

# As Safe as Necessary: Becoming Comfortable with Appropriate Risk

Early Childhood  
Education  
Information Brief

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Climbing, jumping, tumbling, or vigorous spinning - if it's a big movement that makes you feel nervous, your toddler or preschooler is bound to want to try it! When children engage in large motor explorations such as these, they are expressing the need to develop their muscle control in one of three areas: stability, manipulative or locomotor. If a child is showing this need, directing them to other activities might work only for a short time, or not at all. Working with children to find safe ways to try new body movements will save the child the hurt, and you the headache of feeling like a broken record.

Since all children develop at their own rate, determining what an "appropriate" risk is can be challenging. First, you must know the child's current skill level. If you believe the child could successfully do the desired activity independently or with a small amount of adult support, the risk would be considered appropriate. If the child needs the adult to physically assist to complete the activity, then the child is not yet ready to take on that risk and is more likely to experience frustration or injury.

## Why Children Need to Engage in Appropriate Risk

As children test their skills and try out new appropriate risks, they develop self-awareness of their own abilities. This means they learn to tell if their choices pose a risk to themselves or others. They begin to understand how their body does (or does not) fit within a space. They develop curiosity, creativity, wonder, and inventiveness. Finally, they build resilience and perseverance. When trying something new, there's sure to be a bump, scratch, or maybe even tears, and that's okay! Experiencing minor set-backs is how children learn to try, try again.

## Supporting Children to Take Appropriate Risks

A child who has a strong interest in spinning, balancing, jumping, or doing somersaults is exploring their **stability** skills. These actions can be very stimulating, so once a child starts, it's even harder for them to stop. To support a child engaging in stability risks, make sure they have a large space to try these skills without hurting themselves or others. Provide mats or cushions at various heights in a designated space so they can practice jumping and rolling. Consider movement activities where the child can explore new skills while learning the rules for safety.



As children develop **manipulative** skills, they will repeatedly throw, kick, and hit objects with other long objects, such as sticks. Children are practicing the skills needed to coordinate movements for sports.

Climbing, crawling, and running (yes, even away) are **locomotor** skills that young children will begin to explore. Since this is the first of the three motor skills that children develop, a mobile infant or even a toddler may find themselves precariously perched on top of a table. For toddlers, use foam mats, pillows, and even blankets to provide interesting terrain for children to navigate while maintaining a soft place to land. Older children may crave more

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risk. Provide large, clear spaces for running and introduce obstacles as their reaction time improves.



### **Appropriate risk isn't just for movement!**

Children also need opportunities to explore and practice with real tools. With the proper support, children can successfully cut fruits and vegetables to help make a meal or use a hammer and nails to create something. Children have their own ideas for which risks they would like to take. The adult role is to make sure children are “as safe as necessary” not necessarily “as safe as possible” (Epstein, 2014, p. 65).

### **Strategies for supporting children in taking appropriate risk**

**1. Communicate to children that taking a risk is a good thing!** Adults can model trying new risky moves, but even if you choose to keep your feet on the ground, your words and facial expressions tell children how you feel about risk.

**2. Set up an appropriate space for taking risk.** Making the couch off limits for climbing and jumping is fine, but make sure children know where they *can* try those moves. Make sure there is plenty of cushioning and that sharp corners and breakable objects are out of the area. You can set up specific times when it's okay to try risk in a space, especially if the space serves more than one purpose.

**3. Make sure an adult is available to supervise.** An adult should always be nearby if a child is trying something new or risky. Children are learning what their skill level is, so they may need to be “rescued”

if they can't solve a problem on their own. Being close also allows the adult to talk a child through challenges.

**4. Trust the child.** If a child feels that they are capable of achieving something new, they likely are! As the child tries something new, they are continually evaluating their comfort level. Just like they communicated their desire to try, they'll let you know if they need help.

**5. Help the child match their skills.** Sometimes, children have incredible amounts of confidence. If a child requests to try something risky, and you aren't convinced they will be safe or successful, help them break their goals in to parts. For example, if a child wants to try a handstand, help them find a space where they can prop their feet against a tree for support.



### **Resources:**

- Epstein, A. S. (2014). *The intentional teacher* (2nd ed., pp. 65-97). Ypsilanti, MI: NAEYC and High Scope Press.
- Little, H., & Wyver, S., (2008). Outdoor play – Does avoiding the risks reduce the benefits? *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33(2), 33-40.

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