

Thriving

children • youth • families



Growing Edge Training online journal



Reframing Risk as a Developmental Need

Nevin J. Harper

A leader in adventure education and therapy takes a critical view of excessive risk-aversion in current western society, challenges legalistic approaches for keeping kids safe, and describes why risk is essential to healthy child and youth development.

Are we trying to make today's young people too safe for their own good—so protected they cannot develop and thrive? Like a swinging pendulum, incidents of child injuries are often met with highly reactionary policies. Thus, a child breaks an arm falling from a tree at school leading to a rule against tree-climbing, or worse, cutting down the tree. The dueling needs for safety and risk are both essential to healthy growth (Brendtro, 2016). A conscious balance is needed to counter current trends of limiting childhood risk by recognizing that manageable levels of risk are developmentally important (Harper, 2017).

Wrapping children in a risk-prevention cocoon is mainly an issue with children of social and cultural privilege in modern Western society. Traditional societies long recognized that healthy risk-taking is essential to growth (Rogoff, 2003). Of course, many children and youth today daily face real dangers, well beyond their capacity to prevent harm. Thus, diverse individual and community needs must be part of our consideration.

A question is posed as to whether increasing adolescent mental health problems may be correlated with the decreases of risk afforded a child in his or her development. This is not a call to retreat to the era before child protection and injury prevention. Yet, how can we maintain a balance between child risk-taking and challenge, providing resources and support—including safety efforts—to maximize child development opportunities?

Historically, children grew up under the watchful eyes of numerous adults, older siblings, and other local children in the “village.” This community of care has deteriorated in a highly individualistic society. An artificial village still raises the child, but through hired babysitting, daycare, after-school care, music lessons, soccer practice—forcing parents to work more hours to be able to afford ‘farming out’ their kids to strangers.

Today's children are increasingly in the care of others beyond the immediate or extended family. Concern for preventing harm when children are away

from our care has sent policy proliferation into overdrive. Our modern “risk society” has produced the notion that hazards in life can be assessed, calculated, and predicted (Giddens, 1991). We have quit living in harmony with nature, local knowledge, and tradition; instead we place our faith in the fiction that science, technology, and risk assessment can safely guide us through life's challenges.

Many efforts over the last half century have increased child safety and contributed to the community of care. These changes have reduced childhood injuries and abuse and have arguably increased overall quality of child and family life for many. The pendulum is a classic metaphor for large scale change, swinging down from one extreme and up again in an opposite direction. An idealized European example was the pendulum swing away from communism toward democracy.

In North America, the realities of child abuse became increasingly public in the 1960s leading to shockingly high rates of reports of maltreatment by the 1990s (Anglin, 2002). Parents were worried about changes in law, sparking an increased demand for child supervision to prevent being charged with neglect. It was no longer okay to slip into a store for milk while your 3-year-old slept in the car or to leave your pre-teens home alone (Pimentel, 2015). Normalized behavior like walking or riding to school, facing fears of being home alone, and simply climbing a tree were suspect. Liability driven attempts to legalize safety interfered with developing curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and independence.

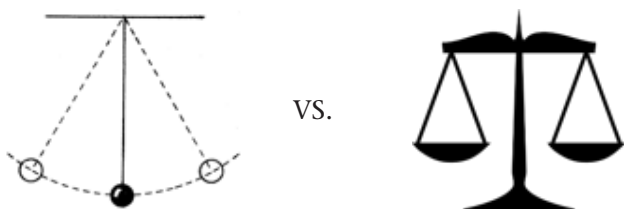
Mark Tremblay and colleagues (2015) recently published research reviews and a formal position statement on the need for outdoor play and activity—recognizing the inherent risks essential for healthy child development. Reactions in the Canadian press included an influential Chief Medical Officer of a local health authority who equated these proposals with arguing for unpasteurized milk and the anti-vaccination movements (Times Colonist, 2015). The editorial back and forth ensued with one side touting child injury prevention success (i.e., fewer kids ending up in emergency rooms) while others noted epidemics of anxiety and depressive symptomology in overprotected young people.

Studies are currently being undertaken to identify possible links between reduced childhood risks and increased emotional reactivity. Some researchers suggest that outdoor risky play is an ideal way to

counter phobias (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). In resilience science, the steeling effect describes benefits of being exposed to manageable levels of risk which serves to strengthen long-term stress management and coping skills (Rutter, 2012).

Progress made in child protection and safety is admirable; child restraint seats and bike helmets are key examples of positive steps in injury prevention. But critical questions arise when reactionary responses to risk interfere with the quality of child and youth care. For example, urban playgrounds were developed a century ago to tap the spirit of adventure in youth (Addams, 1909). But playgrounds have changed radically over the last 20 years. Government standards in North America seek to increase safety by lowering swing sets and removing old favorites such as the merry-go-round, teeter-totter, and high, minimally protected steel slides. If not eliminated, they are replaced with newer innocuous versions. Surface areas, now rubber or bark chips cushion falls. All seems technically well in the playground, except that children only use these new playscapes as they were designed at a rate of about 3% (Herrington et al., 2012). The authors of this study found playground equipment was unoccupied 87% of the time or was used in other child-invented ways. This suggests that children were not consulted in its design nor were their motivations and developmental needs considered. Again, honorable intentions may be misguided.

Can we go back to the “good old days”? Not likely? Just as we can’t ignore the trends of smart phones, screen time, and social media. It has been adopted and we are adapting, whether we like it or not. Can we reverse or slow down the trends of child over-protection? I believe we can. Through concerted effort and the infusion of common sense and trust, parents and professionals can influence policy and practice to re-establish a healthy level of risk in child development. This is where the pendulum metaphor is called into question.



A pendulum swinging toward healthy risk-taking will reach its terminal destination—until some incident like a head injury from falling from playground equipment causes it to return

to its original position. A better metaphor is a balance scale: risk and challenge should be added, along with resources necessary to support safety in development. This is different from simply finding an appropriate level of risk and challenge but rather blending the need for both safety and adventure (Brendtro, 2016). As we get back to basics, adventure and experiential learning can address child and youth needs in education, development, and treatment (Brendtro & Strother, 2007).

Developmentally appropriate risk-taking is simple in theory but more complex in practice. Each of us must find comfort, weighing our liability concerns and protective measures to allow for change. This is not a radical suggestion. A quick peek at the growing interest in forest and nature schools shows that outdoor risky play is a central feature of this educational model (Knight, 2011). How then is risk to be conceptualized by service providers, parents, and schools?

The real challenge is to help parents and caregivers to understand risk and challenge as important as young people grow towards maturity (Vota, 2017). At one end of the spectrum are overly protective “helicopter parents.” At the other are “free range parents” who allow their kids developmental challenges through risk-taking, decision-making, and spending more time alone. This parenting style is not for the faint of heart as some parents take heat from authorities for being “neglectful” by allowing children ages 9 to 12 to walk to school.

A promising turn of events recently occurred in Utah where Senator Lincoln Fillmore successfully proposed the “Free range parent bill” enacted in May 2018 (De la Cruz, 2018). This will allow—get this—for parents to let their kids explore in a playground alone or even walk home from school without supervision. This was previously considered neglect and parents had to deal with reactions of the risk society such as reports to child protection or police—all for making decisions for their children based on sound developmental principles.

Nevin J. Harper, PhD, is Associate Professor in the School of Child & Youth Care at the University of Victoria, National Research Coordinator for Outward Bound Canada, and co-chair of the Adventure Therapy International Committee. He enjoys spending more time outside than in, preferably with his family, and ideally in the woods or by the water near home on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. He may be contacted by email at: njharper@uvic.ca

References

- Addams, J. (1909). *The spirit of youth and the city streets*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Anglin, J. P. (2002). Risk, well-being, and paramountcy in child protection: The need for transformation. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 31(4), 233-255.
- Brendtro, L. (2016). The dueling needs for safety and adventure. *Thriving: Children, youth, families*, 1(4), 1-3. growingedgetraining.com
- Brendtro, L., & Strother, M. (2007). Back to basics through challenge and adventure. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 16(1), 2.
- De la Cruz, D. (2018). Utah passes "Free Range Parent Law." *New York Times Online*. [nytimes.com/2018/03/29/well/family/utah-passes-free-range-parenting-law.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/29/well/family/utah-passes-free-range-parenting-law.html)
- Harper, N. J. (2017). Outdoor risky play and healthy child development in the shadow of the "risk society": A forest and nature school perspective. *Child & Youth Services*, 38(4), 318-334.
- Herrington, S., Lesmeister, C., Nicholls, J., & Stefiuk, K. (2012). *7 C's: An informational guide to young children's outdoor play spaces*. Consortium for Health, Learning and Development (CHILD). University of British Columbia.
- Knight, S. (2011). *Risk and adventure in early years outdoor play: Learning from forest schools*. London, UK: Sage.
- Pimentel, D. (2015). Fearing the bogeyman: How the legal system's overreaction to perceived danger threatens families and children. *Pepperdine Law Review*, 42, 235.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rutter, M. (2012). Resilience as a dynamic concept. *Development and Psychopathology*, 24(2), 335-344.
- Sandseter, E. B. H., & Kennair, L. E. O. (2011). Children's risky play from an evolutionary perspective: The anti-phobic effects of thrilling experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 9(2), 257-284.
- Vota, N. (2017). Keeping the free-range parent immune from child neglect: You cannot tell me how to raise my children. *Family Court Review*, 55(1), 152-167.