



Talking about practice: Adventurous play - Developing a culture of risky play

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In this Talking About Practice series (TAPS) we are looking at how educators plan for adventurous or risky play. As we hurtle into the twenty-first century, increasingly, we find a society that is becoming more risk averse. Our society's fixation on safety and 'no risk' play starts in the early years and continues as children grow older. The nightly news creates an atmosphere of fear about the outside world, as we view images of violence that reinforces a perception that it's not safe to be outside. So we protect our children even more, and in doing so we remove them from the natural environment and move indoors. In our desire to 'keep children safe,' we create play environments that are devoid of adventure and interest.

If professionals take cues from both understanding of child development and our knowledge of the lives that children are leading, the environment professionals provide can enhance childhoods. Perhaps some programs would look less like schools and more like homes and children's museums or like fields and parks. We might develop (or adapt) varied places that resonate with a genuine sense of place—or beauty, variety with elements of surprise and mystery—places where adults and children delight at times in simply being together, messing about, and working at the tasks that daily living requires (Greenman, 1998).

To help you explore the *Talking About Practice* video on risk and play we have set up a series of discussion points that will help in exploring risk, how we think about it, what stops us and others from taking risks or setting up risky experiences for children and how we can build risk into our daily planning.

Within your team, have a discussion about play and your own childhood

Your childhood may have seen you play in the streets of your neighbourhood, roam the farm you grew up on or explore the local creeks and forests. Often when talking with adults about play, there are familiar stories of exploring, roaming and spending big periods of time during the day without parents or adults watching over them.

Do you remember your childhood? Where you played? Who you played with? The secret places, the fun, the danger, the freedom, the smells, the excitement, the long days, the exhaustion? Did you take risks?



Now reflect on the world of your children

In less than a generation our children have moved from the outdoors to indoors. In a recent survey of families by Planet Ark, they found that there has been a significant shift of outdoor activity to indoors. In a national survey that the report is based on, 73 percent of the respondents said they played outside more often than inside as children, yet these same adults said that less than 13 percent of their children now play outside. Disturbingly, one in 10 children play outside once a week or less, the report found.

Of concern is the reluctance or reticence of children to engage in healthy and risky play. In the Planet Ark survey, parents indicated that less than 20 percent of their children climbed trees, a significant drop from the 65 percent of parents who headed up into the branches as children.

The trend towards risk-free indoor living: How has the world changed for children?

The world of children has changed. The family structure has and is changing, from two parents to one, to blended families and all combinations in between. We have an increased use of out-of-home care services for younger children. With mobility, we see families isolated from extended family units.

There is increasing evidence that the line between home and work is blurring, especially as we find our reliance on computers and technology keeps us connected 24/7.

We have witnessed a rise in 'enrichment' activities for children— ballet on Monday, tennis on Tuesday, drama on Wednesday, and it continues through the week and into weekends. All designed to give children the edge and to 'stop them from being bored'. Increasingly, we see governments focus on academic fundamentals and this increases parental concern over academic achievement.

Have a discussion about the world of children today

- What are the differences between your childhood and theirs?
- What influences the decisions we (parents, community and educators) make about children and play?
- What opportunities do they have to explore the world?
- Are they able to engage with the natural world?
- Do they have opportunities to take risks?
- Do they have opportunities to run barefoot through grass, jump in puddles, climb trees or spend time quietly on their own for the whole day or parts of a day playing in their backyard, or inside, without adult intervention?



How do we enable children to engage in risky or adventurous play?

To be able to effectively learn, children need to engage in play that involves and immerses them, too often risk is taken vicariously through a screen, that rarely will see the child actually have to climb a tree, risk a scraped knee or even come into contact with mud or a splash of water from a cloud burst. Yet we know these were invaluable lessons for us as we grew up.

This discussion will explore how early childhood educators provide opportunity for children to engage in risky play and why.

Identifying risk

No play space is risk-free. No matter how much we try to remove the risk of children being hurt, children (and adults) can still get hurt. We can have the super smooth, soft fall surfaces in our children's centres and school playgrounds, but, when children walk out into the real world, the surfaces they come into contact with are anything but that. The greater risk is not providing children with the skills and abilities to identify and mitigate risk when they come across it so they can engage with the big wide world.

A **risk** is something that is possible to negotiate and may be appropriate for particular situations and children.

A **hazard** is something that is inherently dangerous and needs to be remedied, such as a climbing structure with sharp edges or loose boards that could seriously injure children if they play on it (Curtis, 2010).

- Think about what we mean by risk. What does society say about risk?
- In our children's play spaces, do we incorrectly label risk as a hazard?



- Reflect on the Early Years Learning Framework: what does it say about play, and risk? What does the National Quality Framework say?
- Reflect on you and your team's approach to risk assessment and play.
- Think about the features of your play environments: does it encourage risky play? Are there areas or features that are problematic? If yes, is this because they are hazards, or that we think from our own understanding?



Planning for adventurous play

Being adventurous is about creating opportunities for children (and adults) to explore and test their own capacities, to manage risk and to grow as capable, resourceful and resilient children and adults.

We also need to think about how we talk to our children when they are playing. Creating adventurous children is also about building them up through our words and actions, showing joy in their achievements and also in them just attempting to do something. Our words can be as simple as 'you can do it', 'how can we make that happen', 'wow you did that so well', 'will we try that again' -- all gentle and positive ways of encouraging children to keep going and not to give up.

Think about how you create opportunities for children to take risk. Think about the benefits of risky play and how this is supported in your planning. How do you talk about this with children, families and your colleagues?

How do you reconcile your own knowledge of the benefits of 'risky play' with parents' views? I imagine that many educators watching the video might say, 'Well, that's fine for them, but the parents at our centre would never let us [insert activity]'. How do you (or would you) deal with the risk-averse views of some parents?

Adventurers and enquiring minds are nurtured from the early years, they are encouraged to keep trying, never rescued but expected to go further, to seek new ways of thinking and doing. Adventurers are encouraged to be dreamers, to think of what is possible, to challenge what is known and unknown.

References

Greenman, J. (2005). Caring Spaces, Learning Spaces: Children's environments that work. USA: Exchange Press Inc.

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