

Letting go - the *benefits of risk* for your child

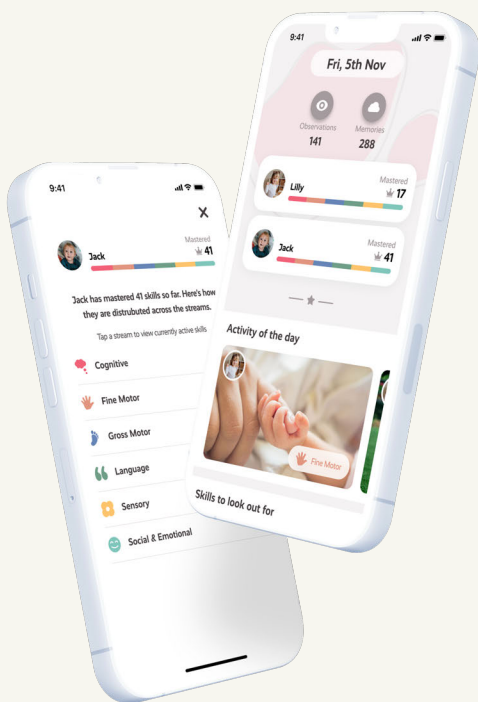
by Anne Statham



*My First
Five Years*

Human beings are hardwired to take risks from birth. From the moment your child is born they will demonstrate a growing drive for freedom and control. From their first independent breath, they decide to try crawling, walking and then running, they try new foods, they see the stairs and want to climb them, and so on! This drive propels them to get to grips with the people, places and things around them. They want to work things out for themselves, to learn new skills, to build their self-confidence and a sense of what they are capable of.

We know this presents a dilemma for parents, as while you hope to foster these qualities of curiosity, self-reliance and confidence, you are also, of course, emotionally invested in keeping your child safe from harm!



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What is risky play?

Risky play is play that is thrilling and exciting, it's challenging, it tests limits, and it helps children to establish boundaries. It's not only related to physical risk, but it could also be emotional risk, those activities that go outside the usual comfort zone by, for example, doing something alone for the first time or exploring a new, unfamiliar place, or it might involve using new equipment or potentially dangerous tools. It also encompasses risky physical play, where there is a possibility of potential injury, play that tests the boundaries of physical skill such as climbing high, balancing or jumping.

“Children seek out fear and exhilaration at the same time through risky play,” suggests Ellen Sandseter, a Norwegian researcher and expert on risky play. She talks about the sort of scary-funny feeling, the butterflies in the stomach that parents might recognise. Through her research she has identified six common categories of risky play category.[1]

Ellen Sandseter's 6 Categories Of Risky Play

This handout is based on research analysis completed by Ellen Sandster for her doctoral thesis entitled Scary Funny—A Qualitative Study Of Risky Play Among Preschool Children. She writes that her results, “indicated that experiencing both exhilaration and fear at the same time was the primary goal of engagement in risky play.”

Great Heights



Rapid Speeds



Dangerous Tools



Dangerous Elements



Rough And Tumble



Disappearing Or Getting Lost



Children seek opportunities to climb to great heights as well as, jump, balance, hang, or swing from those heights.

Interacting with great heights helps kids face fears and build confidence.

Climbing to great heights comes with the risk of injury from falling.

Children seek opportunities to run, swing, slide, sled, bicycle, skate, roll, ride, and spin at rapid speeds.

Moving at rapid speeds helps children understand and use their bodies.

Moving at rapid speeds can lead to injury from collision.

Children seek opportunities to use potentially dangerous tools like knives, saws, axes, rope, power tools, machinery, etc.

Using dangerous tools helps children build confidence and skills.

Using dangerous tools can lead to injuries and wounds.

Children seek opportunities to engage with potentially dangerous elements such as fire or deep, cold, or moving water.

Engaging with dangerous elements is a chance to face fears and understand the world.

Engaging with dangerous elements can lead to injuries and wounds.

Children seek opportunities to play fight, wrestle, chase, sword fight with sticks or pool noodles, etc.

Rough and tumble play is a chance to hone physical and social skills.

Participating in rough and tumble play can lead to physical injuries like scratches and bruises.

Children seek opportunities to play and explore unfamiliar spaces either alone or in small groups.

Disappearing or getting lost offers a temporary scary thrill.

Allowing children to play at disappearing or getting lost could result in a child *really* getting lost.



Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, referred to as one of the world's leading experts on the value of playground risk-taking, is a professor at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education in Norway.



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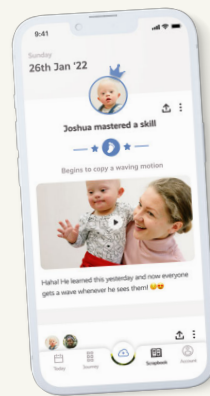
What is it about these experiences, which place children in a little bit of danger, that makes them so attractive? Well, there's an indication that it's an evolutionary drive, helping young children to explore and learn, and there's evidence that it's found in many other young mammals too.



Luckily, we were all children once! At this point it's helpful to tune into our own childhood memories and our own risky play experiences. Perhaps you enjoyed riding your bike down a steep hill, sought out opportunities to play close to the river, or perhaps you remember going somewhere alone for the first time. What was your motivation, and how did you feel?



Some categories of risky play involve thrilling and exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury, others involve a feeling of responsibility and being trusted. What seems to matter is that children have some space and time where they feel like they are in control and can confront their fears, without adults calling the shots. Children seek out situations where they feel they are in charge and are making the decisions, and where they have a sense of forging their own way in the world.



Download our app to get ideas and information about how you can support the development of your child's physical skills.



What are the benefits of risky play?

Most importantly, children enjoy it. Any activity that a child is engaged in and focused on is likely to be a great learning opportunity, and that is certainly the case with risky play. Children state that this kind of play is both fun and scary at the same time, and that experiencing these contrasting feelings is exciting. The expression of these exciting feelings can, according to research, take the form of smiling, laughing, shrieking, screaming, yelling loudly, dancing a little jig or verbal expressions, such as smiling broadly and saying, "I am so glad I did that," after managing a risky task. These pleasant experiences and the sense of thrill are the most important immediate rewards influencing children's risk-taking decisions in play.[1]

What's more, there are longer term benefits. Encountering risk in playful situations enables children to develop the skills to make their own risk assessments. If they're not exposed to risk in their lives, they have no chance to learn how to assess it and manage the different situations they may encounter. Engaging in risky play offers children the opportunity to develop the self-reliance and confidence to cope with uncertainty and new situations. When children progressively encounter risky play in a gradual manner, this allows them to master the challenges involved.[2]



Assessing risk starts at an early age. Babies are natural explorers; a baby will start to crawl and take risks. They'll start to pull themselves up on furniture when they can't really stand yet.



As children grow, we can teach them to use knives to cut up vegetables, or to use a vegetable peeler to whittle a stick, even using staplers and hole punches can be fascinating, as they hold a certain level of excitement and thrill.



By giving your child permission to use real tools and equipment and handling situations that we've grown to associate more with adulthood, you are demonstrating you have respect for their judgement and ability, which bolsters their confidence.



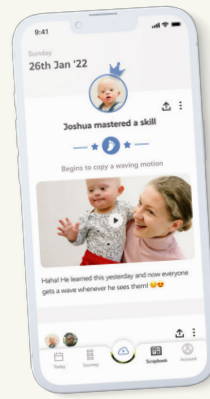
Children will have the opportunity to learn more about themselves and their limits, to learn what safety looks like, and to learn risky/safety language and how to help others stay safe in risky circumstances. You can read more about how your child uses social referencing to make judgements about risk in our article – Social referencing - a complete explanation (mffy.com)

The idea of progressively encountering risk is helpful to bear in mind as your child grows. There is complexity in risk-taking decisions and the factors that influence them. Some risks are subjective, depending on your child's personality and approach to new situations. What your child classifies as a risk might be completely different to what another child classifies as one. This is the same for adults, and understanding our own approach to different risky situations helps us to consider how our own response might influence our child.



Risky play is natural and invaluable for children to support them to understand the world around them. But it also allows them to experience and explore emotions such as hesitation, excitement, fear, pleasure and mastery.

Some of these might be emotions we find hard to witness in our child, especially hesitancy and fear. Our instinct may be to quickly step in to solve the problem with advice or help but by giving children time to feel the emotion, weigh up the options and judge how to respond themselves, they learn to be more comfortable with these feelings, which enables them to use them positively to help them cope in future stressful situations.



You can learn more about how to support your child's emotional development in our app.



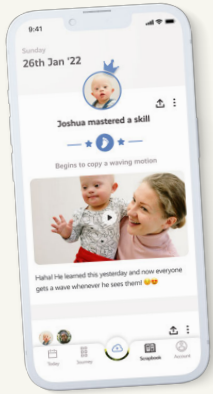
Finding the right balance

There's no denying that for you as a parent, getting the balance right between freedom and safety is hard. The problem is that making things too safe can starve your child of the very experiences that best help them learn how to keep themselves safe. This balance relies on many factors, the nature of the risk, the age and developmental stage of your child and the subjective element of personality. As we have noted, the idea of acceptable risk is subjective, to you as a parent and to your child. It is also dynamic and ever-changing, as your child changes and grows.



Play with young children usually happens under adult supervision, constraining what children are allowed to do and where they are allowed to go. In this sense, adults are helping to ensure children's safety when playing, and at the same time they represent the most important constraints on children's opportunity to experience risks and challenges.[3]

As parents, we are aware that part of our job is to help our children prepare for life as an autonomous adult, and that this process involves a gradual transfer of power. Whatever our initial views about our children's vulnerability, sooner or later we have to respond to our children's demands for greater everyday responsibility.



Find out more about how you can support your child's developing sense of autonomy by downloading our app.



Tim Gill, an author and researcher, argues that we need to move away from a parenting norm that equates being a good parent with being a controlling parent, and that sees the granting of independence as a sign of indifference, if not outright neglect, even though the benefits of giving children a degree of freedom have been well documented.[4]



We know that taking the first steps to give your child the opportunity to experience more risk and challenge in their play can be challenging for you as a parent. We're here to support you with our five My First Five Years tips.

Tips for supporting risky play

1. Trust your child

Aim to respond to your child's curiosity in a positive way. Understanding that your child is highly motivated to play in risky ways is helpful. Watch and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge of their own capacities. Notice the way they may hesitate and avoid risks they are not ready to take, either physically or emotionally. They may be motivated to explore their boundaries but will weigh up their own approach. Let them lead the play and decide their own level of risk. Notice the situations where they demonstrate hesitancy, excitement, fear, pleasure and mastery, and offer them language to support these feelings.



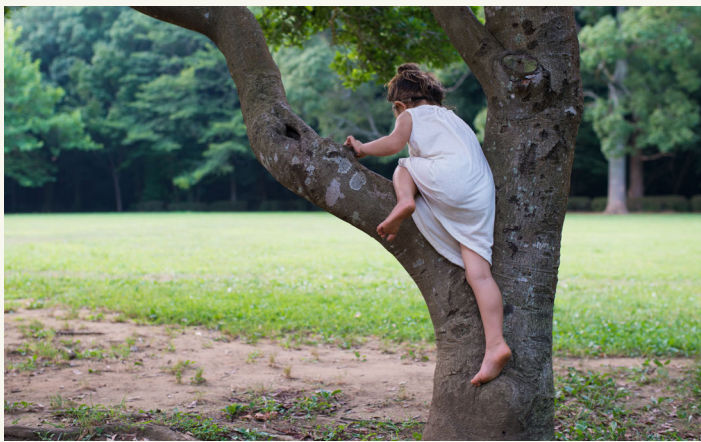
2. Focus on the positive aspects of risky play

It's tricky, but rather than holding the risks in the front of your mind try to focus on the benefits your child will gain from risky play. This will give you the confidence to relax a little and see what transpires.

3. Build confidence

Build your child's confidence by using positive language. If your language is fearful ("Be careful", "Don't go there/do that", "Come down, it's too high", "That's dangerous") your child may develop anxiety, not confidence.

It is difficult not to pass over your own fears in the way you speak. Try to use alternative positive phrases instead, such as “I noticed how you spotted the best way of climbing across there by holding the strong branch”, “Where do you think your foot can go next?”, “Does that feel wobbly?” or “Do you feel safe?” This language highlights your child’s decision-making and problem-solving skills and helps make their internal risk assessments more visible. It focuses them on their surroundings and does not make them reliant on you to point out risks. You can always advise, “I’m here if you need me.”



4. Wait before helping

We know it’s difficult to resist the urge to help your child when they’re struggling, but by intervening too quickly you may stop a potentially valuable learning experience. Try to wait a little longer before offering advice or use some of the phrases above to support your child to think through possible solutions for themselves.



5. Make time for physical play

Give your child plenty of time to explore physical play in a range of outdoor situations, whether it’s in a playground, a garden or walking along a wall on the way to school! Children will seek out their own challenges. Natural areas such as woodland offer lots of different possibilities for physical challenge. Allowing plenty of time is one of the most important things you can do to help children become more physically confident.

You can read more about outdoor play in [our blogs!](#)

Keen to learn more?

We wanted to share with you some of the great articles we used to research this piece:

No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society by Tim Gill – This brilliant (and free) book by Tim Gill is great if you want to understand more about why risky play is important and what we can all do on a bigger scale to combat an increasingly risk-averse society.

Download

Don’t forget our app is full of ideas about how you can support your child’s learning and development and has a scrapbook so you can remember all the marvellous moments.



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References

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