



# Risk is not a Four Letter Word

I often remind myself of one day when I arrived late to the Hubbards Farmers' Market. My family had been there for a little while, and as I approached the Barn, a lady who knew me, but to this day I couldn't tell you who she was, approached me a little agitated and reported that my son was at the top of the big pine tree. I thanked her for the news, I think I laughed and expressed some pride, and let her know that he had been taught to climb trees and was really good at it. She seemed unimpressed with that skill, and my parenting approach.

I continued to the tree and sure enough, there he was, at the top, among the skinnier branches, looking down upon the vegetable stands and coffee drinkers. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned. He was a little beyond what looked 'safe' to me. But he had gotten himself up there, and now was not the time to

express worry.

My son at the time was about ten. What was interesting to watch was the throng of other kids assembled around the base of the tree looking up at him. Many of them were too small to reach the first row branches. A few of them had just enough reach and confidence to ascend into the first few rows of thick bottom branches. But none of them could, or would choose to, approach the height of my son. He had achieved legendary status amongst the younger, smaller kids below him. Surely they would talk about this on the school yard for years to come.

I called up to him to ask him to come down and to remind him to keep three points of contact on the tree on the way. When he arrived on the ground he asked me why he had to come down, "I know how to climb trees." I

told him that I knew he knew, but I was more concerned about the other kids following his lead and getting in over their heads. Plus, he made one lady nervous.

I've debated that decision since. When I asked a colleague what he would have done he said "I would have left him in the tree. The kids at the base didn't follow him because they had already figured out their own limits and abilities and made their own decisions. Your son was a role model of what they might accomplish in a couple of years."

I like that story because I think it illustrates a number of important lessons about how play in nature is essential, and what our role as adults should be to foster active play in kids.

Risks are not the same as hazards. Hazards are sources of harm that are not obvious to a child. The potential for injury

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is hidden from the child and therefore they are unable to evaluate the best way to proceed. Risky play is thrilling and may involve injury; but risks allow kids to evaluate a challenge and assess their own abilities before making a decision on how to proceed in play.

Kids get hurt sometimes, and the adults in their lives should do everything possible to remove hazards and avoid and limit the severity of injuries. But risky play has benefits and kids should be given the chance to evaluate and manipulate their play spaces to be able to realize the benefits (see sidebar).

Childhood educators and researchers have been studying the benefits of risky play for decades. As our collective sense of ‘something lost’ has increased in recent years, risky play has received more and more academic attention.

For the rest of us, our sense of nostalgia for those long summer days spent in the woods can be summarized in one word: freedom. The freedom to climb a tree as high as we wanted, to get as dirty as possible, to turn over rocks looking for flying ants, and add an extra board to the wall of the fort. Freedom to manipulate our spaces, to make our own good decisions, and to push ourselves just to the edge of our abilities is an essential element of childhood development. This is practice for life. Without these ingredients, we lose the ability to assess our environments, assess bigger risks and hazards in adulthood, think critically and solve little problems before they become big problems.

If you want to learn how to foster healthy risky play in kids, watch them. I’ve gone for walks in the woods with my kids and their friends and have noticed a dynamic I call ‘tethering’ (there’s probably an academic word for it). Try it out. Walk down a trail and watch as the kids run away from you off in to the woods. They’ll only run so far before they boomerang back to make sure you’re still close by. They’ll run off again, maybe a

little farther this time, before springing back. In this simple walk, they are at the same time playing, exploring, and having fun; and determining their own limits and confidence levels.

Here are some strategies for encouraging active outdoor play in nature.

- Watch, but don’t supervise. Kids are less active if you keep too tight a reign on how they interact with the space they are in. Nudge them to discover the space (what’s under that log?) then step back.
- Breathe. Minor injuries do happen, but major injuries are extremely uncommon.
- If you feel the need to guide their actions, use encouraging words specific to the task. If they’re walking across a log try “use your balance” rather than “be careful.”
- Bring a friend. Outdoor play in unstructured environments is ideal for socialization and developing inter-personal skills like cooperation and empathy.
- Embrace the weather. As the old saying goes “there’s no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing.” This doesn’t mean you need the most expensive gear

(they’re going to grow out of it anyway) just appropriate gear that can keep them warm and dry and is made to get dirty.

- Everywhere is a play space. Playgrounds serve their purpose and can be fun, but they typically lack the manipulative elements that nature offers. The patch of woods in the backyard, the little beach down the road, the old log pile on the edge of the field are all free spaces that offer unlimited play and discovery opportunities.
- Talk to your school and see if there are any opportunities to include outdoor play into the school day. Many schools are looking for ways to include nature based play, and welcome assistance and cooperation with folks who have the interest, and perhaps skills, to foster it.
- Recognize that kids are competent and capable, and take the time to assess their aptitude and interests. Parents are best positioned to do this.

### **Just a few of the developmental benefits of outdoor active play:**

- Improved physical literacy and motor skills
- Increased independence
- Reduced stress and improved mental health
- Decrease in sedentary behavior
- Increase in social and creative behaviors
- Reduced fear through gradual exposure to new challenges
- Better risk perception and management skills which help to learn how to navigate risk and avoid injury
- An appreciation for the natural world and the interdependences of living things
- Self-worth and efficacy
- Increased resiliency, autonomy, and problem solving abilities
- Better overall physical health and avoidance of disease (i.e. diabetes, heart disease, etc.)