

# Risk-taking, pretend play, and resilience in early childhood

Jacob, age 3, loves to climb. He often goes off on his own to different areas of the playground at his preschool. His teacher, Ms. Patti, knows that Jacob likes to test his limits on small climbing structures, tree stumps, and the wooden seat of the picnic table.

Typically, Jacob climbs and jumps off into the mulch. Ms. Patti has watched Jacob do this task multiple times and land safely on his feet each time. But today Jacob climbs to the second level of the big climbing structure and looks down over the edge. Ms. Patti watches Jacob carefully, a bit nervous about his new goal.

She starts to walk toward him considering whether to caution him or to stand ready to help if needed. Jacob jumps and lands on his feet with outstretched arms for balance. He looks surprised, but then smiles up at his teacher who has just watched him take his first leap off the big climbing structure.



During the early childhood years, children learn to recognize their own abilities, likes and dislikes, and strengths. By allowing children to explore self-imposed risks in outdoor environments, programs and teachers can support children's discovery and recognition of these personal attributes.

Physical activity and pretend play during outdoor time offers the greatest opportunity for children to take risks to find their strengths and abilities, and to recognize their fears. Outdoor play also encourages children to engage in the pretend play that invites social comparison and the discovery of individual likes and dislikes.

Although playgrounds are an essential environment for learning in early education, many in the United States think otherwise, identifying only chaos and the danger of physical injury.

## Perspectives outside the United States

Perhaps it's worth considering the perspectives of early care and education professionals, developmental experts, and families of children outside the United States for different ideas and recommendations.

Specifically, Australia and the United States have both differences and similarities in guidelines (and licensing regulations) for physical activity in early care and education programs and elementary schools.

Through an analysis of research on playground design criteria, we find that both countries address topics including safety regulations, proper materials and space, teacher supervision, children's risk-taking behavior, pretend play, and activity planning. Each issue impacts the whole child across all developmental domains. And by not engaging in outdoor play, children's capacities for learning social cognition, fine and gross motor skills, and problem-solving



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skills are likely to diminish (Bergen 2002).

In Australia, the Department of Health and Ageing physical activity guidelines recommend that children ages 1 to 5 years should be physically active for at least three hours per school day (Little and Sweller 2014; Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing 2010). To U.S. professionals, this amount of physical activity may seem excessive for children of such young ages, but this amount of playtime allows children to experience, discover, and learn about themselves and the world (Bundy et al. 2009).

## ONLY POSITIVE OUTCOMES WERE FOUND.

In the United States, on the other hand, early childhood education programs are more likely to focus on classroom learning. The emphasis is on academics and a lack of artistic activities and creative learning involving children's imaginations. According to the Washington State Full-Day Kindergarten Guide (2016), children age 5 and younger have only about 45 minutes to 1 hour of physical activity per school day. Texas minimum standards recommend 60-90 minutes of outdoor play on typical days. This minimal time dedicated to such an important aspect of learning and overall health can lead to negative outcomes physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

The time that children engage in physical outdoor play can be enriched through the amount of space, structures, elements, and materials that are available. Further, within the outdoor environment, additional factors that can affect a child's play include the type of playground, loose and stationary parts, facilitators, teacher responsibilities, and most important, safety.

**Playground types.** Different types of playgrounds provide different opportunities of learning and growth for children. Traditional playgrounds are the most common and most used design. A traditional playground is composed of fixed structures such as climbing frames and slides, and follows a generic design pattern.

The traditional design allows for less pretend play because each piece of equipment can be used only in a limited number of ways (Oke and Middle 2016). With limited use of equipment comes inevitable boredom. Research by Hyndman (2015) suggests that by preventing boredom, a program can reduce the number of behavioral missteps that could cause injury or provoke bullying and therefore increase overall child well-being.

On the other end of the playground spectrum are adventure playgrounds, which are built to encourage children to create, arrange, and build the playground themselves. Because they often consist of old tires, scrap lumber, and crates, they are sometimes viewed as unsightly and inherently unsafe, requiring maximum child supervision. However, they have the most potential for pretend play because children are not limited to what they can do (Oke and Middle 2016).

Nature playgrounds, the newest design of playgrounds, involve nature elements such as plants, dirt, rocks, and water. This focus on sensory materials encourages children to use their imagination to the fullest (Oke and Middle 2016).

**Loose parts.** These materials include car tires, hay bales, empty containers, wheels, lumber, stumps, and cardboard boxes—materials that are flexible, open-ended, and simple. Because loose parts have no designated purpose or place, they provide opportunities for children to engage their imaginations to use the parts in new and inventive ways (Bundy et al. 2009). Every outdoor play experience offers children



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a new opportunity to build, explore, construct, negotiate, and engage with other children.

Bundy and colleagues (2009) describe a school in Sydney, Australia, with loose parts added to its traditional playground. Teachers were encouraged to observe changes in types of play in the children, and only positive outcomes were found. Teachers reported the following:

- more active play as opposed to sedentary play in certain children;
- more social play, meaning children that did not normally play together were negotiating ideas and roles with peers in their pretend play;
- more creative play because of the materials provided; and
- more opportunity for the children to engage with materials and less opportunity to engage in conflicts over possession of previously limited materials, enabling teachers to feel more settled in their supervisory roles.

Consider this scenario:

Emily, age 5, walks to the sandbox to play with the single shovel and bucket available. She digs for about three minutes but then becomes interested in materials in the open grass area—tires, hay bales, and thin wooden planks.

Curious, she runs over to the new materials. She finds her classmates Garrett, Cole, and Sally talking about what they are going to do with all the new materials, but they can't agree on one. Quiet Emily speaks up: "Let's build a fort." Her classmates buy in to the idea.

Together the four children build a fort with a tire tunnel entry, hay bale walls, and a wood plank roof.

**Stationary parts.** These items are monkey bars, climbing frames with ladders, and swings. Because they are familiar to most people, they may offer a greater sense of safety. Unfortunately, familiarity invites complacency in supervision and boredom in children. These single-use parts dictate their use (a swing goes back and forth). Inventive children may challenge this single use (batting a swing with a stick, for example), thus inviting greater risk and potential for injury than expected.

**Facilitators.** These are playhouses, cars, pirate ships, and ride-on-toys that aid in pretend play. Some researchers such as Talbot and Frost (1989) argue that if the facilitators are overly defined, the

magical state of mind that children acquire during pretend play is gone.

**Resilience.** This ability to bounce back from adversity or failure is a social-emotional skill that has lifelong implications. Bundy and colleagues (2009) found that resilience increases and children are more likely to try a task again if an initial failure is followed immediately with another opportunity—and the necessary support—to attempt the task again. Essentially, teachers allowed children more trial-and-error time and more time for problem-solving before intervening for safety reasons.

The research found that frequently the teacher's fear of risk generalized to a greater reluctance in allowing children to make mistakes at all. This reluctance is unfortunate because early childhood is a prime time to be able to make mistakes with little consequence in return for optimal learning opportunities.

**Teacher responsibility.** Both the type of playground and the parts available have impact on children's development across domains. However, the most common and most important theme that emerges from the research is the child risk-taking and teacher responsibility.

Little and Sweller (2014) found that having natural elements in the outdoor environment provides a certain element of risk that allows children to express themselves, explore, and learn about their bodies' capabilities. Taking risk in play gives children the opportunity to test their own limits and discover new skills in themselves. With opportunities to practice



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skills like kicking, running, throwing, and climbing, children can master important motor skills that they will continue to practice later in life.

But with the recognition that risk-taking activities are important, teacher observation, knowledge of individual children, and active supervision are essential. In the research, teachers agreed that natural elements in the playground that invite risk in play would benefit the child. However, the teachers also recognized that safety regulations—both those specific to the program and those mandated by licensing agencies—sometimes prevent them from encouraging the physical activities that build strength, agility, balance, and stamina.

## SINGLE-USE EQUIPMENT LIMITS DISCOVERY AND PRETEND PLAY.

Hyndman (2015) reports similar teacher concerns related to teacher preparation and large-motor outdoor activities. Old, traditional, single-use equipment limits discovery and pretend play. Restricted and tightly scheduled time limits children's interactions and truncates play scripts—once roles are agreed upon and play begins, it's time to transition back indoors. Lack of regard for developmentally appropriate differences—a 3-year-old's skills are not the same as those of a 5-year-old—impedes skill development and success.

Both supervision and opportunities for self-challenging activities must reflect the individual child, the group, and the developmental skills already mastered and the next logical skill level.

Hyndman further suggests that adult over-protection during outdoor play could potentially contribute to children's risk anxiety, a loss in confidence when presented with overcoming a risk-taking task, and the negative results for cognitive development due to reduction in active play.

### **Observe, reflect, act**

In the opening scenario, Jacob consistently demonstrates his ability to leap from high places. Some children in Jacob's group may have greater ability,

while some may yet be unable to balance hopping from a curb to the ground. Ms. Patti's task, for all the children in the group, is to **observe** what the children can do and are interested in doing, to **reflect** on how she might best support the children, and then to **act**—with materials and appropriate levels of supervision—to help children succeed.

Misconceptions about the impact of outdoor play on child development continue to exist. Many observers fail to notice that when programs restrict outdoor play, children are lacking not only in physical health but in mental health as well. The opportunity of risk in high quality outdoor play allows children to discover and appraise their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional abilities—skills that will prove pivotal in adult resilience and success.

Outdoor play, including children's activities that build resilience through considered risk, leads to more creativity in pretend play, more productive problem-solving, and overall increased competence across developmental domains.

Children learn and discover personal abilities and attributes, likes and dislikes, and demonstrate their strengths in different developmental domains to solve problems. Increased teacher competence in the area of risk and resilience has the potential to lower teacher stress levels related to children's safety and to improve communication with parents on the positive developmental impacts of risk-taking activities.

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## About the author

McKenzie Emery is a recent graduate of Texas State University and completed research on risky play in outdoor environments as part of her senior coursework in child and family development. ■