Taking a Risk with Play

Recently, the 2015 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth was released. The good news: 70% of preschool-aged children meet the physical activity guidelines for the early years. The bad news: children are not engaging in enough outdoor "risky" play. So what is "risky play" and why is it important for your preschooler to engage in it?

"Risky play" includes active and independent play, like climbing trees, exploring the woods or neighbourhood - the types of activities that you likely took part in when you were a kid.

This type of play is challenging and there are elements of danger, but it is not reckless. Kids find this type of play fun and enjoyable.

The types of risky play appropriate for your child will change based on their development and environment. For example, risky play for your 8-year-old might be exploring the playground on their own while you are within earshot or a safe distance away. In fact, there is some evidence that over-supervision (while well-intentioned) causes children to be less active. Dependent play like climbing One study found that children under 5 years old are less active on the playground when they are closely watched by their parent or caregiver.

Young children are more physically active when outside than inside. Some preschools and kindergartens are even shifting to outdoor-based programming to promote movement and learning. The Physical Activity Guidelines for the Early Years suggest young children should be getting at least 180 minutes of physical activity every day. Make sure your child is getting enough outdoor play at home, childcare, and school to help him or her meet this target!
Risky outdoor play is safer than you think

As a parent it is normal to be worried about, and try to prevent, your children from getting hurt. But most injuries from outdoor play are minor (like scrapes and bruises). These are a normal part of childhood. A lot of parents worry about "stranger danger" but these encounters are not as common as you might think. According to RCMP reports, odds of a total stranger abduction are 1 in 14 million. Being inside has its downsides - kids are less active when indoors and are more likely to use screens. The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology recommends that screen time be kept under 1 hour a day for 2-4 year-olds.

Examples of Risky Play for Preschoolers
- Climbing up the slide instead of using the stairs
- Swinging high and fast
- Balancing on a log
- Hanging upside down

The key is to provide your child opportunities to test his or her boundaries but not push them into a risk they are not ready for.

Kids like Challenges!

Children like play structures that are challenging and have an element of risk. When play structures are "safe" and not challenging, children will quickly master them, find them boring, and stop using them.

Natural Playgrounds

You may have heard about natural or adventure playgrounds, or maybe even had one pop up at your park or school. Natural and adventure playgrounds use trees, rocks, loose parts, and other natural elements to create play spaces. Kids find these spaces exciting and challenging. There isn't much research yet to show that these types of playgrounds are better than regular playgrounds, but one study suggests that preschool-aged children are more active in playgrounds than in traditional playgrounds. Don't have a natural playground in your neighbourhood? Take your child on a hike or let him/her explore in the backyard. To a child, natural playgrounds are everywhere! Photo by Infinite Playgrounds.

Additional Resources

Active for Life www.activeforlife.ca
Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology www.csep.ca/guidelines
Canadian Sport for Life Physical Literacy www.physicalliteracy.ca
Best Start Resource Centre www.beststart.org
Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute www.cflri.ca
ParticipACTION www.participaction.com

REFERENCES

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