

Risk-Taking vs. Playing it Safe

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Finding a Balance

On the one hand, it's a parent's job to protect a child from harm. On the other hand, children need to explore their world in order to understand their world. If we over-protect, we limit their ability to learn, we may teach them to be timid and fearful, and we may actually put them at greater risk. "If we round every corner, and eliminate every pokey bit, then the first time that kids come in contact with anything not made of round plastic, they'll hurt themselves." (Ted Talk by Gever Tulley)

If we allow children to take small, manageable risks with us there to coach them through, they learn more about life, feel bold and empowered, and learn an internal sense of when a situation carries a potential risk and requires that they be more cautious to stay safe.

Levels of Risk: What Needs to Be Child-Proofed and What can be Explored?

When evaluating new environments and new activities, it helps me to think about different levels of risk and label it. This guides me in thinking about how much child-proofing and supervision I need to do. It also influences how I talk with a child about the situation. MOST things fall in the green or yellow zone. Very few things fall in the red zone.

Level	Definition	What Parents Can Do	How to Communicate to Child
Green	Safe – no worries.	Relax! Sit back and let your child discover the world! No need to limit or guide their play.	When your child looks to you for input: put on a big smile, nod, verbally encourage exploration.
Yellow	Some risk, but really the worst that might happen is minor injury to person (bump or bruise) or property (mess to be cleaned up or non-valuable item broken).	If you feel comfortable, allow your child to explore these things as they learn about their world. Observe them at play. Offer suggestions or demonstrate new skills as needed, but then back off to let them practice. Respond calmly to bumps and bruises.	Look positive but thoughtful, lean forward to show you're paying extra attention, use a gentle voice to suggest how to behave: "gentle touch" or "it's fragile, so hold it carefully" or "yes, but watch your feet." <i>Ask them</i> what they need to do to stay safe.
Orange	Risk of harm to child – injury that would require medical treatment.	When child encounters these situations under your supervision, talk with them about the risks so they know they need to use caution. Tell them <i>specifically</i> what they need to do to stay safe. These hazards should be removed from places where the child is left unsupervised.	Look concerned (not scared) and attentive. Stand up and move closer. Use a strong voice to say what the risk is and model what they need to do. "The oven is hot. Move over there" or "that would be a big fall – go that way" or "it's not safe to run near cars – hold my hand." You can also ask <i>them</i> to describe the risk
Red	Situation could turn from harmless to life-threatening in one unsupervised moment.	Remove hazards (e.g. don't leave out poisonous items, sharp knives), block them off (e.g. fenced swimming pools, locks on second-story windows) or closely supervise the child (e.g. when playing with a ball near a busy road). Rules should be clearly explained, non-negotiable and followed every time.	In situations of imminent danger: Look <i>intensely</i> alert. Move toward them. Use your strongest, most urgent, non-negotiable voice, and as few words as possible to say what to do. "Stop!" "Back away!" "Hands up!" Remove them from the situation if needed. After they're out of harm's way, <i>then</i> explain

Kid's Favorite Risky Behaviors

No matter what we do to safety-proof, "Kids are always going to figure out how to do the most dangerous thing they can." (Gever Tulley)
Ellen Sandseter developed 5 categories of risk that seem to especially appeal to kids in play. For each, the child has a sense of possible risk, and feeling *just barely* in control, but managing to stay in control through a challenge. This gives a thrill and a sense of power / competence.

Risk	Examples of what kids enjoy	What Can You Do to Honor this Impulse? (while you supervise & teach)
Great Heights	Climbing trees, furniture, anything else to get that "king of the mountain" thrill.	Let them enjoy: the big slide and tall climber at the playground. Climbing a tree. Hiking up a steep hill. Balancing on a curb or wall. Jumping off a wall.
Rapid Speeds	Swings, merry-go-rounds, slides, bikes, roller coasters. Anything fast.	Take them for a ride in a bike trailer or wagon, or let them ride a bike or scooter. Push them high on a swing. Spin them in an office chair or on a merry go round.
Dangerous tools / Elements	Fire, hammers, knives, guns, power tools, chemicals, big sticks, fireworks.	Let them use real tools you use: a table knife to cut food with, a small hammer, a glue gun, a rake or shovel. Teach them how to safely roast a marshmallow.
Rough & Tumble Play	Wrestling, play-fighting, chasing, pushing, pinching, "sword" fighting.	Wrestling! Holding hands and swinging them up high. Chase games. Tickle games. Pillow fights or battles with pool noodles or other soft objects.
Disappearing / Getting Lost	Hide and seek. Sneaking away from parents. Running ahead of parents.	Hide and seek. Play red light / green light so you know they'll stop when you tell them to. Then let them sometimes run ahead of you in a park. Give them space.

Benefits of Risky Play

It's easy to look at risky play that could lead to bumps and bruises and think of it as "foolish." But what are the benefits?

Kids learn that they can get hurt, and they need to be careful to avoid injury: They need to learn that some situations are dangerous and learn there are limits to what the human body can do and not get broken. A scrape or bruise motivates them to keep themselves safe.

Kids learn skills they'll need as an adult: At some point, kids need to learn to confidently and safely use dangerous tools. They need to learn to move slowly into something, testing the waters as they go, and learning that sometimes "it's OK to say no when your friends say go."

Persistence / overcoming challenges: Children learn when they push themselves to the edge of their capabilities. "Risk teaches children how to fail and try again, test their limits and boundaries, become resilient and acquire coping skills" (Hammond)

Responsibility: "Children take more responsibility for themselves... We do children a dis-service by trying to eliminate risk... It's good for children to be exposed to the possibility things might go wrong because that's how they learn to cope with challenges." (Tom Gill)

Emotional regulation and social negotiation: Risk taking helps children "regulate fear and anger... youngsters dose themselves with manageable quantities of fear and practice keeping their head while experiencing fear. In rough and tumble play, they may experience anger [at a playmate], but to continue the fun, they must overcome it." (Gray)

More Info: The Overprotected Kid by Rosin. www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/ Risky Play: Why Children Love & Need It, Peter Gray. www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201404/risky-play-why-children-love-it-and-need-it; 5 Dangerous Things. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn_awAPYIGc Overprotecting? www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BLCqMnIOQA