

Risk and challenge in babies' and toddlers' play

A Froebel Trust early childhood
research highlight by Dr Maria Cooper



Froebelian principles

This research highlight focuses on risk and challenge in babies' and toddlers' play. It makes links between research and practice in Froebelian education today.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the inventor of the kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood. [The principles](#) of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern early childhood education.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk

A Froebelian approach to education reflects the wholeness of Froebel's ideas and brings together all the principles of his work. This research highlight makes particular connection to five of the principles:

- Unity and connectedness
- **Autonomous learners**
- **The value of childhood in its own right**
- Relationships matter
- Creativity and the power of symbols
- **The central importance of play**
- **Engaging with nature**
- **Knowledgeable and nurturing educators**

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What is 'risk and challenge' in play?

An activity can be considered risky play if a child **chooses it willingly, finds it naturally engaging, and deems it meaningful to them.**¹

Risky play often brings a sense of **thrill and excitement and carries a level of risk of physical injury.**²

It can also include trying new things, a feeling of **pushing one's limits because of great height or speed, and conquering fear.**³

Risky play can be divided into six categories:⁴

- Play with great heights (which may cause injury from falling)
- Play with high speed (including risking collision)
- Play with dangerous tools (risking injury)
- Play near dangerous elements (such as fire or water)
- Rough-and-tumble play (where children can harm one another)
- Play where children can disappear or get lost (out of sight of adults)

Physical Risk (Objective)⁵

Features of the environment that might cause physical harm or lead to negative consequences. For instance, areas of significant height, spaces that encourage speed, or unstable surfaces that can result in falls, crashes, or tumbles.

Emotional Risk (Subjective)⁶

An internal or emotional sense of risk often expressed through non-verbal cues, body language, sounds, or spoken words.



What are the benefits of exploring risk and challenge in play?

Risk and challenge are
a natural part of life. ⁷

Froebel believed that, by honouring children's desire to explore, they can discover their own interests and strengths. They can also become well-rounded individuals, in harmony with the world around them.

'Play is to the child a mirror of life-long struggles that await him.' ⁸

Play that involves risk and challenge lets babies and toddlers experiment with problem-solving. It gives them chances to discover their individuality, lead their own learning, and understand themselves in relation to their world.

By introducing risk and challenge in play, we can assist children in:

- Tackling real-world challenges they may face as they grow. ⁹
- Enhancing their confidence, abilities, and relationships with peers. ¹⁰
- Learning to assess what might be too much risk. ¹¹

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"Babies would never learn to crawl, negotiate steps, stand up, run, ride a bike, and so on without being prepared to take a risk, to tumble and to learn from the consequences. Learning to navigate space, people and objects requires risk and a willingness to make and learn from mistakes." ¹²

What does risky play look like for babies and toddlers?

A motivating factor for babies and toddlers to engage in risky play is the potential for heightened excitement. **Some play experiences might not pose a high risk of injury, but can offer a high degree of thrill**¹³, like being gently nudged into pillows or playing under blankets. Still, it is vital that experiences are suitable for each child's abilities, comfort zones, energy levels, and confidence.

Common ways babies and toddlers engage in risky play:

- Showing **determination when faced with obstacles**¹⁴ - putting on shoes, negotiating stairs, carrying play materials from one space to another, climbing up and down independently.
- Tackling **subtly risky challenges**¹⁵ - such as when a toddler is reluctant to try something unfamiliar, like a new play feature. Eventually they get the courage to try, succeed, and repeat it with pride.
- Exploring aspects of the outdoor environment - jumping into the sandpit, balancing on a large stone, riding/pushing wheeled toys, crawling in the long grass, or **sensory exploration of the natural world**.^{16, 17}
- Experiencing risk indirectly by **watching older peers take risks**¹⁸ - often a thrilling experience to observe and learn from.





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Why should educators consider risk and challenge in babies' and toddlers' play?

Conversations about risk and challenge in play often **lean towards the negative, downplaying potential benefits for young children.**¹⁹ The possibility for injury during play has **spurred a focus on safety measures and laws**²⁰ regarding play area design to manage risks.

This has led to a **culture of overprotection**²¹, creating tension between ensuring safety, allowing for risk, and providing play opportunities for children to learn and grow. A completely **risk-free environment can lack challenge, leading to boredom among children and unanticipated use of materials to create their own challenges.**²²

Froebel believed that, as children encounter more challenges during play, they actually become safer as they **become more aware of the possibilities and limitations of their own bodies.**²³

Given children's natural tendency to test and demonstrate their **prowess and physical competence**²⁴, they will instinctively **find ways to engage in risky activities.**²⁵



How can educators create an environment that balances risk and challenge for babies and toddlers?

Froebel had a deep respect for children, their innate desire to understand their place in the world, and the idea that babies are perceptive to what goes on around them.²⁶ His teachings inspire educators to create a nurturing, risk-aware environment that balances physical, responsive care and rich, sensory experiences.



Consider the following strategies to establish a balanced, risk-aware environment for babies and toddlers:

- Observe and listen to how they play, particularly their **willingness to take on 'risky' experiences and their non-verbal cues to stop when something feels unsafe.** ²⁷
- Be alert to potential hazards in **certain experiences** ²⁸, like splinters in the slide, poisonous plants, or unsafe gaps in equipment.
- Support babies and toddlers to feel relaxed **in nature so they can appreciate first-hand the beauty of the outdoors and experience their interconnectedness with the environment.** ²⁹
- Let them explore different terrain and textures.
- Promote full-body experiences like crawling, jumping, rolling, and balancing.
- Recognise that accidents are part of the learning process.
- Instead of focusing on 'safety from all possible harm' consider 'safety to explore, experiment, try things out and to take risks'. ³⁰
- Trust children to explore and take **suitable risks.** ³¹
- Have realistic high expectations of what each child can do and ways they contribute to their own play.
- Engage in **open conversations about risk, safety, and the benefits of risk-taking** ³² with parents and carers. This can promote a harmonious approach to supporting risk and challenge in both the home and early years setting.



Reflecting on risk and challenge

Has reading this resource made you think about your own views of risk and challenge? For example, how are your personal beliefs, past experiences, and assumptions shaping your perception of what is a suitable level of risk for babies and toddlers?

How are you maintaining a balance between ensuring safety and promoting the benefits of risky play for children in your setting?

What specific strategies are you using to foster babies' and toddlers' developing understanding of risk and challenge in their play?

How are you communicating with parents and carers about the importance of risk and challenge in their child's play? What improvements might you need to make to your communication strategies?

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Ozzy Torr and family for the use of his photos, and Dr Sue Robson (Series Editor).

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This research highlight was first published by the
Froebel Trust in September 2023.

ISBN: 978-1-7391277-4-9

