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EXTENSION**

Family Matters

Improving Health Together

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Staying Physically Active, While Exploring Outside Our Comfort Zones

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As parents, we all want to keep our children safe and healthy, but research shows that allowing children to take risks while playing is important for their development. So, finding balance is key! "Risky play" is a term used to describe play where children are pushing themselves outside of their comfort zone, where there is excitement or thrill alongside some risks.

Children gain many benefits from risky play. Risky play helps children to build resilience, improve their self-confidence, and grow their creative thinking and risk assessment skills. Risky and creative play allows children to explore their own limits and comfort. As children take risks, they become more coordinated, and their body awareness improves. This process actually decreases their risk of injury when in more dangerous situations.

As a parent, you can help your child develop risk assessment skills by helping them identify potential dangers in their play area. For example, you can help your child know what branches of a tree may be safer to hang on compared to others that may be too thin or rotten. Watching your child take risks may be scary, but they are developing skills and confidence that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

What makes play risky?

Experts have identified six risky elements of risky play:

- Play with heights (tree climbing, tall playground structures)
- Play with high speeds (running, fast bike riding)
- Play with tools (building a fort, using tools like a hammer and nails)
- Play near dangerous elements (water, steep drops)
- Rough-and-tumble play (play wrestling)
- Play where children can "disappear" (hide-and-seek, unsupervised play with friends)



During risky play activities, parents can provide supervision as they see necessary while still allowing children to push boundaries in a healthy way.

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Let's Talk

Talking with kids as they learn to take risks safely is important in helping them build confidence. Instead of saying, “be careful!”, try these phrases to help them become more aware of their body and environment and to improve their risk assessment skills.

- **What's your plan...** if you climb that tree, to cross that part of the playground
- **Do you see...** the pond nearby, the thorn bush?
- **Notice how...** those rocks are loose, that tree branch is strong
- **How will you...** slow down when you are going fast, get down from that height?
- **Are you feeling...** scared, nervous, tired, safe?

Helping your child see and overcome challenges will help grow their confidence that they can do hard things, and you believe in them!

Activity for Health

Risky play can take place in almost any environment, try one of these activities this weekend to bring risky play into your play time.

Climbing at home can be a great way to try risky play during colder months. Younger children will enjoy trying to climb over a pile of cushions and pillows on the floor. Slightly older children can practice balancing on a step stool to help reach higher heights. With adult supervision, older children can use “adult” tools such as sharp scissors or a box cutter to build a fort out of cardboard.

When you can spend time outdoors, try walking around the neighborhood or local parks to find trees, rocks, benches, large hills, and playgrounds to climb and play on. Of course, with all of these activities, practice helping your child identify risks and make a plan for how they can stay safe.



For more information, ideas and recipes visit the Colorado State University Food Smart website at: foodsmartcolorado.colostate.edu

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