Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

Risky play and the outdoors

by Helen Little

Outdoor environments provide a space where children can engage in physically challenging, potentially risky experiences that take them out of their 'comfort zone'. The risks and challenges of being outdoors also provide rich opportunities for learning and problem-solving. In this context, children continually test the limits of their physical, intellectual, social and emotional development **(Little & Wyver, 2008).**

What is risky play?

Risky play involves thrilling, exciting and physically challenging activities like climbing, jumping, balancing or rough-and-tumble play. These activities provide a sense of fun, enjoyment and excitement, and children thrive on them.

The word 'risk' is often associated with negative outcomes, but in terms of children's play, it's important to understand that risky play is not about children engaging in unsafe, reckless behaviour or being pushed beyond their abilities. Instead, we need to think about it as the desire to try something new or difficult, accompanied by the uncertainty of whether or not we will be successful.

The key elements of risky play include trying something new, potentially feeling almost out of control (perhaps due to height or speed), experiencing exhilaration and fear at the same time, and overcoming the fear to achieve success (Stephenson, 2003). Risky play can have many forms, but the essence of each form is giving children the space to build confidence, explore their environment, find out what happens and test their skills on their own terms. Children are usually aware of their own skill level and competence, often increasing the risk or 'scariness' to set themselves additional challenges (Stephenson, 2003).

Why is risky play important for children's learning and development?

Risky play has various learning and development benefits for children. The physical motions required for many of these play experiences help children acquire, and ultimately master, fundamental movement skills—such as running, jumping, kicking, balancing—that help develop muscle and skeletal strength, motor fitness and endurance.

Everyday Learning Series
Volume 17, Number 3, 2019

Risky play also helps in the development of perceptual abilities—depth, shape, size, movement perception—and general spatial-orientation abilities. Once children gain mastery over a challenging physical task, they feel a sense of success, which then increases their confidence, competence and self-esteem. This further encourages them to seek new challenges and learn new skills.

Risky play presents children with experiences that help them develop risk-assessment skills. It prompts them to make instant decisions and take responsibility for their actions. It also helps them experience the emotions of both exhilaration and fear (Sandseter, 2009). Learning to deal with these emotions as well as persisting with a difficult task, coping with frustrations and unexpected outcomes supports children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Environments that support risky play

The features and qualities of the play environment influence the nature and extent of children's risky play. Children need to be in natural environments where they can scramble over rocks, roll down mounds or jump off logs. If they don't have access to these environments, they don't get the chance to learn these skills.

Climbing trees also provides a different experience. Manufactured climbing equipment has a uniformity that doesn't exist in the natural world. Climbing trees requires children to be aware of body positioning and orientation, as well as problem-solve by deciding the best (and safest) routes to take.

Building supportive relationships

Central to children's willingness to engage in risky play and push themselves beyond their comfort zone is an encouraging environment and supportive adults. Having supportive relationships with adults enables children to gain confidence, learn new things, work through challenges and take calculated risks. So, for supporting risks and challenges outdoors parents must:

- have realistic but high expectations of children's capabilities, and make decisions about when to stand back or when to intervene
- build a positive outlook towards challenge and uncertainty
- help children gradually take responsibility for their own safety by giving clear information about the hazards or risks that children need to be aware of
- teach children skills that will help them do things safely.

Developing a language to talk about risk and safety

Often, parents will tell children to 'be careful' without specifying what they need to be careful of. Here are some things you can say instead of 'be careful':

- Stay focused on what you're doing.
- Notice how these rocks are slippery/that branch is stronger/the roots are sticking up under that tree.
- Take your time. Try moving your feet carefully/quickly/in this direction.
- Make sure that branch is strong enough before you try to climb it.
- Do you feel like you are stable/balanced/safe?
- Is the pathway clear?
- What's your plan for that big stick/if you cross that log?
- How will you go up/get down/get across?
- That log looks really heavy. Can you manage it by yourself or do you need my help?

References

Little, H., & Wyver, S. (2008). Outdoor play: Does avoiding the risks reduce the benefits? *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 33*(2), 33–40.

Sandseter, E.B. (2009). Children's expressions of exhilaration and fear in risky play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 10*(2), 92–106.

Stephenson, A. (2003). Physical risk-taking: Dangerous or endangered? *Early Years: An International Research Journal, 23*(1), 35–43.