

Blog

Risky play as a recreational fear activity

Recreational Fear Lab friend and collaborator Professor Helen Dodd reflects on risky play, recreational fear, and developmental psychology.

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As a child psychologist who researches child anxiety, I don't think I ever anticipated writing a blog post on recreational fear. I have spent 18 years researching how to reduce fear and anxiety in children. Anxiety disorders are the most common emotional disorder affecting children and having an anxiety disorder can have a huge impact on children's lives and the lives of those who care for them. Given this background, it is paradoxical that fear can also be fun, exciting and enjoyable, with a substantial proportion of people enjoying recreational fear activities. So much so that these experiences are often sought out, even when they come with a high price tag.

When I became a parent, I observed my children beginning to play and explore the world. They would take risks, fall, get back up and do it all over again. It struck me then how much of my job as a parent seemed to be assessing what they were about

to do and making a choice: whether to step in and intervene, or step back and be ready if something went wrong. I became increasingly interested in risky play and what the consequences might be of not giving children the space to play in a risky, adventurous way, of always stepping on and intervening. I was already familiar with Susan Bogel's work about how challenging parenting, which pushes children out of their comfort zone, might help to protect against anxiety (Bögels & Phares, 2008), and had worked myself on how overprotective parenting can increase children's risk for anxiety (Hudson et al., 2019). I read with interest the brilliant work from [Ellen Sandseter](#) and [Mariana Brussoni](#) on children's risky play.

In 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic put a stop to a lot of our regular research, Kathryn Lester and I decided to write a conceptual model about how risky and adventurous play, where children experience excitement, thrill and fear, might help to prevent child anxiety (Dodd & Lester, 2021).

If you watch primates play, they will jump between trees, swing at high speed from one tree to another, chase and tease each other. They intentionally seem to expose themselves to moderate fear, switching from being in and out of control (Špinka et al., 2001). It is hypothesised that for developing animals, playing in this way helps them to learn how to cope emotionally when unexpected things happen (e.g. Pellis & Pellis, 2009; Špinka et al., 2001). Whilst there is likely some physical benefit to this type of play, Špinka et al. also propose that this risky play teaches young animals how to 'avoid emotional overreaction during unexpected stressful situations' (p. 143). It would make sense, therefore, that risky, adventurous play in human children might serve a similar purpose.

We drew on this context from animal research, as well as our own experience and understanding of the cognitive and behavioural mechanisms that underpin anxiety to propose in our conceptual model that risky, adventurous play provides exposure experiences which, in turn, provide learning opportunities. Specifically, we propose that when children play in a risky, adventurous way they learn:

1. about the subjective feeling of uncertainty and how to tolerate uncertainty;
2. about effective coping mechanisms when faced with feelings of uncertainty and fear, as well as when things don't go according to plan;
3. about physiological arousal and how their bodies respond when they feel fear.

At this point we were entirely unaware of the idea of recreational fear. But now, after spending some time reading their work and collaborating with the Recreational Fear Lab, I realise how well this works aligns. Because risky, adventurous play is conceptualised as child-led play where children experience subjective feelings of excitement, thrill and fear, it fits beautifully with recreational fear; fear can sometimes also be fun. Risky play seems to be one way in which children experience recreational fear but I am increasingly realising that it is not

the only way. When you start to look for it, children's engagement with recreational fear is widespread. For example, a game of peek-a-boo, playing hide and seek, and many classic children's stories all include recreational fear elements. Staff working with young children seem to understand children's enjoyment of these experiences and they play with children in a way that generates a curated 'just-right' level of fear, accompanied by enjoyment and thrill (Andersen et al., 2020).

It is fascinating, given how widespread these experiences seem to be, how little recreational fear has been researched, particularly in children, and how little we understand about why children seek out and enjoy these broader experiences. It seems possible that our ideas about why risky, adventurous play might be beneficial for children, might apply to recreational fear experiences more broadly. This would be in keeping with the idea that horror fiction provides opportunity for adults to practice emotion regulation strategies (Scrivner et al., 2021).

For me, going back to how to prevent problematic anxiety and fear in children, the key unknown is what happens if children do not get to have these experiences? If engaging in recreational fear activities, such as risky play, is part of normal child development and supports children's emotional development, then denying children the opportunity to have these experiences could increase their risk for difficulties with anxiety. There is evidence that, as a society, we are becoming increasingly risk averse. For example, our research showed that in Britain, children are not allowed out to explore and play without adult supervision until almost 2 years later than the previous generation (Dodd et al., 2021). Of course we want to keep children safe, but if we stop children taking risks and prevent them from experiencing the 'scary-funny' emotions that accompany recreational fear activities, we might be denying them vital learning experiences.

I've been writing this blog whilst drinking from a mug that was a gift from the Recreational Fear Lab. On it is a quote from Stephen King '*we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones*'. Maybe he is right and children need opportunities to play with fear so that they develop the ability to more effectively cope with what life throws at them.

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