

# Promoting risky play: Insights from the Outside Play Lab

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## **Mariana Brussoni, founder of the Outside Play Lab at The University of British Columbia, is a pioneer in promoting the benefits of risky play for children**

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Her research emphasizes the importance of allowing children to engage in outdoor activities that involve a certain level of risk, arguing that this type of play is crucial for their overall development.

In this exclusive interview, Mariana Brussoni from the Outside Play Lab shares her insights on risky play and childhood development.

### **The Outside Play Lab: A passion for studying children’s outdoor play and safety**

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Mariana Brussoni shared her journey from being a developmental psychologist to focusing on injury prevention. Her transition was driven by the need to address children’s safety comprehensively. She explained, “In public health and injury prevention, it’s very typical that they use a very siloed approach thinking only about preventing injuries. Whereas as a developmental psychologist, I think about the child as a whole and what they need to thrive.” The Outside Play Lab seeks to strike a balance between safety and the developmental needs of children, promoting a holistic approach to injury prevention.

Ellen Sandseter’s work on risky play in 2009 influenced the team’s decision to get involved in this work. Risky play involves thrilling activities where children engage with uncertainty and there is a potential for injury, like climbing trees or rough-and-tumble play. “Our lab investigates the effects of outdoor and risky play, identifies barriers to risky play, and works to dismantle them, focusing on adult attitudes and the design of the built environment,” Brussoni explained.

### **Risk and hazard: How to practically ensure children’s safety without stifling their play opportunities**

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Brussoni clarified, “One of the things that we really focus on is the need to move from a risk assessment, which is what’s traditionally done... to riskbenefit assessment.” This approach evaluates the benefits of taking certain risks and ensures that children have opportunities to engage in beneficial risky play while managing genuine hazards appropriately.

She explained that risk is often viewed negatively and gets confused with hazards. Hazards are serious threats that children can’t recognize or manage, like broken equipment, whereas risks are challenges children can assess, like climbing trees. This

distinction helps us manage risks appropriately, limiting hazards while keeping risks, allowing children to engage and challenge themselves through risky play.

## **Criticism: Could promoting risky play lead to an increase in avoidable injuries?**

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Brussoni acknowledged the potential for injuries, just like any physical activity or sport, but emphasized the importance of focusing on serious injuries rather than preventing all minor injuries. She stated, “What we want to do is really just focus on preventing those serious injuries or deaths...otherwise we forget to consider the costs to kids in not getting these kinds of experiences.” The lab’s approach is to keep children “as safe as necessary, rather than as safe as possible” allowing them to develop essential skills and confidence.

## **The long-term health outcomes for children who regularly engage in risky play**

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The benefits of risky play are well documented. Brussoni highlighted research showing that children who engage in outdoor play are more physically active and less sedentary. Navigating challenges and risks in outdoor play can help children build skills gradually and on their own terms. By doing that, children develop confidence, independence and mental resilience, as well as skills to face their fears. It can create opportunities for children to experience and manage strong emotions, reduce anxiety disorders and prevent fears from turning into phobias.

Above all, it is important that children have opportunities to engage in play for the sake of play itself, especially play that is unstructured and child-led.

## **Toolkits: How do they help parents, teachers, and communities encourage more outdoor play for kids?**

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“We developed free online toolkits for parents, early childhood educators, and teachers to address the barriers to risky play, particularly adult fears around children’s risk-taking. Using health behavior change theory, we help adults reflect on their attitudes and provide practical guidance that helps adults support children’s outdoor risky play,” explained Brussoni.

“We also consider equity, ensuring that all children have access to outdoor play, regardless of their circumstances. Our toolkits aim to create supportive environments in childcare and schools, aligning policies with developmental values.”

## **Training educators and caregivers to support risky play**

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Brussoni addressed the overemphasis on safety, noting that the likelihood of severe injury or death in play is “vanishingly small.” She stressed the need for educators and caregivers to balance safety concerns with opportunities for children to build self-confidence and resilience. “Part of what we do in terms of that anxiety based caregiving is

actually help educators and caregivers recognize their fear and give them the cognitive space to think about questions like, ‘What’s the worst that could happen and how likely is this to happen?’ and ‘How are these experiences benefiting the child?’

## **How can risky play be made accessible and beneficial for all?**

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Tailoring approaches to fit different contexts ensures that all children can benefit from risky play. Children with disabilities have the same need for risky play. Brussoni explains that adjustments should be made based on individual needs. Strong relationships between adults and children are crucial for caregivers to understand how to best support the children in their care.

Providing opportunities for unstructured outdoor play in schools and child care centres is essential to ensuring that all children are given [equal] opportunities to engage in outdoor risky play. To do this, it is important that educators and caregivers are adequately equipped to support unstructured risky play opportunities. It is also important to communicate with children’s families about the importance of risky play, as well as provide the physical outdoor space to allow for a variety of play to take place.

Advise policymakers and community leaders to promote risky play in their areas Brussoni called for a “whole of society approach” to ensure children have access to play every day. She urged municipal planners to prioritize children’s movement and engagement within cities, moving away from car-centric designs. She emphasized the importance of understanding children’s needs and integrating child-centered, rights-based approaches into city planning, stating, “It’s good for all of the city.”

Schools and child care centers should prioritize children’s developmental needs over fear-driven caregiving, resulting in better behavioral outcomes and enhanced teacher retention. This holistic approach benefits the entire community.

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