

Supporting risky play opportunities (Birth – 6 years)

Connections to **Aistear** and **Síolta**

Aistear Themes: Well-being, Exploring and Thinking

Guidelines for Good Practice: Learning and developing through play

Síolta Standards:

2. Environments

6. Play



Introduction

Risky play can broadly be defined as physical, expressive and exciting play, which involves an element of risk, challenge and adventure. It is fun, exciting and even somewhat scary. There are six categories of risky play. Engaging in these categories of risky play has many benefits for children - choice, control, decision-making, sense of achievement along with the ability to assess risk and problem-solve and cope with or overcome challenges. The development of these skills is central to positive mental health and physical well-being. Without exposure to risky play children can potentially develop fearful or reckless dispositions¹ and may be unable to access risk.

The first section of this tip sheet outlines the role of the adult in supporting risky play while the second section provides a description and examples for each of the six risky play categories. There is also a podcast available on supporting risky play opportunities and it is accessible [here](#).

The role of the adult

Before beginning on this journey, the adults within the setting should take time to identify and reflect on opportunities for risky play in the learning environment and have a discussion so that all staff and children (and parents) are clear on what is/is not permitted. It may be useful to use the examples below as the basis for team discussion and reflection on where the setting is currently at in providing risky play opportunities and considering how comfortable the setting is to begin engaging in and facilitating more challenging opportunities for children. The Action Planning Tool on the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide may help in the reflection and ongoing development of this area of practice. This tool is available [here](#). It is important to note that encouraging and facilitating children to engage in risky play opportunities is a process that develops over a period of time. During risky play the adult takes on a number of different roles, these include:

1. Keeping children safe enough and setting consistent boundaries

Adult supervision is a priority during risky play activities. The adult ensures that children have the freedom and opportunities for risky play

¹See the Tip sheets on Developing Positive Learning Dispositions for [Birth – three years](#) and [three – six years](#).

within a framework of security and safety. This involves the adult undertaking two key tasks:

- (i) setting and maintaining clear behavioural boundaries which are consistently adhered to and using rules to enable freedom
- (ii) adopting a 'risk assessment to enable' approach - a sense of the environment being *safe enough* as opposed to being completely risk free after doing a risk-benefit assessment

2. Creating environments that encourage risky play

A key role of the adult is to ensure the environment provides opportunities for risky play. Access to natural environments and open-ended materials/loose parts is important.² Play spaces should offer different levels of demand in terms of height, surface and steepness. For settings that have enough space adults can ensure there are natural spaces with trees, long grasses, huts, dens, ramps, bridges, sturdy rocks along with a variety of open-ended materials like tractor tyres, recycled materials and planks of wood. No matter how small the space some natural elements can be included – small trees or large shrubs in planters, a sand pit, a water tray, a mud kitchen. Appropriate clothing is essential, as risky play usually means getting very wet and very muddy. It is important that children have access to suitable clothing and footwear (e.g., wellingtons, wet/waterproof gear, coats, hats).

3. Supporting children to take challenges and to problem-solve

Children need time and space to work things out for themselves or to have a go at something that is challenging, maybe even a bit scary. Adults may be tempted to intervene too quickly to help children or to discourage them before they get a chance to figure out how to solve a problem for themselves. Be mindful that the language used can make a difference. Instead of saying 'Be careful,' use language

that encourages awareness of the environment and children's own bodies, use phrases like 'Keep going, you can do it' or 'Try using your hands too!' Being aware of body language is important, so smile and nod to let children know that you are happy for them to have a go and intervene only when necessary.

4. Encouraging children who are hesitant to take part in risky play

In preparing for risky play it is important to consider each child's age, ability and dispositions. Some children love to partake in risky play while others may be more hesitant. With support, children who are reluctant can be encouraged to explore risks in safe and secure environments. In such cases, children will need sensitive support. Celebrating any steps made towards increased engagement in risky play is very important for these children. Think about the opportunities that are available too for both boys and girls, of all abilities, as it is important to facilitate equal opportunities for risky play activities based on the developmental stage and ability of the child.



5. Support progression in risky play

To allow children to progress in their risky play, environments, tools and experiences that offer different levels of demand or challenge for

²See the tip-sheet [Using open ended materials](#) (Birth – years)

children are necessary. Equally, children need to be provided with the chance for sustained periods of play, giving them time, choice and space to build complexity in their play and learning, and to express different funds of knowledge³ that they bring from home and their wider interests. Children bring challenge into their own play when given the time and space to do so and generally it progresses in complexity and challenge over time. Assessing children's risky play is part and parcel of overall approaches to assessing learning and play and interactions are best observed over a sustained period of time^{4,5}.



6. Promoting inclusion in risky play

Risky play is greatly beneficial for all children. Often children with disabilities (both visible and invisible) face major barriers that can prevent them from fully benefitting from the opportunities provided by this kind of play. It is important for the adult to be aware of the barriers that exist and promote inclusion of children with disabilities in risky play opportunities. Barriers can include accessibility issues, motor and sensory limitations which can hinder a child's ability to explore the environment or intellectual limitations which could make it difficult for the child to assess and deal with risk. In these instances, the child may rely on support and

guidance from an adult to participate in risky play activities. At the same time, it is important that the adult does not underestimate the child's abilities or to hyper-protect the child. The degree of risk that is acceptable for play activities performed by a child with disabilities must be assessed and supported according to the child's individual needs, traits and dispositions. It is crucial that the adult understands the child's abilities and scaffolds their participation in risky play appropriately.



Risky Play categories and potential activities for children aged 1-6 years

This section outlines the six categories of risky play. Each category is broken into age ranges (1-1.5, 1.5-2, 2-3 and 3 - 6 years) and enables adults to identify suitable risky play activities. It is important to be aware that the ages are only given as a guide and children will develop and partake in these activities at their own pace. Many children may begin to experience each of the categories through vicarious play where they observe and enjoy watching their peers engage in risky activities and therefore begin to build their own confidence to try new activities and develop new skills.

³ See the video [Explaining the term funds of knowledge](#) by Elizabeth Wood

⁴ See the tip sheet [Documenting children's learning and development](#) (Birth-6 years)

⁵ See the video [Supporting Progression in Play](#) by Elizabeth Wood

There is growing recognition of the importance of risky play opportunities for children and the rewards in terms of 'risk-benefit' are such that it would be remiss not to incorporate it into children's everyday experiences. However, it should be acknowledged that the final two categories of risky play, play with real tools and play with/near natural elements, in particular fire, represent a greater level of challenge for out-of-home settings.

Category one: 'Rough and Tumble'

This category of play involves wrestling and play fighting. It can take place indoors and outdoors, but the outdoors typically offers more space for this play. When undertaken indoors the activity should take place on soft surfaces to avoid hard impacts. Although both girls and boys will partake, it is worth noting that young boys have a far stronger inclination to engage in this playful activity. Supporting the child to learn to calm down again and enjoy a restful period at the end of the game is important.



Age 1-1.5:

For the youngest children, activity associated with rough and tumble generally consists of playful interactions with an adult such as moving in space, initially moving slowly up and down or from side-to-side, being lifted into the air, or gently bouncing on the adult's knee.

Age 1.5-2:

Children of this age will enjoy gentle rough and tumble with an adult on soft surfaces. Making silly noises or using repetitive phrases such as "I'm coming to get you!" contributes to the excitement.

Age 2-3:

Playing chase or tag, spinning and dancing can all become rough and tumble play, but again be observant of finding surfaces that lend themselves to cushioning falls.

Age 3-6:

Children in this age group tend to enjoy engaging in wrestling and play fighting, chasing and catching games and imaginary weapon play. Children will often use materials in their immediate environment as imaginary weapons. A stick can often become a sword, a spear or a gun.

Category two: Disappear/ Get Lost

Children love to play in places where they have the sense that adults cannot see them. In doing so, they will experience a feeling of excitement, even though the adults will always keep a watchful eye and supervise.

Age 1-1.5:

Windows facing the outdoor area or sharing time and space with older children affords watching/interacting with older children engage in risky play. Younger children will often begin their risky play journey through vicarious risky play. 'Peek a boo' or similar style activities provide associated experiences for this age group.

Age 1.5-2:

Hiding under trees or behind large shrubs are activities enjoyed by this age group. More and more playgrounds offer natural play spaces alongside playground equipment so organise regular trips when possible where toddlers can hide under trees, in long grass and in mazes.

Age 2-3:

For this age group, den play as well as exploration of nearby forested areas are suitable activities. Den building with open-ended materials/loose parts like boxes, sheets, tyres, recycled materials can be very exciting for this age group!

Age 3-6:

For this age group, games such as 'Hide and Seek' and 'Camouflage' can be thrilling and exciting. As children get older, longer time and an increased search area can be included. Children are thrilled by seeking out new hiding spots and being 'unseen'. Providing dens and tents is another way of facilitating this activity if the setting doesn't offer children the opportunity to get cover from trees, hedges and long grasses. Providing children with open-ended loose parts like boxes, sheets, and wooden planks to make their own dens is even better. Parachute games like 'Cat and Mouse' are another excellent way to explore getting lost or disappearing for this age group.



Category three: Great Heights

This category of play involves opportunities for children to climb and jump from still or flexible surfaces, balance on objects and hang/swing from an elevated position. Climbable features should be made available within the play environment for children at all stages. Young children experience height from a different perspective than that of an adult. The child may perceive even minor elevations, such as the height of a small chair as a challenge.



Age 1-1.5:

Lifting the child to your waist or chest. Whilst holding on to the child's waist pretend to throw the child up in the air while facing you or facing outwards.

Assist the child in balancing on a structure slightly elevated from the ground.

Crawling up and down ramps. Learning to climb up steps or stairs.

Age 1.5-2:

As the child gains the ability to walk with some confidence, the indoor environment should include structures to climb up onto and to step down from.

The outdoors should facilitate climbing up, sliding or rolling down small ramps or hills.

Age 2-3:

The child could use a sofa or other small structure for climbing and jumping on/from.

Consider installing wall-bars or a climbing wall. In the outdoors, the environment should provide age-appropriate opportunities for climbing, such as climbing frames and other secured structures with 'jump-down-off-able' features like sturdy rocks.

The outdoors should also provide 'balance-on-able' features, such as a balance rope with a handrail, stepping stones, low walls, timber structures. If the service has access to suitable trees, this age group could start exploring climbing trees with supervision.

Age 3-6:

Play spaces which offer different levels of demand or challenge in terms of height, surface and steepness are key to this kind of play. Provide opportunities for children to experience different heights - balancing on a beam, climbing on a tractor tyre, hanging from the branch of a sturdy tree. Never lift children up into a tree, as it would go beyond the ability of the child to self-regulate the perceived risk. One example of managing risk in tree climbing is to mark out an agreed height to which children are permitted to climb.

Logs are a good starting point before progressing to climbing trees. Climbing on low walls and jumping off is also enjoyable, as is jumping from a low windowsill.

Consider providing loose materials such as crates, wooden planks, large stones and old tyres for children in the outdoor environment. Using these materials, children can build their own structures for climbing over or under and jumping off. For example, a plank could be used as a balance beam for an older child, whereas a younger child might crawl along it.

Climbing frames offer opportunities to explore height and help children to develop their climbing skills. If installing a climbing frame in your setting, consider climbing frames that come in various sections and offer differentiated levels of challenge.

If there are hills or slopes near your setting, consider going on an outing to visit these and allowing children to climb to the top and to roll/run down. A child in a wheelchair could roll down a slope themselves while another could race a tyre down it.

Category four: 'High Speed'

Facilitation of this category requires flat, relatively smooth and/or soft surfaces, which encourages running and chasing as well as the introduction of trollies and different types of cycles. 'Swing-on-able' features are also good for this variety of activity.



Age 1-1.5:	<p>Most young children love to be pulled around in trollies or other modes of transport.</p> <p>A swing with a support frame or adult assisted use of other playground equipment is suitable for this age range. Crawling up and down ramps.</p>
Age 1.5-2:	<p>Building on the activity from the previous stage, adults can encourage further use of playground equipment like see-saws, carousels and slides.</p> <p>Children should have access to a variety of surfaces and gentle slopes in order to challenge their capability.</p> <p>Classic metal or plastic slides are a fantastic way of providing children with opportunities to encounter great speeds. Children have little control as they slide down and often, they don't know where they will land or how far they will be propelled at the bottom.</p>
Age 2-3:	<p>Ideally speaking this age group should have access to a variety of trikes, bikes (with and without pedals) and small cars to sit in.</p> <p>The child could, with the assistance of an adult also be engaged in group games like 'Duck-Duck-Goose' or 'Red Rover'.</p> <p>In addition, children should be encouraged to engage in other physical activity like running, or chasing, which can be facilitated through traditional games like 'Tag'.</p> <p>Slopes and ramps can now be used as a 'launch pad' for rolling or sliding.</p>
Age 3-6:	<p>Swings offer children an opportunity to experience speed and heights. A rope swing can be a more natural alternative to a playground swing and will provide plenty of opportunities for risky play. It is important to have a strong rope and some kind of tree or similar structure is needed to hang it from.</p> <p>Classic metal or plastic slides are a fantastic way of providing children with opportunities to encounter great speeds. Children have little control as they slide down and often, they don't know where they will land or how far they will be propelled at the bottom. Encourage children to go down the slide in lots of different ways. There are also lots of natural sliding activities you might like to try in your setting. A mud slide is made on a small natural hill or slope, where children simply slide down in the mud. Make sure children are wearing appropriate waterproof clothing and footwear.</p> <p>Bicycles or similar objects are another way that children can experience high speed. Children will need adequate space to build up speed and will also need to know how to stop! Consider challenging children by asking them to cycle around and through obstacles. For older children the introduction of a small cycling ramp can further progress their exploration of high-speed risky play.</p>

See the tip sheet [Nurturing young children's physical well-being through Fundamental Movement Skills \(3-6 years\)](#)

Category five: Real World Tools

This is about allowing access to a variety of everyday objects that feature in the lives of children in their home environment under supervision. The focus here is on allowing children to access real world items and replicas of tools and objects that they see adults use in everyday life, for example, keys, cutlery, hammers, scissors, screw drivers and wrenches. When introducing real life tools, it is very important to go through a 'step by step' introduction programme over time, where the focus must be on safety and



correct use and the child must always be in immediate proximity of an adult during such activity.

At around 3 years of age, children can start to learn the actions required in the use of real-life tools and gradually progress to using the tools themselves. Initially, the adult should model correct and safe use of the tools and use their professional judgement to assess the risk and determine when it is appropriate for a child to begin using the tool themselves, always under close adult supervision. It involves particular health and safety considerations.

Age 1-1.5: Heuristic Play, which involves babies and toddlers exploring the properties of everyday objects is a must. These objects are things from the real world around them and can essentially be made from any material (although plastic should be avoided) and come from a variety of sources in nature and the around the house. See Treasure [Basket](#) tip sheet for more ideas!

Age 1.5-2: As babies grow, they move beyond being content to simply feel and ponder objects, to wanting to find out what can be done with them. Toddlers have an urge to handle things: to gather, fill, dump, stack, knock down, select and manipulate in other ways. Between 1.5 – 2 years, many toddlers will begin to play their first 'pretend' games by acting out everyday actions they have seen adults do, like talking on the phone, feeding the baby, making the dinner, using keys to unlock a door. Providing children with access to replicas of everyday familiar items is important to facilitate this type of play.

Age 2-3: Activity for this age group could continue to build on the earlier examples, but with the introduction of real tools under strict adult supervision. The three-year olds might participate in activities, such as buttering bread using real butter knives. Here, it is very important to go through a 'step-by-step' introduction process over time, where focus must be on safety and correct use.

This age group could also start to learn how to use other real tools such as scissors, as well as ropes (again under strict adult supervision). Ropes have many functions in a playground, like towing, tying things together, as a lasso to catch 'a horse', or when setting a trap to catch 'a pirate'.

Age 3-6: The type of tools that might be introduced are knives, for example, blunt knives to chop food which is easy to cut like cheese or bananas. When children are older, sharper knives can be used to cut fruit or vegetables or to scrape bark; children can learn to use a vegetable peeler – learning to peel an apple or to learn how to set the table using real glasses, cups, plates and cutlery. Other tools that might be introduced are learning how to use an electric beater when making buns or using a scissors or stapler. For settings that are very experienced in supporting risky play they may introduce children to real tools like screwdrivers, saws, drills, hammers.

The correct protective gear including junior safety goggles is vital and any interaction with these tools is done under strict supervision with adults who are competent in using the tools themselves and can model and support children's engagement with the tools in a safe way.

Category six: Natural Elements

This category involves play with or near natural elements like water and fire. Water is one of the most favoured activities that young children engage with and safe water play should be readily accessible. However, there is little tradition in Ireland with regards to introducing children to the element of fire, primarily as it is seen as too risky. The learning focus for any activity involving fire or water is to teach appropriate behaviour and respect for the element.



<p>Age 1-1.5:</p>	<p>Babies and toddlers should be introduced to water play and to water of different temperatures, colours and textures - ice, bubbles etc. Bring children to sources of water, such as a tap, nearby stream, a pond or the sea.</p> <p>In terms of fire, the child might observe the lighting of candle flames, which could be lit during meals on a regular basis.</p>
<p>Age 1.5-2:</p>	<p>When playing with water, children enjoy pouring, squirting, scrubbing, stirring and squeezing. They love stamping in puddles and turning on and off taps!</p> <p>In terms of fire, the children might take turns to blow out the candle.</p>
<p>Age 2-3:</p>	<p>At this stage, the child could be allowed to walk into water during outings if the right safeguards have been put in place.</p> <p>Learning to use the outside tap is another favourite. Installing a water pump outdoors could be a good investment.</p> <p>A mud-kitchen is another favourite and a nearby water tap with a hose would add to the opportunities for risky play. In terms of fire, you might consider introducing an outdoor barbeque where children could learn how to toast marshmallows or bread safely.</p> <p>Children could also be encouraged to gather materials like small sticks and leaves to make a pretend outdoor fire. Stories could be read around it and children taught to never walk across the fire path.</p>
<p>Age 3-6:</p>	<p>Water - you may have a small stream or pond, or water feature in or near your setting. Once again, supervision and risk benefit assessment are very important. At this stage, the child could be allowed to walk into water if the right safeguards have been put in place, such as ensuring total staff attention, water levels and use of appropriate clothing and/ or safety equipment. Installing a water pump outdoors could be a good investment and access to an outside tap and a hose pipe is another option. A mud-kitchen near the tap provides endless opportunities once it includes plenty of open-ended materials such as containers of varying sizes, syringes, pipettes, pieces of hose, watering cans and piping.</p> <p>Learning to do things near heat safely is also important like putting toast in the toaster, using the microwave to melt chocolate, stirring food in a pot.</p> <p>Fire – young children will learn from watching a fire being built and lit and observing the adult modelling the necessary safety precautions. If your setting has an adequate outdoor space, you could consider building an outdoor ‘fire pit’ or ‘fire circle’. The ‘fire pit’ is an area that can safely accommodate a live fire, and usually has some form of seating at a safe distance around it. The fire is normally lit in a large metal pot and the seating can be made from logs, tree stumps or wooden benches. The ‘fire circle’ can be used as a communal space for storytelling, singing, group discussion and eating and drinking. It is very important to establish some agreed rules before lighting a fire. One useful rule that you can introduce is to never walk through the middle of the ‘fire circle’, even if the fire is not lit. Spend time practising walking around the outside of the fire circle and only when children have grasped this idea, is it safe to light the fire. The fire can be used to cook on or heat up drinks.</p>

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Developed in collaboration with Dr. Orla Kelly, DCU and Jan Pettersen, TUD.
