

# Risky Play

Young children are *hardwired* for risky play. Avoiding it, preventing it, or prohibiting it can stunt a child's development as they don't learn to manage and assess risks themselves which could lead to dangerous behaviour at a later age. We all want our children to grow into independent, resilient adults. Risky play is a key component of developing those traits.

- Risky play promotes concentration and immersion in play;
- Risky play requires children to use all of their senses, physical skills and mental power;
- Risky play helps children's brain structures to grow;
- Risky play encourages a desire to learn because uncertainty triggers the motivation and reward portion of the brain;
- Risky play develops resilience and tenacity in children as they encounter challenges, fail, try again, and succeed;
- Risky play allows children to progress and develop physically, cognitively, and emotionally, therefore helping them reach their potential.

## How To Support Safe Risk Taking:

With care, we can raise children who will actually be safer, more self-aware, and more confident as they face any number of challenges in life. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Trust your child.** Your child knows much more about their own abilities and how the situation feels than you do. We *don't* need to remind our children to be careful: they already are. Let them make decisions for themselves: when climbing trees, never put children higher than they can get themselves. They know when to stop if they don't feel safe! This lets them take on the risk of height when they are ready.
2. **Create (or go to) the right environment.** Woodland, beaches, and other natural spaces provide uneven, varied surfaces to navigate,

rocks or trees to climb. Your own backyard may provide a spot for a campfire or space to run fast. Even in your home, consider introducing your child to tools, such as hammers and knives. Be aware of other factors, like having younger siblings around, that mean your attention is divided and you aren't able to give your child the focused attention they need when trying something new.

3. **Discuss risks (but don't take them away).** As you can see from above, awareness is a key part of mitigating risk. Talk about risks, being matter of fact, rather than patronizing or fearful. 'The fire is hot. It could burn,' instead of, 'Be careful, the fire is soooo hot. It will give you a big owie!' We don't want to scare our children! Ask questions like, 'What would happen if you slipped?' to gauge his understanding of the situation. At that point, then, let the child test his ability: climb the ladder, run down the hill, roast a marshmallow over an open fire.
4. **Affirm smart behaviour.** Try to keep quiet while your child is doing something risky. Even saying 'be careful' could distract them, potentially causing them to get hurt. Instead, do your best to watch, and keep calm by observing their focus and ingenuity. Give feedback that is positive and specific. 'I like how you tested each rung before you took a step'. 'I saw how you came down those steps backward.' 'Thank you for walking slowly when you are near the fire'. Aim for a casual tone, just like when you are discussing a risk.
5. **Embrace the mess!** Children need to know that you value their learning experiences and not feel worried about getting involved in case they get messy. (See our messy clothes board in the cloak room.) Dirty clothes are a sign of an exciting experience and great learning. Clothes can be washed!

