

# Kids must spread their swings



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visits a playground in Launceston. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

A little risk helps children's coping abilities, writes **Paula Goodyer**.

In *Seven Up!*, the British documentary tracking the lives of 14 children into adulthood, one particular scene stands out. It's 1964, the year the series began, and the seven-year-olds race around an adventure playground that resembles a jumble of leftovers from a building site.

What's remarkable is how reckless their play seems compared with most seven-year-olds in 2022. Little kids wrangle long lengths of splintery old timber to build a house, and another wields what looks like a wooden pick axe. No one says "be careful!"

It's a stretch to say that Australia's playgrounds are doing a U-turn back to that old-school level of risk, but they are offering more ways for kids to challenge themselves. After years of risk aversion, structures for climbing are getting higher and there are more natural features such as boulders, rocks and logs for scrambling over or balancing on. Some even have flying foxes – a feature of that playground in 1964.

"It's a shift that began five years ago with a recognition that risk is an important part of play – children face a greater likelihood of injury if they don't learn to handle risky environments," says Barbara Champion, executive director of Play Australia, which has advocated for children's play since 1914.

"Risky play promotes selfconfidence, fitness and resilience and helps kids learn their limits – and although there might be scrapes and grazes, there's little evidence of serious injury from play in playgrounds in Australia."

So what counts as risky play?

Climbing, jumping, balancing or rough and tumble play are examples, and they come with a list of benefits, says Dr Helen Little, senior lecturer with Macquarie University's School of Education.

"Fitness, muscle strength, balance and agility are obvious benefits that come from running, jumping and climbing, but there are others like better spatial awareness or problem-solving," she says. "Emerging research is also linking adventurous play to a reduced risk of childhood

anxiety. When kids have the chance to experience uncertainty, it can improve their coping skills.”

Less anxiety in children is also linked to having parents who encourage kids to push their limits in a managed way, she adds – although for some parents, that’s easier said than done.

“We’ve come to see risk as something negative but we need to see it differently,” Little says. “Risky play isn’t about putting kids in danger – it’s about uncertainty. We need to remove hazards but we need to provide an environment where they can be challenged.”

How can parents encourage a healthy level of risk in children’s play? Think twice before you say “be careful” or “no” .

“Kids may not know what you need them to be careful about,” Little says. “We need to specify what we want them to do. Like ‘think about where you’re putting your feet’, ‘go more slowly’ or ‘have you got your balance?’ That way, you’re equipping them with skills to appraise what they’re doing.

“Before you say ‘no’, think about the situation and ask yourself if it’s really dangerous, what the likelihood of injury is and what will be the gains if they do it. Often when children have an injury, it’s because they’ve misjudged what they’re capable of – but the more we give them feedback, the better they’ll be at assessing a situation.”

There are ways to put more challenge into play – and that’s where not having perfectly landscaped, even terrain can put kids ahead.

“When kids are always on an even surface, how do they learn to cope with different terrains?” she asks. “The more we go for manicured outdoor areas, the fewer the opportunities for children to challenge themselves.”

What if they pick up a stick? It depends what they want to do with it. Running with sticks is off limits because of the potential for injury but a sword-fight might be okay if both kids are willing – and they're far enough apart to ensure it's stick against stick, not stick against child.

“When sticks are involved, think about the context,” Little says, “and rather than just saying ‘no’ ask kids ‘what’s the plan?’”