

The Importance of Risky Play



The PlayGarden preschool is full of opportunities for risky play. Not dangerous or hazardous, but healthy risks. Preschoolers walk along a seat wall around our basketball court. They place one foot in front of the other in a single file line, careful not to jostle the child ahead of them. Preschoolers climb up and over handrails. They run full speed down the slope in our “Wild Zone”. Some even climb atop and across a tall grape arbor. They feel strong, confident and proud as they navigate these risks.

According to Mariana Brussoni, Department of Pediatrics, at the University of British Columbia, “Risky play in early childhood can help develop a child’s self-confidence, resilience, executive functioning abilities and even risk-management skills. And Brussoni’s work in injury prevention research shows that engaging in risky play can actually reduce the risk of injury, too.” (Brussoni, 2012)

There are many ways we incorporate risky play in our day. We climb ladders to reach the bird feeder, we use hammers and nails to build things, carrot peelers and cheese graters to prepare snacks, and even hot glue guns. All of

these tools can be used safely by preschoolers with supervision at first and then, once skills are perfected, independently. When a child attempts an activity that involves physical, or psychological risk, like entering into a new play situation, they look to their adult for a sense of security. Teachers can help children by offering space and by using encouraging and instructive language.

Here are some things you can say to a child instead of “Be Careful!”

“What’s your next move?”

“Take your time.”

“I’m here if you need me.”

These statements allow a child to feel more in control and encourage children to manage the risk ahead by pausing, looking for a moment, and planning out their next steps instead of feeling nervous or insecure. (Toole, 2021)



Six categories of risky play are listed in the [European Early Childhood Education Research Journal](#)

- Play with heights, such as climbing trees or structures
- Play at high speeds, such as a fast game of tag or riding a bike really fast
- Play with tools, such as building a fort or whittling a stick
- Play near elements, such as playing near fire, water, a cliff or something that a child could fall into
- Play with a chance of getting lost, such as wandering the neighbourhood with friends unsupervised, or simply hiding in the bushes for younger kids
- Rough-and-tumble play, such as play fighting

It is important to know your students abilities and to provide the appropriate amount and type of support. Keep in mind that all children benefit when they engage in risky play including children with disabilities. They may need closer supervision, physical support or encouraging words but they do not benefit from over protection and should not miss out on the opportunity to feel strong, proud and exhilarated by risky play.