

# Risky play is not a category – it's what children DO

Marc Armitage

*We often throw around the term 'risky play' as though it was a category of play like social play or gross-motor play. But it is not. Taking risks is simply one of the things children do when they are playing and, because a significant amount of playing is about pushing boundaries and extending ourselves, it turns out that most play is risky in one way or another.*

The problem is we have over a number of years gradually become a risk averse society. We have simply become very wary of anything labelled risky and have been encouraged to avoid it in any form. The newspapers for example are full of stories of this being banned and that being stopped on anti-risk health and safety grounds.

The issue seems to be largely confusion over our use of the word 'risk' and we can see this when reading documents such as the National Quality Framework (Siolta) where for example Component 2.4 *'The environment promotes the safety, both indoors and outdoors, of all children and adults'* asks the question: "In what way is the indoor environment/equipment designed to reduced *risk* of injury to children?" [my italics]. The wider component goes on to give numerous examples of these 'risks' to be avoided such as not having sharp corners on furniture, electrical sockets being out of reach and non-slip flooring for example – all of which are *hazards* in this context not risks. There is further confusion when the Health Service Executive (HSE) uses the unhelpful phrase 'safe risk' in its guidelines. So, it is no wonder people are confused when it comes to the question of risk and what is risky and what is not, and what we can do and what we can't.

In the United Kingdom this is something which has been tackled very effectively by the play sector which has taken back control over defining risk in play and childcare settings. The document *'Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide'* produced by the UK Play Safety Forum has been endorsed by the equivalent HSE body in that country and gives lots of practical guidance and common sense advice on risk in a play context. This document has, quite simply, revolutionised the idea behind risky play.

For 'taking risks' we should read 'making mistakes' and being able to make mistakes at a young age is vitally important in terms of learning and development. Rather than shying away from being risky in our childcare settings we should actually embrace it!

Below are four 'risky' things that we could all provide access to, as do many play and childcare settings around the world.

## 1. Experience height and depth

We often associate risky play with big pieces of fixed play equipment and the first piece of equipment that comes to mind is usually some kind of climbing frame. And that's good, but there is more to experiencing height than just climbing. The desire to get off the ground is a powerful one from a very young age and so children in a setting will climb on things even where nothing is provided for them to do so. Fences, gates, tables, window ledges, each other will all be pressed into use as they try to gain height. But a 'climbing frame' is limited in the experience it can provide because once you're 'up' then what?

Watching the world go by from a height attracts children (as does being able to see outside of the setting) so a climbing feature that has some kind of viewing platform works well. Being able to physically 'look down' on things is an experience children rarely have an opportunity to do unless they live on the side of a mountain and such a platform can keep their attention for a significant length of time as they see the world (literally) from another angle. But there is more: it is not a coincidence that those climbing features which are the most popular in public playgrounds with children of all ages are also those with

multiple platforms and levels and with multiple ways of getting onto and off it. Children often play chasing games on these types of features and complex pretend games as well as just climb up and then down again. Multiple levels allow children to experience different levels of height and that provides multiple opportunities for challenge.

In safety terms the real concern here is likely to be how high such a feature should be but 'height' is not the issue – it is 'fall height' that is important, in other words is it possible to fall out of or off the feature and if so onto what surface do we fall. The European Playground Safety Guidelines (see below) recommend critical fall heights of no more than 3m high for any piece of play equipment. That is not to say that such a height will be appropriate to all but a feature which is very low and with only a single level is not going to provide the degree of experience that will give a sense of challenge and that does not represent good value for money. If we are going to use our limited resources on something big we should make sure we go for something that works.

Talking of money, if a setting which has limited space can buy or have bespoke built a fixed play feature that has platforms, levels and viewing points, and build that feature on sand as the main surfacing material (rather than on rubber which has no play value in itself) with maybe a play house built under on the ground level, we will have provided four or five different opportunities for play combined within a limited ground area and usually lower cost than if everything was provided separately. Such a feature properly constructed, in the right place with the correct surfacing and policy and procedures around its use, satisfies both the need of our children to experience height and depth and satisfy our legal responsibilities under the European Playground Safety Guidelines.

## 2. Experience movement and speed

Being able to run around is by far the simplest, cheapest and amongst the most popular ways of experiencing movement and speed. And it's clearly important as children will often spend up to a quarter of all their time at play running around. But running around can interfere with other forms of play that does not involve movement. There is no point in the world, however, in simply telling children NOT to run around. Just like the need to experience height they must move around and they simply cannot stop themselves from trying to do so. And there are good health and safety reasons for making sure they can. During the 1980s many British playworkers visited and worked in orphanages and schools in a number of the failed European communist states setting up play and childcare facilities for children of a broad age. Many of them began to report that they found teenage children with very poor levels of balance and coordination while moving (they would, for example, stumble when playing chasing games). This was the effect of being brought up in confined, mainly indoor, spaces with little opportunity to run around. As movement is how we develop and maintain our sense of balance these children had missed out on a valuable, never to be repeated experience.

Our children must experience movement and speed and preventing them from doing so for health and safety reasons at a young age is hazardous to their longer term well-being. In other words there are strong health and safety reasons for ensuring that children *can* run around.

Running around does not satisfy the need for free movement through the air though and nothing provides for this sensation better than a swing. These are play features rarely seen in childcare settings, often because of concerns of children falling off them. But falling off a swing is not the real hazard – it is being hit by a moving swing that is the problem and that is easy to deal with by enclosing the swings in a coral fence with limited access. Then there is the question of what type of swing. We might feel that very young children need a swing with a bucket seat to keep them firmly in place but a swing with a cradle or large platform instead provides a feature that can be used by all ages and abilities AND by multiple people at the same time – another example of making best use of limited space and limited budgets.

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A well-sited swing can provide lots of challenging movement. However, it can also be expensive and take up lots space. A tree swing, on the other hand, can be both cheaper, temporary (moveable in other words) and an exciting alternative. We are often guilty of ignoring the trees that some of us are lucky enough to have on site or at times actively keep children away from them over safety fears. In fact, the idea of a rope in a tree for swinging may seem very hazardous – but not when it's done properly. The organisations *London Play*, and *Monkey Do* have produced a technical guidance document that shows how to do this in a practical, cheap and exciting way (see below). This document goes into detail about what type of trees are suitable for swings, what type of rope and knots to use, how to fit them and how to maintain them in a way that satisfies health and safety requirements.

### 3. Experience den building and using tools

The adventure playground movement (which is very strong in the UK, Germany and Japan in particular) has its origins in a Danish form of play called the 'Junk Playground'. The concept is very simple – it is that children should have a degree of control of their physical environment and have the ability to change it and add to it.

Den building is one obvious way of being able to do this and many childcare settings already provide access to this form of play by providing loose-parts for building them (improvised materials such as old sheets, netting, rope and poles etc.). But a 'den' is not just a structure – it also becomes a centre of very complex pretend play involving narrative and cooperation. Before it gets to that point though it needs building and building is very satisfying in itself and very popular with children. In fact, it is not uncommon to see children spend a great deal of time building a den only to then abandon it and move onto something else as soon as it is finished.

Building other things are also very popular – making ramps for wheeled toys, gullies to run toy cars and balls down, making carts and trolleys that can be used to transport yet more materials and people around the setting. Making small playthings too such as cars, airplanes, boats and spaceships is also popular, and often these are made by combining other things. The experience of building dens and these smaller things can be limited though by both a lack of access of available materials to combine in the first place (this is true where bought toys dominate our play boxes for example) and more so by limited ways of being able to fix things together. To develop this we need tools.

We get an extra dimension to building things by providing access to tools. Adventure playgrounds typically provide supervised access to tools which allow children to saw, screw and hammer things, which increases the complexity of building and creating. This can result in more substantial dens such as those typically found in Norwegian childcare settings which are built to last for weeks. Access to 'real' tools, as opposed to plastic hammers and saws, also adds a sense of realism to building play which enhances the experience hugely. Being able to play with 'things' is important but playing with things you yourself have made is much more satisfying. In addition, using a toy hammer and pretending to nail two pieces of wood together is nothing compared to the experience and the sounds of using a real hammer to bang a real nail into a real piece of wood.

### 4. Experience fire

We are very keen on promoting the importance of the natural world and access to the elements in our childcare settings, as can be seen in the increasing mentions of playing outside in good practice documents and guidelines. But while we don't seem to have a problem with earth, air and water we do seem to have a problem with fire. In fact, of all the forms of potentially 'risky' play this is probably the one that raises the most concerns

and is almost always absent in Irish settings. But this is not the case in other cultures around the world.

In the Scandinavian and Nordic countries in particular it is common to see fire pits in the outside spaces of childcare settings. Fire is a particularly important cultural element in these countries which celebrate just about anything you can think of by lighting candles and setting fire to things. Where we have a very negative attitude to fire, seeing it as destructive and harmful, the Scandinavians see it as a vital, life-giving element that should be respected but not feared. It is interesting to note that instances of deliberate fire damage by teenagers in Sweden, for example, are virtually nil whereas in Ireland and the UK fire damage is common. At least part of the reason for that is that Scandinavian children know not only how to light a fire but how to control it and how to put it out. A significant number of arson attacks by teenagers here are actually fires that simply get out of control.

Access to fire is another common element of the adventure playground movement and there are numerous courses available in the UK on fire play. Easier to access though are a number of useful guidance notes on how to do this including one produced by Martin King-Sheard of Play Wales the national organisation for play in Wales (see below).

Fire is unique – there is nothing like it for the noise it makes or how it looks or the obvious power it has – and that fascinates children who want to experience it. A properly constructed and located fire pit can allow them to experience this in a controlled way and at the same time enhance the outdoor experience in a great variety of ways, especially during the darker and colder winter months.

Cooking around a fire pit is very different to making biscuits indoors and cooking them in the oven – in this case we can actually see things cooking in front of our eyes and changing from one thing into another. Story telling is also a completely different experience when huddled around a warm, crackling fire adding to a unique story telling atmosphere. In fact, the most important element of all in a communal fire pit is the sense of gathering and the light and heat it produces, all of which makes for a welcoming atmosphere. After all, when we visit friends homes at winter time we don't gather around the fridge, do we?

So there you have it – four risky play experiences that will enhance our children's experiences during play. All we have to do now is overcome the greatest barrier to risky play ... and that is the unwillingness of us adults to take risks ourselves.

Marc Armitage  
Independent Children's Playworking Consultant

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### **Bibliography and Useful Reading**

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Martin King-Sheard (2010) 'Using Fire as a Resource in Playwork Settings: Ideas and Guidelines to include consideration of Risk-Benefit Assessment' [available on-line at <http://www.playwales.org.uk>]

A useful guide to the European Playground Safety Guidelines for playground equipment at surfacing can be found on the Wicksteed website [www.wicksteed.co.uk](http://www.wicksteed.co.uk)

Produced jointly with the Play Inspection Company 'An Essential Guide to BS EN1176 and BS EN1177' (revised 2008) [www.playinspections.co.uk](http://www.playinspections.co.uk)