

RISKY PLAY

in Early Childhood Education Settings

RESOURCE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS



This resource draws on two key authoritative documents: the Risky Play Position Statement for Young Australian Children (2025) and the Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics (ASDP) Risky Play Position Statement (2025). Together they provide a strong, evidence-based framework to guide practice in early childhood education settings.

What Is Risky Play?

The Risky Play Position Statement for Young Australian Children defines risky play as play that is exploratory and challenging with often unpredictable outcomes. It is child-initiated, physically engages all the senses, and promotes positive learning and development outcomes.

The Position Statement identifies refers to research that identifies eight categories of risky play:

Category	Examples
Play with heights	Climbing trees, play equipment, rock faces, logs
Play with speed	Running downhill, riding bikes, rolling, swinging fast
Play with dangerous tools/materials	Sticks, woodworking tools, hammers, sand, mud
Play near dangerous elements	Water, fire (with appropriate supervision)
Rough and tumble play	Wrestling, chasing, tumbling with peers
Play away from adult supervision	Child-led exploration at an appropriate distance
Play with impact	Jumping, landing, falling on safe surfaces
Vicarious play	Watching others take risks and experiencing the thrill

Importantly, risky play is fundamentally different from hazardous play. Risky play involves manageable uncertainty; hazardous play exposes children to dangers they are unlikely to perceive or manage

Why Is Risky Play Important?

The Position Statement highlights that within Australia, risky play has significantly diminished from children's lives over the last two decades. This is driven by heightened adult anxiety about injury outcomes and increasing safety regulations — not by evidence that risky play causes serious harm.

The ASDP Position Statement notes that children's engagement in risky play is goal-directed and intrinsically motivated. Children seek challenge to learn, grow and self-actualise — not out of recklessness. Their perspectives must be central to how we design and facilitate play environments.

The first eight years of life are a critical window. Skills developed during this period – risk literacy, risk management, resilience and decision-making – form the foundation for healthy development, learning and wellbeing across the lifespan.

Benefits of Risky Play: The Evidence Base

Both position statements draw on substantial research evidence demonstrating development, learning and wellbeing benefits across multiple domains:

Physical and Motor Development

- Promotes fine and gross motor skills, muscle strength, skeletal development and coordination
- Develops perceptual skills including depth, shape, size and movement perception
- Strengthens spatial orientation and body awareness
- Supports children's learning to self-regulate physical risk

Cognitive Development

- Builds problem-solving, planning and decision-making capacities
- Develops risk literacy — the ability to assess and manage risk in context
- Fosters critical thinking, perseverance and a growth mindset
- Supports the development of agency in learning

Social-Emotional Development

- Builds resilience, confidence, courage and emotional regulation
- Promotes prosocial behaviours — encouraging peers, supporting others to overcome challenges
- Strengthens friendships through shared challenge and mutual support
- Enhances self-concept, identity and sense of competence

Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Promotes positive mental health outcomes through self-management of risk
- Builds the emotional resources to cope with uncertainty throughout life
- Offers a sense of achievement and mastery for building positive self-esteem



Promoting Risky Play in Your Early Childhood Education Settings

1. Adopt a Benefit-Risk Approach

Both position statements advocate moving from 'as safe as possible' to 'as safe as necessary.' When assessing play experiences, ask:

- **What might the child experience or learn?** Consider physical, social, emotional and cognitive benefits.
- **What are the real risks?** Distinguish between hazards (remove these) and risks (manage these proportionally).
- **What is the child's capacity?** Consider developmental skills, past experiences, individual abilities and temperaments.
- **What is the cultural context?** Consider family backgrounds, cultural values and community knowledge and context.

2. Design Rich, Challenging Environments

- **Loose parts:** provide open-ended natural materials — sticks, rocks, logs, sand, water and mud.
- **Varied terrain:** create environments with slopes, uneven ground, steps and balancing elements.
- **Climbing opportunities:** trees (where safe), climbing structures and graduated heights
- **Nature play:** offer regular access to dynamic outdoor natural environments, both in and beyond the service.
- **Water play:** rocky water courses, paddling pools, water troughs, wet mud or sand areas.



3. Reflect on Your Own Practice

- **Critical reflection:** examine your own risk tolerance and how it shapes your program planning and responses to children's play.
- **Resist over-intervening:** allow children to struggle productively, try again and find their own solutions.
- **Use open questions:** "What are you trying to do?" and "How does that feel?" builds children's own risk management skills.
- **Document and share:** pedagogical documentation of risky play demonstrates the development and learning potential of risky play to families and others.

4. Work With Families

- **Share the evidence:** educate families about why risky play is important for children's learning and development.
- **Communicate transparently:** explain your approach to benefit-risk assessment and how you manage children's learning environments.
- **Build shared language:** use consistent terminology (risk vs hazard; benefit-risk approach) with families.
- **Acknowledge anxiety:** validate parental concerns while providing evidence-based reassurance.

5. Inclusion and Cultural Responsiveness

- **Children with disabilities:** adapt environments and activities to enable all children to engage in meaningful, goal-directed risky play.
- **First Nations perspectives:** recognise that Indigenous play practices have always incorporated challenge, bravery and connection to Country; respect cultural protocols.
- **Culturally diverse families:** acknowledge that perceptions of acceptable risk vary across cultures and engage in respectful dialogue.



Regulatory and Policy Context

Key Principle from Play Australia (2025):

"Risky play is not unsafe play; it may involve some risk of injury, but it does not involve hazards that cause injuries." The Position Statement is clear that safety regulations exist to prevent serious harm — not to eliminate all challenge from children's environments.

Educators are encouraged to use Benefit-Risk assessment frameworks when making decisions about play environments. The National Quality Standard (Quality Area 3) supports physical environments that provide children with opportunities for physical activity and play, including challenge and risk.

Position Statements Referenced

This resource is based on the following two authoritative position statements. Educators are strongly encouraged to access and read the full documents:

1. Jones, R. et al. (2025). *The risky play position statement for young Australian children*. Access at: https://www.playaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/PA_RiskyPlayPositionStatement_web.pdf

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

Access at: asdp.au/files/1195/Risky_Play_Position_Statement.pdf

For further professional learning, Play Australia offers online courses and resources on benefit-risk assessment and play space design: www.playaustralia.org.au

