Introduction

Designing nature-based risky play spaces that allow children the freedom to bloom requires a thoughtful landscape design process that incorporates specific considerations that meet children's needs. This book explores innovative, inspiring, and creative ideas for designing these play spaces.

Nature-Based and Risky Play

Nature-based play refers to playing in natural landscapes, such as woodlands, or designed landscapes, such as parks. Climbing on trees and boulders, hiking in the woods, and playing in a creek are a few examples of nature-based play. Research shows that children need nature for healthy development of their senses and for learning and creativity. Providing children with exposure to nature-based play allows them to be immersed in the sensory elements of sounds, sights, smells, and textures in the environment. Children use their imagination when playing in nature differently than when playing on stark asphalt and concrete pavement outdoors. Playing in nature is also, of course, different from playing indoors. If children's creativity is allowed to flourish, there are no limits as to what they can create with simple objects like branches, sticks, and stones. For many children, the most wonderful, powerful, life-changing discoveries they make lie hidden in nature (Dannenmaier 1998). For all of us, childhood is a time for discovery.

Risky Play Defined

Risky play is often misunderstood to mean unsafe play. That simply is not the case. Risky play is not hazardous play. Instead, risky play is exciting, thrilling, and challenging while at the same time keeping risk to a minimum (Frost 1992). Unfortunately, it is a term that has been used by academic researchers and health professionals since the 1900s and is still being used today. Ellen Sandseter (2011), a well-known researcher, identifies six categories of risky play. These are namely (1) great heights, such as climbing on a tall tree or ladder or sliding down a giant slide; (2) rapid speeds, such as swinging on a vine or rope; (3) dangerous tools, such as building with construction tools; (4) dangerous elements, such as building a fire, wading in deep water,
or rolling in muddy ponds; (5) rough-and-tumble play, such as chasing or wrestling; (6) and disappearing and getting lost, such as wandering in a maze, tunnel, or woods. According to Sandseter, riskiness is determined by what the child perceives, and each child perceives it differently. It does not include hazards that a child is unaware of on the playground (Jambor 1995; Wallach 1992). In Sandseter’s (2007, 2009a, 2009b) control studies, she observed that children in varying degrees have a tendency to seek out more exhilarating play situations, thereby increasing the level of risky play even when playing on traditional playground equipment. For example, children will try to stand on swings to heighten the risk level. They will often jump off swings instead of slowing them down for ease of stepping off.

Risky play is play that allows children greater exploration, challenges, and limits of play, according to Joe Frost (1992), founder of contemporary play advocacy. It is play that gives children a chance to identify the challenge, evaluate the risk level, and determine how to deal with the task at hand (Jambor 1995, p. 7). Mariana Brussoni and colleagues (2017) in their research findings note that risky play increases a child’s abilities to deal with fear-inducing situations and to learn valuable risk-management skills. Their research indicates that young children reap substantial benefits when they are given room to explore risky play in outdoor spaces. These beneficial behaviors include “improved socialization, problem-solving, focus, self-regulation, creativity and self-confidence, and reduced stress, boredom and injury” (Brussoni et al. 2017, p. 139).

Tim Gill, an expert on childhood and risk, stresses the deleterious impact of risk aversion on childhood development in his book, No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society. He explains that risk aversion stymies “limits and freedom of children’s play, corrodes relationships with adults, and constrains their exploration of physical, social, and virtual worlds” (Gill 2007, p. 95). In his 2006 presentation on risk and childhood at the Royal Academy of Arts, Gill expressed his view that we are overprotecting our children. He pointed out that looking at our multitudes of restrictions on playgrounds, we are closing down childhood experiences that foster children’s full development. “What we should consider,” he concludes, “is a little more benign neglect” (Double Exposure, Flashback Television, 2006 video).

Risky play is important to childhood development. It is a topical issue today, and it is a frequent topic of discussion at conferences focused on play, early childhood education, child psychology, and landscape architecture design.

Design Process Highlighted in Five Case Studies

Five outstanding case studies of children’s nature-based risky play spaces are analyzed in this book through the explanation of the background, design, and visitor experience. These uniquely designed children’s nature-based risky play spaces are intended to serve as a broad platform to inspire others to create well-designed play spaces. This book includes a comprehensive collection of rich visual images—drawings, sketches,
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and photographs—that illustrate successful play spaces. It provides explanations of both the design criteria and the design process.

The design process, including research, program development, site inventory and analysis, design, and construction, is described in detail. This comprehensive process shows the level of groundwork, planning, and design that goes into building a successful play space. Design concepts surrounding nature-based risky play are highlighted in relation to key considerations for designing children’s outdoor spaces. These include attention to scale and the incorporation of elements of plants, wildlife, water, retreat, enclosure, heights, active play, creative play, and enrichment of the five senses. Educational and sustainable landscape concepts unique to each case study are also covered.

Importance of Children’s Play

Studies show that risky play in particular is crucial and that taking risks leads to greater learning experiences. Children love to play in risky ways. It’s how children learn. Risky play is not a negative experience; rather, it presents a joy of freedom with the right measure of fear to produce thrill for children (Gray 2013). Creating learning environments that foster and optimize children’s learning abilities is very important. Children come into the world with instinctive drives to learn for themselves. These include the drives to play and explore. “Unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life” (Gray 2013, p. 1).

Creating children’s outdoor environments is critical in today’s society, as more and more children are growing up in cities. Risky play is just one type of outdoor play. Children today lack ready access to nature-based spaces and the chance to create their own play in these places, which factor significantly into healthy physical, mental, and emotional development (Kellert 1998). They are spending less and less time outdoors. Sedentary indoor lifestyles and easy access to technology for children are contributing to obesity and other health problems, as well as, for today’s urban children in particular, a sense of disconnection from nature. The idea that children’s spending less time outdoors is causing various behavioral problems has been notably termed by Richard Louv as “nature-deficit disorder” in his book Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder (2005). Providing children with enriching outdoor experiences is a public health priority. Thus, it is crucial to maintain places where children can be physically active (Moore 1997). The fact is that more than one-half of the world’s population now live in urban environments, and it is predicted that by 2050, city dwellers will compose roughly 70 percent of the world’s population (United Nations 2018). This reality cries out for more outdoor spaces. And when nature no longer occurs naturally for children, it is imperative that we collectively work to design spaces that provide opportunities for children to explore nature and experience the thrill that comes from playing outdoors.