

From an article written by Teresa Gonsoski, MA in Human Development

Providing Opportunities for Risk-Taking

The Importance of Creating a "Yes" Environment for Children

When was the last time you took a risk? How did you feel? When children take risks and succeed, they feel proud and self-confident. When things don't go as planned, they feel frustrated, learn that things don't always happen as predicted, and maybe even decide to try it again.

Risk is a vital component of children's play. It allows children to be challenged, to face uncertainty, to problem-solve, to work with others to find a solution, and to think outside the box. All of these qualities serve to expand children's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional abilities. They become the building blocks for later learning and managing of experiences, both throughout school and as an adult.

Allowing children to take risks in their play gives them the opportunity to develop the use of their judgment. When a child starts to climb the side of the play structure, our first instinct might be to say, "Don't go up that high." In taking away the experience from the child, however, he never learns what might be unsafe about climbing. He also never learns to balance his feet, grip tightly, and steady himself if he slips. He definitely doesn't get the opportunity to figure out how to climb down after going up. He may later find himself in a situation—perhaps his friends are climbing a tree in the neighborhood, out of view of an adult's eye—in which he doesn't feel comfortable participating because he never learned to climb. Or maybe he does climb and falls because he never learned how to do it!

Risk-taking can also occur in activities that are less gross motor-centered. A child can take a risk and explore goeey sensory materials. Perhaps a child who has never wanted to get her feet wet finally does, shoes and all. Risks can happen when exploring real tools, such as scissors or a mallet, that are a bit beyond the child's developmental level. When the child decides to give it a try, even when the adults present don't think she has the capability to do it, she is taking a risk. When we support children in taking risks, we give them the chance to learn something new about themselves, their physical abilities, and their thought processes.

Allowing children to take appropriate risks in their play gives them the opportunity to develop the use of their judgment. In the event that a child does get hurt, it's important to remember that scrapes and bruises are a part of childhood. All children experience these small injuries. Children are still small, and if they fall, they're not so far from the ground. Their bodies are resilient, and a bump doesn't stop them for long. When a child is learning, adults are nearby to comfort, give first aid, and encourage the child to think about what happened and perhaps try again.

There are ways to promote risk in play that don't involve gross motor. Giving children opportunities to experience messy play, whether it's with water, mud, or paint, allows children to take risks through experimentation of materials. Letting a child get wet or muddy shows that you trust them to manage themselves and use the materials in a way that is comfortable for their bodies. (It also shows you understand that hands, feet, and clothing are washable!)

Giving children opportunities to experience messy play is an important form of risk-taking. Including open-ended materials is another way to promote risk. Simple wooden blocks, loose parts such as craft sticks and cardboard tubes, and costume items such as scarves and fabric remnants give children the chance to experiment with how they can be manipulated and to apply their creativity in new ways. Children can take risks by trying out different ideas, seeing if they work, and trying again if it doesn't work the first time. Items from nature, such as sticks, rocks, or pinecones, can also be used in this way.

When we allow children to take risks, not only do we give them opportunities to experience how much we trust them, we also allow them to learn how to trust themselves when trying out new things. Children can have safe experiences with risk-taking if we're doing our jobs to guide them.