

I climbed right up to here' or Risk and Challenge in a Forest School

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Risk taking is widely understood to be a natural precursor to a child's development. Adults who work with children are moving on from thinking of risk only in the context of 'the risk assessment' which decides those things are too dangerous to allow. Looking at risk from a child's point of view, risk and risk taking is better understood and reframed as challenge. Providing realistic challenges for children and allowing them to work through the challenges they set themselves supports their development, actively engages them and helps them better understand themselves and each other.



I am always fascinated to watch groups of children climbing trees. I remember years ago working with a little girl who was very risk averse. She was part of a group of voracious tree climbers and she would watch them anxiously reporting to the adults just how high the others were climbing. One day she stood on the lowest branch and, reaching up, tied a string on the trunk. Each week she would climb up and touch that string until one day she felt ready to reach higher. She stood on a different branch and moved the string further up the trunk.

Last week I went out with a Forest School group who had been coming to the woods since the previous summer. They still climbed to the same height limits that they had set themselves months previously. But there was a change in the amount of support they required from the adults present. It had started with our active support and encouragement when they wanted to climb, more often than not we would talk them down when they climbed out of their comfort zone. This moved on to them needing our presence nearby, just in case, to the point where now they were climbing and moving around with ease. One of their classmates, who had not previously been out to the woods with us, joined in the tree climbing. Within moments had climbed higher, on different trees in a very different way, shinning up the trunk rather than climbing branch to branch, wedging himself comfortably, literally out on a limb.

Children's responses to risk taking are as diverse as the children themselves. Douglas & Wildavsky (1982) have suggested that there are four kinds of people when it comes to managing risk: Hierarchists, egalitarians, individualists and fatalists. Mark Gladwin (2005)¹ linked these different types of risk takers to the observations he made of children at play. You may recognise these types of risk takers in the children you know and work with. Hierarchists are those people who will naturally follow the rules, who deal with risk by following the procedures. If these procedures stress safety above all then these people are unlikely to find ways to push themselves out of the comfort zone. These are the children that look to you for permission before testing themselves and conform to set parameters like the little girl and her string. Egalitarians have strong group identification and emphasise group solidarity at the expense of official rules. These children like the group I was watching climb trees had developed a group norm. They had set parameters for themselves as a group and no one person in that group was likely to engage in risk taking behaviour that didn't conform.

Individualists are independent-minded and able to defy official rules and group pressures to make their own decisions on risk management. Like the boy who joined the tree climbing group but went out on a

limb individualist children are the likeliest to engage in risk-taking of the kind described by Hughes (2001) as "deep play". Fatalists are those people who submit passively to external control without commitment to group norms or solidarity and take no steps to either avoid risk or manage it. These children are the hardest to predict how they will respond to a risky situation. I wonder if their response to risk is borne out of inexperience in risky situations. Sue Palmer (Toxic Childhood 2008??) says "All real children's play involves an element of risk, and the more real play children are allowed the better they become at analyzing and managing those risks. If, on the other hand, adults try to eliminate risk from their lives they're likely to grow up either unduly reckless or hopelessly timid."

By observing the children we work with and understanding their approach our response to their risk taking can become more informed. The risks we all take as humans take are not only physical but are social and emotional. Forest School gives lots of opportunities for risk taking and challenge. For some children just being in woodland, especially if it this is an unfamiliar environment, is an emotional challenge. The opportunity to climb, move tree trunks, run on rough terrain etc provides endless physical challenges. Using tools and being around fire provides opportunity for physical and emotional challenges for children. Being in a group without the structure of a classroom and having to communicate with others, talking with a partner when using a billhook to split wood provides social, physical and emotional challenges. When someone overcomes a challenge, be it one that is set by ourselves or by others and we are given chance to reflect on how we feel, we offer the opportunity to build those critical qualities of self worth and resilience.

It is too easy under the guise of health and safety to try and remove the risks and therefore take away any challenge in the activity or environment for the children and it is worth noting that the child's need for having a challenge, if not met, will often express itself in other ways including 'challenging behaviour'. The importance of a Forest school activity is in providing children the opportunity to take risks and build their self-confidence.

"Most psychiatrists agree that mental health in adulthood springs from a successful weaning of the child from its parents, an ability to deal with the outside world confidently, without overdue dependence on adults. And making good relationships can only come with practice. Through unstructured play with others, children can work through their emotions and discover their identity. If they are never free from adult supervision, they cannot internalise a parental voice or find a way of setting their own boundaries. They have no chance to do mildly dangerous things and find out how risks should be judged. They cannot chart their own course through the minor hazards of everyday life. Nor can they explore the real bonds of friendship and loyalty that are formed through common adventures with others their own age." (Sieghart, M. A. in the Times, 5 th August 1995)

References: 1. Playwords (Summer 2005 - Issue 26)

Author: Lily Horseman