Playing it safe: Why parents need to let children take risks when they play

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New research reveals that parents' tolerance of risk and injury is a determining factor in how physically active their children are.

In a world-first study looking at children's physical activity behaviors and their parents' attitudes towards risk and injury, more than three-quarters of parents expressed a low tolerance for adventurous play.

Alethea Jerebine, a Ph.D. candidate at Deakin University's School of Health and Social Development, and Coventry University's Center for Sport, Exercise and Life Sciences in the UK, said the results could help explain why Australian children aren't as physically active as they need to be.

"We found 78 percent of parents weren't keen on their children taking risks when they played, and put limits on things like climbing trees, riding bikes fast down hills, rough-housing and play-fighting," Jerebine said.

"The kids whose parents were tolerant of risk were more physically active and played more adventurously than kids whose parents were risk averse. These children were around three times more likely to meet the Australian physical activity guidelines of an hour a day of 'huff and puff' physical activity, the kind of activity we know is good for their physical and mental development."

As part of her study, published in the journal *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, Jerebine asked 645 Australian parents (81 percent female) what play activities they would let their child participate in, how they felt about play injuries, and their beliefs about the benefits of risk-taking.

"Our results show that although most parents recognize the benefits of risk-taking for their children, many are unwilling to allow their children to play adventurously. This suggests that they may be conflicted about the issue."

A male parent of an 8-year-old girl summed up his concerns, telling the

study, "School age kids do not have the right judgment regarding risks. The level of challenges has to be limited and safety cannot be overlooked."

Jerebine said providing children with the opportunity to experience risk helped them learn about what they can and can't do, build confidence and independence, as well as how to manage risk and keep themselves safe.

"We also know children have more mental health challenges, especially after the pandemic. Outdoor play can be a great way to support children's mental well-being as well as their physical development."

Professor Lisa Barnett from Deakin's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN) and Ph.D. supervisor for Jerebine, said children needed to experience challenges in their active play to help them develop the "physical literacy" they require to be active for life.

"Physical literacy is the physical, social, psychological, and cognitive skills a person needs to develop long term physical activity patterns," Professor Barnett said.

"A challenge for one child might be an easy task for another child so we need to make sure play environments have lots of different opportunities for different abilities."

Jerebine is now undertaking further research to understand the attitudes to risk in schools and how this influences children's opportunities for active play.

  More information: Alethea Jerebine et al, Playing it safe: The relationship between parent attitudes to risk and injury, and children's adventurous play and physical activity, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*

Provided by Deakin University