

# Let them climb! How adults shape risky play opportunities for children

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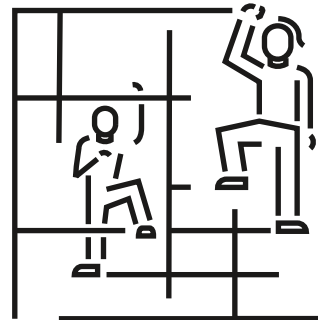
# Introduction

**Risk** is often seen as something negative, but in the context of **play**, it refers to activities that children find **exciting and challenging**.

While there's always a small chance of a bruise or a scraped knee, risky play helps children test limits, make choices, and learn from mistakes.

These experiences build important life skills. Yet, opportunities for risky play have **declined** due to adult concerns and safety regulations.

To support children's development, it's important to understand **how play spaces are shaped – and how adults' perceptions of risk and safety influence them**.



This brief highlights key findings and recommendations from a 2024 study by Visser and colleagues on **how adults shape opportunities for risky play**.

Based on interviews with parents, play professionals, and municipal policymakers in the Netherlands, this study explores how their **beliefs, attitudes, and decisions** collectively shape the social and physical environments in which children play.

This brief is particularly relevant for **parents, play professionals, and policymakers**.

## Study facts

Netherlands

0-12 years

2024

Public Open Space

Risky Play

## Key results



### Parents: Supportive but conflicted

#### WHAT?

Most parents recognize the value of risky play in **building confidence, resilience, and independence**. Still, their support is often **mixed with worry** – especially about letting go or leaving their child in unsupervised play spaces.

#### WHY?

*I have been very careful about letting go, I have supervised them for a very long time and I am there very often, I am always on guard.*



A mother with three sons aged 4, 7, and 9  
the Netherlands

#### WHERE?

Due to safety concerns, risky play has **moved away from public spaces** and mostly occurs in **supervised settings**.

#### HOW?

In supervised settings, **play professionals** can help stimulate children's risky play by creating an atmosphere in which parents feel comfortable letting go.





## Play professionals: Navigating rules and risks

- WHAT?** Play professionals – such as playworkers or educators – recognize the benefits of risky play, but are typically **constrained** by municipal, national, or European regulations.
- WHY?** These rules focus on certified equipment to prevent injuries, often making play spaces **safe, but boring**. **Spontaneous activities**, like climbing trees or building huts, are hard to certify, so they're often not allowed.

*If you climb trees, that means it becomes play equipment. Then that tree must be certified. You have to take responsibility for that. I find it quite challenging to implement this for natural play. As soon as you can climb on or inside something, it becomes play equipment; then it needs to be inspected and certified.*

*Playground manager  
The Hauge, the Netherlands*

- HOW?** However, some play professionals are beginning to **push boundaries** by interpreting the rules more flexibly and challenging established norms.

For example, one play equipment designer mentions a 3-meter-high climbing trunk with small notches that allows children to **judge risk for themselves while still meeting safety standards** through features like a sandy surface.

Others encourage risky play through **natural elements or loose parts** that do not require certification.



## Policymakers: Balancing safety and public reputation



### WHAT?

In the Netherlands, municipalities design and manage public play spaces. Their job is to ensure safety. But **balancing adventurous play while avoiding accidents and public criticism** isn't easy.

### WHY?

*We had a small raft in a natural playground, all within the safety rules. But a young child went on it unsupervised and almost drowned. Even if it's technically safe, it still attracts kids who might not be ready for it.*



*Municipal policymaker  
Utrecht, the Netherlands*

### HOW?

While parents are responsible for supervising their children, this supervision is not always consistent or guaranteed.

As a result, policymakers tend to act with **extra caution**, influenced not only by formal rules but also by uncertainty, assumptions about parental oversight, and concerns about accountability or reputational damage in case of accidents.



## Recommendations

The study finds that children's risky play is shaped by the interplay between **parents, play professionals, and municipal policymakers**. To support risky play, all actors need to reconsider how they perceive and manage risk.

Changing the narrative from **risk = danger** to **risk = learning opportunity** is key.

### Parents

- Many parents understand that risky play is good for their children – but still find it hard to let go. **Using tools** can help parents gradually shift their mindset and behavior.
- One useful approach is **risk-reframing**, as suggested by some scholars (Niehues et al., [2013](#), [2016](#); Brussoni, [2021](#)). These tools help parents see that risk isn't just about danger – it's also about **learning, growth, and decision-making**.

### Play professionals

- Play professionals should **help parents feel safe** about letting children take risks.
- At the same time, play professionals should have room to **use their own judgment and test creative ideas** that make risky play possible.
- **More research is needed on how to train professionals** to handle common challenges – like concerned parents, strict rules, and organizational barriers.



## Policymakers

- In policy documents and standards, we should **highlight the benefits of risky play** – not just what could go wrong.
- While safety matters, overly strict rules often lead to boring and limited play spaces. Instead, policymakers can use **risk–benefit analysis** – not just risk analysis – to weigh the need to protect children against the need to give them **exciting, meaningful play**.
- With **creative thinking**, it's possible to design challenging play equipment (like climbing structures) that still meets safety standards. This balance should be the norm when creating or updating play areas.



## This brief is based on

### Primary source

- Visser, K., van Aalst, I., & Meijer, M. (2024). Creating environments for risky play: Understanding the interplay between parents, play professionals and policymakers. *Children and Society*, 38(6), 2071-2088. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12878>

### Secondary sources

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