

Healthy Risk Taking

Risk taking is a critical part of healthy child development. Evergreen is part of the The International School Ground Alliance, who lists the following benefits of children engaging in risky & adventurous play:

- Learning caution, resilience and knowledge of one’s own abilities & limitations
- An increase in self-confidence from growing one’s abilities
- Preparation and experience responding to risks they encounter in the future

At Evergreen, we strive to make activities **as safe as necessary rather than as safe as possible**. Removing risks that are likely to cause injury is a critical part of our work, however, if we remove all risks, we are also depriving children of the critical developmental benefits they provide.

EXAMPLE

Risk Taking in Tree Climbing

Tree climbing is a great way for kids to gain confidence in themselves and work through the challenge of playing at height. Here are some tips for navigating it with a **safe as necessary** approach.

- **Do a risk assessment.** Ensure the tree that children are climbing has strong, thick branches and is not dead or dying. Ensure that there’s no hazard of falling limbs from other trees as well.
- **Use the right footwear.** Closed toed shoes are best for this activity.
- **Finding the balance.** Children are often most engaged when they are slightly challenged, but if that challenge is too much or not enough, it could result in boredom or frustration. If a child is perpetually frustrated, re-direct them to an easier branch. If a child is bored, find a more challenging tree.
- **Establish a rule of 3 points of contact.** This means 3 parts of their body must always be touching the tree, allowing for a strong sense of balance.
- **Empower don’t dictate.** Speak in accessible language and try to equip children with the tools to achieve safe as necessary tree climbing on their own.



- **Give time and space.** One of the benefits of risk is working through a challenge. If your child is struggling, allow them time to work through it independently, offering supportive encouragement.
- **Step closer and further away.** If a child is doing something that might be approaching hazardous, step closer. If a child is slightly uncomfortable but working through it and enjoying themselves, step further away.
- **Avoid “no” when possible.** We want to avoid making kids feel bad for doing things that are important for their development. Use positive language to redirect when necessary.
- **How high should I let them climb?** That depends on the kid and depends on the tree! If you have a very experienced climber, very sound tree and a three points of contact rule in place, the hazard of falling may be very unlikely. On the other hand, less experienced climbers climbing higher in more precarious trees is likely not as safe as necessary.
- **Know when to intervene.** If your child is engaged in something that is likely to cause severe injury or is extremely agitated, intervene immediately! We want children to associate the activity with working through challenges, not being frustrated or badly hurt.

Here are some other landscape features in and around home that can promote healthy development through risk:

- **Leaves & Rocks.** Along with leaves being super fun to jump into, they also can hide all kinds of creatures. Lifting rocks can also be fruitful for discovery and lifting and transporting them is great for creativity. When using rocks, we often set an agreement that they cannot be thrown or lifted above the shoulders.
- **Gradient.** Navigating speed, jumping from height, negotiating safety with others – the benefits of hill exploration are endless. For climbing steep hills, we often establish the agreement of 3 points of contact (2 legs and an arm) for traveling down the hill.
- **Water.** Balancing on rocks, jumping in puddles, ice smashing- playing near water helps us navigate caution while still having a lot of fun. We also like to call water a ‘loose part’ as it can be a rich tool for imaginative play.
- **Fallen logs.** Great tools for kids to develop balance and climbing skills. They also can lead to great bug, fungi and moss exploration and shelter building.
- **Terrain.** For toddlers, uneven and rough terrain can be critical for developing a strong sense of balance and practicing motor skills critical for navigating more challenging terrain in the future.

