
The Cost of Control: Examining Play, Developmental Growth, and Liberation

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Between birth and five years old, children experience 1,800 days of endless wonder and discovery, each one brimming with magic and joy. Yet as adults—whether caregivers, educators, or community members—we often impose limits on children’s play based on our own fears, biases, and desire for control. We dictate what is deemed “appropriate” play, where it happens, and how it should unfold. But this need for control comes at a steep cost—one that stifles the very developmental growth we aim to nurture, suppressing children’s autonomy, creativity, and confidence along the way.

What types of play are deemed acceptable, restricted, or outright forbidden? In this article, I challenge us to question the *why* behind our reflexive “no’s” and to closely examine how these restrictions affect children’s learning, growth, and self-expression. Through this lens, I will explore forms of play like risky play, rough-and-tumble play, and weapon play, and confront the impact of our control on their development.

The Policing, Politics, and Perceptions of Play

Play, often dismissed as a mere break from “real” learning, is actually a deeply complex, self-initiated, and self-chosen process where children use the power of their imagination to make sense of the world

around them. Yet, this vital aspect of development is frequently curtailed by the narratives shaped by the policing, politics, and perceptions of the adults who govern children’s lives. Our worldviews—formed by the expectations, values, attitudes, and stories we inherit from family and society—often lead us to unconsciously impose limits on children’s play. These limits are not just physical; they reflect the societal norms, cultural expectations, and personal fears that dictate what is deemed “acceptable” play.

For instance, rough-and-tumble play might be interrupted because it’s seen as too aggressive. Weapon play is often swiftly banned due to adult anxieties around violence. Risky play, where children push their physical limits, is restricted because of fear of injury. However, these forms of play are crucial for fostering resilience, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence. The boundaries we set aren’t neutral; they are

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shaped by biases related to safety, morality, and behaviour. These perceptions influence who we believe has the “right” to explore freely. This becomes particularly dangerous for BLACK, Indigenous, and other marginalized children, who are disproportionately impacted by these restricted opportunities to play without constraint.

It’s time to challenge these restrictions. When we question our reflexive “no”—which often stems from our own discomfort rather than actual danger—we create space for new possibilities in children’s learning and self-expression. With that in mind, let’s delve deeper into three types of play that are frequently the first to be restricted but hold immense potential for growth: risky play, rough-and-tumble play, and weapon play.

Risky Play: Building Confidence and Resilience

Risky play—encompassing activities like climbing, balancing, using

tools, and interacting with elements like open water and fire—can understandably make adults feel uneasy. There's always that nagging fear of injury lurking in the back of our minds. However, it's precisely through this type of play that children acquire essential life skills. When they climb trees or balance on a beam, they learn to assess risks, make decisions, and test their physical limits. They are also honing their executive function skills, which are crucial for navigating life's challenges. By stepping in too quickly, we inadvertently rob them of the chance to distinguish between a hazard and a risk, as well as the opportunity to build self-confidence and resilience through their own experiences.

Risky play isn't inherently dangerous; the level of risk can and should be adjusted based on a child's age and developmental stage. True hazards are those situations that pose an immediate threat without offering any benefits to the child's learning. Once we start to understand the difference between risk and hazard—and stop letting our fears take the lead—we can begin to carve out space for risky play in our learning environments. Embracing this kind of play becomes essential

for healthy development, fostering strong critical thinking skills and nurturing capable individuals.

Rough-and-Tumble Play: Developing Emotional Intelligence

Big body play—wrestling, chasing, and mock fighting—also known as rough-and-tumble play, is often mistaken for aggression or seen as disruptive. However, it serves an essential role in children's social and emotional development. During this type of play, children practise reading social cues, negotiating boundaries, and understanding the difference between play and real conflict. It is a space where they can explore physical limits and emotional responses in a safe, consensual way.

Suppressing this form of play often stems from adult concerns about safety and social decorum, but in doing so, we miss an opportunity to support emotional regulation and empathy.

Rough-and-tumble play teaches children how to navigate conflict, build friendships, and manage emotions—a critical skill set for adulthood. As host of my favourite podcast, *That Early Childhood Nerd*,

Heather Bernt Santy asks: which of those things do you wish your child hadn't learned?

Weapon Play: Navigating Power and Identity

Weapon play is a trickier one to incorporate throughout all learning spaces. However, it is no less vital to a child's development. Weapon play can look like children using sticks as swords, Lego guns or "pewers" as my crew once called them, or having imaginative duels that end when someone is "deaded."

This play can make adults cringe because we think of things like mass shootings, police brutality, and street violence and we may even intervene when they see weapon play. But those societal issues are adult problems that have nothing to do with child's play. To a child, weapon play is about power, bravery, heroism, and empowerment, so even if it isn't permitted in a child care centre or on the school playground, we should at least change our mindsets as to why it is being done.

Have you ever automatically said "no" to weapon play? It's time to rethink that reflex. Consider the following about children's weapon play:

- Their play is not about condoning "violence."
- Their play isn't representative of societal issues at large.
- Their play is not there to activate you, your lived experience, or trauma.

Their play is, was, and forever will be there to help them process the world around them in a way that is informed by their age and stage of development. The sooner we come to terms with this truth, the better off our children will be.

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The Cost of Control

The cost of control in play environments extends far beyond stifling creativity—it reinforces systemic biases that disproportionately affect marginalized children. These children often find their play and behaviour scrutinized through a lens of control rooted in fear and bias. They're frequently told, either directly or through subtle cues, that their forms of expression are dangerous, inappropriate, or disruptive. This constant policing has lasting effects on their self-esteem, sense of agency, and willingness to take risks—core elements that are vital for growth and development.

For marginalized children, the denial of certain types of play can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, particularly around aggression and violence. Weapon play, for instance, is not inherently negative. When allowed to unfold in a monitored and guided space, it offers valuable lessons in justice, fairness, and self-regulation. By shutting it down out of fear, we miss an opportunity to help children learn critical life skills and navigate complex emotions.

As early childhood professionals, we have one essential job: to see each child as capable and allow them the freedom to rise to the occasion. When we let children navigate complex situations, take risks, try, fail, and learn from it all, we build that internal muscle that tells them they are stronger than they know, braver than they believe, and as smart as they've always been.

Moving Toward Liberation

Liberating our learning environments means allowing children to engage in all forms of play—risky, rough-and-tumble, and imaginative

weapon play—without fear of being shut down. It means challenging our internalized biases and fears and giving children the freedom to explore who they are and how they interact with the world.

We need to reconsider why we forbid, shame, and punish children for using play for play's sake—to process the things that go on around them, be it power, understanding of good versus evil, or adversity. Navigating discomfort with hard topics in the field of early childhood development is both a challenge and an honour. As professionals, we are entrusted with the profound responsibility of walking alongside children through times of difficulty, whether it be grief, complex family situations, or other forms of adversity. This journey allows us to listen deeply and stand witness to their unique interpretations and emotions.

When we trust children to play freely, we honour their autonomy, celebrate their creativity, and create spaces where they can truly thrive. In embracing this perspective, we are not just fostering growth—we are cultivating spaces of possibility, where every child can experience the full spectrum of joy, agency, and discovery. It's time to challenge the status quo and create environments for children to imagine new possibilities. The question we must ask ourselves is: are we ready to let go of control and trust the transformative power of play?

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