



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on January 26, 2024

## We Made Kids So Safe That It's Hurting Them

Kids need to climb trees, jump off things and ride their bikes fast. That's what the Canadian Paediatric Society is recommending in a white paper out today: "Healthy childhood development through outdoor risky play."

If that sounds positively radical — and also commonsensical — you're right. Mariana Brussoni, a developmental psychologist at the University of British Columbia, has been championing risky play for more than a decade. But the Paediatric Society was never quite ready to endorse her call to action.



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It was only when faced with soaring rates of childhood anxiety, depression, obesity and even myopia that the pediatricians came to "realize that letting kids go out and play could be a way to deal with a lot of these challenging issues," Brussoni says.

That's because the doctors came to recognize two truths:

- 1 — Children are hard-wired to play because it is developmental gold. It teaches them how to take action, get along and solve problems.
- 2 — Replacing rollicking, kid-led play with structured, adult-led play was a mistake. It deprived children of a million opportunities to exercise their autonomy. And in terms of physical injuries, it turned out to be MORE dangerous.

When kids play without adult intervention it increases their social-emotional skills, says the report. What's more: It can "significantly reduce children's risk for elevated anxiety."

Play does that in a rather obvious way, says Peter Gray, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Boston College and a co-founder with me of Let Grow. "From an evolutionary standpoint, why do children want to play in a risky way? Because this is how they develop a little courage," Gray says. "They deliberately put themselves into situations where they're feeling fear so that, unconsciously, they can have a sense of control over it: 'I can feel this fear and survive it.' So when they face a real emergency, they are slightly less likely to panic. And they are also less fearful because they know, 'Something can happen and I can manage it.'"

The Canadian report recommends pediatricians promote risky play as preventative medicine for mental health.

But what about the physical danger risky play involves? How can doctors — and parents, and schools — ignore that?

By looking at statistics, says Brussoni. "From 2007 to 2022, there were two deaths from falls on the playground, and 480 deaths from motor vehicle crashes." That is, kids as car passengers. And there were zero deaths from falls from trees.



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And as the Paediatrics paper notes: “The research has established that children are less likely to be injured while engaging in unstructured activities than when playing an organized sport.”

Sports are more dangerous than goof-around play? It’s starting to sound like the real risk in “risky play” is that our culture has been busy outlawing it. Think of signs like the one in suburban Washington, D.C., that cautions: “Adult supervision required. Do not climb on slides. No jumping from swings.” And, on the monkey bars, “Do not skip rings or rungs.”

So how can we renormalize free play?

Brussoni tells parents to start with an “underwhelming” experiment. “Let them out into the backyard while you’re watching for a few minutes.”

The next day, sit in the kitchen and *don’t* watch. You and your kids will get used to time apart.

Another way is to ask your kids’ school to start a “Let Grow Play Club.” That’s when the school stays open for mixed-age free play. An adult is there, but like a lifeguard. They don’t organize the games or solve the spats. [Our free implementation guide is here.](#)

If even cautious Canada is saying safety culture has swung too far, it’s time to jump off the swing.

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