

Let's go Play!
Rejuvenating Outdoor Risky Play in Childhood Education

A Podcast by Camilla Petterson

<https://youtu.be/G8tC7W7BvA0>

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Think back to when you were young and imagine what outdoor play looked like.

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What kinds of mischievous activities did you and your peers get up to?

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I'm sure outdoor play manifested itself in drastically different ways for each of you listening.

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However, assuming most of you are either on the brink of or outside of generation z,

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I guarantee that your experiences looked a lot different

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than the common play experiences of children today.

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Hi, my name is Camilla Petterson and you're listening to

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Let's go play!

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A short podcast about rejuvenating outdoor risky play in early childhood education.

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Which was completed as a part of my final undergrad project at Quest University Canada.

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To explore the topic of outdoor risky play I draw on the expertise of Dr. Mariana Brussoni

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and the insight of two early childhood educators trained in Waldorf pedagogy.

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Here's Dr. Brussoni:

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"I'm Mariana Brussoni I'm an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia

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in the School of Population and Public Health and the Department of Pediatrics

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and i'm an investigator at the BC Children's Hospital Research Institute and the BC Injury Research and Prevention Unit."

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Dr Brussoni's research intersects developmental psychology and injury prevention

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"...but in a bit of a different way. In the sense that it really focuses on outdoor and risky play.

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So looking at the importance of children being able to take risks in their outdoor play and the

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kind of effects it has on the kids and how do we create environments that support outdoor and risky play."

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Dr. Brussoni has worked alongside Norwegian Early Childhood Educator Ellen Sandseter

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who originally coined the term risky play

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and in her original definition she talks about physical risks right
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thrilling or exciting forms of play where there is a risk of physical injury.
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Sandseter divides risky play into six main categories:
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great heights
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rapid speeds
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dangerous tools
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dangerous elements
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rough and tumble
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and disappearing or getting lost.
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this framework has been the foundation for much of Sandseter's and Brussoni's empirical research over the past decade.
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Their work provides thorough evidence of the benefits of risky outdoor play including but not limited to:
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the promotion of physical activity, independence, cognitive and social development,
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risk management skills and reducing mental illness and learning difficulties.
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Recall the question of the start of this podcast and the feelings and images that
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surfaced in your mind as you thought of your own childhood and the time you spent outdoors.
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Unfortunately it is unlikely that children today share many of these same experiences.
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In recent years the amount of time children spend outdoors has decreased significantly.
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As opposed to running barefoot in the warm summer sun or venturing through the cold winter snow
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a vast majority of children spend their days sedentary in school and at home,
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their eyes fixated on a screen before them.
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Technology and screen time as author and pediatric occupational therapist Angela Hanscom writes:
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Is greatly contributing to children's loss of desire and ability to play
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and has a key role in the rise of clinical prescriptions for children.
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Increased indoor time is decreasing children's strength
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and tarnishing their determination to overcome adversity.
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In an interview with a Waldorf kindergarten teacher
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she commented on how the negative effects of screen time
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have clearly showed themselves in her classroom.

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"There's high anxiety, they have no impulse control, they cannot concentrate..."

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On top of all of this, there rises the issue that when children are given the opportunity to play freely outdoors,

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their experiences are becoming frequently hindered by risk-averse attitudes

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Though there are multiple layers that impact the implementation and support of risky outdoor play with an early childhood education,

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overarching them all are the fears of society at large.

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Dr. Brussoni talks about this:

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"...and at the societal level kind of a risk aversive attitude

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you know towards kids taking risks um maybe getting injured

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you know the fear of injury, the fear of liability

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as well as a general sense that children aren't competent to navigate their own risks.

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Particularly in the Western world, attitudes regarding risky play

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have shifted toward treating developmentally appropriate outdoor experiences

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as safety hazards

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and the rising fear of harm and injury is hindering the child's optimal development.

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Dr Brussoni says that one of the main things that's happened

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"...is a change in the perception of children's capabilities in competence,

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from seeing them as competent and capable to manage their risks, whether they be physical

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or emotional like you say with with other kids to one where um feeling that they aren't that

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they're vulnerable that they're in need of care and that adults really need to guide that for them.

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As educators and guardians learning to allow risky play can have positive influences on children's development.

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A Waldorf preschool teacher offers a revealing story with one of her own children

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of how she first came to clearly recognize these positive influences

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and how she learned the importance of trusting the child in their outdoor play experience.

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"My older one was a child that just loved to climb everything and tried to experience that thrill of

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danger wherever and whenever she could and it made me realize that um if she has the opportunity to

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figure out herself, how high she can climb and how much it hurts when she falls down,

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she will, you know, cap her own height rather than me saying oh this is how high you can go
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then i know she would go higher than that and that's that's what i see with other children too
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we need to trust them to be able to figure these things out at a young age."
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This story the preschool teacher shares exhibits one benefit of risky play.
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The child is able to gain confidence in independently assessing their own level of risk.
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The benefits of outdoor risky play however are extensive.
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The outdoor and the ubiquitous inconsistent and unpredictable natural obstacles throughout it,
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provide the optimal environment for children to strengthen and challenge themselves physically.
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It encourages them to utilize cognitive processes to problem-solve, think creatively and make decisions
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and serves to benefit their social and emotional development through peer interactions
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where comradery, conflict resolution listening and leading are practiced.
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Fostering positive outdoor risky play opportunities within early childhood education
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come with complexities far beyond the scope of this podcast.
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There are various factors to consider when integrating and ensuring children have such opportunities
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and for supporting them throughout these crucial developmental experiences.
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One crucial component of supporting outdoor risky play is the cultivation
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of the positive teacher child relationship.
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Here's Dr Brussoni:
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"...well it's not even so much differences, as it's, I think what's key there
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is the relationship with the children
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and through building a relationship you have a better sense of what those kids are capable of
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and therefore, how much support that individual child needs you know in the context of this and
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so yeah that relationship piece is actually really critical.
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"The overwhelming consensus within child development literature
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is that in order to best approach supervision of risky play activities
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the educator must know the child well so that they can predict their usual abilities and dispositions.
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"...you have to really know your children."
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In her interview the Waldorf kindergarten teacher stated:

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"I mean as a teacher you really have to get a sense of the limitations some of your children have"

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Recent outdoor literature confirms that the ages, interests, feelings, perceptions, abilities, and capacities

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of each individual child,

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must be observed, considered, and consistently revisited as educators work to support engagement of outdoor risky play.

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By taking the time to build a relationship with each child

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the educator can reduce the possibility of extreme risk.

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Knowledge of the individual needs to be prioritized in all early educational programs,

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so that risky play can be maintained and partaken in for children to develop to their full capacity.

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The second crucial component is based on the use of language.

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In the exact moments when children engage in risky play

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the educator or guardian will decipher whether they support or condemn this activity

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with the use of certain language.

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Research has shown that today, educators and guardians frequently interrupt children's play with negative language.

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Many adults believe that children are incapable of assessing risk on their own

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and therefore intervene projecting their own worry into the child's experience as they do so.

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Here's Dr. Brussoni with more insight on this topic

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"...I mean even as a parent myself I sometimes find myself wanting to say 'Be Careful!'

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you know it just like it comes out of your mouth before you even like notice that you're forming the words right

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and what adults are saying when you know often when they're saying 'Be Careful' is that

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I have anxiety you know about your safety and i want to keep you safe."

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The phrase however is not a useful safety prompt

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"...it's just kind of this nebulous 'Be careful'

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distracting them from their risk management and then potentially creating hazard."

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What children take in when adults interject with this language,

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is that they are not trusted to keep themselves safe.

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"...you're injecting yourself into this kind of whole risk management situation..."

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um and so it can be very undermining as well as very ineffective."

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Dr Brussoni believes that the overuse of this utterance makes children feel as though there is a constant threat,

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when in reality there is no obvious immediate danger.

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She states that if you as an adult decide that interjecting yourself in a child's play is still necessary:

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"...then it's empowering language right so it's not...

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'Stop!' you know 'Don't do that!' or um 'Not so high!'

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She suggests it's much more beneficial to involve the child themselves in the decision making.

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This can be done by asking questions

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"...What some ways you could...' or 'Here's some of the things i'm noticing what do you think that we could do about that?'

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you know so that very much involving the child and empowering the child in that

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so that they can build their skills and you can also gain insight into what they're capable of

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and so it can also calm you down as well."

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In spending time around young children and assessing risk, educators and guardians must be

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ever conscious of their own fears and how they may manifest verbally.

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They must remain reflexive and observant of their own intervention strategies

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in order to balance appropriate encouragement and self-reflection within each child.

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A focus must be given toward the use of positive discourse

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in order to best support outdoor risky play and instill children with the agency they deserve.

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Here is the shared wisdom of a Waldorf educator one last time:

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"Risky play allows the ability of a child to learn about themselves

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because especially in nature they will set their own goals

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and so, it is this place where children are free in deciding what they want to do and they

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they give themselves a goal and they work towards it and i think that's a quality that

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we need later on in all sorts of areas, in work and in schooling and anything we want to achieve later on,

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so i think that's a very beautiful way of allowing children to experience that.

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Let's go play!