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HEALTHY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OUTDOOR RISKY PLAY

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Introduction:

Hello! My name is Emily, and I am a third-year medical student at McMaster University. This podcast was created with Dr. Emilie Beaulieu, a pediatrician in Quebec City, in conjunction with PedsCases and the Canadian Pediatric Society. Today, we will summarize the recent 2024 Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS) statement written by Dr. Beaulieu and Dr. Suzanne Beno which discusses the role of outdoor risky play in children's health and development, emphasizing its value in preventing and managing common issues like obesity, anxiety, and behavioral problems.

Objectives:

After this podcast, listeners will be able to:

1. Recognize what qualifies as risky play and what does not
2. Describe the benefits of risky play
3. Evaluate the balance between the benefits and risks of risky play
4. Communicate the value of risky play to families and help reframe their perception of risk

Case Study:

Let's start with a case study to put things in context.

Imagine you are working at a primary care clinic, and Mrs. Johnson, a concerned mother, brings her 8-year-old son, Ben, for a check-up. Ben has a noticeable bruise on his arm from falling while climbing a tree during recess at school. Mrs. Johnson is visibly upset and expresses her concerns about the lack of supervision at school and the dangers of such activities. She believes that children should only play on equipment that has been tested for safety and is contemplating talking to the school administration about enforcing stricter safety measures and supervision.

This scenario is not an uncommon one and highlights the balance that healthcare providers must strike when discussing risky play with families. Mrs. Johnson's concern for Ben's safety is completely valid, but it's also important to understand and convey the importance of risky play in a child's development.

To effectively address Mrs. Johnson's concerns, we first need to define risky play. Risky play is often misunderstood, so let's clarify what it is and, just as importantly, what it is not.

Understanding Risky Play

Risky play is any form of play that is thrilling or exciting and involves some level of uncertainty, including the potential for physical injury.

There are 6 categories of risky play¹. These include activities involving height, speed, tools, potentially dangerous elements, rough-and-tumble play, and scenarios where children can wander or explore independently.

These categories are intentionally broad because the activities that fall within each category can vary significantly based on a child's developmental stage, their past experiences, and their personality. Whether a child has the confidence to sled head-first down a steep hill or prefers rolling down a snow drift into soft snow, both count as risky play involving speed. Despite how different the play can look, each child is still experiencing the thrills and challenges that define risky play.

To truly support and encourage risky play, it's essential to understand the difference between risk and hazard. This distinction is crucial for creating safe environments where children can engage in adventurous activities while minimizing the potential for serious harm.

A risk is when a child is able to identify a challenge and choose how they want to handle it, such as choosing how high to climb on a jungle gym or how fast to run down a hill. On the other hand, a hazard is a danger that exceeds a child's ability to perceive or manage. Some hazards are obvious to identify, like playing near a busy street. However, other activities like playing around fire present a more nuanced relationship between risk and hazard. Activities that were once hazards may become manageable risks as the child grows, but new hazards may emerge as their physical and cognitive abilities expand.

For risky play to occur, adults must first identify and address any hazards, and then give the child the freedom and space to engage in free, unstructured play. Of course, adults can intervene if the play ever becomes dangerous to the child or others. But the level of intervention, when and how you choose to intervene, depends on how well the adult knows the child's abilities. This requires an element of trust – trusting the child enough to step back and encourage creative and spontaneous play that matches their skills.

Risky play is not about ignoring evidence-based safety guidelines like wearing a helmet or lifejacket. It does not mean leaving children unsupervised in hazardous situations or pressuring them to take risks they're not comfortable with. Instead, it is about striking a balance where children can engage in thrilling and challenging activities while being protected from genuine dangers. Ultimately, the goal is to keep children "as safe as necessary" rather than "as safe as possible."

Benefits of Risky Play

Now, let's dive into the benefits of risky play. Risky play positively impacts children's physical, mental, and social-emotional development.

Physical Benefits: When children play freely without strict supervision, especially in environments with loose parts or natural materials, they tend to be more physically active and less sedentary. This type of play also builds physical literacy, which refers to instilling the desire, confidence, and skills to stay active for life. Improving physical literacy not only enhances overall health but also reduces the risk of sports injuries down the line.

Mental and Social-Emotional Benefits: Risky play also offers many mental and social-emotional benefits. Engaging in this type of play with peers helps children develop essential social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and compromise. It also gives them the freedom to test their limits and discover what they can and can't do, which builds resilience and enhances problem-solving skills. Additionally, risky play provides a safe space for children to confront their fears, allowing them to experiment and develop effective coping strategies. This exposure can greatly reduce anxiety, making risky play a valuable tool for managing or preventing anxious feelings.

In short, risky play isn't just about having fun; it's a vital part of healthy development that equips children with the skills they need to tackle both play and life challenges.

That said, it's natural for parents to worry about their child's safety when it comes to risky play. To illustrate this point, let's return to our case study with Mrs. Johnson.

After discussing the wide range of benefits that risky play offers, you notice that Mrs. Johnson still seems apprehensive. She hesitates for a moment before asking, "But what about the risks of injury? Aren't these activities still dangerous?"

This is an important question and gives us a chance to explore the realities of injury in risky play. By understanding the actual risks involved, we can better support children in engaging in risky play safely and meaningfully.

The Risk of Risky Play

Most injuries associated with risky play are minor. These are the typical bumps and scrapes that come with any active play. The more concerning injuries, like head injuries and concussions, are what parents often worry about the most. While there is growing concern

about the increase in these injuries in sports and playground environments, the data specifically for outdoor risky play is limited. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the risk is relatively low.

Data from the Canadian Hospital Injury Reporting and Prevention Program has shown that the injury rate from climbing trees is significantly lower—anywhere from 5 to 22 times lower—than for other common childhood activities like soccer, biking, or even falling from playground equipment. Notably, some experts suggest that playground injuries might actually be linked to unexciting or poorly designed play structures. When children are in environments with low, unchallenging play structures and unnatural play surfaces like synthetic turf, they may take greater risks or use the equipment inappropriately, leading to injuries. Essentially, research indicates that children are less likely to get hurt during unstructured play than when participating in organized sports.

But is risky play suitable for all children?

There are valid concerns about the unequal benefits of risky play, especially for certain groups of children who face higher levels of risk for injury. For example, Indigenous children, children living in marginalized neighborhoods, and children with disabilities may have different experiences and needs when it comes to risky play.

The literature on risky play among Indigenous children is sparse, and we don't yet have a clear understanding of how they perceive or adapt the concept of risky play within their own communities.

For children in marginalized neighborhoods, studies have shown that their parents often worry about the physical safety of play spaces, leading them to keep their kids indoors more often. This shows the importance of community institutions like schools and daycares in ensuring safe and equitable access to outdoor play spaces.

As for children with disabilities, risky play can be incredibly beneficial. These children are frequently shielded from risk and underestimated, which can negatively impact their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and independence. Encouraging children with disabilities to take manageable risks in their play helps them gain independence, learn self-responsibility, and feel more included.

Overall, while the risks associated with risky play are generally low and often outweighed by the benefits, it's essential to consider the unique needs and circumstances of each child.

Jumping back to the case study, Mrs. Johnson, while more informed, still wants to know, "So, how can we ensure that Ben stays safe while doing this risky play?" This question opens the door to discussing how we can reframe perceptions of risk and facilitate risky play in a safe manner.

Reframing Risk and Facilitating Risky Play

It can be a real challenge for parents to balance providing opportunities for risky play with the instinct to protect their children. However, adults play a crucial role in creating physically safe and emotionally supportive spaces that encourage risky play. This might mean having to step back a little—allowing your kid to climb a tree just a little bit higher without a hand ready to catch them or letting them explore on their own terms.

In today's society, where children's schedules are often filled with structured activities like extracurriculars and academics, it's essential to carve out time for free play. This could involve allowing children to interact with natural elements like sticks, branches, and other loose parts, or allowing for rough-and-tumble play. These unstructured moments are where the real benefits of risky play shine.

The language we use to talk about risk matters, too. Phrases like "Be careful," "Slow down," or "Not too high" are often meant to protect children, but over time, they might make children feel like they are not trusted or capable. Repeated use of these well-meaning warnings can unintentionally create fear even when there is no real danger. Additionally, they don't teach children how to actually manage risky situations or build the confidence needed to handle challenges on their own.

Instead, experts recommend that parents try pausing, even for just 10-15 seconds, to observe their child before intervening. When they do decide to step in, parents should start by helping their child become aware of the situation or behavior. They might say, "Do you feel stable on that log?" or "Notice how sharp this tool is." Then they can guide them through problem solving, such as by asking "What's your plan if you jump on that rock?" or "How will you get down?" By adjusting the way we talk about risk, we can turn these moments of risk into valuable learning experiences, giving children the autonomy to explore, grow, and thrive in their play.

Turning back to Mrs. Johnson, as you continue the conversation, you notice her perspective shifting. She's beginning to understand the balance between allowing Ben to explore and keeping him safe. After discussing the importance of stepping back, creating opportunities for free play, and using supportive language, Mrs. Johnson feels more confident. She says, "Now I see how I can let Ben engage in risky play while still keeping an eye on his safety. It's not about eliminating risk, but about managing it in a way that helps him grow."

As healthcare providers, we are in a unique position to support families by including education about the benefits of risky play as part of regular counseling. Just as we discuss injury prevention, healthy eating, and intentional screen time, we should also be talking about the importance of risky free play. This includes helping parents adjust their language around risk and guiding them to understand the difference between risk and hazard in children's play. By doing so, we empower parents to allow their children to explore and develop important life skills safely.

We also encourage healthcare providers to include risky play as part of their approach to preventing or managing issues like obesity, anxiety, or behavioral challenges. Instead of recommending a specific amount of exercise each week, consider "prescribing" active outdoor free play. This not only supports physical health but also fosters emotional and social development, offering a comprehensive strategy for raising resilient and confident children.

Key Learning Points

In summary, today we learned that:

1. Risky play involves thrilling activities with some potential for injury, allowing children to explore their limits and build confidence. It emphasizes balancing safety with challenge and requires distinguishing between manageable risks and harmful hazards.
2. Risky play enhances children's physical, mental, and social-emotional development. It promotes physical activity, builds resilience, improves social skills, and helps children manage anxiety through safe exploration of challenges.
3. The risks associated with risky play are generally low and often outweighed by the benefits, but it's important to consider each child's unique needs and circumstances.
4. Encouraging risky play involves providing appropriate environments, prioritizing unstructured playtime, and using mindful language that helps children learn to manage risks independently.
5. Healthcare providers should incorporate education on risky play into regular counseling, leveraging it as a tool to promote healthy development and overall well-being in children.

Thank you for listening!

References

1. Hansen Sandseter EB. Categorizing risky play—how can we identify risk-taking in children's play?. *European early childhood education research journal*. 2007 Jun 1;15(2):237-52.
2. Beaulieu E, Beno S. Healthy childhood development through outdoor risky play: Navigating the balance with injury prevention. *Paediatrics & Child Health*. 2024 Jul;29(4):255-61.