

physical, social, and even cognitive. Children are constantly trying out new things and learning a great deal in the process. They love to move from adventure to adventure. They face the risk of mistakes and even of injuries, but that does not deter children. They embrace life, play, and risk with gusto, and they are prepared for a certain amount of bumps and bruises while growing up. Even a broken bone doesn't slow them down for long. Fortunately, they heal fast.

Although no one wants to see a child injured, creating an environment that is overly safe creates a different kind of danger for them. Growing up in a risk-averse society, such as we currently have, means children are not able to practice risk-assessment which enables them to match their skills with the demands of the environment. As a result, many children have become very timid and are reluctant to take risks. At the opposite extreme, many have difficulty reading the situations they face and take foolhardy risks, repeatedly landing in trouble.

When children are given a chance to engage freely in adventurous play they quickly learn to assess their own skills and match them to the demands of the environment. Such children ask themselves consciously or unconsciously if they can do it. They become savvy about themselves and their environment. Children who are confident about taking chances rebound well when things don't work out at first. They are resilient and will try again and again until they master a situation that challenges them or wisely avoid it, if that seems best.

As a preschool and kindergarten teacher, I liked to give my children as many opportunities to face age-appropriate risk as possible. In the various playgrounds where I taught, there were trees to climb and hills to slide down in snow, or to roll down in other seasons. Indoors, the children could build their play houses high. They played with tree stumps and stones, some heavy enough to cause injury if the children were not careful. They sewed toys using scissors and needles, and cut fruit and vegetables using knives. Overall, the children were remarkably careful, and I was constantly amazed at how quickly they mastered a new challenge and how well they handled it.

During my twenty years of teaching we occasionally experienced a mild injury that could be handled with a simple bandaid. The children learned from their mistakes and rarely repeated them. I became convinced that when children are given visible risk they rise to it and become very competent. On the other hand, hazards are to be avoided. Hazards are invisible risks that children can't see such as broken glass on an otherwise clean lawn, or a malfunction on a piece of playground equipment. Because children do not see the hazards, they cannot risk-assess them. Thus, protecting children from hazards is the responsibility of adults. But providing opportunities for children to experience age-appropriate risk is also the responsibility of adults.

He made the leap, tottered a bit as he landed, but regained his balance. His friends started passing him fairly heavy stones which he carefully placed in the creek, all of the children leaning precariously over the water but never falling in or even getting wet. All of this good play would have been lost if Peter had not been allowed to take a risk.