

# 10 WAYS TO SUPPORT RISKY PLAY



## DESIGNING FOR PLAY



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### CONNECT TO YOUR CORE VALUES FOR PLAY

Close your eyes and connect to your deepest values of play. What are your beliefs about the role of play in children's lives and child development? What do you stand for and what do you stand up for? Take a moment and connect to the strongest part of yourself where your beliefs and feelings meet your commitments to the lives of children. While our ideas can change and our fears but poke the surface of our selves, the core of your self knows best. **Connect to that core.** It is from this place of strength that we can stand up with conviction for what we believe in to support play and children being children. It is up to us as adults to do this! But it takes our deepest committed selves to overcome fears and obstacles. **With deep breaths we can do it!**

### REMEMBER YOUR CHILDHOOD

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Where did you play as a child? What kinds of things did you do? Were you overly supervised and protected? Or were you more free ranging? Did you do things your caregivers didn't know about? Did you do risky play? Children today need opportunities for freedom and self-directed play just like children from generations past. Whether today's children get to play depends on the adults in their lives. Because adults so often hold the power to say yes or no to children's play, it is important that we remember our own time as children and how we played. **Play it forward.**







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## RISKY PLAY IS BENEFICIAL

Risk in play used to be considered a four-letter word and while it still has four letters, we now know that risk is beneficial and an important part of childhood.

**Why is risky play important?**

**Let's count the ways:**

- Risky play can be fun! Testing limits and challenging oneself can be thrilling.
- Access to risk helps children navigate their bodies and develop resiliency.
- Risky play helps children tap their inner guidance to manage risk & keep themselves safe.
- Risky play takes concentration.
- Risky play takes creativity, problem-solving, and coordination.
- Risky play builds confidence.
- Risky play helps children overcome obstacles and try things they've never tried before.
- Risky play builds self-esteem.
- Risky play helps build the prefrontal cortex of the brain.
- Risky play helps emotional regulation.
- Risky play helps children take initiative and set their own goals.
- Risky play helps children deal with failure.
- Risky play helps promote physical development.
- Risky play helps social skill development.
- Risky play can promote teamwork.
- Risky play promotes decision-making skills.

**And much more—the list goes on!**

## RISKS VS. HAZARDS

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When supporting risky play it is important to make a distinction between risks and hazards. **In short: risks are good and hazards are bad.** Think of it this way: a **risk** is an activity or element that could be a little dangerous with the potential of injury, but a child can see the risk and choose for themselves if they want to take that risk. This could be a jump in the mud, climbing a tree, rough and tumble play, or balancing on a log. A **hazard** is something dangerous that could hurt a child that they do not see and are not able to make a choice about interacting with or not. A hazard could be broken glass, a chunk of concrete on the playground, or a sharp broken toy. It is our job as adults to locate and remove all hazards from children's environments. We take care of the hazards so children can take risks. **Being vigilant about removing hazards from children's spaces can help us feel more confident to let children take healthy risks.**

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## RISK-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

In the old days we did risk analysis of our play yards, activities, and elements. To decide about having something like a fallen log on the playground we would do a risk analysis and think about all the bad things that could happen to a child (fall, break a bone, poke your eye out, etc). Since we would never want those things to happen we would say no to that log and we would feel that we did our due diligence and be proud we stopped that bad stuff from happening. Unfortunately, we were also stopping play and learning opportunities for our children that we now know are important for their healthy growth and development. So now we are doing risk-benefit analysis.



We are still looking at the bad things that could happen but now we are also looking at the positive outcomes and experiences that could happen with that same feature or activity. We weigh the bad with the good and then decide – not just basing our decisions on the bad stuff. Sometimes this analyzing happens as split-second, in-the-moment decision-making in the yard with children in action. Other times adults use the risk-benefit analysis as a formal process to look at various activities, think about how they fit with core values for play, and come to consensus about how to best handle them. This could be parents with their backyards, schools with recess rules, or childcare settings in their outdoor spaces. Many programs create actual forms to do risk-benefit analysis and make their decisions to say yes or no to a risky activity. **You can too: List out the risks, benefits, and also how you are going to manage the activity to limit serious injuries.** These forms can be kept on file to show there was a mindful and thoughtful process that helped you decide to allow riskier activities. These forms can be shown to other teachers, family members, new parents at a program or school, licensors, and administrators. It is basically saying, “we’ve carefully thought this through. We know the risks, but we also know the benefits and we’ve decided that the benefits outweigh the risks”.

## PLAY CLOTHES

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**Don't let messy clothes stop you from letting children play!** Most of the time children aren't getting messy on purpose—mess is mostly just a by-product of play. Grass-stains here, muddy shoes there, dirty hands and feet everywhere. Children dressed in fancy clothes can a big limitation to how much play (and fun) they can get into. It's understandable: parents don't like nice or expensive clothes getting messed up. So how about letting kids play in play clothes? That's how we did it in the good ol' days, right? At home, put on the play clothes to play. If you are at school or childcare let parents know to send their kids in less fancy clothes. You could have bins of extra play clothes to change into so the burden doesn't always fall on parents. Ask for hand-me-downs, and shop at garage sales. **Don't let clothes and mess stop play!**

**DON'T LET CLOTHES AND MESS STOP PLAY!**



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## YOU KNOW YOUR CHILDREN

**Nobody knows the lives of your children like you. You live with them. You know their strengths and their challenges and have seen them grow.** You know what they are capable of and what they need help with. Some children are fine to take bold risks and push their bodies to the limits. Other children need more helping hands and closer supervision to try something risky. Other children never want to try something that pushes their comfort zone. All of it is ok and all of it you understand because you know your children. You can predict how they might act in any given situation. If you are a parent you know more about your children than neighbors or other parents on a playground. If you are a teacher or childcare professional you know more about your children than a regulator just walking into your space for the first time. They may get nervous about things that don't worry you because they don't have the same information about the strength and resiliency of your children. Yet this is your opportunity to talk to them **about your children, their history and stories and skills and learning and how you came to say yes to all the great play that you say yes to. Nobody knows what your children are capable of like you do. Share that information with joy!**







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## DON'T ADULTERATE PLAY

We love play, we support play, we believe in play, but sometimes we also mess up children's play! Sometimes we stop play on purpose but sometimes we stop it unintentionally. A commonly agreed upon definition of play from the Playwork Principles states that play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. This means directed by the children, not the adults! If adults try to lead play, change play, narrate play, stop play, take over play, insert "teachable moments" in play, or join the play without being invited they are adulterating the play. Don't adulterate play. Support play by creating the time, space, and materials for play and then step back. **Let the children play.** Is play about you or the children? It is about the children! So Let the children play and stay out of the way as much as you can (but happily join in if they invite you).

## DREAM BIG, START SMALL, NEVER STOP

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Dream big and keep your eye on the prize but by all means, start slowly. No need to rush any of this. It takes time to build confidence with risky play. Small cautious steps and incremental changes are the best way to proceed. Start with the simplest new yes to play that you can think of. Watch what happens. Try another. Watch what happens there. Little by little, step by step we can start to feel more comfortable to let our children play. Start with a cardboard box. Start with a mud kitchen. Start with some loose pots and pans. See what happens. Observe the play and also observe your thoughts and feelings. The smallest steps are the easiest and the more times we observe positive results the easier it is to take another step. Little by little. Day by day. Messy play by messy play. Before you know it you'll have chickens in your yard and be cooking over campfires! (Well, let's start with a cardboard box...)



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## ADVENTURES IN RISKY PLAY: THE BOOK!

You know we're just getting warmed up here—but you can take it to the next level by buying my book on the subject:

**ADVENTURES IN RISKY PLAY:  
WHAT IS YOUR YES?**

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