Risky Play

The Value of Adventurous Play

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Learn & Grow Together

The Power of Risky Play

Risky play is highly valuable for children's development, particularly in outdoor settings, as it promotes numerous benefits supported by research and organizations like the Forest and Nature Alliance of Canada. Let’s jump in!





Risky Play Value

- **Physical Development:** Activities such as climbing, balancing, and running improve motor skills, coordination, and overall physical fitness
- **Emotional Resilience:** Facing and managing risks in a safe, supervised environment helps children build confidence and develop the ability to handle challenges and failures
- **Problem-Solving and Decision-Making:** Risky play encourages children to assess their environment, evaluate potential dangers, and make decisions, fostering independence and critical thinking skills.
- **Social Skills:** Engaging in activities like rough-and-tumble play or cooperative games helps children develop communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution skills
- **Connection to Nature:** Spending time outdoors fosters a deeper appreciation for the environment and strengthens children's sense of place in nature.
- **Creativity and Exploration:** Unstructured play allows children to explore their surroundings and use their imagination in ways that structured activities might not encourage

At Forest and Nature Programs, our goal is to build your child's confidence through meaningful and managed exposure to risks. Here's how we approach this:



Empowering Confidence



Trusting Children's Abilities

We believe in your child's potential to assess risks. Instead of telling them what to do, we ask questions like:

- "What's your plan to stay safe here?"
- "How does that branch feel under your feet?"

This helps them develop decision-making skills and trust in their own judgment.

Creating a Safe Space to Explore

We balance safety with freedom by:

- Supervising without hovering.
- Intervening only when necessary.
- Offering encouragement, such as: "You're really thinking about where to place your feet—great job!"

This scaffolding approach allows children to take on challenges with just the right level of support.

Empowering Confidence





Modeling Calm and Confidence

Our calm demeanor in risky situations teaches children to approach challenges with curiosity rather than fear. For example:

- Instead of saying, "Don't climb too high!", we might say, "Take your time and check your balance."

This builds their resilience and reduces anxiety.

Fostering Emotional Safety

We acknowledge their feelings. If a child is nervous, we might say:

- "It's okay to feel unsure—what's one small step you feel ready to try?"

This validates their emotions while empowering them to take action.

Empowering Confidence





Celebrating Growth

We focus on effort and progress, not just outcomes:

- "You climbed higher than last time! That's amazing effort!"

This helps children see challenges as opportunities to grow, not something to fear.

What This Means for Your Child

- **Confidence**: They'll trust their abilities and take pride in their achievements.
- **Resilience**: They'll learn to face challenges head-on, even after setbacks.
- **Independence**: They'll become capable decision-makers in both play and life.

Through our supportive and empowering approach, your child will gain the skills and mindset to navigate life's challenges with confidence and joy!

At first glance, a "zero-risk" program might seem like the safest option for children, but it can actually hold them back in important ways. Here's what can happen when we remove all challenges from play:

Missed Learning Opportunities:
Without manageable risks, children miss chances to develop critical skills like decision-making, problem-solving, and learning how to stay safe on their own.

Reduced Confidence:
Constantly protecting children can make them doubt their abilities and feel fearful of trying new things.

Weakened Resilience:
Facing and overcoming challenges builds emotional strength. If children don't experience risks, they may struggle with setbacks later in life.

Long-Term Safety Concerns:
Children who don't learn how to assess and manage risks early may face bigger dangers as they grow.



The Risks of "Zero Risk"



The Hidden Risks of Zero Risk: What's Lost When Play is Overprotected

At Forest and Nature Programs, we focus on manageable risks—challenges that allow children to learn while maintaining safety. Activities that are considered too risky typically meet the following criteria:



Balancing Risk & Safety



Life-Threatening Risks

- Activities where the potential for fatal or severe injury is high, such as swimming in unmonitored deep water, climbing unstable or excessively high trees, or venturing into dangerous wildlife areas without preparation.

Unmanageable or Unforeseen Risks

- Situations where the environment is unpredictable and hazards cannot be adequately assessed or mitigated, such as extreme weather conditions, uncharted terrain, or loose rock climbing.

By carefully evaluating risks, we ensure that every activity provides opportunities for growth and adventure without compromising safety.



Balancing Risk & Safety



Developmentally Inappropriate Risks

- Challenges that are beyond a child's physical or emotional capabilities, like operating power tools without proper training or navigating advanced survival skills independently.

Lack of Supervision or Preparation

- Activities where there isn't enough adult supervision to ensure safety or where children haven't been taught the skills to manage the risks involved, such as handling sharp tools without proper instruction.





Our Risky Play Approach



We balance risk with safety by:

- Conducting dynamic risk assessments for all activities and sites.
- Matching challenges to each child’s age, ability, and readiness.
- Teaching children how to assess and manage risks themselves.
- Providing adequate supervision and safety equipment when needed.



A Story from Practice



At Forest and Nature Programs, we are deeply connected to the land, and one of our favorite spots is the small creek along Indian Ridge Trail. Two beautiful willow trees lend their wispy arms over the stream. The flowing water, rocks, and varying depths, up to thigh-high on our youngest adventurers, make it an incredibly engaging place for children. But it also presents some risks, particularly with the slippery rocks and varying depths.

One of our children, who had a tendency to run off or "elope," presented an additional challenge. While his desire to explore the creek was clear, we knew we needed to find a way to balance his joy for adventure with his safety. We couldn’t simply prevent him from engaging with the water, as we understood the educational value of these moments—learning about nature, experimenting with water flow, respecting diverse ecosystems, and developing physical confidence.

So, we created a plan just for him, a unique approach that allowed him to enjoy the creek while also keeping him safe. Here's how we made it work:

The Risky Play Exploration Plan



Personalized Risk Management:

We took the time to observe and understand the child's behavior and needs. Knowing that he loved to run and explore, we developed specific strategies that allowed him to engage with the creek at a safe pace. Extra staff were involved during creek time to ensure more hands-on guidance.

Daily Risk Assessments:

Every morning, we did a thorough site check of the creek's conditions. We observed water flow, rock stability, and depth changes based on weather, ensuring that the environment was safe for the day's exploration. This gave us the knowledge to adjust the risk level depending on the day's circumstances.

Creating Boundaries for Safe Exploration:

Instead of imposing rigid restrictions, we worked together to set boundaries that were clear but flexible. For example, we designated specific areas of the creek where the child could explore safely and encouraged gradual steps, teaching him how to assess his surroundings and make decisions based on what he observed. We also provided appropriate gear like water shoes and ensured he understood the importance of careful movement. allowed him to practice making decisions about his safety, which is a crucial skill for life. And through it all, we were able to give him the tools and supervision he needed to be safe, while also respecting his natural curiosity.

Risky Play Success



Encouraging Independent Exploration with Support:

We saw the importance of letting him take the lead in his exploration. At the same time, we supported him in developing his self-awareness—helping him understand the value of caution while still encouraging adventurous play. Over time, he began to check the water himself, testing how deep it was or how slippery a rock felt before stepping on it.

This approach worked wonders for building his confidence, as he had the freedom to explore, take risks, and learn from them. It also allowed him to practice making decisions about his safety, which is a crucial skill for life. And through it all, we were able to give him the tools and supervision he needed to be safe, while also respecting his natural curiosity.



Privilege in Risky Play



Engaging in risky play is a privilege many of us take for granted. Here, in our Forest and Nature Programs, we can carefully design an environment where children can explore, learn, and grow with manageable risks. But in many parts of the world, children face daily risks that go beyond play, they navigate environments where safety is uncertain, and danger is a constant companion. For some, just accessing education or simply walking to school carries real threats. In these places, the idea of a safe space for exploration is a distant dream.

In contrast, we are fortunate to offer children the gift of ‘controlled’ risk, an opportunity to face challenges, build resilience, and develop confidence within a space designed with care and intention. This privilege is not lost on us. As we watch children take on the world with courage, we are reminded of the deep responsibility we have to honor and nurture their ability to explore freely. Through our approach, we are not only teaching them about nature and themselves, but we are also fostering a sense of gratitude for the safety we sometimes overlook, and a reminder of the realities faced by children around the world.


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