

Dear Parents,

Following on from our last Forest School update at the beginning of the month, with some reminders about important dates, please remember the drop-in session on [1st April](#), where we will welcome you coming along to support your child and see the benefits of Forest School for yourself.

We know the benefits of outdoor play, even in the winter, and we've found a thought-provoking article from The Guardian (Kate Blincoe October 16) that we thought you might find interesting.

Blincoe cites a recent all-party parliamentary group [report](#) on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, which has led to lots of parents asking themselves how much risk they should introduce into their children's lives. The report says that: *"Risky play, involving perhaps rough and tumble, height, speed, playing near potentially dangerous elements ...gives children a feeling of thrill and excitement."* Whilst we clearly don't want to put children at risk of danger, we perhaps do need to think about this a little bit in the context of early years education and helping children to learn about their own limitations and how their bodies work.

Let's encourage our children into the great outdoors: Research from Play England (2006) shows that 'age appropriate risk' is an essential component of a balanced childhood. Allowing children to take managed risks, such as climbing a tree or balancing on a wall, enables them to experience fear, and learn the strengths and limitations of their own body. The thinking is, that unless children are allowed to take appropriate risks with the support of a caring adult, they won't know whether something is safe or unsafe when they are in a risky situation and there is no adult around to help. I wouldn't be suggesting you drop your toddler off in the woods and just sit back and watch what happens, but I do think this is something that perhaps we should think about.

There's lots of evidence that many children today get taken from home to the padded soft play centre, to nursery, and back to the sofa and simply don't get the opportunities we used to get as children. I remember playing outside, in the garden or out in the park with my friends and learning to take care of each other whilst we were out. We don't expect children to turn into Bear Grylls either, but perhaps we need to consider whether the opportunities we give them to learn about their bodies and about taking risks are enough. As parents, we are so focused on keeping our children safe, that the roaming distance of children (how far children play from home) [has decreased by 90% in the past 30 years](#). If you want a good read on how this affects children, try, 'Last Child in the Woods' (Louve 2005) who talks about this in some detail.

Blincoe says parents these days, 'project-manage a schedule of activities' for their children from a very early age and then spend their time waiting and watching, anxious in case they should slip or fall and doing their best to make sure they don't. She says, it's no wonder that the 'make pretend' risks children encounter in computer games are so exciting – the real world seems rather tame in comparison.

So how can we put some of that danger and excitement back into the lives of our children? We suggest that step-by-step, age-appropriate risks are important. The outdoor environment is key to this. Outdoor time every day is essential, and don't just gravitate to the neat and controlled environment of the play area. Encourage your toddler to poke around under hedges and permit your pre-schooler to climb and explore. Unsupervised time, in the garden, might lead to more cuts and scrapes or fights between siblings and friends, but it is what most of us did as children. It teaches children how to make risk-related decisions for themselves, including whether or not to share and the 'cause and effect' of quarrelling with your friend or your sibling.

Risk perception is like a muscle that needs to be developed and flexed. Unless we use it, we lose it.

So, let them climb in streams and fall over in puddles wearing all of their clothes; let them slide in mud or splash in puddles with no shoes on; let them go out without a coat and feel the rain on their face. It's only water...the clothes will wash. Let them climb and dig, and generally 'check-out' the world around them.

Our job as the caring adult and loving parent is to manage the risk. Checking the branch on the tree before children climb to make sure its strong enough to take their weight and not too high; researching good puddles to paddle in, then stepping back to allow them to make their own decisions, which will inevitably vary from child to child. Don't forget to have fun yourself – join in with the risk and enjoy being a parent as your child discovers their abilities and learns to manage their own risks.

Remember:

'You don't stop playing because you grow old. You grow old because you stop playing'

Oscar Wilde

Quick Reminder: Please make sure your children have plenty of spare clothes in their bag. Some children get wet and dirty and need a change (not necessarily toilet 'accidents') during the day.

The weather is becoming warmer; remember water-bottles for Forest School and sun-hats/cream where necessary.

Happy Outdoor Play!

Best wishes,

Caroline, Vanessa & the team