

Courageous outdoor play: Re-framing risk and building skill

Nature playground
Outside space
Play yard
Outdoor classroom
Adventure playground
Nature preschool
Forest learning

No matter the language you use to describe the area designated for outdoor play and discovery, research supports your efforts to help children move into the natural world to refresh, support, and stimulate all development domains. Nature is constant and ever changing; it invites and urges children (and their adults) to explore, discover, manipulate, and master.

As playground designs changed, from 1885 *sand-gardens* (where children were penned in sand pits to keep them away from street traffic), through early 20th century over-sized play structures in parks and school yards, to early 21st century outdoor areas built and modified to reflect concerns with child safety, we have seemed to focus more on manufactured materials than on what the natural world offers. But some change is afoot.

In 2005, Richard Louv wrote a well-researched call to arms for families and teachers—saving children from *nature-deficit disorder*. In accessible text, he challenges the protected and protective environments in which children spend so much time and advocates instead for time in nature that lowers stress while improving academic success, self-regulation, and creativity.

Following Louv's lead, researchers, educators, and community planners have coordinated efforts to provide supportive, safe, challenging, satisfying, and natural play spaces for children. Preschool nature programs emerged from Northern Europe, including

icy Scandinavian countries (where children spend most of their time outdoors), and are taking hold in the United States as both full-day and part-time programs. The U.S. programs use different models and philosophies, from thematic units to Montessori, and most celebrate the success of project approaches—cooperative, teacher-guided explorations of things important to children.

Most programs follow a structured indoor curriculum and schedule while allowing outdoor time to be a laboratory for children's self-regulation, discovery, challenge, and accomplishment. On nature's playground, children climb trees, fish in streams, slide down snowy slopes, climb rocks, encounter insects (and sometimes snakes), and identify mushrooms—safely, with minimal injury, and intense joy. David Sobel (2016) asks us to consider which is healthier: a group walk along a stream or solitary video gaming.

Of course, safety supervision is essential to any activity with children; we always want to minimize



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opportunities for children’s physical injury. But consider: Is it possible that we are so concerned about physical injury that we’ve stifled courage? Risk is a natural part of life. We learn to manage it—and that management takes practice in everyday play. We build courage by taking considered risks, however small. Think about yourself as a beginning teacher and the courage it took to talk with a child’s parent about a lost sock. Educator and writer Mike Huber (2017) suggests changing our vocabulary from *risky play* to *courageous play*.

Consider too the difference between **hazard** (a danger that is out of a person’s control—something we can’t see or predict, like a pothole or broken traffic light) and a **risk** (a potential danger that a person can evaluate and assess like park creek with running water or a dangling tree limb). As a society we address hazards, for example, by insisting on car safety seats and seatbelts because we can’t anticipate or predict a wreck. Potential risks, on the other hand, require developing the tools that allow us to evaluate, predict, and measure consequences.

As infants, humans (and other animals) demonstrate an innate sense of risk assessment. Babies avoid the **visual cliff** described by psychologists Gibson and Walk (1960); you can watch babies assess their own abilities at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WanGt1G6ScA. Without adult interference or peer taunts, a preschooler will typically climb a vertical structure to a comfort level and then down again—assessing risk and achievement—usually to

climb a bit higher the next time. The Boston Children’s Museum has a 15-foot high climbing net near its entrance. It looks risky but a docent explained that tumbles occur only when parents are overly directive. He felt the children absorbed the parent’s anxiety, lost focus and confidence, and either froze or fell (Sobel 2016).

Courageous play then, asks teachers to think about safety, but not safety alone. Injury is inevitable no matter the degree of precaution. Injury is also natural as we learn new skills; as is our bodies’ recovery from the inevitable scratches and cuts. And injury is important (Green 2017). Many years ago, in my class of 3-year-olds, two girls were building a tower with large wooden hollow blocks. They carried each block together and added them one by one to the construction. As they tried to add a fifth block, one girl let go too soon and the other child’s pinky finger was caught (and broken). After a few tears and a visit to the doctor, the child came back to the classroom with a splint—both proud of the splint and eager to let her friends know that it’s important to, “Use your big muscles to keep a good hold on building blocks.” This was an accident that I wish had never happened but the outcome was positive for the child and the whole learning community.

Courageous guidance

Beyond the basics of outdoor safety rules and state licensing regulations, consider the following issues as you support children’s courageous play—indoors and in nature. Effective and wise teachers know every individual in the group—each child’s strengths, goals, interests, and fears—as well as those of the whole learning community. Always use specific and individual knowledge to weigh and determine appropriate risks—the behaviors that build courage. Work consistently to minimize risks while helping children build confidence and strength.

- Weigh the potential benefits of an activity against the potential risks. One preschool class has a permanent clothesline strung across the classroom. Sometimes the teachers use it to enhance the environment by hanging gauzy fabric or wooden bead curtains from it. Sometimes it’s used as a drying rack for children’s art. The teachers use a handled step stool to reach the line. Should children be allowed to do the same—to hang their own art, for example? Think: How do we learn to use a ladder safely?

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- Develop language that reminds children of potential risks rather than forbidding a potentially risky activity. For example, a child on a swing may be so thrilled by the experience of successful pumping that the danger of height is forgotten. Would, “Wow! You’re flying higher than I’ve ever seen you go!” work as well to help the child focus as “Jin, stop pumping, you’re going too high and might fall!” Your verbal observation will likely be enough to remind the child of the need for self-control.
- Observe and be ready to intervene—if it’s necessary. At the Holly Street School, the play yard is covered with deep wood chips. The preschoolers have access to loose construction parts and use a tree trunk as a balance beam. They take turns walking across the 6-inch high trunk until two children carry over a length of lumber that they place crossways on the log, “...to make a harder balance.” How do the teachers minimize the potential risks of this impromptu investigation of balance, weight, and manipulation?
- Indoors there are clear and consistent rules about standing on and jumping down from chairs. Outdoors, there are six tree stumps, each about 30-inches high that children are free to stand on and jump from. How do teachers help children learn the difference between the two similarly sized potential risks?
- Courageous play isn’t a free-for-all; it isn’t an invitation to chaos. The outdoor play area is an essential part of the learning environment and can

never encourage antisocial behaviors that are hazardous to anyone—physically or emotionally. Taunting and teasing are never acceptable and demand quick and consistent teacher responses.

- Consider how your response to accidents can amplify rather than minimize distress. Lolly, for example, is learning to master a scooter and tumblers as she glides down the smooth vehicle track on the playground. You have several potential responses. You could panic, run to Lolly, and insist on a full body check. Or you could observe—does the child really need attention? Are tears from pain or fright? Does a scrape invite a conversation about blood and the body’s ability to heal? Can first aid be a self-help skill rather than what an adult does to a child? Is Lolly resilient enough to brush off and try again?

Green (2017) suggests a four-step response to minor injuries. He suggests waiting—is there really a need for your attention or does your stepping in too soon set up an endless expectation of attention and intervention for even minor issues? Then Green says to wait again. You might see that the child really does need help with an injured body part but warns of the pitfall of learned helplessness instead of the lifelong tool of self-help. Third, Green suggests communication: Talk about the injury, ask questions and listen to what the child has to say. Respond with support, communicating your expectation that the child is capable and powerful in moving forward. Last, Green urges teachers to empower children, balancing the need for comfort with the need for resilience and self-control. Help the child learn to control recovery and forward activity.

- Support children’s autonomy in decision-making. All of us learn from the consequences of our choices and we must have opportunities to fail. Most children are able to make good choices but are sometimes distracted by peers, “Come on up here—it’s not too high,” and adults, “It’s important for you to give this a try.” Avoid pushing children to attempt a physical skill that is scary while providing challenges that are available and appropriate to the skills and sizes of the children. A 5-year-old will always climb over, up, and through a slide that’s designed for a 3-year-old.
- Head and neck injuries can be devastating and life altering. While older children may be eager to

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hang from their knees head down, be mindful of height, provide tumbling mats, and act as a spotter. Work to identify ways to allow children to experience the sensation of upside-down play (like hanging over a stable bench) safely.

- Consider how you offer help—and the opportunities you offer children to help themselves. Self-reliance and self-regulation work in tandem; always support children’s autonomy and independence. Listen to requests for help and avoid making the assumption that a child needs your assistance. “Let me know if you need a hand” instills confidence and self-esteem in a way that “Looks like you need my help for that” ever will. Pay attention to how much help the child needs—words and body language matter.

Courageous play activities

Across seasons and environments teachers see opportunities to help children increase their self-reliance, self-regulation, and self-regard. Use these ideas as a starting point for challenging and self-regulating investigations in nature.

Coordinate with other program teachers to plan any big changes in the outdoor space, especially as you move to a more natural (and less manufactured) environment. Keep in mind the geographic and sociocultural features of your learning community while you plan muddy and dry areas, soft seating areas, rough areas (like piles of large rocks), sunny and shaded spaces, open areas for constructions, and



spaces for quiet or solitary play. Make your goal an environment that resembles the natural world—alive with opportunities for self-reliance, self-regulation, and discovery. Rachel Larimore (2019) suggests that this natural outdoor area is the place between—less formally structured than the inside classroom but more than the space beyond—a forest, seashore, or national park that children easily recognize as separate from a human-built and arranged play area.

Tap community resources to secure both common and unusual materials for children to use. (See resources at the end of this article.) Some materials are free; some producers will donate materials if you cover shipping costs. Listen to children’s conversations and work to build an outdoor environment that will be both satisfying and challenging.

Gather loose parts—open-ended materials children can explore, manipulate, and use in different ways. Nicholson (1974) held that children love to interact with variables—the greater the number of loose parts, the greater the inventiveness and creativity (and engagement). Loose parts can be manufactured like lumber and fabric or primary sources like tree limbs and wool fleece. They can be recycled and repurposed like plastic caps and varied enough to sort and classify. Sand, sticks, cups, ropes, leaves, PVC pipes, rocks, seed pods, acorns, pinecones, and sea shells are all loose parts. Encourage children to observe and to document providing the necessary tools like magnifiers, clipboards, pencils, and colored markers.

Think about how these ideas might satisfy the child children in your group in cognitive stimulation; physical dexterity, coordination and balance; and socioemotional satisfaction. All require gathering tools (inexpensive to purchase or to borrow). Always introduce the topic with books, pictures, and lots of conversations about past experiences.

- **Wool.** Visit a farm for **sheep shearing** or secure some sheared wool, a **fleece** for exploration. Set up a wash station with two tubs for washing and rinsing. The fleece will be oily (with **lanolin**) and probably muddy too. Spread out the clean wool to dry. Bring out **wool carders** or wire-toothed brushes (from a pet store) and show how to brush small bits of wool (always in the same direction) over the carder creating a fluffy cloud of wool. Supply a basket for collecting the carded wool. **Spin** the wool by rubbing the carded wool back in forth in

the palms of your hands making lengths of **yarn**. Gather forked tree branches to build **looms**. Tie string across the two tines of the fork. Invite children to **weave** their yarn on the loom.

- **Critters.** Watch for birds and squirrels. Identify a protected area in the yard to best observe and care for wild critters. Make bird **feeders** from plastic soda bottles; scatter nuts in shells; maintain a shallow water bowl (washing it weekly). Make pinecone bird feeders with suet or peanut butter and seeds. Use tree **stumps** as platters for bird seed, apple cores, carrot tops, and pumpkin seeds. Affix a cob of corn to the stump. Encourage children to cook for the critters, **grating** nutmeg, avocado pits, corn cobs, acorns, or black walnut hulls; moderate conversations about what the critters like to eat and what they don't like. Set up a viewing station with binoculars and record keeping tools. Do the eating habits of critters change with the weather?
- **Logs.** Wood—from lumber cut to dimension to twigs that fall in windy weather—offers limitless opportunities for nature play, work, and exploration. Build your nature space with as many sizes and species of wood as you can. Lumber yards and carpenters at building sites are often willing to have you take away scraps. Ask tree-service companies, city forestry departments, and families for donations—diseased trees that are felled for safety are particularly interesting to children. Offer exploration, observation, and recording opportunities as children look at holes, sizes, fungus, moss, color,

and bark texture. Look for 12-inch diameter logs to cut into stumps for circle seating or climbing, leaping, and hopping activities. Thin slices (½-to-1-inch) of a branch make dandy tree cookies for counting, stacking, display, platters, and rubbing.

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- Larimore, R. A. (2019). *Preschool beyond walls: Blending early childhood education and nature-based learning*. Lewisville, NC: Gryphon House.
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Images of natural play-areas for inspiration

- Community Playthings. www.communityplaythings.com/
- Google images for natural playgrounds. www.google.com/search?q=natural+playgrounds&tbm=isch&source=univ&client=firefox-b-1-d&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjTufWxho_iAhVMQq0KH-W3sA-YQsAR6BAGHEAE&biw=1099&bih=681
- National Wildlife Federation. www.nwf.org/Home/Kids-and-Family/Connecting-Kids-and-Nature/Nature-Play-Spaces
- Nature Explore. <https://natureexplore.org/natural-outdoor-classroom-products/>

Additional resources for teachers

- Blakey, N. (2002). *Go outside!* Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.
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- Outdoor Learning Environments/OLE Texas. www.texaschildrennature.org/outdoor-learning-environments-ole-texas
- The regulatory framework for naturalistic outdoor learning environments in Texas childcare facilities. www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Care/Search_Texas_Child_Care/CCLNET/Source/TALibrary/DownloadTADoc.ashx?ID=3041
- The regulatory framework for outdoor learning environments in Texas childcare facilities. www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Care/Search_Texas_Child_Care/CCLNET/Source/TALibrary/DownloadTADoc.ashx?ID=3061
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