identified six elements of risky play and in 2019 two additional elements were added: heights, speed, elements (earth, water, air and fire), tools, rough and tumble, getting lost/hiding, vicarious and play with impact.[3]

Each of these elements means different things depending on the age and stage of the child. For a 2-year-old who has just learned to climb, standing on top of a log round could be risky, whereas a 4-year-old who has been climbing for a while might think being high is a couple of metres up a tree. Equally 1 metre up a tree to a 6-year-old who doesn't have much experience climbing or feels really scared, could be a great height for them.

The 8 elements are all relative to the child and what is in and out of their comfort zone at the time. This comes from their experiences to date, and as they have more experiences their comfort zone will expand.

Let's look at each of the 8 elements.

Heights

This is where children find opportunities to get up high. They will likely climb and when there might swing, jump, hang or just chill. They will use logs, trees, swings, tree huts, forts and even climbing up a hill could meet this need.



Heights help children to build their confidence and understanding of their own physical capabilities, and how their own body responds and the feelings that follow, when faced with a challenging situation...AKA emotional intelligence.

Speed

Children find opportunities to go fast. They might run, bike, scooter, skate, swing, slide, roll and spin. Moving at rapid speeds helps children understand how to use their bodies, stabilise themselves and they are learning about special awareness in time.

As with most of these elements, rapid speed for a child looks different from rapid speed for an adult.

Elements

Children engage with the four elements of earth, water, air and fire. For it to be classed as risky play it would include an element of danger e.g. deep mud and getting stuck, a rope swing going really high, being near a fire or playing in or near, flat or moving water, where there is a chance they might fall in. Children start to understand the environmental elements and face their fears, thus building resilience.

Tools

Children find opportunities to use real tools. Sandsetter refers to them as dangerous tools, but I prefer to use the term 'tools' as while there is potential for harm, many can be used everyday. Things like knives, saws, hammers, axes, power tools and rope. Using real tools builds confidence, develops skills and offers mastery. When we master skills it can help strengthen our sense of belonging.

Rough and Tumble

Children seek opportunities to get physical with others. This could be play fighting, rolling around, stick fights, wrestling, chasing and sometimes a bit of tickling thrown in for good measure.

Rough and tumble gives children a chance to get physical, explore how their body moves, understand consent, and to develop social skills and better understand facial observation as a form of communication.

Hiding Places / Getting Lost

Being able to hide and get lost is wonderful for children. This could be in a hut, behind a tree, in the bushes or under a rug. Whether it's alone or being with others it gives a feeling of excitement and fear which is what we can feel when we are outside our comfort zone. Having these feelings helps develop an understanding of how our body responds in challenging situations and is ultimately helping to build resilience. Children seek opportunities to play and explore unfamiliar spaces either alone or in small groups. Disappearing or getting lost offers a temporary scary thrill.

Vicarious

Children observe others engaging in risky play when they're climbing, swinging, hiding, or rough and tumbling. This can provide similar feelings of taking a risk without actually taking it. Humans learn a lot through observation and through retelling stories. This type of risky play should not be underestimated.

Impact

Children seek opportunities to play with impact. This can be with other children, riding bikes or scooters into barriers or running and jumping into bushes. Impact play offers further understanding and awareness of their own bodies and can help with social development and understanding consent.



WHY IS RISKY PLAY SO IMPORTANT?

Risky play allows children to engage in age-appropriate activities, giving them a better understanding of their potential and limitations. It builds confidence, develops their problem-solving skills, decision making and helps them to understand what they are physically capable of.[4] For example, a 2-year-old child I was observing at **Bush Kindy** had been trying for weeks to climb up a man-made ladder to a tree hut. I had watched her persevere each week getting one rung higher each time.

After weeks of practice, she got to the top and onto the platform. She persisted and motivated herself to keep trying each week. She stayed focused and it was a privilege to watch. She was so proud of herself and what she achieved.

In addition to the above benefits, when children engage in risky play with others, we see cooperation, communication, teamwork, more creativity and social skill development.[5]

Life is full of risks. By providing children with opportunities to take risks or challenge themselves we help them develop these essential life skills. These skills are not just relevant to those physical risks but apply when making decisions later in life and dealing with the many challenges that life will throw their way.

If children are **restricted in their risky play** then it can get deferred to when they are older and may not have an adult around to guide them – and then the risks can be very real and dangerous.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Something we often don't think about when we think of risky play is the emotional intelligence that is developing when children are faced with these challenges.

When a child is challenged or operating outside their comfort zone different feelings will occur. These feelings may be new or not so well known and by repeatedly challenging themselves they figure out how to manage those feelings. Eventually, the challenge becomes easier and will sit inside their comfort zone.

They will also start to recognise over time (and often it is subconscious) that these feelings are associated with something that is both challenging and also achievable.

They may have another experience where they pushed themselves too far and it may have felt really scary and not something they want to experience again. Being able to differentiate between these two is a great outcome of childhood!

Subconsciously through these 'outside the comfort zone' experiences, they are learning about their body's emotions, how they feel inside when these emotions come about and how they respond to them. They figure out how to deal with their big feelings and regulate themselves to deal with the challenging situation.

Over time they can transfer this knowledge to other challenging situations where they must manage their emotions and persist through a different challenge situation.

Through these physical and emotional experiences, they are developing the foundations of resilience.

RESILIENCE

When talking about risky play you will often hear the words **resilience** or emotional resilience, which can be defined as the ability to bounce back from difficult events or situations.



I observed this with a group of children who were having a go on a slackline (two ropes tied between trees) which had been set up at Bush Kindy. Most of the older children could pull themselves up except for one boy who was about 5 years old at the time...who I'll call 'Jimmy'.

When Jimmy had a go he was unable to pull himself up to get onto the slackline. It was difficult for him. So, his mum lifted him up and held him as he traversed across. When he got down, I quietly suggested his mum take a step back and let him have a go by himself. She trusted what I was saying and stepped back. Jimmy called for his mum, and she remained back giving him some moral support from a distance.

Jimmy couldn't pull himself up. He tried and got frustrated. A couple of the other children who had already mastered it heard his frustration and came over. They showed him how to do it. He watched and observed what they were doing to get themselves up and he tried again.

When he still couldn't do it, they gave him a push-up from behind. Now he was on the slackline but it felt a little scary for him, so he stepped down.

Progressively over the next couple of hours, Jimmy persisted with the slackline even though he was still finding it tough.

His persistence and perseverance paid off and by the end of the morning, he had figured out how to get himself up without a push and he was able to traverse the slackline to the other side all by himself.

The smile on his face as he did it himself was so big and I could see he felt as proud as punch of what he had achieved.

Now imagine if mum had continued to lift him up and hold him there. We wouldn't have seen that transformation, the confidence, that determination and the problem-solving that he demonstrated. Oh and his huge smile!

Being able to overcome something that is difficult and persist is one element of what helps lay good foundations of resilience.

WHAT RISKY PLAY IS NOT

There is a difference between risky play and reckless or dangerous play. When engaging in risky play we are taking a step outside our comfort zone into a place where we can learn more about ourselves and what we are capable of, this can be called the learning zone.

Reckless play is play where there is potential for significant harm, it is dangerous and we are not having a positive learning experience. This danger zone is beyond the learning zone. Something that can help us to differentiate these is to understand the difference between learning injuries and life-altering injuries.

Learning injuries are things like cuts, bruises, grazes, bumps and even a simple broken bone. These are a normal part of children's play and should be expected.

When children are engaging in risky play they will go home with bumps, cuts, scratches and bruises. These are called learning injuries, they are a normal part of childhood and should be expected.



A life-altering injury is where there is potential for significant harm, for example, a fall from a great height, strangulation or drowning. We don't want these!

Our role as the adult is to help prevent these kinds of injuries. The way we do this is to support younger children when it comes to hidden hazards ie: hazards children might not be able to see such as a big pile of rocks under the tree they are climbing or a deep pool in the stream they are playing in.

Children are good at knowing their limits. They know when they are too scared to go any further and when they need to come down or when they can go higher. They can assess their own capabilities, but they can't always see the hidden hazards. So, this is our key role in young children's risky play.

HOW TO SUPPORT RISKY PLAY

Risk-Benefit Assessment

Often we can focus on the risks that exist. These are good to be aware of and they can be balanced out when we hold the benefits up alongside them too. If we decide not to have a fire because it's dangerous, but we don't consider the benefits of having a fire and the skills that can be learned, then it isn't a **balanced assessment**. [6]

If the benefits outweigh the risks then we may need to add in some controls to reduce the risks that were identified. Ultimately it should go ahead as the potential for learning is greater than the risks.

Environment Outside

Having your outdoor environment set up for creative risky play is key. You can think about the first six elements of risky play and reflect on how well these are catered from in your outdoor environment and make a plan from there.

Risk Profile

Become aware of your risk profile. Are you more risk-averse or more of a risk-taker? There is no right or wrong answer here as we are who we are from the experiences we have been exposed to during our life. Our risk profile can change depending on the situation too!

This awareness is the first step in understanding how we respond when our children are engaging in risky play and we can then ask ourselves 'is my attitude to risk in this situation helping or hindering the children's play?'

Curiosity

This is two-fold. First, be curious when talking about risk-taking with children. Ask questions that get them to think about the risk and/or how to solve the problem. Second, enable children to be curious about their abilities. Provide opportunities for them to see what they are truly capable of.

Nature provides children with age-appropriate risky play opportunities which allow them to understand their limitations, develop their problem-solving skills, and teach them to overcome fears and anxieties. Additionally, it boosts confidence and self-esteem by putting themselves outside their comfort zone and doing things they thought they might not be able to do. They become more resilient. [7]

LET THEM PLAY

Let them get dirty, **climb a tree**, play with fire, walk barefooted, use real tools, build huts in the woods and jump off a swing. Let them persist, fail and succeed. Let them fall and get up again. Let



them take risks, problem solve and figure it out. Because if you don't let them experience risk, then who will?

Risk-taking is not something that we need to teach young children, it is something they are born with. They thrive on it. Our role is to provide space, time and the right environment for children to play in the ways they developmentally need to. So let them be children and take risks in their play, starting today.

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