

Adventurous Play in Forest School

By Lea Komaromi



If there is one reservation about Forest School, it is the risks involved. As the director of Upstream Forest School, a Forest School for kids ages three and up in downtown Calgary, I get questions such as: What will you do in winter? Won't they get tired? Aren't you afraid of someone getting hurt? Can you trust them with sticks, let alone tools? Who will take responsibility for injuries? As Tim Gill reflects in his book, *No Fear: Growing up in a Risk Averse Society*, these worries come from an underlying and common view that children are weak and vulnerable and it is the adult's responsibility to protect them from all harm. A 'risk' is anything that could potentially be a harm to the child.

Forest Schools are based on the Reggio Emilia approach to education, named after a city in Italy and developed after WWII. In this model, teachers view the children as being full of knowledge and potential; they are capable of making informed decisions. In Forest School, we see children as both resilient and on a search for meaning. We also make an important distinction between 'good risk' and 'bad risk'. Good risks are ones calculated with the children involved and when the benefits outweigh the potential hazards. A bad risk is one where there is no obvious benefit and the children may not be able to assess it themselves. Every day when children go out to the site, we evaluate it for potential hazards and discuss what should be done about them. Forest School Canada releases publications that detail instructions for any such program across the country.

At Upstream Forest School, when we get

to our location on McHugh Bluff in Calgary, I ask the children what potential dangers they see. We observe things like sticks poking out, dogs in the park, garbage, the weather, and then discuss how to be careful or avoid getting hurt or in trouble. The children know, for example, that when an off-leash dog approaches, they should stay still with their hands at their sides. If they get scared, they can come behind me and I will keep the dog away from them. A bad risk is one where there is no obvious benefit, and the children may not be able to assess it themselves. When all risks are thoroughly avoided, children are deprived of an opportunity to learn and be challenged. Learning from mistakes as well as successes of all kinds, including physical ones, is so important in life.

Risk management is very important at Forest School. All sites are assessed prior to starting to ensure that the good risks will outweigh the bad. Anytime the weather or season changes, a complete site assessment takes place by the practitioner, sometimes accompanied by the children. Once the conditions for a safe learning and growing environment are met, an experience assessment is undertaken for new activities that include shelter building, fire building, and the use of real tools.

When we, as educators, see children as competent and able to navigate risks and hazards, we acknowledge this as a crucial part of their development and learning. Forest School and outdoor learning helps children self-regulate and determine for themselves when something feels safe or something is off. Children learn to follow

their 'gut' after practising how to evaluate risks and tuning in to themselves. On the ground at my Forest School, I have seen how different children approach the task of tree-climbing differently. Some children love climbing trees and will attempt a tree that is leaning and doesn't have many branches to hold on to. Some know they can do it, some ask to have me close by, and some only go to the closest branch. They are following their instinct of what they are capable of and are willing to attempt. Because children living in the city have so little exposure to natural experiences, tree climbing can be a new activity that many schools and parents would consider too risky. Richard Louv has termed this *nature deficit disorder*, which might have serious effects on physical and mental health.

Listening to a child's opinion about what kind of play they would like is a fundamental right: the Convention of the Rights of the Child is a United Nations treaty that, when it came into force in 1990, must be upheld by the nations that ratified it (Canada ratified the Convention in 1991). Article 12 of this Convention states that children have a right to their opinion, to be heard, and have their opinion be taken into account. This means listening to children when they ask for their play to be more challenging, for this is what they crave and need as developing learners. In today's urban centres, children spend less and less time outdoors. This is partly because it is not seen as 'real' learning – real learning only happens inside the classroom. But what does the little outdoor time most students have at their school actually represent? As Gill writes in

his book: “School playgrounds give many children their only opportunity to socialise and spend time with their friends and peers face to face in a relatively adult-free space.” As part of a growing risk-averse society, playgrounds are becoming more and more ‘safe,’ which students see as less fun. Some children are asking for less shelter and the freedom to take on new challenges, unconsciously tuning in to their need to learn how to manage risk. Our society too often denies them these lessons, often due to fear of litigation.

Some of the children I spend time with in Forest School are very comfortable in the outdoors and love to be creative outside. Others are very unsure of what the forest offers. Some of these city children took six weeks to feel comfortable sitting on the forest floor. For them, this was a risk they were willing to take only after feeling safe and having positive experiences in the forest. Others are quite comfortable in the forest and challenge themselves in other ways; one is building a dam by breaking and using sticks, an activity that is banned at his local public school. Another girl is building confidence by learning saw skills, which in turn has made her less shy and more connected with the other children. These kinds of tool skills always require adult help, but the help is offered with the

belief that the children are capable of learning to use the tool safely. Without these opportunities, these children would not have grown in the ways they have.

How can our children be given the chance to explore and use their abilities to manage risks in a deliberate way? A first step is to create more opportunities in the schools for free, creative, and challenging play. In one school in Calgary, with a beautiful natural area in their yard, children are not allowed to touch sticks, climb anything, dig, build or even run when it is slippery. Children are inadvertently being taught that they are vulnerable and unable to manage their own bodies. When children are given the tools to manage risk themselves, they learn to trust their instinct and inner voice, which is very valuable in the long run. As it turns out, life is not without risk and danger.

A second step is to resist risk aversion. Advocating for Forest Schools in public schools is a start, just one way to have children challenge themselves intellectually, socially, and physically. Another way to resist risk aversion is to understand the reality of risks. Becoming familiar with the actual risks, not the perceived ones, can put the limits where they belong. As adults, it is important to be honest with ourselves about what children deserve. It is not honourable or necessary to literally and figu-

ratively take your child by the hand everywhere you go. As difficult as it may be, it is important that guardians and educators let the children take the reins themselves sometimes. Once we get over our own fears as adults, we will empower our children. A good step to take would be creating more walkable and livable cities while building more spaces where our children can play, learn, and maybe even get some scrapes and bruises.

Seeing the children as resilient and capable of making decisions about their bodies, experiences, and education will change the way we program their time. Outdoor time every day is an absolute must, as well as allowing children to take risks that push them beyond their ‘edge.’ This is when their intellectual learning will take off, and when we, as guardians from a safe distance, will be in awe of what our children can accomplish. 🌲

Lea Komaromi is a teacher at Upstream Forest School in Calgary who sometimes likes to try things that may make her nervous. Her latest adventure was making and sleeping in a quinzee in the mountains. She recommends it!