

Injury Insight

Child's play: why it's time to pop the bubble wrap

Play enables children to learn creative, problem solving, socialization, cognitive, behavioural flexibility and autonomy skills as well as positive psychological well-being. Most of today's playgrounds, with the now ubiquitous and colourful pre-fabricated play structures, simply don't serve a child's need to learn and develop these skills. This is because children need to manipulate their spaces to suit their own activities, something typical play structures make nearly impossible.

Risky play is defined as thrilling and exciting forms of play involving risk of physical injury.¹ However, risks (situations in which a child can recognize and evaluate the challenge and decide on a course of action) have been equated with hazards (a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden), thus dismissing the benefits of risky play.

Developmental benefits of risky play:

- physical/motor competence
- spatial orientation skills
- environmental competence & literacy
- self-worth & efficacy
- promotion of cognitive and social development
- reduction of fear through natural gradual exposure
- helps children learn risk perception and management skills which are important in developing an understanding of how to navigate risks and avoid injuries

Other benefits of risky play:

- promotion of physical activity
- promotion of independence
- reduction of mental illness and learning difficulties

A recent survey of the general public² was conducted to gather opinions about typical playgrounds found today and to share memories of their favourite outdoor play space as a child.

A survey of the general public on typical playgrounds found:

69%
say playgrounds
are too safe

59%
prefer natural
play spaces

14%
prefer spaces
designed for play

Survey results showed that 69% of 592 respondents found today's playgrounds too safe, lacking challenge and offering limited play opportunities. 59% preferred natural play spaces and 14% preferred spaces designed for play.

Risky Play Systematic Review Summary

A systematic review³ on risky play that explored the relationship between risky outdoor play and health-related behaviours and outcomes in children found:

- an increase in physical activity
- a decrease in sedentary behaviour
- an increase in social and creative behaviour
- overall positive effects of risky outdoor play on health

Risky Play Symposium

Canadian and international researchers, practitioners and play safety experts on child development, experts on play space design and playground safety, provision of recreation, and legal and societal perceptions of risk and hazard convened at a *Risky Play Symposium*⁴, held November 2013 in Montreal, Canada. Presenters provided multidisciplinary

evidence and perspectives indicating the potential negative effect on children’s development of approaches to injury prevention that prioritize safety and limit children’s opportunities for risky play.

Despite the variety of presenters at the symposium and the vastly different disciplines and backgrounds they represented, all came to the same conclusion: the injury prevention status quo, which prioritizes safety above all else, is not reasonable or acceptable. The challenge is to broaden the focus and commit to a child-centric approach—one that includes not only the mitigation of injury but also optimal

child development, which necessitates exposure to competence-appropriate risky play in a play space that limits hazards.

The Seven Cs

The Seven Cs⁵ is an informational guide for early childhood educators, designers, administrators and parents. The goal of the Seven Cs is to help people design outdoor play spaces that support the development of young children and integrate the unique qualities of playing outdoors.

Overall the Seven Cs suggest that the highest quality playgrounds are scaled

to the child, sensitive to climate, and include the following:

- Living materials
- Elements children can manipulate
- Flexibility to allow imagination to shape play
- Spaces for individual and group play

Moving Forward

In order to move forward we can take a look back at the kind of play many adults experienced as children themselves to understand how risky play used to be a healthy and normal part of growing up. Discussion is already underway around whether some injuries are acceptable and a debate over commonly held yet recently formed assumptions that create the “bubble-wrapped recreation” of today’s children has begun. However there is a pressing need to expand these discussions to emphasize the difference between risk and hazard, and the importance of risk for healthy child development.

RESOURCES

- ☑ Can child injury prevention include healthy risk promotion?
- ☑ Risky Play and Children’s Safety: Balancing Priorities for Optimal Child Development
- ☑ The Design of Landscapes at Child-Care Centres: Seven Cs
- ☑ Systematic Review (in press)

References:

1. Sandseter, 2011.
2. Brunelle, S., Coghlan, R., Herrington, S., & Brussoni, M. (2014). *Play worth remembering*. Vancouver, BC: Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies.
3. Systematic Review (in press)
4. Brussoni M, Brunelle S, Pike I, Sandseter EB, Herrington S, Turner H, Belair S, Logan L, Fuselli P, Ball DJ. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2014 Dec 22; doi: 10.1136/injuryprev-2014-041241.
5. Susan Herrington and Chandra Lesmesiter, Department of Landscape Architecture, University of British Columbia, Canada, 2006

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Popping the bubble wrap: risky play for children’s health

Keynote Speaker: Tim Gill

For more information visit:
www.wildaboutvancouver.com/event



The Seven Cs

1 Character
The overall character, feel and design intent of a play space.

2 Context
The number of kids, micro-climatic conditions (ground plane, sun/shadow, view of surrounding areas).

3 Connectivity
The pathways, movement through space (e.g., concrete, soft, rocks).

4 Change
A range of differently sized spaces, change over time.

5 Chance
The opportunity for child to create, manipulate and leave an impression on the play space.

6 Clarity
Play spaces should create enough mystery to promote spontaneous exploration, but not confusion that will detract children from exploring the landscape.

7 Challenge
Physical and cognitive, graduated challenges.

Source: The Design of Landscapes and Child-Care Centres: Seven Cs, Susan Herrington and Chandra Lesmesiter, Department of Landscape Architecture, University of British Columbia, Canada, 2006.