

"I'm into risky play...BUT"

"The new *"I'm not racist...BUT"* of early childhood.

It's too conclusive to argue with - the research is out, nearly every professional development, conference, blog post, EC article, TED talk and textbook discusses the importance of risky play for children and the many, many factors that are beneficial for including this kind of play. It's so widely acknowledged that it has become almost taboo to outrightly say you're not a risky play advocate and so, as humans do so very well, the naysayers have found a clever way around this provocative approach to play.

"I'm into risky play...BUT"

We are hearing it on playgrounds everywhere and it is the catch-cry of the risk-averse educator. It is always followed by some very good reason as to why the particular experience children are engaging in is far too dangerous and is then almost always actioned by removing it altogether. My favourite example is what I lovingly refer to as "the brick incident".

Earlier in the year we removed our rain tanks and, in doing so, revealed some brick pavers that had been a base for them. The children, of course, saw this opportunity for what it was and began methodically moving the bricks from where they were in our dirt pit to a mat, conversing as they worked about all the projects they were hoping to complete with these - "let's make a wall!" said one, "and a house!" said another, "it could be roads!" said a third and the ideas kept rolling hard and fast. I sat and watched as they took their time. Without needing to say a single word, the children were already risk assessing as they worked - "be careful, this one is sharp on the edge there" and "don't throw it, you have to put it down slowly" they said.

I trusted the children implicitly with this newly self-initiated resource. I have watched them work all year and I know these children well enough to know that they will continue to take their time, to work slowly and carefully. The biggest concern I had was that someone would see this play as too scary, too risky and shut it down and so I started the work of every risk-positive educator. I had discussions with the team members on staff that day, pointing out the positive aspects of their play, the amazing things they were making, how careful they were being. I took photos of their collaborative work, including photos of the moments (and there were many) where they were standing back to assess the structural integrity of their towers before adding more height to them.

I wrote a risk benefit assessment and included the children's voices and ideas for how to use this resource safely - I emphasised the value of repurposing materials that were sustainable and durable and open-ended. I showed the risk-benefit to every staff member and asked what they thought and if there was anything else they might like to add and then I brought it up at the next staff meeting and discussed it with the entire team.

As timing would have it, the next day was an RDO for me and when I returned the following day I was told "we have taken the bricks away, they are just causing way too many injuries". Baffled I said, "oh, were there lots yesterday? I only know of two where children grazed their legs and were fine?". There were no more. Just two grazes, neither drawing blood or needing a band aid, neither even resulting in tears - the children had taken on their grazes as a learning curve and adapted the way they held their bricks as they continued to work.

So, after that, the bricks were gone.

Many educators were fuming, they had seen how careful the children had been, they had been having conversations with the children about safe ways to work with this material and how to assess how high is too high to build a tower.

It wedged a very distinct chasm between our team members - those opposed to the bricks and those in support of them. It created unnecessary animosity and, even worse, confusing, contradictory rules for the children.

Upset as I was, I understood the approach. Some of the educators were just concerned but felt too uncomfortable to be out rightly against a new risky play approach because, as we all know, the evidence is just too clear to not be. Their catch cry rose to assuage the pain of the divide and frustration of the staff - "I'm really into risky play...but...there are too many injuries/ it makes me feel sick/ I'm just not comfortable with bricks".

So let's make something else overwhelmingly clear as well... IT'S OK TO BE SCARED.

It is. Every person who has decided to pursue a career in being responsible for young beings is always very aware of the huge onus this carries with it. Always.

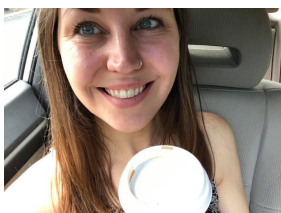
So, let's reframe the risky play thing.

There isn't a risk-positive educator in the business who actually wants kids to get hurt, we're not sadistic. We just understand that a few scratches and bruises now are a thousand times better than going a lifetime without developing skills in assessing risk.

This is written in love for the people who want to be ok with risk but are just finding it too intimidating.

Some tips to take the edge off this whole risky play thing:

- Create a buffer - if they are climbing too high, running too fast toward a wall or spinning like mad on concrete and your insides are doing back flips, just add some matting. I have a bit of an issue with safety mats honestly, but that's a whole other write-up - if the options are to either stop the play or add mats, just add mats.
- The 17 second rule. I read about this here and loved it. It can be any number, it doesn't have to be 17, but just give yourself some time to breathe and observe - often you'll be surprised at how incredibly capable the children really are at risk assessing when you stop to watch.
- Focus on the WHY. Being stuck in the terror of what could happen can be completely diminished when you see the whole picture - read up on risk and the long-term benefits to pull out from the micro to the macro. This TED talk is fantastic for helping to see it from a bigger point of view. <https://youtu.be/WASW3TFdjlQ> (Our relationship to Risk- Judy Kelin Youtube)
- Use conversation, not warnings. This is where you can really challenge your respect of children and their capacity to regulate their own play - ask questions and let them tell you the answers - i.e. instead of "put that rock down or you'll drop it on your foot and cut your toe off!", ask "if you drop that super heavy rock, where do you think it might land?", instead of screeching at them mid-climb "stop! You're going to fall!" suggest some thoughts that can help them think through their approach - "make sure you think about finding really sturdy spots with your feet and hands - places for feet to push and hands to pull". There are some great articles on swapping out fear-based language for affirmative - this one is a great(https://www.backwoodsmama.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/What-to-Say-Instead-of-_Be-Careful_.pdf) "cheat sheet" - print it out and stick it on the staff toilet door!
- Finally, if all else fails, press pause. There is no shame in saying "hey I'm sorry, this is just freaking me out way too much. Can we pause this experience for a day/week/month and do some reflection and benefit-risk assessments so I can feel comfortable with what's happening or decide whether it might just be too much right now?" I guarantee this will be taken so much better than just shutting it down completely without an opening to continue to explore together.



Hannah is an early childhood teacher and forest school facilitator who is passionate about children's rights to environments that nurture their autonomy, resilience and flow.

She has started up three forest school programs in three separate services, running one of them while supporting educator's to run the others.

She was a finalist in the Outdoors Queensland awards and worked in different schools and services as the ECT, teacher and educational leader.