

## Risk Taking in Childhood



The above photos are of my daughter and one of her cousins. I watched them stand on the edge and discuss the height and landing of such a jump. Then, six years old, they were making a thoughtful decision on whether the risk was worth the thrill. As you can clearly see from the second photo it was and the look on my daughter's face is pure joy. I look I love to see on her face. Children rarely take risks without carefully considering the task at hand.

I know when I think back to the best memories in my life, they all involved taking a risk. For example selling everything and travelling Australia and South East Asia for a year, getting married, enrolling in University with a young baby to look after, moving interstate with my young family knowing only one person in Melbourne. All of these experiences were a risk however they led to the most amazing experiences and outcomes. The experiences I had from taking risks are the best I have had. No one can know if we are doing the right thing at the time and sometimes things don't work out but imagine taking no risks. So I have a couple questions for you:

***What are the best memories you have?***

***Did they involve some risk?***

Most risks children take are the outdoor type. The "what will happen if I climb that tree/jump off the sea wall/ride without my training wheels" type of risk. It

is so easy as parents (I hear myself saying it all the time) to yell “No don’t!” we naturally want to prevent the scratch, the bruise. I am certainly not advocating that you let your child do anything you perceive as dangerous but small risks with small chance of a bump or bruise teach children to trust their bodies. My husband, an old skateboarder, always talks about ‘knowing how to fall well’ his years of skateboarding experience have actually taught him how to think quickly and best protect his body. Our kids take a stack, break their fall and he congratulates them on falling successfully with minimal damage. He and my daughter constantly compare scratches, bruises and scars, they are trophies, stories, lessons learnt and adventures.

When children are playing outdoors they are thinking, refining their skills, developing their muscle strength and flexibility. Overall learning what their body can do and importantly what it can’t do. They are developing trust for their physical ability and making decisions. All of the small independent decisions and experiences in childhood – the failures, the triumphs, the falls, the adventure are building of their self-esteem, confidence and trust in themselves and in their others.

***What types of risks do you see your children take?***

***At what point do you find yourself intervening and giving limits or stopping something too risky?***

Of course, the context of outdoor play of preschool is completely different from play within our setting. We adhere to regulations and policies and we all strive for all of the children in our care to be well looked after in terms of outdoor safety. However, children are also children and they will get scratches and bruises in our care. Naturally, all parents react differently to that and I am interested in hearing your opinions and starting conversations about how your family views your child’s risk-taking and bumps and bruises.

***What is your reaction to bumps and bruises at preschool?***

I am amazed when I read Education blogs about some of the things happening in other preschools and things I have seen in the different placements in Melbourne was a student. Dirt/mud pits with real size-appropriate shovels, the experience was made safer with compulsory hard hats and steel cap boots but none-the-less the less these were 4 year old with shovels.

On another placement, my first actually, I was silently terrified at the sight of 3 to 5 year olds using real hammers and nails. They had scrap wood and pieces of craft that they would nail onto the wood. I questioned the teacher “Is this safe?” She smiled explained to me that they had assessed the risk, had a parent demonstrate to the children correct safe handling and function of the hammer and nails. Yes, there was very occasionally a bruised thumb but I was absolutely amazed at how well the children could hammer in nails, better than me that’s for sure. And that’s the whole point isn’t it? These children will have a skill that most adults don’t. A skill they have for the rest of their life.

My point is, I love being challenged not only as an educator but as a parent. I love being horrified and then taking a moment to ask, ***but what could the learning be? What skill could be developed? How will the child's self-esteem and confidence benefit?*** Children in our care will often invent their own games, despite our best efforts to constantly change our outdoor experiences in order to engage each of them. If the danger isn't immediate and huge, I purposely bite my tongue and hold my ground and observe the play and assess the fun verse the risk. Of course I factor in the safety of those around them and the need to not break any resource, but sometimes, something that would not normally be advocated, is allowed to go on because the children are playing, learning, cooperating and gaining something from the experience.

We are all so different in our experiences and perspectives and I would love to hear some comments, questions and suggestions from our wonderful families such as:

***What type of risks are you comfortable for your child to take?  
What is an example of risk-taking your child has taken and you intervened to either stop or set limits?***

***How have you seen your child feel after taking a risk (Joy, sense of achievement)?***

***What can you recall of your own childhood and the excitement of the risks you took...riding fast down a hill, jumping off a high wall, racing your friends on your bike? How would you respond to seeing your own child now engaged in that experience?***

Some links you might be interested in:

<http://teachertombsblog.blogspot.com.au/2009/09/bloody-owies.html>

<http://www.kidsafe.com.au/>

<http://www.wgkg.vic.edu.au/bush-kinder>

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