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Chiropractic Newsletter
Well-Being

Risky Play

Fear, you would think, is a negative experience, to be avoided whenever possible. Yet, as everyone who has a child or once was one knows, children love to play in risky ways—ways that combine the joy of freedom with just the right measure of fear to produce the exhilarating blend we identify as thrill.

A theme underlying my new Substack series is that Mother Nature (the goddess of natural selection) endowed us, especially when we are young, with strong drives to play in ways that have life-promoting benefits. So why, if that is true, did she endow children with a drive to flirt with danger in their play?

I'll get to that, but first here's a bit on the common forms of risky play observed in children worldwide.

Six Common Categories of Risky Play

Ellen Sandseter has identified six categories of risky play that are common to children everywhere. These are (with my elaborations):

- **Great heights.** Children climb trees and other structures to scary heights.
- **Rapid speeds.** Children swing on vines, ropes, or playground swings; slide fast on sleds, skis, skates, or playground slides; shoot down rapids on logs or boats; and ride bikes, skateboards, and other devices fast enough to produce the thrill of partly losing control.
- **Dangerous tools.** Depending on the culture, children play with knives, bows and arrows, farm machinery, woodworking equipment, or other tools known to be potentially dangerous.
- **Dangerous elements.** Children love to play with fire and in or near deep bodies of water.

- **Rough and tumble.** Children everywhere chase one another around and fight playfully in ways that could lead to injury. In chase games (such as tag), the preferred position is that of being chased, which is also the most vulnerable position.
- **Disappearing/getting lost.** Little children play hide and seek and experience the thrill of temporary, scary separation from companions. Older ones venture off, away from adults, into places filled with imagined and possibly real dangers, including the danger of getting lost.

Potential Benefits of Risky Play

Researchers who have studied risky play have proposed, with sound logic and at least some empirical evidence, that such play has various interrelated, long-term, life-promoting benefits. Mother Nature apparently was her usual wise self when she planted in the brains of children an urge to play with danger. Here are some proposed benefits:

Prevention or reduction of phobias.

Psychotherapists who treat phobias know that the best method is to encourage patients to expose themselves, in increasing doses, to whatever it is they fear. People overcome phobias not by avoiding the feared situations

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but by experiencing them. Sandseter and her colleagues (2023) suggest that risky play is Mother Nature's way of reducing the chance of growing up with life-constraining phobias. By playing with objects and situations that naturally induce some fear, children develop familiarity with them, which reduces or eliminates the chance of developing the debilitating degree of fear classed as a phobia.

A concern of some is that children who experience frightening accidents or injuries in play might develop lifelong phobias, but research has provided little or no evidence to justify that concern. In fact, a study of fear of heights revealed that children who suffered an injury due to a fall before age 9 were less likely to fear heights at age 18 than were those without such an experience (Poulton et al., 1998), and another study found no relationship between the experience of water trauma before age 9 and fear of water at age 18 (Poulton et al., 1999).

Development of courage

All of us, at some points in our lives, experience real emergencies. These are times that require us to be brave, to deal effectively and decisively with the emergency rather than freeze and cower helplessly. When children play in ways that involve some danger and associated fear, they may develop a generalized sense of courage. Researchers have found that young rats and monkeys deprived of opportunities for rough and tumble play become adults who freeze with fear and fail to adapt, as other rats and monkeys do, when exposed to a novel, potentially dangerous environment (LaFreniere, 2011).

A little girl who, on her own initiative, climbs high enough up a tree to experience some fear comes down feeling proud and capable. "I did that; I went way up there and lived to tell the tale!" The experience not only reduces the chance of developing acrophobia (fear of heights), but, along with other instances of risky play, may contribute to a general sense that she can deal with all sorts of dangers in real (non-play) life. She can feel fear and still control her mind and body to act effectively.

The resulting confidence, or courage, may in the future save her life or that of her child. The whole community also benefits from the presence of courageous individuals, so courage is socially rewarded in life-promoting ways. Among other things, you are a more attractive mate if you are courageous than if you are not. Don't we all desire a mate who can face life's dangers without falling apart?

Learning to deal with the unexpected

Largely from observations of play among nonhuman mammals, some researchers have proposed that play is a means of learning how to deal with the unexpected (Spinka, Newberry & Bekoff, 2001). Some forms of play, in children as well as other young mammals, involve putting yourself into situations where you can't control what will happen next. Examples are sliding rapidly down a snowy hill without full control of your movements; or prancing around in a way that puts you deliberately out of balance, so you don't know how you will land; or, for a young child, scrambling uphill over rocks, not knowing which ones will hold and which ones will slip. Risky play of these sorts seems to violate the premise that play is practice in exerting control. Here it may be practice in being out of control, adapting to one surprise after another.

Much of life, of course, is unpredictable. To do almost anything interesting is to put yourself into a situation where you can't be sure what will happen next. Some people live very constrained lives and suffer because they are afraid of the unknown, afraid of situations where they are not in complete control. So, some forms of risky play may be ways of becoming comfortable with unpredictability and therefore more open to life's adventures.

Tolerance of physiological arousal

Some people suffer from fear of their own physiological responses. This seems to underlie panic attacks and agoraphobia. Something—maybe something stressful—activates the autonomic nervous system, so heart rate increases. The pounding heart and other bodily reactions become themselves a source of fear. Some call this fear of fear. "My heart is pounding, something awful is happening inside me, I feel as if I will explode."

Dodd and Lester (2021) have suggested that one value of vigorous, emotion-arousing play is that it helps children become comfortable with autonomic physiological reactions. "My heart beats fast when I slide fast down the hill, but then it slows back down again soon after." Risky play may help to normalize physiological arousal so it is not itself a source of fear.

Practice in risk evaluation

Some people believe that children have no sense of what

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is risky or not, but those are people who have never really watched children engaged in risky play. Observational studies show that children of all ages, from toddlerhood on, tend to be innately cautious (e.g., Tangen, Olson, & Sandseter, 2022). Before engaging in a risky activity, they evaluate the situation. Maybe they watch others do it first, or they test cautiously. They climb just a little way up the tree, and after doing that many times, they go a little higher. They slide down a gentle slope first, and then work up to a steeper one. They don't need anyone to tell them to do that.

As they play, and as they move gradually from less challenging to more challenging adventures, they are thinking about and learning what they can and cannot manage. Some research indicates that children who frequently play in vigorous ways are less accident prone than those who have had little experience with such play, perhaps because they have learned to identify potential dangers and think about what is safe or not (Bloemers et al, 2012).

Development of physical competence

I've focused on the psychological benefits of risky play, but there is also an obvious physical benefit. Risky play is often physically challenging. It takes strength, stamina, and coordination, not just emotional control, to pull yourself from branch to branch up a tree, or scramble up a rocky hill, or steer a fast-moving sled.

A concluding thought

Perhaps I don't need to point this out, because it should be obvious, but…Given the restraints our society has placed on children's opportunities for risky play over the past few decades, out of concern for safety, is it any surprise that children, teens, and young adults today are suffering at record levels from anxiety, feelings of helplessness, and poor physical fitness? Many depictions of childhood play from the early 20th century, shows that we were not always so afraid of allowing children to experience risk. For an explanation of how deprivation of all sorts of self-directed play can result in mental anguish, see Gray, Lancy, & Bjorklund (2023).

-Peter Gray, PhD

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