

POSITION STATEMENT

Risky Play for Children in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

This statement provides the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand context for the ASDP (Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics) endorsement of the Canadian Paediatric Society Position Statement on risky play.

Adventurous and risky play—activities that involve challenge, exploration, and uncertainty—are fundamental to children’s growth, health, and well-being. For children, engaging in what adults label as “risky” may be experienced as exciting, brave, adventurous, or an opportunity for experimentation. Such child initiated play nurtures resilience, confidence, curiosity, and problem-solving skills. Recognising children’s perspectives and these positive constructs are essential for creating environments that support their developmental goals while respecting safety (‘as safe as necessary’ rather than ‘as safe as possible’).

We explore cultural contexts, the importance of risky play for children of all abilities and the importance of viewing risky play as a nuanced, goal-directed process that promotes health, development and positive mental health. Children’s experiences of risk are often multi-dimensional and adults should consider the benefits and risks in a balanced, thoughtful way.

Historical and Cultural Context of Play

Historically, Australian and New Zealand children played outdoors in natural environments involving climbing, exploring, and risk-taking – activities seen as vital to their development. Indigenous land-based play incorporated traditional practices that involved challenge and bravery, deepening cultural identity and resilience.

Over time, urbanisation and safety concerns have led to more controlled, sanitised play environments, often limiting children’s opportunities for adventure. Similarly to the Canadian experience, children in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are also spending less time in unstructured outdoor play, and more time indoors, often on screens, or in structured activities. However, contemporary research advocates reintroducing elements of challenge and risk that align with children’s curiosity and natural inclinations to explore and experiment.

Children's Perspectives and Positive Constructs of Risk

From children's viewpoints, what adults call "risky" play can be experienced as:

- **Adventure:** the thrill of exploring new environments, climbing a tall tree, or navigating a log.
- **Bravery and Courage:** attempting something slightly beyond their comfort zone, feeling proud of overcoming fear.
- **Experimentation:** testing their physical limits, trying new movements, or developing new skills.
- **Challenge and Mastery:** working through difficult tasks, experiencing success, and gaining confidence.
- **Independence and Autonomy:** making decisions and managing risks for themselves, fostering a sense of control and competence.

Children often see risky play as a goal-directed pursuit—an opportunity to learn, grow, and self-actualise. Their engagement is driven by intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and a desire for mastery, rather than reckless abandon. All of these experiences can have a social aspect, with mastery and excitement shared with peers.

Benefits of Risky Play: A Nuanced, Goal-Directed View

Developmental and Growth Benefits

- **Physical Skills:** Climbing, jumping, balancing, and exploring natural terrains promote strength, coordination, and spatial awareness.
- **Cognitive Skills:** Risk-taking fosters problem-solving, planning, and decision-making.
- **Emotional Resilience:** Facing fears and managing uncertainty builds confidence, courage, and emotional regulation.
- **Social Skills:** Negotiating shared risks, cooperation, and leadership develop social competence.
- **Identity and Self-Concept:** Successfully engaging in challenging activities enhances self-esteem and a sense of bravery.

Balancing Benefits and Risks

Children and adults alike weigh the value of risky activities against potential risks and costs. This process is often dimensional and nuanced, involving:

- **Perceived Utility:** How beneficial is this activity for the child's growth or goal achievement?
- **Context and Environment:** Is the environment appropriate, supervised, and adaptable?
- **Child's Developmental Stage:** What risks are suitable for the child's age, abilities, and temperament?
- **Cultural Values:** Do cultural practices and beliefs support or encourage certain kinds of risk-taking?

Adults are encouraged to adopt a risk-benefit analysis approach—supporting children's goals of exploration and mastery while managing hazards proportionally.

Risks and Disadvantages

While risky play offers multiple developmental benefits, it is not without concerns:

- **Injury Risks:** Fractures, bruises, or more serious injuries can occur, necessitating thoughtful supervision. As in the Canadian context, In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand play based injuries are usually minor.
- **Parental Anxiety and Overprotection:** Fears about safety can lead to overly restrictive environments.
- **Inequity and Access:** Children from diverse cultural backgrounds or with disabilities may face barriers to engaging in risky play, especially if environments are not inclusive.

- **Cultural and Disability Considerations:** Indigenous play practices involve risk and bravery; children with disabilities require adaptive opportunities that respect their developmental needs and cultural backgrounds.

Children's Perspectives on the Impact of Risky Play

Children's own perceptions of risky play are goal-oriented and focused on growth. They often seek activities that challenge them, push their boundaries, involve their peers, and lead to feelings of achievement and independence. Such activities support:

- **Self-Discovery:** Understanding their capabilities and limits.
- **Courage and Resilience:** Learning to face fears, recover from setbacks, and persevere.
- **Goal-Directed Learning:** Activities are often driven by goals—climbing to see further, crossing a log to reach a destination, balancing to master a skill.
- **Competence:** Developing a sense of physical mastery, physical and mental wellbeing and connection with others.

Children's engagement in risky play is dynamic and context-dependent, with their perceptions and motivations shaping their experience.

Implications for Practice and Policy

From a developmental paediatric perspective, environments and practices should:

- **Support Goal-Directed Play:** Facilitate activities where children can pursue their own and peer group goals, with appropriate supervision.
- **Balance Safety and Growth:** Manage hazards thoughtfully, allowing children to experience manageable risks that promote learning.
- **Promote Cultural Relevance:** Incorporate indigenous and cultural practices that involve challenge and resilience.
- **Ensure Inclusivity:** Adapt environments and activities to enable children with disabilities to participate in meaningful, goal-oriented risky play.
- **Educate Caregivers:** Foster understanding that risk is a necessary component of growth, and that children are capable of assessing and managing risks with guidance.

Conclusion

ASDP's mission is to partner with families and communities, to foster equitable opportunities for children that promote life-long wellbeing.

Risky play embodies adventure, bravery, experimentation, and challenge—core aspects of childhood that support goal-directed development. We endorse the Canadian Position Statement on risky play in our context, to foster resilient, confident and capable children in Australia and New Zealand.

References

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