



Children Thriving with Risky Play

A RISKY PLAY POSITION STATEMENT FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN

play
AUSTRALIA

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Acknowledgement of Country

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Collaborators

We thank the following collaborators for their contribution to the *Position Statement*.

Please note: collaborators are listed in alphabetical order based on first name. The order does not represent level of contribution - all collaborators mentioned contributed equally.

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What resources are currently available in Australia to support risky play? Junjie facilitated the literature review of empirical research and Jason facilitated the review of current policy and practice documents.



Executive Summary

The *Risky Play Position Statement for Young Australian Children* (hereafter *Position Statement*) has united professionals from medical, educational, and playground design disciplines representing government and not-for-profit sectors across Australia in providing an authoritative voice to advocate for risky play in children's lives. Risky play is an inherent and critical component of young children's play; yet, within Australia, risky play is often missing from children's lives. This *Position Statement* challenges the current Australian narrative around risky play and highlights a benefit-risk approach to risky play for all young children.

The *Position Statement* recognises the importance of risky play for all children's health and wellbeing. However, the *Position Statement* intentionally focuses on children aged birth to 8 years. The first eight years of life is a critical time for overall child development including, the development of risk literacy skills, risk management skills and a healthy appetite for risk. Children during this period are receptive towards change and challenge; and, the skills developed during this time form the foundation for decision-making as they gain independence in later years.

Despite the numerous and well documented physical, social, emotional and cognitive benefits of risky play, risky play is not consistently supported and encouraged for young children within Australian contexts. The dearth of support and advocacy for risky play in Australia may be due to several misperceptions. The *Position Statement* addresses these misperceptions and provides current research evidence about risky play. Throughout the *Position Statement* guidance pertaining to hazards, risks and safety are intentionally prominent. Risky play is not unsafe play; it may involve some risk of injury, but it does not involve hazards that cause injuries. Further the *Position Statement* highlights the role of adults in children's risky play. Adults can support children's engagement in safe risky play and promote children's refinement of their risk-management and risk-literacy skills critical throughout life.

The *Position Statement* takes an inclusive approach, acknowledging that risky play differs across knowledge systems and cultures and may be influenced by local community perspectives and experiences, such as First Nations knowledges on play and risk. The *Position Statement* recognises the importance of respecting cultural protocols around specific environments, spaces and activities.

This *Position Statement* is a benchmark for guiding all adults in children's lives, to actively promote positive and engaging playful learning opportunities which include risk. In developing this statement, we are advocating risky play for all children, relevant stakeholders and the wider community and inviting informed discussion about the meanings of risk and risky play provision for young children. The *Position Statement* is an imperative first step in guiding the Australian community to reconceptualise risky play, what it involves and how it can be promoted for all children aged birth to 8 years.

Play And Risky Play

The significance of play in children's lives has been acknowledged by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990)¹ Article 31, which supports children's right to rest and leisure, and to participate in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child¹. Within the Australian context, the Early Childhood Australia Statement on Play² further highlights the importance of play for all young children. The Statement on Play acknowledges that play has been part of First Nations people's culture for thousands of years and is a key component of young children's health and wellbeing². Through play, children learn, grow and develop³ and discover connections to their world and their cultural identities². Play is an inherent part of children's lives irrespective of ability, culture or lived experiences.

A key element of play is risky play and the concept of risk and risk management is not new. In contemporary societies, risk is pervasive across physical, economic, social and political spheres of life, it is a daily consideration personally, professionally and publicly. Irrespective of age or experience attending to risk management is normal, whether cooking a meal, driving a car or building a house. Risk is also universally subjective, what is risky to some is not to others and there are varying degrees of risk seeking or risk aversion.

Young children naturally seek risk in their play, they are curious and want to be challenged as their capabilities develop over time. Risky play invites young children to learn about oneself, others or the immediate context across a range of developmental domains including social, cognitive, language, physical and emotional. Children can learn to capably manage risk in their environments and build their own risk literacies through risky play experiences. Children learning to self-manage risk during play may demonstrate perseverance, resilience, critical thinking, agency, problem solving and/or a sense of achievement. Risky play is integral to life-long learning and promotes capable and confident adults.



**Scary makes me happy,
I like the feeling. - Declan 4y**

YES – the *Risky Play Position Statement for Young Australian Children* is needed!

Within the Australian context, in the last two-decades, risky play has greatly diminished from children's play⁴. Parents and carers are heightened to the potential negative risky play outcomes (e.g., broken bones, scratches and bruises) and governing and community organisations are bound by safety regulations and risk assessment policies and documentation.

Global shifts in thinking about risky play and policy supported by evidence-informed research illustrating the benefits of risky play^{2,5-7} affirm that the development and dissemination of an Australian *Position Statement* is timely. Collectively, these national and international documents advocate for the rights of children to play and the importance of risky play as integral to children's play.

The aim of this *Position Statement* is to advocate for embedding risky play opportunities in children's play and natural and built play spaces (e.g., playgrounds, nature parks, zoos, museums etc.). The *Position Statement* has been developed in consultation with experts from medical, health, education, design and safety sectors, and provides an authoritative and unified voice about the utmost importance of risky play for children aged from birth to 8 years.

The *Position Statement* defines risky play as play that is exploratory and challenging with often unpredictable outcomes. It is child-initiated and physically engages all the senses leading to positive learning and development outcomes. Several definitions of risky play are commonly employed, but we argue this definition best encapsulates the type of play that is currently often missing from children's lives. Furthermore, we have deliberately used the term 'risky play'. Although other terms, such as adventurous play, nature play or active outdoor play are used to describe risky play within the Australian context, we propose the word 'risk' is vitally important. **The risk element of risky play invites children to participate in play that offers a sense of thrill and excitement, as well as opportunities for exploration, problem-solving, challenge and dealing with uncertainty - skills important for life-long learning.**

Risky play in this *Position Statement* aligns with the eight categories of risky play: (1) play with heights; (2) play with speed; (3) play with dangerous tools and materials; (4) play near dangerous elements; (5) rough and tumble play; (6) play away from immediate supervision of adults; (7) play with impact; and, (8) vicarious play⁸⁻¹⁰. We acknowledge that risky play is different for all children, and is fundamentally informed by children's lived experiences, culture, family background and ability. We also recognise that risky play occurs in different environments (e.g., home, community environments (e.g., homes, parks, playgrounds, zoos, museums, churches and education facilities); and thus, is contextually diverse. We also acknowledge that risky play potentially involves physical, emotional and social risk.

The *Position Statement* offers a benchmark for recognising children's fundamental learning disposition to push risk boundaries in their daily lives; and in so doing, develop multi-dimensional risk management competencies. This recognition must be evident in the types of diverse and rich play landscapes offered, where children can explore, self-manage and assess risk. For the adult stakeholders, whether parents, teachers, designers or policy makers, embedding opportunities for children's self-management of risk can be viewed as an insurance for children's future well-being. The real risk to children's futures is not having opportunities to engage in risky play as children. The *Position Statement* aims to restore risky play to its rightful place and promote a whole of community responsibility and approach in this benchmarking endeavour.

Why Is Risky Play Important?

Risky play is important because it positively shapes children's health, well-being and developmental trajectories, including physical/motor, social-emotional, cognitive and language development. Risky play promotes the development of fine and gross motor skills, muscle strength, skeletal quality, coordination and endurance¹¹⁻¹⁴. For example, when children engage in risky play that involves heights, children maintain a hold to the climbable feature, pull their body weight up and coordinate their movements to be safe. Likewise, when children engage in risky play that involves speed, they must coordinate and exert their bodies in a way that can maintain stability at speed, or when children engage with tools, they can develop their hand-eye coordination and motor competence to avoid injury. Furthermore, when children are moving at speed or climbing high, their perceptual skills (depth, shape, size, movement), and general spatial-orientation abilities are strengthened¹⁵.

Risky play promotes social and emotional child-related outcomes, for example, prosocial behaviours such as encouraging peers and supporting others to overcome challenges^{16,17}. Further, risky play increases one's sense of self¹⁸ and can strengthen friendships through mutual social support^{19,20}. For example, when children participate in rough and tumble play, children self-regulate their actions and emotions as they control how much force is used and demonstrate social competence and interpersonal problem-solving skills³. Risky play not only promotes social-emotional development, but children also take social and emotional risks during play, potentially having mixed feelings or being hesitant to engage in play with others due to possible rejection risks²¹.

Risky play promotes children's confidence, self-esteem and resilience^{3,22-26}. When children are encouraged to push their limits through exposure to managed risks, practice social assertion, and explore unfamiliar situations, they can build positive dispositions towards challenge and uncertainty that prepares them to interact more confidently in the world, likely reducing the risk of childhood anxiety²⁷. The positive, thrilling and at times fearful emotions associated with risky play fulfills an innate need within children informing their recognition of physiological arousal and learning about how to manage fear and anxiety²⁸. Risky play provides a context in which children practice their responses to uncertainty or unpredictability. In doing so, children develop coping skills and resilience which over time may reduce the risk of childhood anxiety^{13,28,29}. Furthermore, the skills developed through risky play in the early years transcend beyond childhood into adulthood where risk management and literacy skills are critical across all life facets.



Climbing a tree is risky, because sometimes I double flip off it.

It helps you get stronger. – Callum 4y

Risky play is important for all children irrespective of culture and background, however within the Australian context there continues to be resistance towards risky play. The problem we argue is wider community misperceptions that risky play is: (1) dangerous and leads to injury; (2) unsafe for children; and, (3) bound by regulations and legislation. Thus, it is easier and less onerous to avoid offering or promoting risky play.

Misperception 1: Risky play is dangerous and leads to injury

Play is inherently dynamic and presents experiences that can be unpredictable and uncertain as children actively engage with their changing physical and social environments. During risky play, unpredictability and uncertainty are more pronounced, however children do have innate abilities to appraise risk to support their own and others' well-being and safety. Young children, including children as young as 1 year old, can make decisions and take responsibility for their actions⁸. They can accurately discriminate between situations involving injury-risk and those that do not and in addition, can explain what makes a situation risky^{30,31}. Children can demonstrate awareness of risk in play situations and are able to adapt their behaviour and show caution or withdraw from play if it becomes too dangerous or provokes fear^{8,10,24,32}. Risky play may lead to injury, although current research suggests that injury related to risky play is minimal³³; even if risky play does result in minor injury, it is important to note that this type of play is acceptable.

Misperception 2: Risky play is unsafe

Adults have mixed perceptions about risk and attitudes towards risk-taking, often suggesting that risky play is unsafe. Such perceptions are shaped by experience, knowledge, cultural values, educational context/system, and regulatory requirements^{22,25,34-36}. Well managed and supported risky play is not unsafe play. Risky play includes elements of thrill, excitement and challenge, involving children in extending their thinking, exploring their environment and testing their limits^{15,21,25,34,37-39}, but this does not make it unsafe play. Unsafe play is reckless play that involves hazards or unacceptable risks (for example, broken equipment or resources, sharp protrusions, possibilities of head and neck entrapment, crushpoints and collisions, playing near traffic or water bodies) where children's health and well-being are potentially at risk.

Adults have a responsibility to provide play environments where risk, challenge and safety are balanced. Strategies for ensuring children's safety should first and foremost prevent accidents with a fatal or disabling consequence (unacceptable risk), but recognise that in learning to cope with risk in the context of play, minor injuries such as bumps, bruises or even the occasional broken limb, are acceptable when weighed against the benefits. Adults can directly promote children's safety through age relevant support, which ensures that hazards are identified and managed. This reduces the likelihood and severity of injury, but maintains opportunities for risk. For example, when children participate in risky play involving heights, such as climbing a tree, nearby adults might assess the hazards within the environment. A hazard may include tree branches that are potentially not strong enough to hold a child's weight; and thus, children could be intentionally informed about these branches to self-manage this risk. It is important that adults support children in recognising hazards to extend their risk management skills, enabling them to gradually take greater responsibility for their safety and increase risk literacy skills.

Likewise, adults as public domain operators (i.e., those responsible for play spaces at zoos, museums, swimming pools, churches, hospitals and public parks) can promote risky play by prioritising regular inspections for potential hazards and ongoing high-quality maintenance.

Misperception 3: Risky play is bound by regulations and legislation

Regulations and legislation for assessing the safety of children's spaces, equipment and resources have traditionally been based on adult work health and safety standards. Application of adult work health and safety standards results in an over emphasis on detrimental risk and underrepresentation of potential learning and development benefits for children. However, extensive recent international and Australian work has led to the drafting and implementation of new Standards (AS ISO 4980:2023; AS 4685.0:2017; AS 4685.1:2021) for play spaces and equipment that recognise risk-taking as an essential part of children's play. Most significantly, the Standards state that play spaces and equipment should be assessed through a benefit-risk lens rather than a risk-only lens. This approach proposes that both the risks and benefits are considered in parallel and when the benefits outweigh the risk, the activity should proceed, or if necessary be re-evaluated after further risk reduction⁴⁰. These standards, in conjunction with other international and Australian work^{6,7}, recognise that risky play benefits children and approaches to assessing risk in play should consider both the benefits and risks. Regular inspection and maintenance of play environments is important in hazard reduction / elimination and for enhancing usability, which then invites children to engage in self-chosen and hazard-free risky play. The application of a benefit-risk lens to the regulations and legislation for assessing the safety of children's spaces and equipment will enhance play opportunities for children aged birth to 8 years.



What Resources are Currently Available in Australia to Support Risky Play?

Australia offers limited sporadic publicly available policy- and curriculum-related documents which advocate for risky play. For example, at a national level, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (V2.0) (Outcomes 1 and 3) briefly highlights the importance of children taking calculated risks in play and the need for educators to provide “well-planned and challenging outdoor environments that encourage risk-taking and risky play experiences” (p. 47)⁴¹. The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority has supported the establishment of nature play programs at sites beyond early childhood service perimeters in parks, beaches and bushland where risky play opportunities are further enhanced⁴². The Early Childhood Australia Statement on Play similarly directs attention to the importance of risky play, suggesting that children’s ‘overall well-being depends on engaging in a rich, diverse range of play that includes vigorous physical play and activities that incorporate elements of risk-taking, such as risky play’ (p. 24)².

At a state level, the Tasmanian Catholic Education Commission policy document advocates for risky play within formal school settings and highlights the role of executive, staff, teachers and students in managing risky play. Supplementing these curriculum-based documents, a few state or local governments have developed and enacted their own public policies inclusive of risky play. Individual examples from across New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and ACT have been identified (e.g. NSW Government, *Everyone Can Play*, 2023; Tea Tree Gully Council, South Australia, 2023) and trends towards playspaces with more natural risky elements are evident. Furthermore, several peak national and state bodies (e.g., Play Australia, Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, New South Wales Department of Education, Kidsafe Australia, G8 Education, Early Childhood Australia, Child Australia [Western Australia and Northern Territory], Western Australian Association of Independent Schools) have published one-off information-based newsletter- and website-type articles highlighting the importance of risky play for children aged birth to 8 years.

Complementing these policy- and practice-related documents, over the last 15 years 34 Australian-based research studies focussed on risky play for children birth to 8 years old have been published. Of the 34 studies, 18 (53%) specifically focused on risky play in early childhood education settings (traditional and non-traditional such as bush kinder). Eight of these studies reported early childhood educator’s perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about risky play in early childhood education settings^{12,21,23-25,29,43}. Some of these studies also explored parent’s perceptions of risky play^{12,43} and some compared educator’s perceptions across cultures (e.g., Australia and Norway^{25,29} and Australia and United States of America)¹². Three studies explored spaces, resources and features of risky play in early childhood settings⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ and five studies explored the impact of a pedagogical practice intervention or the redesigning of an outdoor space on risky play for children in early childhood settings^{9,47-50}. Two studies explored the relationship between risky play at bush kinders (early childhood settings in Australia that regularly spend time at local natural sites such as a beach or forest) and science and STEM education^{51,52}. One study involved exploring children’s sense of belonging during risky play experiences⁵³.

In addition, eight (24%) of Australian risky play studies focussed on risky play in outdoor spaces, including public playgrounds. Two studies explored adult's perceptions about risky play in outdoor spaces^{4,54}. Three studies involved child participants: one explored children's play choices in outdoor spaces⁵⁵; one explored children's perceptions of risky play in outdoor spaces⁵⁶; and, one explored children's risk perceptions about play outdoors³⁰. Individual studies have explored the role of adults in children's risky play⁵⁷ and the relationship between adult's beliefs and their responses to children's risk-taking behaviours³⁹. One study provided a commentary on safety in Australian and Norwegian playgrounds⁵⁸.

The remaining eight studies (24%) focused on different aspects of risky play, including pre-service teacher's perceptions of risky play⁵⁹, parent's perceptions of risky play for children with disabilities^{60,61} and the relationship between father's and toddler's during rough and tumble play⁶². Additionally, one study explored cross-cultural risky play differences in school playgrounds^{37,63} and three school-based studies mentioned risky play as part of an intervention study, but did not specifically assess or explore risky play^{37,64,65}. No school-based studies specifically focussed on risky play for children aged up to 8 years old were identified.

Collectively, policy- and practice-related documents highlight the importance and benefits of risky play, however, in general, such documents are limited in scope, accessibility and reach. Further, the empirical research alerts to the ongoing need for a collective authoritative voice in this arena and further education and discussion among parents, educators, designers, policy makers and local and national governments.



6

Recommendations

Given the importance of risky play for children, the following six recommendations are key:

1. Sharing a consistent definition of risky play: Risky play is often mentioned, but rarely defined. Within the Australian context risky play should be defined as “play that is exploratory and challenging with often unpredictable outcomes. It is child-initiated and physically engages all the senses leading to positive learning and development outcomes. Risky play invites children to participate in play that offers a sense of thrill and excitement, as well as opportunities for exploration, problem-solving, challenge and dealing with uncertainty - skills important for life-long learning”.

2. Promoting risky play in all spaces and places: Risky play should and can be promoted in all spaces and places, including privately-owned and public spaces, built and natural environments, including schools and early childhood education settings as well as museums, zoos, hospitals, churches, nature reserves and playgrounds. Ongoing resourcing (e.g., supply of loose parts) and high-quality rigorous maintenance regimes are critical to ensure such places promote usability, are without hazards and as safe as needed. All adults across a broad spectrum of stakeholders including parents, policy managers, teachers and playground designers, inspectors and playground maintenance personnel have key roles in promoting and supporting children’s access to and engagement in safe risky play.

3. Reconceptualising risky play: The current prioritising of risk over benefit is no longer tenable and a shift towards a benefit-risk narrative reflecting contemporary research evidence is essential. This requires reframing risk both for and with children and adults, acknowledging children’s inherent risky play dispositions and positively promoting wider access to risky play utilising a benefit-risk analysis approach.

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Jumping off the
rock wall makes
me feel good. It
exercises me too!

– Callum 4y



4. Building knowledge and skills: Upskilling/re-educating adults, including parents, teachers/educators, playground designers and inspectors about the importance of risky play, but also offering the knowledge and/or skills to effectively assess, manage, co-construct and promote risky play. Professional development training that offers examples of risky play in diverse contexts and discusses how risky play can be implemented and managed is particularly important for all involved in play provision.

5. Instigating advocacy and action: Empowering individuals and communities to create awareness of the importance of risky play within their local environments and organisations through community and government advocacy and actions. This could be enacted through the use of multiple dissemination avenues including media and static documents that are appropriate for different communities and shared in community languages.

6. Prioritising policy shifts: The inclusion of risky play in national curriculum and policy documents (e.g., AC*, EYLF*, MTOP*, NQS*), and recognition of risky play as vital for inclusion in the quality standard and initial educator training by various quality assurance and accrediting bodies (e.g., ACARA*, ACECQA*, ASQA*) and teaching facilities. Plus, the inclusion of risky play and benefit-risk approaches in state and local government planning and policy documents applicable to public play contexts.

*AC - Australian Curriculum

*ACARA - Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

*ACECQA - Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

*ASQA - Australian Skills Quality Authority

*EYLF - Early Years Learning Framework

*MTOP - My Time, Our Place

*NQS - National Quality Standard



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