

# Keeping Children Safe Means Letting Them Take Risks

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**B**e careful! “Not so far!” “Get down!” Most parents can relate to having shouted these words. Their children typically react with disappointment that their fun was cut short, or with worry that they are less capable than they thought, or with confusion because they don’t understand what their parent is warning them about. This risk-averse approach is part of a societal trend that views children’s risk taking as unequivocally negative. Not long ago, the sound of children playing outside was a regular fixture on most residential streets. Now, children on the streets are an endangered species. Over-protection has become the norm, and risk is considered synonymous with danger.

After spending several years reviewing child-injury statistics and researching injury prevention, it is clear to me that we are putting excessive limitations on children’s play despite the fact that serious injuries are rare. For example, recent research showed that children would have to play outside for three hours per day for approximately 10 years before they were likely to have one medically treated (and likely minor) injury. Many injury-prevention initiatives are driven by fear and worry rather than research, evidence, and child-centred decision making.

Children need the freedom to play how they choose, including taking

Risky play helps children learn about the world and how it works, learn about themselves and what their limits are, and learn how to keep themselves safe.



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risks and engaging in risky play. My own and others’ research (Brussoni et al., 2015) points to the importance of risk-taking opportunities in play for children’s health and development, including promoting self-confidence, social development, physical activity, and resilience. Risky play helps them learn about the world and how it works, learn about themselves and what their limits are, and learn how to keep themselves safe. When we try to limit children’s risky play, we rob them of these fundamental opportunities, which ironically, could result in them being less safe. This is because children learn risk-

management skills through exploring risk in play that they can apply to other situations. If they have an adult doing all the risk management for them, they will not learn how to do this for themselves.

Over the years, our efforts to curb risks have resulted in children’s play spaces that are increasingly uniform, standardized, and boring. Access to nature and natural materials has been reduced, while fixed plastic and metal play equipment that meet safety standards but have limited play value have become ubiquitous. Safety standards apply a systems-engineering approach

that is more suited to factories and complex engineering problems than to children's play. Standards are voluntary yet have been widely and unquestionably applied as a way to limit liability. This is despite the fact that research on the safety benefits of the standards is mixed. Serious injuries are so rare that studies that have examined injury rates before and after change in standards have not shown significant changes; in contrast, other research suggests that when equipment becomes too boring, children use it in unsafe ways to maintain challenge.

The widespread adoption of safety standards and the fear of liability have helped discourage use of nature and natural play materials in children's play spaces, despite the fact that they provide rich and varied play opportunities and are ideal venues for children's risky play. The research literature also shows that exposure to nature comes with a multitude of other health benefits to children and their caregivers ("Nature and why it's essential," 2017), including improving mental health and promoting physical activity and other measures of wellbeing.

Encouragingly, concerns over the status quo have been getting increasing media attention and have led to efforts to redress the imbalance. For example, Canada's *Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play*, launched by a consortium of organizations and academics, includes a brief summary of the supporting research and recommendations for action from relevant sectors, and has already proven influential in shifting policies (Tremblay et al., 2015). It advocates a new approach to injury prevention that seeks to

keep children as safe as necessary, rather than as safe as possible. As an example of this approach, the risk-benefit assessment process developed by the Play Safety Forum in the UK allows for a more balanced and child-centred consideration of the play space or activity (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2012). The risk benefit assessment process could replace or supplement equipment standards and would facilitate inclusion of nature and natural materials in children's play spaces.

A major barrier to children's play is parents' and caregivers' fears and worries. To help them gain the confidence and skills to let children out to play, my lab has created the online tool [Outsideplay.ca](http://Outsideplay.ca). It takes users through a series of tasks designed to help them reflect on their attitudes and fears and apply the ideas to develop a personalized plan for making changes to their approach. We sought to create an easy-to-use tool that could be widely shared to help parents and communities start the necessary conversations for change.

We are experiencing an unprecedented curtailing of children's outdoor and risky play that is already impacting children's health and development. It is up to all of us to help provide children the opportunity to develop those life lessons and skills that are so important in shaping their future, and help them develop a view of the world as a place of possibility rather than danger.

## References

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