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Seeing Risk As a Benefit

An interview with
Laurie Cornelius
by Margie Carter

"An environment that is as safe as possible, where all possible sources of risk of harm are removed, is actually an unsafe environment because it offers little value in terms of play and learning and denies children the necessary experience to develop and practice the skills to be safe."

Helen Tovy (2014)

Reading Helen Tovy was a breath of fresh air for me. Her writing on the value of risk taking for young children is very compelling, especially for those of us in the United States who are swimming in a culture of fear and litigation. In fact, if you search 'risk taking in early childhood' on the web, you will see that most of its advocates are from outside the United States. Across the globe, north and south, early years educators, and in some cases governments such as those in the U.K., seem to have sorted out understandings we in the United States still struggle with. They make clear distinctions between the ideas of hazards and risks, and recognize that the well being and healthy development of children involves offering them both physical and intellectual challenges. They focus on the risks that are worth taking, not just the ones that need eliminating, thereby separating the concept of risk from danger and linking it to recognizable benefits.

In studying child development we learn that children benefit greatly from play, exploration, and active involvement in the world around them. They gain confidence from 'living on the edge' as they take on social, physical, and cognitive tasks. We know that insufficient challenge will not only leave children bored and disengaged, but likely result in 'risk compensation behavior': seeking thrills that bypass the good judgment that comes from experiencing their own competence. Here in the U.S. with such a strong emphasis on risk liabilities, I'm always heartened to find directors who reinforce an understanding of this developmental process with their staff and families, and emphasize the importance of children developing risk-taking dispositions.

A Dialogue with Laurie Cornelius

You may recognize the name of Laurie Cornelius because she authored a story about her program's outdoor play space in *Reflecting Children's Lives* (Curtis & Carter, 2011). I first captured that story on a cassette tape in 1996 as Laurie gave me a tour of her new playground. I was amazed at how the promotion of risk taking was solidly built into the design. That story has inspired

countless educators to reconsider how they design their early childhood outdoor spaces. For instance, Laurie said,

"Our discussions on providing for risk taking in the new play space design were intense, illuminating, and full of growth for all of us. We decided that we would need to keep our fear away from the children. . . . We asked ourselves, 'If a child tries to jump over a log and skins her knee, is that more dangerous than never understanding her body's capability as she grows and takes on more physical challenges?' What happens if our group care settings don't allow children the freedom to take risks and to feel capable of doing difficult things? How do they learn to make good judgments about whether something is safe if they have never experienced the consequences of their limitations? We have to allow children to experience little physical hurts so that they can learn natural consequences. In doing this, they start to develop a sense



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of their capabilities. They also have an experience of celebrating their success in trying something over and over again and finally learning to do it. These developmental understandings evolved out of our numerous adult discussions of our childhood memories. We decided we wanted the challenge of that emotional element to be in our planning design along with the physical challenges. The two go hand in hand."

MC: Laurie, your playground design was so inspiring with its inclusion of prickly bushes that might scratch children; sloping paths that gave more speed to their tricycles; and an array of boulders, logs, and hiding places. But equally stunning was the title you gave to your keynote at your state's Department of Early Learning conference, a few years later, boldly saying, "We Want Your Kids to Get Hurt!"

LC: I gave this keynote after I had lobbied hard to get rocks and driftwood into our original outdoor play space (it did result in licensing approval). The evolution of the idea for the keynote began with parents perceiving injury as 'bad.' I introduce the value of bumps and scratches at our parent orientation when we talk about our 'ouch reports.' For parents, this helps to set the stage for our commitment to active exploration and play. In order to change a widely held societal attitude, I think it is necessary to create a conscious awareness of the importance of risk in children's play. While I don't want serious injuries, I believe it is critical that children actively explore natural, challenging environments.

MC: You are reminding me of something Helen Tovy says,

"Instead of promoting a *safe* environment, we should focus on creating an environment that is *safe enough* for children to act on, transform, seek out challenges and take risks. . . . Above all,

we need to view children both as risk-seekers and risk-takers and trust in children's emerging capabilities. This means knowing children well, understanding their capabilities, respecting their intentions and supporting their desire for risk and challenge."

You've clearly embraced that approach in your center.

LC: I believe this is the core (essential element) of what I refer to as the magic of childhood play. What children do in play is an individual experience based on their temperament and culture and exposure to different environments. It is critical that adults are keen observers of children's play to help determine if there is risk. When children are playing in groups, we must also ask, "Are they agreeing to play the game?" I often use the example with families of 'home base' and comfort levels of chasing or being chased.

Children have different comfort zones and it is important to help them feel safe while experimenting with risk in their play. I believe a child's self-determined boundar-

ies is critical to her development. Children can determine for themselves when they are ready to risk and when they are not. This experimentation in play helps children learn to judge and self-assess what is risky and what is safe. I worry that adults self-impose their worries and take away a child's initiative and ability to self-assess.

Determining when a rule is needed always involves active discussion because our interpretation of safety is subjective. We discuss and even debate our differing perspectives. Discussion takes time, so we might make a rule until we can determine safety. It is important to assess the potential consequences. What I don't want to happen is to make a rule because of an individual child and apply it to the whole group. We live in a litigious society and we're literally taking risk away from our children.

Use Rules for Danger and Guidelines for Risk

MC: You mentioned what you do in new parent orientation, and I'm wondering



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how you work with staff to come to a shared understanding about risk versus danger. Again, Tovy talks about how we need to look more closely at our own assumptions, 'have a go,' and model a can-do attitude. In her own research she discovered that teachers who understood the benefits of risk taking and felt support by their team were more confident in offering elements of risk and challenge. On the contrary, those who felt unsupported by their supervisors and anxious about blame and litigation tended to curtail adventurous play, even when they understood its importance. I remember your story of having to negotiate 'rule making' with your teachers on the play yard.

LC: When our play space first opened, I was surprised to go outside and discover there were chalk arrows indicating the tricycle path was one-way only. Staff were directing the children and telling them to follow the arrows. This resulted in adults organizing the children rather than the children learning how to navigate the path and problem solve when they came upon another child going the opposite direction. Another time teachers told children 'no' when they wanted to ride tricycles in the snow, rather than letting the children experiment with tricycles' resistance in the snow. These types of situations led to inquiry and learning rather than suppression with rules.

We discovered that the children's experience outside was so important that it became a classroom and we hired an outdoor teacher. As in classroom environments when there is a lead teacher, a focus and climate can be established. Now our outdoor teacher guides adults in the play space. While it is only a part-time position, it has provided the opportunity to establish what we refer to as rules and guidelines.

Rules are non-negotiable for actions where the consequences cause potential

for extreme injury or damage to property. We don't allow our portable rocks to go up in the climbers because the consequence for potential serious injury is too high. We don't allow children to strip plants or bushes of leaves because the potential for loss of plants is too high.

Guidelines are negotiable, given the context. This approach to adaptation is essential to supporting developmental risk play. If children are to initiate and determine their own risk, they must have foundational knowledge about what they know they can do in order to be able to adapt their play as they extend their risk. In these situations, adults assume the role of coach.

Learning to think about rules versus guidelines has created many in-depth conversations. We have a covered bridge and in any given year when we have competent four- or five-year-old children taking gymnastics, they use the ceiling beams of the bridge to hang upside down. Rather than say no, we found ways to adapt the environment and involve the children in arriving at a solution. The solution arrived at through discussion with the children was to close the bridge using traffic cones. The children created signs to say the bridge was closed, and tumbling mats were placed on the bridge.

Sometimes we might alter the environment. Our outdoor

teacher, Ruth Laabs, observed a chase game occurring in the playhouse where children were running through the door and climbing out the window causing some injuries when they dropped to the ground. This game was also disrupting other play in the house and the immediate surroundings. Rather than create a rule, she built a flower box and planted flowers; the adaptation changed the behavior. She also encouraged the chasing game in another area.

Another example was building forts. When a local land trust engaged in water restoration dismantled a beaver dam, they brought us the sticks. The children used the sticks to build shelters against our large fir trees. Although these shelters could fall, we determined injuries would be minimal should they collapse, so we didn't redirect this play.

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Providing for Dizzy Play

MC: I love the term ‘dizzy play’ as something that children seek out. The Canadian province of New Brunswick has incorporated the concept into their curriculum framework for Early Learning and Child Care. Again, Tovy describes this idea, saying,

“All play includes an element of risk, but sometimes risk is the central characteristic of play — for example, when children deliberately put themselves in a position of uncertainty. Such play, often referred to as ‘deep play’ or ‘dizzy play,’ involves a simultaneous experience of risk and challenge, fear and joy, and a feeling of being ‘on the edge’ of danger. We can see this in babies’ delight in being thrown up in the air or tipped backwards by a trusted adult, in young children balancing along a wobbly bridge, or in older children swinging on the end of a rope. Many children seek out such adventurous play, moving at speed, sliding head first down a slide, rolling, spinning, or hanging upside down.

LC: I don’t think positive dizzy play can happen without three critical components: 1) Relationships that support a safe social environment, 2) An investigative environment that provokes developmental risk, and 3) A skilled adult who can observe, recognize, and know when developmental risks occur in play. Whether a parent or a teacher, we’ve all experienced when a child might be wrestling in play and then all of a sudden change to defensive behavior and feelings of being scared. There is a fine line between pretend and reality in the view of a young child. The ability to observe and assess is an important skill for the teacher.

Looking at risk through a cultural lens, there will always be conflict found in groups of children due to their different backgrounds. We can’t run away from the hard discussions. A couple of years ago one of our teachers, Paul

Caggianese, noticed children wanting to imitate weapon play. He put his laptop by the family sign-in and posed the question, “I’m noticing weapon play in the classroom. What are your thoughts?” Parents responded with a broad continuum of answers from zero tolerance for weapons, to a view of guns as tools for hunting, to family members in the military and law enforcement. The parents requested a meeting, which for us is the best kind of family involvement. Families came together in discussion and discovered in dialogue that there were actually value differences, which can’t be solved. Although we didn’t use the term ‘dizzy play’ we did ask, “Are the children playing and is it a game?” What happens if we have a child who has had trauma in his or her life? Are the children agreeing to play the game? How do we know?

Dizzy play is that fine line between the element of risk and danger. Parents agreed to trust us to allow the play knowing the depth of our observation and attention to the game. No one changed their opinions, but all went away understanding the different perspectives. By the way, this opened the door to a program-wide study of why boys are struggling in education and as a program we read the book, *Raising*

Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000). Staff, families, and early childhood education students participated in the conversations. We changed our views of ourselves as experts to that of learners.

MC: When I take people on study tours to Aotearoa New Zealand, they marvel at the ease with which parents and educators allow such things as high tree climbing, barefoot leaps across logs, and hanging from ladders. I remind them that geographically the New Zealand islands are situated in the ‘ring of fire’ where there are a large number of earthquakes and volcano eruptions — and this is also the country that launched bungee jumping as a sport! I do think that different contexts and cultural interpretations influence views on what is valuable and what is unwarranted risk.

When I visited the child development center for employees of a big tech company in California’s Silicon Valley, I was struck by how much risk taking they provided for children inside and outdoors. The director told me, “Risk taking is what made this a global corporation. It is built into their culture and they know it’s valuable for their kids.”

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LC: One time we had a very competent four year old who on his second day with us quickly climbed one of our pine trees. He didn't climb just a little way; he was high up in the crown of the tree. I had been at a meeting and when I arrived back I saw our campus security and facility vehicles parked outside our front entrance. When I arrived on the scene, one of my lead teachers came beside me and said, "I think we have a very competent tree climber." As our security officer placed a ladder up against the tree and climbed up two steps, the child scrambled down to the ground and ran off in less than a minute. The adults, in their desire to be helpful, said they wanted to saw off the branches of the tree. We, in turn, indicated we didn't want this to happen; we want children to have experiences with trees, and we must talk about climbing with the children, describing how they hold on and where they place their feet. We can assist with the skill as well as determine guidelines or, if necessary, rules. When the parents came at the end of the day, they laughed and said he was the youngest of several older siblings and that they live on a farm and their children live in the trees. This is their family culture. When it comes to culture, it is dangerous to make assumptions and set expectations that all children must conform to, regardless of their experiences and abilities.

Supporting Intellectual Risk Taking

MC: Beyond the emotional and physical risk taking we've been discussing, I think it's important our early childhood programs provide for intellectual risk taking as well. Tovy reminds us that,

"... risk underpins creative, imaginative and scientific thinking. We 'hazard' a guess, 'dare' to be different, and take 'imaginative leaps' in our thinking." Tell me how you work with this concept

with the children, parents, and staff in your program.

LC: I think at the heart of learning is the ability to wonder, investigate, and experiment. This is what I like to refer to as a 'culture of learning.' Allowing questions opens the door for creativity and critical thinking. If we teach to right answers, then we totally take away the wonder. I worry when children are taught to give the right answers that we've lost an important part of the learning process. We can't afford to judge mistakes as wrong. Instead, we must value the learning process and use more questions for further research:

- What do you think happened?
- Might there be another way to try?
- What are your ideas now?

Children learn task persistence when they try something over again. If they are judged as wrong, then they often just give up. I think it is equally important to support the element of inquiry and discussion with staff. I don't want any experts here. I want us all to be on the same playing field as we share our ideas with each other.

Sometimes to do something really new can feel quite lonely because it is so different. It is a risk and it can feel scary. I felt this way years ago when I presented to licensors at their state meeting about the importance of risk, and the use of rocks and sticks in play spaces. We were able to change perspectives and now there are many play spaces that have adapted and added Pacific Northwest elements into environments. I don't pretend to have answers and I will continue to ask questions.

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