

Exploring Risks, Benefits and Management in Children's Play

Child Development Dayhomes is excited to share this Educator resource on children's Risky and Adventurous Play. Our document has been a group effort that included resources from across North America. More importantly, it summarizes information and ideas from our very own Educators and Consultants, who understand the complexities of balancing this within Family Dayhomes. Our goal is to increase Educator awareness, foster self reflection and initiate conversations that support the value of offering safe responsive environments within your curriculum ~ particularly in outdoor play.

Definition of Adventurous/Risky Play

Adventurous or risky play refers to a type of play activity or experience that involves a level of uncertainty and physical challenge with the potential for injury or failure.

Engaging in this type of play provides children with opportunities to challenge themselves physically, emotionally and mentally by participating in activities where they can test their limits, make decisions and learn to assess and manage risks in a controlled and supervised setting.



There are 5 main types of Adventurous/Risky play:

1. **Great Heights:** climbing, jumping, balancing etc
2. **Rough and Tumble:** wrestling with other children, roughhousing, snowball fights, stick play, superhero play.
3. **High Speed:** uncontrolled speed or pace running, biking, sledding
4. **Dangerous Tools:** knife, saw, hammers, screwdriver etc
5. **Dangerous Elements:** tree roots, cliffs, open bodies of water

Risky play is NOT:

- Controlling the child's level of risk
- Pushing them beyond their comfort level
- Ignoring mandatory safety measures (ex bike helmets, car seats, stair safety gates)
- Leaving children unsupervised
- Letting children do whatever they want

Risk vs Hazard

A risk is a challenge that a child can see and chooses whether they want to engage in that challenge.

A hazard is something a child does not see, is usually dangerous and it is within our role as educators to identify them, talk to children about why they are dangerous and remove them.



Benefits

Risky and Adventurous Play is not something that you teach children. Children are motivated to seek out challenges and risk on their own, however available opportunities and their environments will impact their curiosities. Some children have stronger dispositions to explore this than others. Participation in risky play in a safe, supervised, and supportive setting, offers several developmental advantages:

- 🧠 Enhances decision-making, problem solving and risk assessment skills (children test theories and limits to see what they are comfortable with)
- 💪 Improves physical strength, coordination, spatial awareness and motor skills (they learn about their own bodies, abilities and how to navigate around other people and physical objects)
- 😊 Builds self-confidence and emotional resilience while managing fear and anxiety (it offers opportunities to overcome fears, develop pride and a sense of well being)
- 🗨️ Encourages communication, cooperation, negotiation, and conflict resolution with peers (children describe new emotions, cheer each other on and discuss ways to overcome obstacles)
- 🌿 Fosters imagination, curiosity and exploration of the natural environment (learning to use natural items in a variety of play stages is crucial to developing their imaginations – symbolic play, dramatic play, role play, fantasy play)
- 🔧 Develops practical skills through supervised use of tools and materials (children can become resourceful- finding ways to reuse and repurpose items)

Assessment

While every effort is made to ensure safety, participation in risky play involves inherent risks. These may include minor injuries such as scrapes, bruises, or falls. The role of the Educator plays a vital part in assessing the benefit and appropriateness of risky play. Looking at the previously mentioned definitions of risk vs hazards, we must keep in mind that they are very different and acknowledge that risky play is not neglect, does not mean danger, nor is it a free-for-all. There may be risk in the loose parts that you offer in provocations. Are the pieces too small for the younger children? Older children who want to climb trees or use the tallest slide at the park are engaging in risky play as well. These are not “one-size-fits-all” opportunities and each child must learn about their own abilities to master the skills on their own.

“Adult anxieties about liability and blame can make it difficult to strike the right balance between children having the freedom to play and keeping them safe from harm. Along with these anxieties, there is sometimes significant pressure to use an overcautious approach or provide written documentation for every decision. It is important to find a balanced approach to making informed decisions that empower children to play freely, without overinvolved adult intervention.” (www.childnature.ca)

What is your role as an Educator in Risky Play and Risk Assessment?

- Find the right balance between allowing everyday risks in children’s play and taking reasonable steps to limit harm. Frontloading, or conversations in advance, must be had with the children, the parents and your Consultant.
- Have plans in place to manage unexpected risks in play. Children’s play is unpredictable it’s impossible to imagine every possible outcome or circumstance. (Dynamic Risk Management)
- Know your own comfort levels and beliefs about risky play (Am I a risk taker? What worries me about taking risks? What excites me about taking risks? What childhood memories do I have of taking a risk?)
- Know the parent’s comfort levels with this type of play for their child /ren

- Know the children, their personalities, their abilities, strengths, and challenges PRIOR to participating in such activities and play. Know their competencies, interests and awareness of expectations to decide if the level of risk is appropriate. (How might each child navigate the space? What hurdles may they face? What kind of support may I need to offer? When should I offer it?)
- Complete a risk benefit and assessment tool to help you decide appropriateness of a new experience

Risk Management

This is the process of identifying, assessing and controlling potential risks by finding ways to minimize or eliminate them and their impact. In childcare, the most apparent risk is the health, safety and well-being of the children in your care. There are additional risks to consider as well such as financial (ex risk of liability) and compliance (breach of FDH or Agency standards). These all need to be taken into consideration when you are determining the level of risk. See the attached Early Learning Physical Hazard Rating Matrix for guidance.

Considerations

Some children who are very shy and quiet indoors can become “fearless” in an outdoor setting, and those who are loud and leaders in play inside, may be quiet and timid when outside.

Avoid power struggles by only offering choices or opportunities that are options. (example- Trampolines and inflatable bouncy equipment are never permitted so do not go to locations where these are available)

As children learn to navigate challenging obstacles and engage in risky play, they need to know you are confident in their abilities, and within your own level of comfort, so they feel supported in their learning.

Every group is different and every child will navigate their environment and play in different ways. Their comfort and competence in engaging in everyday risks outdoors is not an indicator of how they navigate risk at home or inside.

Your uncertainty and caution is contagious and a child could lose confidence in a moment when they need it most. As you decide what is appropriate for each child, consider using a tool to evaluate the likelihood of an adverse outcome from the opportunities in your dayhome program.

Become an Observer - Outdoor spaces are designed to foster running, jumping, swinging, climbing, and moving over uneven terrain. As children move, early childhood educators should pay attention to their fine and large motor abilities, taking note when a child hesitates or pauses while engaged in a task or with others. Through observation, Educators will develop an understanding of a child’s ability to appraise and respond to risk.

Model and Encourage Children to grow in their ability to appraise risk by observing others’ play and movement. Educators can support risk taking by engaging in it themselves and expressing their thoughts out loud. This models the internal dialogue that occurs when assessing risks and challenges.

How do the Government and Agency Standards guide us in our reflections and assessment? Does your play experiences meet the following:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • Std 4B – Furnishings and Equipment | • Std 7 – Child Care Programming |
| • Std 4C – Outdoor Play Space | • Std 8 – Child Supervision |
| • Std 5 – Transportation and Outings | • Std 10B – Safety Checklist |



Community Playgrounds rarely have equipment that is designed for all the children in dayhome due to the mixed age group.



- What is the age restrictions on the equipment you use?
- Is it developmentally appropriate for your group?
- How do you balance the diverse needs and abilities in your group?
- Is it ok to use an “older” playground for younger children?

*review the Alberta Health Services’ guide to age-appropriate playground equipment.

Educators are keen observers of children, and as part of your dynamic risk management plan, you should intervene in a risky play scenario if:

- ✓ the level of risk could lead to serious injury
- ✓ a child demonstrates emotional distress or fear
- ✓ the structure or environment is hazardous (ice on play surfaces, broken glass, construction)
- ✓ you know the child well enough to make the decision that they are not capable to continue with the activity as it would not be safe.

Being supportive of children engaging in adventurous/ risky play will help children view the world as a place of *possibility* rather than danger. It is important to find ways to keep children *as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible*.

Glossary

Risk: the challenge or uncertainty in the environment where a child can recognize and evaluate the challenge and make decisions by setting their own limits and building their skills.

Hazard: a danger in the environment where the potential for serious injury is beyond the child’s capacity to recognize or manage.

Risk assessment: evaluating or deciding which risks are significant and how they should be addressed

Risk Management: The overall process of identifying evaluating and managing risks

Dynamic Risk: managing risk in the moment. Children’s play and the outdoors can be unpredictable. It involves continuously observing play and thinking on your feet to assess risk or hazards as they arise, and making quick decisions to intervene, modify or allow an activity to continue.

Negligence: A failure to meet the standard of care required to ensure a child’s safety and well-being, resulting in harm. Childcare educators have a legal and ethical obligation to ensure the safety of children in their care.

Front Loading: proactive strategy that involves preparing children with information, expectations and skills *before* they encounter a situation or activity.



When You Want to Say "BE CAREFUL"



Play with Great Heights

- Stay focused on what you're doing.
- What's your next move?
- Do you feel safe there?
- Take your time.
- Does that branch feel strong and stable?
- I'm here if you need me.

Play Near Dangerous Elements

- Please move slowly and carefully near the...
- Please give each other lots of space so that no one feels like they need to push, and no one gets knocked over by accident.
- Do you feel stable/balanced?
- Do you need more space?

Rough and Tumble Play

- Make eye contact before you tackle someone. Make sure they know you are coming so that they can get their body ready.
- Check in with each other. Make sure everyone is still having a good time.
- Ask them if they're ok.
- Ask them if they're still having fun.
- Did you like that? Make sure you tell them if you didn't like that.

Play Where Children can Get Lost

- If you need to run, meet me at the next trail marker!
- Let's check this cave/fort to make sure it's safe to hide in.

Play with Great Speeds

- Please find a safe spot for your stick while you're running.
- I've noticed that this is a really busy area and I'm worried that someone not playing this game might get knocked over. Watch out for other people and give them lots of space.
- Should we move this game to a more open area?

Play with Harmful Tools

- Sticks need space. Look around you – do you have enough space to swing that big stick?
- Please keep one end of your stick on the ground!
- What's your plan with that big stick?
- Rocks need space!
- Before you throw that rock, what do you need to look for?
- That rock looks really heavy! Can you manage it?



Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment Process

OPEN OBSERVATION

- Playing alongside
- Trust and caring interest
- Non-intrusive

FOCUSED ATTENTION

- Some warning signs, play and risk escalating
- Proximity and Check-ins
- Dialogue and reflection
- If improves, go back to open observation

ACTIVE INTERVENTION

- Immediate change, steps to reduce risk
- Empowering language
- Safety Prompts

Adapted from Omer's Model of Vigilant Care, 2011



Risk Benefit and Assessment Tool

Educator: Suzanne Spectacular

Date: September 8, 2025

FINAL RISK RATING: *LOW*

Use with Early Learning Physical Hazard Rating Matrix

Location of assessment	Dayhome Backyard
# of children in dayhome (Registered + Educator's children)	5 DH children + 1 (Educator's)
Ages of children in care	1, 1, 2, 3, 3 + 4

Describe the potentially Risky Activity / Provocation / Experience

Adding tree stumps (10) - heights of 8" to 18" tall
 Adding recycled tires, wooden planks

Describe the Potential Benefits of the Activity

Creativity and collaboration in designing obstacle courses, gross motor skills, taking turns, problem solving, learning about - safety, risk, logical consequences, construction

Describe the Potential Hazards and Risks of the Activity

Falls, slivers / splinters, scrapes, pinched fingers, materials that may drop, fall, roll etc
 Children may jump on / bump into each other

Describe Steps that need to be taken to reduce the Hazards and Risks while preserving the benefits

Smooth out rough edges of wood
 Front loading with the children - discuss things like uneven surfaces, objects that can move / slip.
 Designate safety zones around materials if jumping from heights *set out low stumps and tall stumps away from each other, so older children have a separate area to explore safely from infants' space
 Add water drain holes in tires



Risk Benefit and Assessment Tool

Early Learning Physical Hazard Rating Matrix

This physical hazard rating matrix is intended to help early learning professionals assess the potential danger of play activities or environments. This is useful for creating play settings that balance safety with reasonable risk taking. Use this matrix when conducting benefit and risk assessments and other early learning planning.

Consequence	Likelihood Of Adverse Outcome				
	Highly Unlikely	Unlikely	Possible	Likely	Highly Likely
Insignificant No Injuries Or Health Issues	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Minor First Aid Treatment	Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Moderate Medical Treatment	Low	Moderate	High	High	Critical
Major Permanent Disability Or Disease	Low	Moderate	High	Critical	Catastrophic
Extreme Death	Moderate	High	Critical	Catastrophic	Catastrophic

Hazard Rating Key	
Low Hazard	Acceptable hazard. No further action required if the hazard has been minimized as much as practical.
Moderate Hazard	Tolerable hazard. Hazard should be reviewed periodically.
High Hazard	Tolerable hazard. Hazard should be reviewed continuously.
Critical Hazard	Unacceptable hazard. Immediate action should be taken to minimize hazard.
Catastrophic Hazard	Unacceptable hazard. Immediate action should be taken to minimize hazard.

Research indicates that young children benefit from risk taking. Risky activities like climbing, rough and tumble play, using tools, exploring new spaces, and playing with water promote healthy development. Such activities also help children learn to assess and manage risk. While risk taking is important, so is safety. Not all risks are dangerous.



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Risk Benefit and Assessment Tool

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Date: _____

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_____ Use with Early Learning Physical Hazard Rating Matrix

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Guide to Age Appropriate Playground Equipment

Playgrounds should be designed to support children's physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.

Developmental needs change as children grow and age. The Canadian Standards Association (CSA) Children's Playspaces and Equipment Standard, recommends rating playgrounds according to the following age groups:

- 18 months to 5 years, or
- 5 years to 12 years

Play experiences should be appropriate and challenging for the child's age and development level.

Playground structures should be permanently labelled to notify the public of the recommended age group.

When there is no label, look at the size and complexity of the playground structure to estimate the recommended age group.



Playgrounds designed for children 18 months to 5 years have simple equipment, low platforms, and easy access to top platforms. These structures do not require a lot of full body coordination or upper body strength.

Example of playground designed for ages 18 months to 5 years:



The following equipment is not recommended for children under the age of 5 years:

1. Free standing arched climbers
2. Fulcrum see-saws unless they have a spring centering mechanism
3. Log Rolls
4. Pulley or Cable Rides
5. Slide poles including fire poles
6. Track rides

Playgrounds designed for ages 5 to 12 years have higher platforms, sliding poles, challenging climbing features, and equipment that requires full body coordination and upper body strength.

Example of playground designed for ages 5 to 12 years



Additional AHS suggested resources~

Home Safety: Play time. (2016) Parachute.

<http://www.parachutecanada.org/injury-topics/item/home-safety-play-time>

Contact AHS Safe Healthy Environments at 1-833-476-4743

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