

Is It Worth The Risk?
Rethinking risk taking, young children, and the role of the Early Childhood
Educator
by Kim Atkinson

He looked at me as earnestly as only a four year old can, "Can you help me?"
"What do you need?" I asked.
"I need this ladder to be put up here. I need to fix the roof".

The ladder was one of our new "loose parts" outside and was intended as a ramp, but this 4 year old immediately saw the possibilities of using it as a ladder. The roof was the very high sandbox structure. Needless to say, I didn't want to have children climbing on the roof, so I vaguely mumbled that I was not able to help, knowing that without an adult it would be impossible for 4 year olds to lift the huge ladder and prop it against the sandbox. As I walked away I glanced back to see what else he might do with the ladder. What!! The ladder was propped and he was climbing!

Our preschool recently had some outdoor 'loose parts' made, ramps, stumps, balance beams, platforms and tires. They are large enough to climb, but small enough that they can be moved if a few kids work together.

A few days later the 3 year old group is outside moving the parts around. I have to admit that watching 3 year olds lift a 6 foot board and drop it on top of another board to make a teeter totter is a bit nerve wracking. Then to watch 5 kids sit on that teeter totter, some jumping off, others walking up, and still others climbing with their fingers perilously close to the fulcrum leaves me hopping nervously around the edges. All I could see was the potential for injury, a pinched finger, a foot caught under a board, a body toppled by an unexpected bounce.

The risks are real. Pinched fingers are likely to happen at some point. How do I reconcile myself with that? It is a question with larger implications, namely, should we be letting kids take risks? How much risk?

In a constantly evolving society children's play has evolved and changed. A generation ago the natural world of forests, empty lots, and vacant fields provided opportunities for children to explore and challenge the limits of their abilities. Today's children have lost that, and instead play in parks where supervision and regulated structures minimize challenges. An increasingly litigious society and the perception of the world as 'full of danger' has influenced how much freedom

children have to explore and roam outside.

A 2009 report by Interdisciplinary Centre for Environment and Society at the University of Essex states:

"There is growing evidence to show that children today spend less time outdoors than previous generations. Time outdoors has fallen from 86 to 42 minutes per day since the 1980s (Orr, 2002). In addition, time outdoors is now more likely to be organized, managed or overseen by adults, whether parents, teachers or community-group leaders. Thus free and unstructured play in streets, fields, open areas, abandoned buildings, gardens and wild habitats is being lost."

The trend to spend less time outdoors in unstructured play has been increasingly shown to have negative effects on learning and development. And, equally important, children are not given the chance to take risks.

Helen Little and Shirley Wyver in their review of the literature on risk taking in outdoor play make this observation:

"The problems with this response to safety and fear of litigation are that physical play opportunities for children become so sterile and unstimulating that children may actually place themselves at greater risk of injury as they seek to inject some excitement back into the activity (DCMS, 2004). Such a response also denies children the opportunity to learn about risk and how to manage it in the real world of the communities they live in" (Shepherd, 2004).

Caleb and Felix (see the pedagogical narration) have set a beam up against a tire and are climbing it. They have added further risk to the challenge by propping the beam in such a way that it rocks back and forth as they climb.

Caleb closely observes the fulcrum, recognizing that the movement of the beam originates there. When the beam is no longer rocking, he is no longer interested in climbing it. The challenge is gone.

Felix falls off the beam, and the beam falls as well. He is not deterred, and helps Caleb lift the beam back into place. Felix once again begins to climb.

What learning is going on? Experiments with the physics of balance and weight, physical challenges to climb a moving board, persistence, problem solving, co-operation and negotiation to work together, the list goes on and on.

For these boys the risk is what makes the play interesting. They have chosen to move the beam in way that increased the challenge. And they intentionally re-

created the risk when the beam fell off.

Studies suggest that "The development of a risk-taking disposition in some contexts is viewed as a positive attribute associated with persistence in the face of difficulty and uncertainty. This persistence has been described by Carr (1997, p. 10, cited in Stephenson, 2003, p. 41) as 'engaging with uncertainty, being prepared to be wrong, risking making a mistake—going on to learn'. However, where parents and teachers accept and even encourage children to take risks and challenge themselves mentally, physical risk is more often seen as something negative and dangerous and to be avoided."

Helen Little and Shirley Wyver

Taking risks is clearly important for all areas of growth and learning. Physical challenges are integrally linked to cognitive challenges.

I watch a child climb a precariously perched board. As the child climbs I see that the board is likely to move and the child will likely fall off. I put my foot on on the end of the board to prevent it from moving. But I realize I'm doing the child a disservice. How will he figure out cause and effect if I prevent it from happening? So instead I take my foot off and just hopped nervously at the edge. The child adjusts his weight and doesn't fall.

In this situation I weighed the benefits of the risk against the possible danger. I decided that the fall would not seriously hurt the child, the child was capable of the climb, and I stayed close enough to prevent any serious danger. The benefits of the challenge outweighed the potential risks.

Three four year old princesses are decked out in fancy clothes and high heeled shoes. They are stacking some big indoor blocks as high as they can, which is pretty high. They want to climb to the top because it is a princess tower. The first princess steps up in her high heels, wobbles a bit and holds out her hand to me. I retreat saying she needs to climb it on her own. Without my support, she assess her balance, adjusts her weight, and judges the risks. All the princesses climb, but only as far as they feel comfortable. I stand by and steady the blocks now and then. No one falls.

Deb Curtis observes: " I have discovered that the children usually pursue only the challenges that are within their abilities, using caution and remarkable problem-solving strategies. I have come to see that if I stay close to intervene if necessary, observe to get to know individual children's dispositions and skills, I can make sure I keep them

safe while supporting their instinctive drive to challenge themselves and gain new competence. There is great reward in watching the children's unwavering determination and seeing their elated faces when they accomplish something they have worked so hard on."

What are the implications for ECE's? How do we provide appropriate risks without causing injury in early childhood settings?

The first step is to thoughtfully assess your personal attitude to risk, and to begin a conversation with colleagues and parents. Being aware of cultural differences and individual perceptions in discussions around safety is key. Looking at the benefits of risk taking weighed against the consequences of no risk and coming to a agreement on 'managed risk'.

Curtis recommends assessing the environment and making the distinction between a risk and a hazard " 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."

The goal is to create an environment that is free of hazards, yet interesting enough to provide a opportunities for children to face physical challenges and choose their own level of risk. At the same time it is imperative to recognize the role of the ECE's who use their knowledge and experience to respond to and assess individual children, and individual situations.

The loose parts in our yard are providing opportunities for children to try out some challenges. Heavy objects to lift or drag, high places to jump from, ramps to ride a bike across. The pieces can be imagined and tried in many ways, some challenging, some not. There are places to hide, steep inclines to negotiate, stacks of tires to climb. Some children move pieces to increase the risk, some move them to lessen the risk. Individual children asses each challenge, judging the skills required, determining their own comfort and skill level.

The Children's Play Council observes that:

"What is important is how these experiences are scaffolded to allow for the gradual transfer of risk management to children. Through exposure to carefully managed risks, children learn sound judgement in assessing risks themselves, hence building confidence, resilience and self-belief—qualities that are important for their eventual independence" (Children's Play Council, 2004).

The boy who needed to fix the roof did indeed climb up, but wasn't determined to get to the top. He slowed as he got higher, and when I suggested that he might be high enough, he quickly stopped climbing. But he had a good look at the roof, the view beyond, and descended with a smile of satisfaction and pride. Well worth the risk.

References:

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