Risky Play

A Conversation between Zoe Arnold and Janet McVittie

Risky Play has been featured much in the news recently. What concerns me is that there is not enough said about the details of how much risk, and how the adults should be involved. Risky play does not mean taking children to places and letting them do whatever. Zoe Arnold has studied and facilitated risky play among the children she works with. For a great introduction to Zoe, this podcast of a conversation between Zoe Arnold, Michael Prebble, and Leah Japp will support your confidence in who she is and what she knows. She is amazing! https://saskoutdoors.org/podcast/ and go to Season 4, Episode 4.

What is risky play?

Risky play involves thrilling and adventurous play, taking physical risks, taking on challenges and fears, challenges that might result in "acceptable" physical injury. What is an acceptable physical injury? Definitely a permanent injury is not acceptable! But what activities the child will engage in will depend on the comfort level of *the child* and *the adult*. If you are a parent, and your child wants to use a knife, and says that a friend's parents allow their child to use a knife, but you are not comfortable with this – no. For you, knife-use is not an acceptable risk. If you are in a swimming pool, and you want your child to jump from the edge of the pool into your arms, and your child refuses – no. For your child, this is not an acceptable risk. If you believe the risk of breaking a bone is not acceptable, then that limits much of what you do. But, it will be your choice (although there will come a time when it is your child's choice, perhaps when they are 15?)

Risky play, then, involves defining what is to be considered an acceptable level of risk. A hazard (or a hazardous action) is a place, object or action that will cause unacceptable physical damage. Being hit by a car – a hazard. Not being able to swim and still playing, without a PFD, near fast moving water – I would name this as hazardous. On the other hand, climbing a tree. Yet, as with playing

near fast moving water, unacceptable physical injury could happen. Acceptable risk has a fuzzy boundary, and both the adult and child are important factors in making the choice to engage in particular kinds of risky play.

Where you go for risky play will affect what you do. Some environments provide more opportunities than others. As well, what is a hazard in one location might be an acceptable risk in another. For example, when I am far from help, I am more cautious about children climbing trees. If they break a bone, how long will it take to get to medical help? Within the city, there are streets where children can play more-or-less safely, and others where cars hurtle at high speeds. Consider all aspects of the environment when deciding what the children can do.

In summary, what comprises risky play is dependent on the child's and adult's comfort levels, and on the environment they are in.

What are the benefits to risky play?

There are many benefits to risky play. As children engage in risky play, they will make mistakes, may hurt themselves to some degree, and they will learn to assess risks. This is one of the most important lessons a person can learn: what are the risks, and how can I mitigate them to keep myself safe? I remember when one of my daughters, at age two, was playing in a risky situation with a group of five-year-olds, who were negotiating their way around the outside of a deck railing. Another child, two years old, was not allowed by her parents to engage in the play. The next year, same place, same kids, my (now) three year old was very cautious about participating in the risky play of the (now) six year olds, who were clambering higher on the railing. The other (now) three year old leapt in to the older children's activity. What had happened to cause this difference? I know for my daughter that she had had a few falls since the year before, into sand boxes, and not from great heights, but enough to have learned to assess height risks. I felt good about this.

Children and their adults make the assessment of acceptable risk in the younger ages, but as our children get older, they will make choices regardless of what their adults say. Learning to assess risk is integral to children's healthy

development and survival. As they participate in riskier activities, the children learn what the limits of the environment and their skill levels are.

Another important benefit of risky play is that children must become the boss of themselves. They must not give in to peer pressure from peers (or adults, since the adults in risky play must value the children's choices) to take on risks they are not yet comfortable with. Again, this involves the adult in the situation. If the adult notices children applying some sort of pressure on their peers to get them to engage when they don't wish to, the adult must make clear to all the children that they each MUST make their own choice about what they are comfortable doing. We are all learning how to do things, and pressuring or teasing a child to coerce them to do something they are not comfortable with is not allowed! 1. Establish through clear language that each individual child must make their own decision about what to do. 2. I suggest calling all the students involved in any coercion activity together and asking them about how they are going to support one another in learning. Perhaps the more confident child can take on a coaching role, and can be complimented for what they can do. 3. Encourage the children to work out plans for getting along, learning together, each child at their own pace. As the adult, you can (and should) provide guidance. For the children, learning to be supportive of others and to be a good member of the group, and learning to resist peer pressure are important lessons.

Another advantage of risky play is the physical activity involved. Children develop healthy cardio-vascular systems, stronger muscular-skeletal systems, greater flexibility, better coordination, sense of balance, and will eat and sleep better.

With greater physical competency, and recognition of one's abilities, and developing confidence in the group (resisting peer pressure, making one's own decisions, being valued for the risks one takes, or for the caution another suggests, or for the coaching that another one does) comes greater confidence.

What kinds of risky play are there?

Ellen Sandseter (2007), a Scandinavian researcher and advocate of risky play, identified six kinds of risky play, but other categories have since been

added. She identified: speed (running fast, a toboggan ride, biking, etc.), heights (tree climbing, jumping onto a roof, etc.), play with tools (knives, hammers, saws, etc.), play around “elements” (water, fire, etc.), rough and tumble play (pushing and shoving, wrestling, etc.), hiding or getting lost (hide and seek, etc.) Two other kinds of risky play that have since been categorized are impacts (that is me, skating – always running into things, especially the ice), and vicarious play (watching how others play).

How does the adult support children in risky play?

It seems that allowing children to engage in risky play has many positive effects, and only a few worries. So: knowing that you as the adult have a say in what the children do, Zoe illustrated some ideas and guidelines.

To find places for risky play – these places are everywhere. Children can and do engage in risky play at home, climbing on the furniture, jumping off the beds, having a bath, playing with elements like fire (as an adult you might veto this). My children would strike the matches to light the candles when we had a fancy dinner. However, the environments that offer the most in the way of risky play affordances are outdoors, specifically in natural areas. There are hills, trees, animals, water, places to hide, all kinds of risky play can be accommodated. Including lighting campfires. Children must learn the hazards about (not in the situation, we hope) forest and grass fires, and they should learn to assess appropriate places for a fire, how big it should get, what safety materials to have nearby, how to get a campfire going, and, ultimately, how to put it out.

Zoe draws on Saskatoon’s natural areas. She finds an appropriate place, close to where the families drop off their kids, or to her pick-up point for after-school programs. When she chooses it, she first assesses what the risks and hazards are. She determines what the boundaries of the play area will be, ensuring that there is a sufficient variety of things to do, but in a space small enough that the adults can watch all the kids. She has a set of small, brightly coloured cones or marking flags, which she will sometimes set out to mark the area with the children, showing them the limits for their play or to flag off hazards such as a nearby road or parking lot. As the children become familiar with the

site, she assesses whether the cones and flags are still required and removes them when the children are ready. With older children, a landmark such as a path or recognizable large tree may be used as a boundary instead. When she is in the location with the children, after identifying the boundaries, she will, with the children, create two different kinds of call-back sounds. One sound might be call and response, just to know where everyone is (for example, Zoe calls “123 Where Are You?”, and children respond “Here I Am!”) and one is a call for everyone to gather (the group will decide and practice – perhaps a wolf howl).

The adult’s instruction of children in risky play is fluid, dynamic. Zoe says she observes, assesses, and then uses instruction only as necessary. One method that she uses is she helps children to observe each other. “Look how X holds onto branches with her hands before moving her foot to another branch.” Part of the assessment she makes is watching to see if a child has stalled in a particular situation. She will ask “How are you doing?” Do you feel safe? What’s your next move?” and supports the children as needed based on their answers. The questions Zoe asks keep the focus on the risk and the situation.

Children find numerous actions and places risky, and most children will take on an appropriate level of risk. An example Zoe gave was climbing a tree. Some of the children will choose not to climb the tree at all. Most children will climb, and will pay attention to where they are as they climb the tree, and will not climb high on their first climb. An adult nearby can provide guidance to the child who has chosen to climb, giving advice such as: be sure the branch you are getting on is as big as your arm. Be sure to hold on with your hands, and try to have one foot on a branch as you move your foot to another branch. Zoe has observed, they will climb so far, and then exclaim on how high they are. Even if only a meter off the ground, if they exclaim about the height, it is high – for them.

The number of adults in the situation will vary. Almost always, if there are two or more children, there are at least two adults. In riskier environments, invite more adults. You know the children, their ages and stages, their personalities. You decide on the appropriate ratio. Some rules of thumb: with younger kids, more adults. As the children become more experienced in risky play, and as they

generally mature, the number of adults can decrease. Affecting the number of adults in a situation, however, is the particular children involved. With a group you are meeting for the first time, or taking out for risky play the first time, more adults, and be sure to give the adults guidance on your expectations. Occasionally, you will encounter a child who is not inclined to premeditate and assess risks. Regardless, even in natural environments, there are children who rush ahead. These are the ones who need most to learn, experientially, to slow down and assess the situation. One of the adults will likely attend to this child fairly carefully. As the child leaps into a situation, help the child (only if a hazardous result is likely) to examine what they want to do, and how they will do it, help them to assess and plan to mitigate the risks. If the result is likely to be a scrape or bruise, let them try it. A few falls will mean greater caution in the future.

I gave an example above of adult concerns regarding children playing with fire. Similar to fire, many adults are concerned about knives in the hands of children. If you have little background with the use of knives outdoors, Zoe recommends perhaps taking a course in whittling, to develop your own comfort level first. Or choose to start with something you have experience with, such as peeling and chopping vegetables. You are the adult, and you are allowed to decide this. The children can use other tools. Similarly with fires. There are other elements the children can engage with in risky play.

With rough and tumble play, the adult is very important for supporting the children in establishing and maintaining rules. Zoe sets up a designated rough play area. If a child goes into the area, other children are thus invited to volunteer to go in, and engage in pushing and rough play … impacts are involved. But Zoe helps children set their rules (in advance) and helps them to navigate these consensual play rules: there was to be no hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling, etc. The play was about grappling, pushing, shoving, falling down, getting up. The children talked about the ways that people tell us to “Stop” with their words, but also with their body language (putting out a hand, walking away). We must respect the “Stop” when it comes to rough and tumble play and check in frequently with “are you having fun?” If the smiles stop, the play stops.

Summary: Risky Play

The adult and the child assess the level of risk that is appropriate. Adult observation is integral. The advantages of risky play are tremendous, including physical as well as socio-emotional, intellectual, and contribute to life-long health. Outdoor environments offer the greatest number of risky play affordances, with a variety of graduations in level of risk. Establishing physical boundaries and some general guidelines is good pedagogical practice. If you are an adult in a risky play situation, try to take your lead from the children as much as possible, but do let them know when you are uncomfortable.

One last story: I worried about the children climbing trees on a day that was cold, with wet snow falling. The branches were icy. The children, though, having been climbing trees for several months already, quickly adapted their movements on the branches, to accommodate the ice. And Zoe had taken them to a place where the tree branches were close to the ground – no great heights to fall from. However, one boy slipped as he jumped out of a tree, and landed on his face on the muddy hill and slid down. When he got to the bottom, he sat up, rubbed the mud from his nostrils and said “That didn’t work out the way I expected.” And, oh, yeah. He was back up the tree in no time, and jumped again, and, this time, it worked the way he expected. Competence leading to confidence.

Final Advice

Start in familiar environments, with smaller groups of children, and gradually add to your repertoire of what you consider acceptable risks. Be willing to put yourself into risky play situations, learning as much as you can about how you might quietly guide the children.

Reference

Sandseter, E. B. H. (2007). Categorising risky play—how can we identify risk-taking in children's play? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 15*(2), 237-252. doi: 10.1080/13502930701321733