

# Promoting children's risky play in outdoor learning environments



ECE resources

In recent years there has been growing concern about children's access to outdoor play, particularly the extent to which an over-emphasis on safety and general risk-aversion has impacted many childhood play experiences that previous generations took for granted<sup>1</sup>. Today's parents, uncertain as to how they will be perceived by others, may err on the side of caution rather than risk<sup>2</sup>. Teachers, in turn, may limit children's access to risk-taking opportunities citing their 'duty of care', fearing they could be blamed should injuries occur (no matter how minor); some simply prefer not to take a chance<sup>3</sup>. However, children need to take risks in the context of play to promote their learning and development. The risks and challenges of being **outdoors** provide rich opportunities for learning and problem-solving. In this context, children are drawn to experiences that allow them to test the limits of their physical, intellectual and emotional development<sup>4</sup>.

In recognition of the benefits of this type of play, Canadian researchers and play advocacy organisations recently developed a Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play, which advocates that:

Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children's opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings—at home, at school, in childcare, the community and nature<sup>5</sup>.

## What is risky play?

Children thrive on **risky play**. By risky play, we don't mean engaging in dangerous and reckless behaviour or pushing children beyond their abilities or playing in hazardous areas. Rather, risky play refers to play that involves thrilling, exciting, physically challenging activities like climbing, jumping, balancing, or rough and tumble play, as well as hiding or seclusion from the constant surveillance of adults. These activities provide a sense of fun, enjoyment and exhilaration. From a child's perspective, risky play is really just play and part of the natural progression in their learning as they try new things, challenge themselves and extend their skills by moving out of their comfort zone to push the limits of their current capabilities. The risk part is really more about how adults feel about it and their (often over-protective) desire to keep children safe.

## What are the characteristics of risky play?

Alison Stephenson's<sup>6</sup> observations of children's outdoor play revealed their attraction to experiences such as riding bikes very fast, climbing around the outside of the fort structure of the fixed play equipment, running across the obstacle course, and swinging very high. These play behaviours reflected children's noticeable desire to physically challenge themselves and extend their skills. A key element of this type of risky play involves attempting something never done before, potentially feeling on the borderline of being out of control (perhaps due to height or speed), experiencing the concurrent feelings of exhilaration and fear, and consequently overcoming fear to achieve success<sup>6</sup>. In these situations, the children appeared very aware of their own skill level and competence, often increasing the risk or 'scariness' to set themselves additional challenges.

Risky play can have many different forms but ultimately it is about giving children the space to build confidence and test their capabilities on their own terms. Ellen Beate Sandseter<sup>7</sup> identified six categories of risky play, and the behaviours that distinguish each type of play:

- Play with **heights** (where there is a risk of falling).
- Play with high **speed** (situations involving uncontrolled speed and pace potentially leading to collision with people or objects).
- Play with dangerous **tools** (where there is a risk of injury).
- Play near **dangerous elements** (involving the possibility of falling into or from something).
- **Rough and tumble** play (where children can harm each other).
- Play where children can hide or be **out of the sight of adults**.

Later research<sup>8</sup> exploring this type of play in younger children identified further categories that reflect the play of 1-3 year old children, recognising that the equipment and environments typically provided for children of this age may result in limited exposure to the objective risk categories described above, with children mainly experiencing subjective risk. These include:

- Playing with **impact** (children throwing themselves onto mattresses/cushions or crashing bikes into walls)
- **Vicarious risk** (where children watch others engaged in risky play)
- Play with **dangerous elements** (sharing features of objective risk, such as height or speed, but not sufficient to cause physical injury).

In line with this, Te Whāriki<sup>9</sup> highlights the importance for children to have the opportunity to engage in risky play including play with heights, speed, tests of strength and the use of real tools.

## The benefits of outdoor risky play

The unstructured, flexible, open-ended and dynamic nature of outdoor environments provides a level of unpredictability, and children's engagement with the environment inherently involves a certain element of uncertainty or risk. Through exploratory, challenging and risky play, children become familiar with their environment, its possibilities and boundaries, and with their own capabilities<sup>4,9</sup>. This type of play contributes to children's emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, sense of agency and social emotional wellbeing as they deal with change and uncertainty<sup>4</sup>. In outdoor play children gain confidence, they can be adventurous and daring, tackle the unknown, and learn to assess and manage risk. These are all important dispositions that support children in becoming confident and involved learners.

Through risky play, children experience a range of learning and development benefits. The physicality of many of the play experiences described by Sandseter<sup>7</sup> potentially provide opportunities for children to acquire and ultimately master a range of fundamental movement skills such as running, jumping, kicking and balancing, as well as developing muscle and skeletal strength, motor fitness, and endurance. The experience of negotiating their way around their environment at speed and climbing high, for example, presents a new perspective on the world which contributes to the development of perceptual abilities including depth, shape, size, movement perception, and general spatial-orientation abilities. The experience of success and gaining mastery through engagement in challenging physical play provides children with a sense of accomplishment, which then fosters greater confidence, competence and self-esteem. This further encourages children to seek new challenges and learn new skills. The increased

motor competence and confidence that children gain through these experiences are likely to contribute to physical fitness and ongoing engagement in physical activity<sup>10</sup>.

Risky play also provides a context in which children are presented with real but managed risks that support the emergence of risk appraisal skills necessary for handling risks and dangers in other contexts. The decisions that children make and the responsibility that they take for their actions during risky play supports children in developing their autonomy, resilience and sense of agency<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, during risky play children experience simultaneous emotions of exhilaration and fear<sup>11</sup>. Learning to deal with these emotions, as well as coping with frustrations and unexpected outcomes in the context of risky play, supports children's social emotional wellbeing and potentially has an anti-phobic effect whereby fear may be alleviated through normal habituation or coping experiences as children gain mastery in the context of risky play<sup>12</sup>. Adult responses to children's risky play are also important. Parenting behaviour that involves the playful encouragement of children to go beyond their own limits may decrease children's risk for anxiety<sup>13</sup>.

### Environments that support children's risk-taking in play

One of the factors in allowing children to take calculated risks is the physical characteristics of the **outdoor environments** we provide. Features and qualities of the play environment influence the nature and extent of children's risky play. Environments that promote risky play include a diverse range of both natural and manufactured affordances<sup>14</sup> such as:

- Fixed or moveable manufactured playground equipment or natural elements in the environment such as trees, rocks or mounds that afford climbing.
- Platforms, logs, trees, rocks, mounds, fixed or moveable equipment provide opportunities for jumping down from heights.
- Manufactured balance beams, logs, repurposed loose parts such as pipes or timber off-cuts afford balancing.
- Traditional manufactured swings or improvised tyre or rope swings attached to branches, or trees with branches of suitable height and diameter that children can grasp, afford swinging, allowing for play with both height and speed.
- Slides at different gradients provide variations in the sensation of speed.
- Sloping ground surfaces afford sliding, rolling, running, cycling and the sensation of speed.
- Elements that give the sensation of instability such as swaying rope bridges and rope ladders offer unpredictability.
- Tools – real carpentry tools such as hammers, saws, hand drills and so on
- Enclosures/secluded spaces provide children with a sense of being away from the watchful eyes of adults where they can create their own private worlds.

Outdoor exploration using natural materials such as logs, tree stumps, rocks, water and found materials like old tyres and PVC pipe offer vast learning opportunities for children. For example, the inclusion of a small dry creek bed where water can be pumped through, making crossing somewhat risky with rocks of varying sizes that may be slippery when wet, allows for planning and discovery as the children negotiate their way across the creek bed. Providing pieces of lumber and wood of various sizes allow for construction – perhaps building a bridge across the water or a ramp to slide down. This provides the opportunity for children to test their designs and making necessary modifications.

There are two types of risk involved in the play described above – the natural risk of dropping a heavy object or falling off a homemade structure as well as the risk of a child's design not working as imagined. Children need both these types of risk in order to build confidence, resilience, persistence, thinking and reasoning skills<sup>9</sup>.

### Managing children's risk-taking in play

Riskiness is part of everyday life and is associated with potentially good but uncertain outcomes. When considering children's risky play, we need to think about it in terms of behaviours where the outcome is uncertain. It involves a consideration of the benefits against possible undesirable consequences of the behaviour, as well as the probability of success or failure.

Managing risky play should be based on taking a benefit-risk approach<sup>15</sup>. Rather than just deciding something isn't safe, we need to look at the benefits for children's learning and development as well as the potential risks involved, and make a judgement. Whilst there may be a small risk of injury, the benefit to the child's development outweighs it. The environment is challenging but not hazardous for children, and it is important to make this distinction. This means thinking about strategies that may be needed to reduce harm and hazards and how supervision will be provided, particularly when children are engaged in high-risk activities.

Taking a benefit-risk approach to managing risk in play and promoting safety requires adults to challenge their concepts of acceptable risk, to identify why spaces or activities might be too controlling, hence limiting challenge, and to rethink risk management in terms of being hazard-aware rather than risk-averse. However, risk is subjective - a risky play situation for one child may be different from that of another, so having a sound knowledge of individual children's capabilities is essential for providing support and encouragement that allows them to take appropriate risks. Teachers need to be flexible and respond to children's risk-taking based on their knowledge of individual children and an understanding of the benefits for children's learning and development. There is a difference between providing considered risk-taking opportunities based on professional judgement and setting up experiences for the sake of creating risk. Experiences focused on the latter, which fulfil the desire of the teacher to create risk but are not focused on the individual capabilities of the children, can create unsafe situations and anxiety for a child or their family.

### Empowering children to gradually take responsibility for their own safety

Adults' tolerance of children's risk-taking is influenced by individual personality traits as well as socio-culturally constructed notions of risk and **images of the child** as either vulnerable or capable. Including children and families in discussions of risk and safety allows for a shared understanding of what are acceptable risks and appropriate challenges for individuals in specific contexts as well as a shared understanding of how risks are managed.

Te Whāriki acknowledges that kaiako should have conversations with children that empower them to assess risk. By including children in discussions, we help them learn to manage risk themselves. With increasing independence, children become more mindful and can take greater responsibility of their own and others' safety. For example, if children want to climb higher on the play equipment, rather than saying 'no', it is better to ask them what they think might happen if they climb higher, talk about how they need to hold on tightly or perhaps set limits on how high they can climb. Scaffolding children in this way allows children to problem solve and empowers them to learn to take responsibility for their own safety by helping them to identify and manage risks in their play as the following example demonstrates:

Olivia (aged 2 years) enters the outdoor environment and immediately heads for the climbing tower. She climbs into the middle of the tower, stands on the lowest tyre and patiently waits, scanning the outdoor space looking for a teacher and trying to catch their attention. After a few minutes, one of the teachers sees Olivia waiting and makes her way over to the climbing tower. Once the teacher is present, Olivia begins to climb to the height (midway) that she is comfortable with. She stays at this point for some time chatting with the teacher before carefully making her way back down. At times she asks for assistance and the teacher provides verbal and physical prompts about where Olivia should place her feet and hands.

This scenario captures a number of key points: firstly, we can see that, in this context, children are learning to take responsibility for their own safety - there are 'rules' in place that the activity needs to be supervised and the children know they need to have an adult present. Developing 'rules' with the children is important in supporting them to have understanding of why rules might be needed and to begin to think about the consequences of particular behaviours. The hazards have also been managed by ensuring that the children know they can only climb up through the centre of the structure and not the outside. Finally, the child herself only climbs to the height at which she feels comfortable and knows support is available to climb back down if needed.

Central to children's willingness to engage in risky play and push themselves beyond their comfort zone is a conducive environment and the relationship with supportive adults. Having supportive relationships with adults enables children to gain confidence in their ability to express themselves, learn new things, work through challenges, and take calculated risks. Supporting risk and challenge outdoors requires adults to:

- Have realistically high expectations of children's capabilities and make informed decisions about when to stand back or when to intervene
- Develop shared understandings and expectations in relation to acceptable risks
- Develop a positive disposition towards challenge and uncertainty
- Develop a language to talk about risk and safety that supports children in gradually taking responsibility for their own safety
- Teach children skills that help them to do things safely

The way in which risk-taking is viewed within documents such as the Position Statement on Active Play<sup>5</sup> and Te Whāriki<sup>9</sup> provides the opportunity for real changes to children's access to and benefit from a wide range of stimulating and challenging outdoor play experiences.

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