

# Risk-Taking vs. Playing it Safe

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## Finding a Balance

On the one hand, it's a parent's job to protect a child from harm. On the other hand, children need to independently explore their world in order to understand their world. If we over-protect, we limit their ability to learn, we may teach them to be timid and fearful, and we may actually put them at greater risk. "If we round every corner, and eliminate every pokey bit, then the first time that kids come in contact with anything not made of round plastic, they'll hurt themselves." (Ted Talk by Gever Tulley)

If we allow them to take small, manageable risks with us there to coach them through, they learn more about life, feel bold and empowered, and learn an internal sense of when a situation carries a potential risk and requires that they be more cautious to stay safe.

## Levels of Risk: What Needs to Be Child-Proofed and What can be Explored?

It can be helpful to think about different levels of risk. These guide you in deciding what needs to be done to prevent injury, and also guide you in how to talk with your child about each category.

Level	Definition	What Parents Can Do	How to Communicate to Child if Situation Arises
Green	Safe – no worries.	Relax! Sit back and let your child discover the world! No need to guide their play.	When your child looks to you for input: put on a big smile, nod, verbally encourage exploration.
Yellow	Some risk, but really the worst that might happen is minor injury to person (bump or bruise) or property (mess to be cleaned up or non-valuable item broken).	If you feel comfortable doing so, allow your child to explore these things as they learn about their world. Observe them at play. Offer suggestions or demonstrate new skills as needed, but then back off to let them practice.	Look positive but thoughtful, lean forward to show you're paying extra attention, say with a quiet voice "just be careful" or "gentle touch" or "it's fragile, hold it carefully" or "watch your feet" – something that tells them how to be sure they're safe.
Orange	Risk of harm to child – major bump, bruise, or worse.	These hazards should be removed from places where the child is left unsupervised (e.g. their bedroom). When child encounters them under your supervision, talk with them about the risks so they know they need to use caution. Tell them specifically what they need to do to stay safe.	Look concerned (not scared) and attentive. Stand up and move closer. Use a strong voice to tell them what the risk is and model what they need to do. "The oven is hot. Move over there" or "that would be a big fall –go that way" or "it's not safe to run in a parking lot – hold my hand."
Red	Situation could turn from harmless to life-threatening in one unsupervised moment.	Remove hazards (e.g. don't leave poisonous items, sharp knives, or buckets of water out), block them off (e.g. fenced swimming pools, window locks on second-story windows) or closely supervise the child at all times (e.g. when your child is playing with a ball near a busy road). Rules should be clearly explained, non-negotiable and followed every time.	Look intensely alert, and either scared or angry (whatever gets their attention). Move toward them. Use your strongest, most urgent, non-negotiable voice, and as few words as possible to tell them what to do. "Stop!" "Danger!" "Back up!" "Hands up!" Remove them from situation if needed. After they're out of harm's way, <i>then</i> explain the situation.

## **Benefits of Risky Play**

It's easy to look at risky play that leads to bumps and bruises and think of it as "stupid." But there has to be an evolutionary benefit, since young animals of all species learn by playing, often in rough and tumble ways. What are the benefits?

*Kids learn skills they'll need as an adult:* At some point, kids need to learn to confidently and safely use dangerous tools.

*Persistence / overcoming challenges:* "Risk teaches children how to fail and try again, test their limits and boundaries, become resilient and acquire coping skills" (Hammond)

*Responsibility:* "Children take more responsibility for themselves... We do children a dis-service by trying to eliminate risk... It's good for children to be exposed to the possibility things might go wrong because that's how they learn to cope with challenges." (Tom Gill)

*Emotional regulation:* Risk taking helps children "regulate fear and anger... youngsters dose themselves with manageable quantities of fear and practice keeping their head while experiencing fear. In rough and tumble play, they may experience anger, but to continue the fun, they must overcome it." (Gray)

## **Kid's Favorite Risky Behaviors**

No matter what we do to safety-proof, "Kids are always going to figure out how to do the most dangerous thing they can." (Gever Tulley)  
Ellen Sandseter developed 5 categories of risk that seem to especially appeal to kids in play. For each, the child has a sense of possible risk, and feeling *just barely* in control, but managing to stay in control through a challenge. This gives a thrill and a sense of power / competence.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Examples of what kids enjoy</b>	<b>What Can You Do This Week to Honor this Impulse?</b>
Great Heights	Climbing trees, furniture, anything else to get that "king of the mountain" thrill.	Let them enjoy: the big slide and tall climber at the playground. Climbing a tree. Hiking up a steep hill. Balancing on a curb or wall. Jumping off a wall.
Rapid Speeds	Swings, merry-go-rounds, slides, bikes, roller coasters. Anything fast.	Take them for a ride in a bike trailer, or let them ride a bike or scooter. Push them high on a swing. Spin them in an office chair or on a merry go round.
Dangerous tools / Elements	Fire, hammers, knives, guns, power tools, chemicals, big sticks.	Let them use tools you use: a table knife to cut their food with, a small hammer, a glue gun, a rake or shovel.
Rough and Tumble Play	Wrestling, play-fighting, chasing, pushing, pinching, "sword" fighting.	Wrestling! Holding hands and swinging them up high. Chase games. Tickle games. Pillow fights or battles with pool noodles or other soft objects.
Disappearing / Getting Lost	Hide and seek. Sneaking away from parents. Running ahead of parents.	Hide and seek. Play red light / green light so you know they'll stop when you tell them to and then let them sometimes run ahead of you in the park or elsewhere.

More on risk-taking: The Overprotected Kid by Rosin. The Atlantic, March 2014. [www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/](http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/)  
Risky Play: Why Children Love & Need It, Peter Gray. Psychology Today. [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201404/risky-play-why-children-love-it-and-need-it](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201404/risky-play-why-children-love-it-and-need-it)  
Watch: Benefits of Risky Play [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRn1a82tdHM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRn1a82tdHM), 5 Dangerous Things you should Let Your Kids Do. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn\\_awAPYIGc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pn_awAPYIGc)

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