

## Risky Play: Balancing Child Development and Injury Prevention

### Introduction

Many important factors contribute to children's health and well being including physical activity, physical and psychological safety, and healthy and safe environments. Amongst injury prevention practitioners in Canada, there is increasing interest in the issue of risk taking as a positive contributor to resiliency and injury prevention among children. The purpose of this primer is to provide an overview of this emerging issue from an injury prevention perspective.

### Child Injury in Atlantic Canada

Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death and hospitalization for Atlantic Canadian children. Common causes of serious and fatal injury among children include falls, threats to breathing, drowning, cycling, poisoning, fire/burns, motor vehicle collisions, and being injured as pedestrians.<sup>i</sup> To combat this health issue, provincial governments and community organizations have implemented numerous policies, programs, and educational initiatives. The results have been positive – serious and fatal injuries among children have been on the decline. While it is important to keep up this progress, the approach must be balanced with allowing children to explore, be physically active, and learn to manage risks. One of the ways that this can be achieved is through play.

### What is Risky Play?

The literature defines risky play as “thrilling and exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury.”<sup>ii</sup> Risky play has been categorized as play that occurs as follows:

- Play at heights
- Play at speed
- Play near dangerous elements such as fire or water
- Play with dangerous tools
- Play where there is a risk of getting lost

### What are the Benefits of Risky Play?

Risky play is a natural part of child development and has numerous benefits. This type of play not only helps children be active; it also promotes positive cognitive development.

Disclaimer: this continues to be a working primer as research on risky play in relation to injury prevention continues to evolve.

Risky play helps children learn to manage risk by processing and responding to information in their environment. As a result, confidence, learning ability, independence, and mental well being are enhanced. In addition to enhancing child well-being and happiness, all of these benefits are important protective factors against serious and fatal injuries.<sup>iii</sup>

### **What is the Difference Between a Risk & a Hazard?**

Understanding risky play in relation to injury prevention requires a distinction to be made between a risk and a hazard. A risk has the potential for a negative or a positive outcome. In this case, the potential negative outcome is *not hidden* and the risk-taker has the opportunity to recognize and assess the challenge.<sup>iv</sup> A hazard is something where the potential for injury is *hidden* from the individual. In this instance, there is no opportunity to negotiate the danger.<sup>v</sup> As an example, sledding on a steep hill may be a risky and thrilling activity for a child because it involves both height and speed. A piece of sharp metal hiding in the snow on the hill would be a hazard that the child is unable to foresee or negotiate.

### **Implications for Injury Prevention: As Safe as Necessary Rather Than as Safe as Possible**

Societal perceptions of danger are sometimes disproportionate to actual danger and can significantly influence parents' concerns for child safety. This has the potential to result in overprotection and fewer opportunities for free play.<sup>vi</sup> The evidence is clear that risk-taking, including risky play, can have positive health and social outcomes. Therefore, while it is important to keep children safe and prevent serious and fatal injuries, injury prevention strategies must be balanced with the benefits of allowing them to explore, be physically active, and take healthy risks. It is necessary to distinguish between serious injuries and minor injuries that will have a quick recovery with no long-term consequences. Injury prevention professionals can contribute positively to child development by encouraging play, exploration, and physical activity as part of injury prevention messaging. They can also be mindful of the evidence regarding risky play when developing strategies for injury prevention and assess the extent to which these strategies could impact free play and physical activity. As the injury prevention field continues to learn about risky play and the benefits for healthy child development, further research on the relationships between risky play and a child's age and stage of development is necessary. Finally, it is important for injury prevention professionals to keep in mind the following messaging around keeping kids safe: *as safe as necessary rather than as safe as possible*.

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- <sup>i</sup> ACIP & Safe Kids Canada. (2010). Child & youth unintentional injury, Atlantic Canada: 10 years in review. Halifax, NS: ACIP.
- <sup>ii</sup> Sandseter, E. (2007). Categorizing risky play – how can we identify risk-taking in children's play? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *15*(2), 237-252.
- <sup>iii</sup> Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D. (2012). Risky play and children's safety: Balancing priorities for optimal child development. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *9*, 3134-3148; doi:10.3390/ijerph9093134.
- <sup>iv</sup> Sanseter, E. (2011). Children's risky play from an evolutionary perspective: The anti-phobic effects of thrilling experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology*, *9*(2), 257-284.
- <sup>v</sup> Sanseter, E. (2011). Children's risky play from an evolutionary perspective: The anti-phobic effects of thrilling experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology*, *9*(2), 257-284.
- <sup>vi</sup> Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I. & Sleet, D. (2012). Risky play and children's safety: Balancing priorities for optimal child development. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *9*, 3134-3148; doi:10.3390/ijerph9093134.

### **Atlantic Collaborative on Injury Prevention (ACIP):**

The Atlantic Collaborative on Injury Prevention (ACIP) is a partnership of injury prevention practitioners from both government and non-government organizations. The goal of ACIP is to reduce the burden of injury in Atlantic Canada.

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### **Child Safety Link (CSL):**

Child Safety Link is a Maritime wide child and youth injury prevention program, located at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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