

# EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW



## ABOUT RISKY PLAY

### Why children need it, what it does for them, and how to make it happen for families and educators

#### So... what IS risky play?

Risky play is exploratory, challenging play with unpredictable outcomes. It is child-led, it wakes up all the senses and leads to some of the richest learning and development a child can experience.

As an adult can you recall: climbing that tree, racing down the hill, splashing in the muddy puddle, building a wobbly tower, and watching it fall. From a child's perspective this is not dangerous, it is adventurous, brave, exciting, and deeply satisfying.

#### Eight types of risky play – all important!

- Heights and climbing
- Speed and movement
- Tools and materials
- Play near supervised elements like water or fire
- Rough and tumble play
- Some independence from adults
- Jumping and impact
- Watching others take risks (vicarious play)

#### Why does it matter?

The first eight years of life are a critical window for children's learning and development. During this time are children are wired for challenge and curious. They also want to push limits, and the skills they build now lay the foundation for healthy decision-making and independence for the rest of their lives.

We know risky play has been quietly disappearing from children's lives over recent decades. Adults worry, while daily schedules fill up and children spend more time indoors, often on screens. But the research is clear: children need challenge, uncertainty, and a little bit of thrill to truly thrive.

**“The real risk to children's futures is not having opportunities to engage in risky play as children.”**

#### What does risky play do for children?

##### Body Power

- Strength and coordination
- Balance and spatial awareness
- Fine and gross motor skills
- Healthy bones and muscles

##### Big Brain Gains

- Problem-solving and planning
- Decision-making skills
- Risk literacy for life
- Critical thinking

##### Emotional Strength

- Resilience and confidence
- Courage to face fears
- Management of uncertainty
- Healthy self-esteem

##### Social Smarts

- Cooperation and leadership
- Supportive friendships
- Negotiation skills
- Shared joy and pride



**“Scary makes me happy.  
I like the feeling.”**

**- Declan, age 4 years**



## Risk vs Hazard – not the same thing!

A hazard is a hidden danger a child cannot see or manage – a rotten branch, broken glass, an unstable structure. Remove or avoid these.

A risk is a challenge a child can assess and manage for themselves – climbing a tree, balancing a log, running fast. Keep and promote these!

## How to make it happen

Whether you are at home or in an outdoor setting, here are your top tips for risky play:

- Observe and only step in if needed – children are more capable than we think. Watch first and then decide.
- Get outside, go natural – parks, gardens, bush, beach – nature offers dynamic challenge by default.
- Offer loose parts – sticks, rocks, logs, sand, and mud are excellent risky play opportunities.
- Accept that small bumps – grazes and minor falls are part of learning. They are okay.
- Ask, do not tell – “What are you trying to do?” builds children’s risk literacy skills.
- Weigh benefits against risks – ask: what does my child gain? Is this a hazard or a healthy risk?
- Check your own worry – parental anxiety is real, but ask: is this danger real, or felt?
- Be inclusive – adapt for all abilities. Every child deserves risky play opportunities.

## Risky play belongs to every child

Children with disabilities benefit from adapted opportunities that respect their learning and developmental needs. First Nations communities have always understood that challenge, bravery, and connection to Country are at the heart of children’s play – and this wisdom enriches all children’s experiences.

## Want to read more? Here is where this information comes from

This fact sheet draws on two authoritative position statements on risky play, developed by experts in medicine, education, playground design and child development across Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Jones, R. et al. (2025). A Risky Play Position Statement for Young Australian Children. Play Australia

Access at: [https://www.playaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/PA\\_RiskyPlayPositionStatement\\_web.pdf](https://www.playaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/PA_RiskyPlayPositionStatement_web.pdf)

Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics (ASDP) (2025). Risky Play for Children in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand – Position Statement. ASPD.

Access at: [asdp.au – Risky Play Position Statement \(PDF\)](https://asdp.au/RiskyPlayPositionStatement(PDF))



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