

But...but...but... *Isn't It Dangerous?*

Risk and Reward in Nature Play

by Ken Finch, President, Green Hearts INC

“Risk averse” barely seems to do justice to the expansive fears of our modern American society. “Risk paranoid” might be more accurate. So it’s not surprising that when considering nature play, risk is an often-passionate topic and a frequent roadblock.

Naturally, all parents want their children to be safe; all teachers want their students to be safe; and all organizations want their clients and visitors to be safe. Yet it seems as though our strict standards for workplace safety – that is, **no** risks, **no** injuries – are now being applied to children’s outdoor play. When taken to these extremes, the understandable desire for safety can morph into a harmful burden, especially for children. This is a gross error that our society needs to re-consider.

But first, let’s be clear: nature play is dangerous. Children can and do get hurt in nature-based play – as they have throughout human history, and as they always will. Is this valid cause to keep kids away from nature play? Is it in their best interests to do so?

Life itself is dangerous. Life is full of risks, and we should hope it remains so. Without taking risks, no child would ever learn to walk or ride a bike. No adult would ever take up a new sport. No company would ever create new products. Risks are an integral part of progress. Thus, the goal shouldn’t be to eliminate all risks from our children’s lives, but to manage them and keep them in perspective.

The Puzzle of Perspective

Ahhh, the challenge of perspective.... What is the most common cause of accidental death for American children? Give yourself a back pat if you know that it is automobile accidents.¹ So, is our society calling for a ban on carrying kids in cars? Do concerned parents routinely decide not to drive the family out for ice cream cones because it’s too dangerous? Or consider

this inconvenient truth: more teens’ emergency room visits are caused by organized sports than anything else.² Should we ban these sports for the harm they are doing to American youth? One last example: nearly 90,000 U.S. children are injured annually on stairways.³ In fact, a U.S. child under five is treated in an emergency room for stair-related injuries *every six minutes!*⁴ Perhaps a ban on multi-story homes is called for? Or maybe parents should sue homebuilders who knowingly choose to install such dangerous devices where children can encounter them?



Unacceptable risk? Or healthy challenge?

These examples point to the important concept of “comparative risk.” We accept (and even blissfully ignore) daily dangers to our children that are commonplace and routine. In short, we are used to them. A terrible car accident can still shake us up, as can the rare death caused by a fastball’s impact on a young chest. For the most part, though, we tolerate these risks and choose to manage them in order to limit – *but not eliminate* – their dangers. We strap young children in car safety seats, have our fledgling athletes wear protective gear, and put

gates at the top of the stairs. We accept the dangers of these and many other activities because we sub-consciously do risk/benefit analyses for them, and conclude that the convenience and positive impacts are worth the inherent dangers.

We can approach nature play similarly if parents, teachers, and organizations are realistic about its small dangers and powerful benefits. Most injuries that arise from nature play are minor and familiar to American adults who grew up playing outside: scrapes, bruises, and an occasional broken bone. Yes, more severe injuries can occasionally occur – as they do in virtually all aspects of life for any child who is not encased in a protective bubble. For instance, each year over 8,000 American kids are injured (even sometimes killed) by falling flat-screen TVs....⁵ Remember, perspective....



Public play spaces in Europe offer more risk than most U.S. playgrounds – and probably more fun!

But most parents' greatest fear is of other humans: the "boogeyman" worry. Terrible things are occasionally done to kids by adult predators. But crimes against children are less common now than a generation ago,⁶ and most child kidnappings are committed by familiar adults, not by strangers in the park.⁷ Nevertheless, these fears have mushroomed as electronic media has grown. Sadly, horrible crimes against children make compelling news, and thus are often broadcast 24/7, day after day, week after week. No parents are immune to this barrage. Even if their left brains know the tiny odds of such crimes happening to their own kids, their right brains will likely be thinking, "That could have been my child!" Parents are not

wrong to have these worries, but they should try to keep them in perspective – just as they do for the dangers of cars, sports, and stairs.

And where are today's children most likely to encounter a predator, anyway: in the park, or on the internet at home? We all know the probable answer.

The Rewards of Risk

The risks of nature play are minor compared to so many other dangers that children routinely face, but what about the benefits? Research has found a remarkable range of positive impacts from frequent, unstructured play in rich, diverse natural settings.⁸ These benefits cover the entire realm of holistic child development: physical, social, emotional, intellectual, creative, and spiritual. This article, though, focuses on one specific and crucial attribute: the benefits of risk.

The bottom line: children need risk. It is a powerful catalyst for growth that helps them develop good judgment, persistence, courage, resiliency, and self-confidence. "Can I make it across the stream on that log?" "Should I climb one branch higher than I did yesterday?" "Can I jump from that boulder to the next one?" "Why yes, I can – because I've tried it and succeeded!" Remove risk from children's lives, and parts of their growth may stagnate. As adults, we face risks every day – most routine, but some bigger. To deal with these risks, we use judgment which we've honed through years of practice, success, and failure. In effect, we go through our days making an enduring series of minor risk/benefit analyses, ranging from whether or not to eat that tempting donut to whether or not to slide through the bothersome yellow light.

However, kids are not born with the gift of informed judgment, nor with awareness of their own abilities and weaknesses. Instead, they learn their capabilities, their vulnerabilities, and their good decision-making skills through real life experiences – sometimes happy, sometimes harsh, but always instructive. Ultimately, a child can practice and learn good judgment by climbing trees at age eight, or that can wait until they are 16 and behind the wheel of a car. Either way, that learning must occur if a child is to be well-equipped to face the on-going dangers and challenges of adult life.

For countless generations, that valuable learning is exactly what happened when kids grew up with nature as a source of adventure and challenge. For many, it was their first sanctum and testing ground: a special place away from adult rules and structure, where they could create and act out their own worlds of challenges, conquests, and fantasy. Oftentimes these took the form of exuberant physical play, infused with risk.

Today's generation of children also engage in challenges, conquests, and fantasy. Only now these are designed and scripted by anonymous adults, and are experienced second-hand on flickering screens. Did any of us want this change? Do we think it's a good trade-off, in order to avoid the tiny risks and overblown fears of outdoor play? Regardless, that is the change we adults are presiding over, intentionally or not.

The Risks of No Risk

This points toward the hidden risks that don't arise from kids engaging in nature play, but rather from them **not** doing so. If they aren't allowed to play in the yard or at the park, what will they do instead? Probably more mind-numbing, plugged-in play. If schools forbid recess play in naturally diverse, stimulating playgrounds, how will it affect students? No time to "blow off" energy, no quiet place to subconsciously process what they've been learning in class, and less chance to explore nature. And if places like nature centers insist that kids stay on the trails, don't climb trees, don't collect rocks, and don't dig holes, what will be the result? Children who find nature boring and restrictive, decreasing the odds that they will develop lasting personal bonds with the outdoors.

These hidden impacts of **not** allowing outdoor risk and adventure pose more threat to children's healthy development than do scrapes, cuts, and bruises – and may derail their formative connections with nature, as well. Hence, caregivers and conservationists alike need to consider both sides of the ledger: the dangers of nature play, and the dangers of **no** nature play. We need to allow our children to explore risks in nature that are challenging yet manageable. They need to practice identifying and assessing these challenges, and to then decide whether or not to "give it a go." And if they fail, they need the chance to try again!

At the same time, it is essential that we avoid exposing children to true **hazards**: i.e., dangers that children cannot see or foresee, and thus cannot make

informed choices about. These are the real dangers – the ones which can cause serious physical harm without kids being able to consciously assess them first. Parents, teachers, and child-hosting sites should aim to eliminate all such "blind" **hazards**, while still allowing children to experience the benefits of lesser, more-apparent risks.



Yikes!?
or,
Yippee!?

Bringing Courage to our Culture

Can we, as a society, find the will and the way to move away from the fear-driven culture that pervades modern childhood, and that often depicts nature play as unduly dangerous? Certainly! It will take patience and much effort, but the need is too great to shy from the task. Our children are being raised in a culture that stresses dangers rather than opportunities, and that fosters helplessness more than initiative and confidence. These are not good foundations for healthy, happy, successful adulthoods.

Thankfully, these societal trends are not carved in stone; they can be changed. The necessary actions will vary among different stakeholders, but they all start with the need to speak up, and to modify your own (or your agency's) thinking. Become pro-active about the value of manageable risks in childhood, and specifically about the positive challenges inherent in nature-based play. Talk it up with friends, neighbors, colleagues, and elected officials. Challenge the knee-jerk fears, and stress the benefits of nature play for child development *and* conservation. Encourage the common-sense thinking of comparative risk analysis.

If you're a parent, make a commitment to have nature play be a regular part of your children's lives. Set a limit on their screen time, and insist that they go out and play – just as your folks probably commanded

you! Understand the risks and be responsible about them, but if worry is about to overpower your good intents, take a deep breath and remember that nature play truly will enrich your kids' lives! Decide to modify your own yard for better nature play (for a few ideas, check out *A Parents' Guide to Nature Play* at www.greenheartsinc.org). Join or form a family nature club, to foster free group play visits to natural spaces. Take your kids to a nearby park with a patch of wild in it, and let them play without interference from you. (Think of yourself as a lifeguard, getting involved only when something dangerous is about to happen, or when your help is actually requested.) Or take frequent visits to the created nature play spaces that are quickly becoming common at nature centers and botanical gardens.

If you're an educator, use your school's existing structures to raise the issue of nature play: teacher training sessions, parent conferences, parent-teacher organizations, school landscape planning, and even playground design. Question assumptions of undue risk, and offer counter-arguments about the value of children facing and overcoming physical challenges while simultaneously building their connections to nature. Encourage your colleagues to recall their own childhoods, which almost certainly included mastery of many of these same challenges. When the inevitable liability concerns surface, ask if that isn't exactly what your insurance coverage is for – or if the school is prepared to ban the organized sports that are statistically more dangerous. And if your insurance agent or your School Board claims that nature play is too risky, don't roll over and play dead: ask to see their research data on it. They will not have any!

Finally, **if you represent a land-holding conservation organization**, consider how you can change your rules, your practices, and your grounds in order to foster more nature play – which research has identified as the most common influence on life-long conservation values. If today's kids don't get ample opportunities to play in natural areas and fall in love with them, who will protect those spaces 50 years from now? So create or designate areas for children's nature play. Do regular safety inspections of those areas to remove all *hazards*, and lessen (but don't fully eliminate) more-minor risks. Remove sharp branches and stones, keep play away from steep drops or deep water, place deep mulch beneath any designated climbing trees, etc. Write up those inspections,

along with the actions you take to lessen the identified dangers. Then extend your safety reports by pairing each identified risk with a clear statement of the developmental benefits that can arise from it. Remember, you can't do a risk/benefit analysis without both components! Finally, develop a formal policy about the value of play, and of how your organization views and deals with risk in nature play.

It's risky business, this nature play – but the greatest danger of all is that it may continue to slip away from childhood. We won't prevent that by using the same fear-infused attitudes that have caused the problem. Work for change; be part of the solution!



Speak up for sapling swinging!

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Green Hearts is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to restoring and strengthening the bonds between children and nature.

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