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Alliance for Childhood
P.O. Box 5758
Annapolis, MD 21403
202-643-8242
www.allianceforchildhood.org
Risk has become a four-letter word in the U.S.—something to protect children from at all costs. Yet children throughout the ages played freely in the outdoors with their peers, usually without adult supervision once they reached a certain age. They took on as much adventure as they felt ready for. Injuries occurred, but when we have asked adults to review their play memories, they can think of few children they knew who suffered any serious harm. Bumps and bruises, yes, and even an occasional broken arm or leg, but rarely anything worse than that. And while no one wants to see a child injured, the benefits of experiencing risk need to be weighed against the harm done by never learning to cope with it. The latter can be truly dangerous.

Facing risk helps children assess the world around them and their place in it. Children love to see how high they can climb on a ladder, a tree, or a jungle gym. Over time they see their abilities grow, and they become ever more confident about stretching their boundaries and taking appropriate chances. They also learn about their limits and the consequences of going too far beyond their limits. As they grow older they apply these lessons in a variety of real life situations.

It is time to rethink risk and see its benefits as well as its difficulties. Not long ago, after all, “play” was also viewed as a four-letter word and widely disparaged. Then articles began to appear in major newspapers and magazines; films featuring play were aired on public television, and public opinion began to shift. Contributing to the change in outlook about play are the many recent studies documenting the value of play. The European Early Childhood Education Research Journal began a recent editorial with these words: “The proliferation of the number of studies on play in the past decade is remarkable and an interesting cultural phenomenon by itself.” It goes on to say, “The various benefits of play for children are beyond doubt, which is supported by an interesting number of empirical studies.”

Despite so much attention to play, there is still much to be done to restore it to childhood, including in early education. Surveys indicate that today’s children have far less outdoor playtime than their parents did, and that the vast majority of parents recognize this as a problem. They want children to have greater opportunities for play, but urban parents, in particular, express a need for supervision of the children while they are outside playing. It is vitally important that these issues be addressed. However, it is also time to redeem “risk” and make it an acceptable part of childhood again.

Yet allowing—and even encouraging—children to engage in adventurous play poses a problem. How do children learn to risk-assess if adults are always present and doing it for them? The Alliance for Childhood found one solution in the profession of playwork in the United Kingdom. Playworkers understand the nature of play and help create spaces for play. But they hold back from directing children’s play or even intervening with it unless it is clearly called for. Playwork is described in more detail throughout this publication.

Any adult encouraging children’s play needs to differentiate between extreme risk and reasonable risk. For example, one would not let a three-year-old play with an open flame, but one does teach scouts how to build campfires in safe and secure ways. It is not fire per se that is the danger, but a lack of understanding of its risks and how to manage them. Likewise one would not want a six-year-old to cross a log that is stretched over a deep ravine. But learning to cross a log over a stream that does not have a dangerous drop-off is a regular part of the lives of elementary-age children who play freely in the
outdoors. In other words, not all risks are the same. Much depends on the age, experiences, and cognitive and physical abilities of the child, as well as the potential consequences of an accident.

Overall, there are reasonable risks for children of certain ages and abilities to take, and there are more extreme risks that can cause serious injuries and even death. Three levels of risk are identified in Chapter Two. As children develop skills through play, they can master more complex challenges. But individual differences in children’s skill development and assessment of risk during play differ widely across chronological periods. Fortunately, most children have an innate ability to assess risk, as we discuss in this publication. With opportunity to practice they become skilled in taking risks. Opportunity to master increasingly challenging play is essential for safety in play.

This publication is intended as an introduction to the topic of adventurous play and risk. It is not a detailed guide for understanding risk for every age group or circumstance. More detailed guides on this topic are definitely needed.

We begin, in Chapter One, with a discussion of why it is so urgent to continue restoring active play in children’s lives. That chapter provides the fundamental context for understanding the essential role of risk in play and why children need a free-ranging childhood.

In Chapter Two, we describe developmentally appropriate risk in play and why it is so important. Chapter Three looks at how risk in play is handled in adventure playgrounds, both here and abroad. Chapter Four explores the relatively low rates of injuries associated with adventure playgrounds, and Chapter Five looks at basic ways to assess risk in play settings. Finally, Chapter Six brings in the voices of children and suggests next steps.

Throughout, we include results from a survey of play experts and adventure-playground directors. It was commissioned by the Alliance for Childhood and conducted by Halcyon Reese-Learned, Ph.D., who was Executive Director of the Houston Adventure Play Association for three years, beginning in 1992. The Association conducted observational research on, and ran, three adventure playgrounds—two on Houston public school campuses and one at a Houston Parks and Recreation site.

Adventure playgrounds are relatively rare in the U.S. but plentiful in other countries. It is difficult to find solid statistics on the playgrounds, but several web sites state that there are about 1,000 adventure playgrounds in Europe, particularly in Scandinavia, Switzerland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Japan has a significant number, as well.

Adventure playgrounds contain varying levels of risk ranging from sand, water, and zip lines to construction zones where children build two- and three-story huts with hammers and nails. The greater the risk level, the more likely the playground will be staffed by playworkers. The playgrounds are primarily frequented by children from five to 12 or 14 years of age. They are described in some detail throughout this publication. A delightful film showing scenes from an adventure playground in England is available on YouTube.

Adventure playgrounds generally foster more risk than conventional playgrounds. They also keep some records on accident rates, lawsuits, insurance issues, and related matters. They provide a sort of laboratory setting for understanding risk in children’s play.

Halcyon Reese-Learned’s research counters a number of common myths. For example, contrary to popular assumptions:

◆ Risky play—in contrast to hazardous play—does not lead to high accident rates.
◆ Parks districts that have adventure playgrounds are not beset with lawsuits.
◆ Parks districts that have adventure playgrounds do not pay higher insurance rates.

We have also gathered and listed in the back resources from the U.S. and abroad that shed light on the benefits of risk and risk management, as well as information on play and playwork. There are also extensive endnotes that provide valuable resources.

We hope this publication will help professionals, parents, and the broader public become more understanding of children’s need for developmentally appropriate risk in play—and more confident about offering them opportunities for dealing with risk.
Children’s free play is full of risk-taking, a fact that frightens many adults who have become risk-averse. Yet many experts feel that this aversion is excessive and even harmful. They point to children’s natural capacity for risk-assessment which needs to be developed rather than suppressed in childhood. This publication looks at the value of risk from many angles, including interviews with directors of adventure playgrounds that encourage adventurous play yet have very low accident rates. The central conclusion: Give children genuine risk and they rise to it. They are then prepared to meet life’s challenges.

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The Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children’s healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living. Current campaigns include the restoration of play in children’s lives and of experiential, play-based learning in preschools and kindergartens, and the development of the Decade for Childhood: 2012-2022.

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THE VALUE OF RISK IN CHILDREN’S PLAY

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