

# **Adventurous/Risky Play: Framework for the Early Years**

**Early Years Physical Literacy Research Team (EYPLRT)  
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"A Catch-22: Our desire to see that no harm comes to our kids is causing harm to our kids."  
Stephen Marche (2018)

## **Adventurous/Risky Play: Framework for the Early Years**

Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are aware of the importance of providing opportunities for young children to be physically active: using their bodies in many ways, exploring natural areas, testing their boundaries, learning life skills, and experiencing thrilling and exciting forms of play. Provincial and territorial curriculum frameworks and licensing regulations provide specific guidelines for ensuring children's safety in play.

### **Why use this Framework?**

This document was created by an interdisciplinary team to provide a guideline for supporting and enhancing adventurous/risky play for young children in licensed child care settings.

It can be used as:

- a conversation starter for ECEs and families about quality programming for children,
- a resource for ECEs and families to gain understanding of the benefits of adventurous/risky play,
- a consistent interpretation and understanding of adventurous/risky play in child care settings,
- evidence to support benefits of adventurous/risky play and its impact on child's development.

### **How Much Physical Activity Should Young Children Have?**

The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiologists (CSEP) recommends **180 minutes of physical activity daily** for children between the ages of one and five years. Screen time for children between the ages of one and five years should be limited to one hour, with less time better, and zero screen time for infants under two years of age. *Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years (ages 0-4)* (November 2017) discuss the provision of physical activity (sweat and step), sedentary time, and sleep for young children <https://www.participaction.com/en-ca/thought-leadership/benefits-and-guidelines/0-4>.

However, studies have shown that (ParticipACTION, 2015):

- 35% of 2-5 year olds in Canada are overweight or obese.
- 30% of 3-4 year olds are not meeting the daily recommended 180 minutes of physical activity.
- Only 15% of children five and under are meeting the daily screen time recommendation of one hour or less. The impact of screen time on young children and their developing brains is not yet well understood.

### **What is Physical Literacy?**

Physical literacy is the **motivation, confidence, and competence** to move for a lifetime (Whitehead, 2010). The word literacy is key; physical development is as important as the other multiple literacies for young children: language, reading, writing, numeracy.

**Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS)** are basic skills that children develop in the early years through active play. FMS are necessary prerequisites to being physically active for a lifetime and are divided into three categories:

- Stability/Balance Skills
  - Ability to balance and stretch with a steady stationary stance.
- Locomotor Skills
  - Ability to move from one place to another.
- Manipulative/Coordination Skills
  - Ability to control an object using hands and feet.

### **What is Adventurous/Risky Play?**

Adventurous/risky play is **thrilling exciting** play that:

- encourages children to push themselves by running faster, climbing higher, and jumping farther,
- allows children to explore their physical limits and comfort levels,
- teaches life skills such as:
  - using construction tools such as hammers and saws, and kitchen utensils such as knives,
  - navigating ice, snow, water, hills, ditches, and other natural elements.

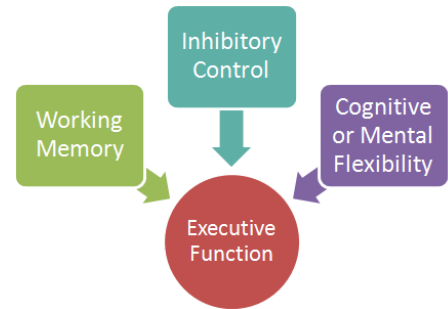
### **Why Program for Adventurous/Risky Play?**

Through adventurous/risky play, children examine their environment, evaluate their movements, solve problems, think geographically, and develop fundamental movement skills. Adventurous/risky play:

- Supports holistic child development:
  - Enhances all developmental domains: cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual.
  - Builds confidence, competence, independence, and responsibility.
- Increases physical well-being:
  - Motivates children to be more physically active, especially when playing outside.
  - Develops appreciation for nature and the outdoor environment.
  - Reduces children's anxiety and stress levels.
- Enhances resilience:
  - Increases awareness of risk and helps to regulate risk-taking play according to fears and abilities.
  - Develops decision-making skills and confidence to overcome adversity.



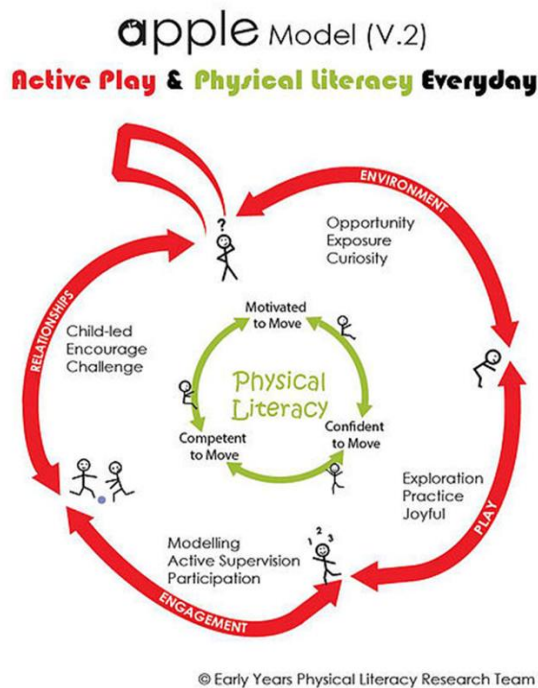
- Supports school readiness by enhancing the development of executive functioning, skills necessary to be successful in school, work, and relationships:
  - Problem solving, remembering instructions, working memory,
  - Planning, flexibility, focus (ignoring distractions),
  - Emotional self-regulation.



**Providing Adventurous/Risky Play**

With different mandates and regulations in each province and territory, how do ECEs intentionally and thoughtfully plan for and implement adventurous/risky play?

The APPLE Model (Active Play and Physical Literacy Everyday) below demonstrates how **motivation, confidence, and competence** (physical literacy) form the core of the apple and active play forms the skin.



Provide physical literacy and active play every day (APPLE)!

- Stimulating **environments**, indoors and outdoors, offer opportunity to explore, exposure to new and different materials and ways to play, and elicit curiosity to test new ideas and boundaries.
- Child-led **play** encourages joyful exploration and practice or repetition to mastery.
- ECEs are **engaged** when they are role models, supervise actively, and participate in play.

- **Relationships** flourish among adults and children through child-led play, encouragement, and challenge.

### **Types of Adventurous/Risky Play** (*Sandseter and Kleppe 2019*)

- Great heights: climbing, jumping from still or flexible surfaces, balancing on high objects, swinging
- High speeds: swinging, sledding, running, cycling, skating, skiing
- Tools (construction and kitchen): saws, hammers, ropes, and knives
- Natural elements: ice, snow, water, hills, ditches, fire pits
- Rough-and-tumble: wrestling, fencing with sticks, play fighting
- Getting lost: exploring or playing in unfamiliar environments
- Play with impact: crashing into something repeatedly for fun
- Vicarious play: experiencing thrill by watching other children engage in risky play

### **Keys to Success**

- Understand and be able to speak to why adventurous/risky play is important for the children in your care and how it fits centre philosophy.
- Know the children well – their ages, development, interests, abilities – and plan accordingly.
- Communicate with staff, supervisors, parents, and others.
- Create physically literate and stimulating environments both indoors and outdoors.
  - Extend indoor experiences with opportunities to climb, jump, move, and use construction tools and kitchen utensils.
  - Plan to be outdoors more frequently, for longer periods of time, in all types of weather.
  - Gather, create, and prepare specific materials such as loose parts, tools, and natural elements.
- Change the indoor and outdoor environments regularly.
  - Rekindles curiosity.
  - Provides increased challenge.
  - As materials and equipment wear out or need replacing.
  - To suit the seasons.
- Teach the children how to use tools safely and how to navigate different natural elements. Provide necessary safety gear such as goggles, work gloves, hot mitts.
- Ensure that both you and the children are dressed appropriately. It is not fun to be cold or wet!
- Practice active engaged supervision.
  - Participate, encourage, challenge.
  - Provide close or one-on-one supervision when children are using tools or navigating natural elements.
  - Be a role model for enjoying the outdoors and adventurous/risky play.
  - Encourage opportunities to practice.
  - Create joyful child-led experiences.

## **ECE Roles in Adventurous/Risky Play**

- Provide active supervision.
  - Keep children **as safe as necessary** rather than as safe as possible:
    - elimination of hazards such as broken glass or sharp edges,
    - knowledge of injuries/risks/possible accidents,
    - weigh the benefits against the risks.
  - Be a role model.
  - Offer verbal encouragement:
    - enthusiastic and responsive,
    - serve and return interactions.
  - Provide distal supervision when appropriate – know when it is okay to step back and supervise from a distance.
  - Ensure one-on-one or small group supervision when teaching the use of tools or when near elements such as a fire pit.
- Shift thinking.
  - Challenge your own comfort level for adventurous/risky play.
  - Explore adventurous/risky play with children.
- Meet the needs of the child.
  - Consider the purpose/intent of program (philosophy).
  - Ask about the possible learning outcomes/benefits from this activity/adventurous/risky play.
  - Explore cause and effect of learning through adventurous/risky play.
- Have fun! Be joyful! Play!

### **Acknowledgements Risky Play Leadership Team**

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## Resources

*Active for Life – Resources and activities for parents and ECEs*

<https://activeforlife.com/>

Alberta Family Wellness Initiative – Healthy Brain Development

<http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/what-we-know/the-brain-story>

Canadian Child Care Federation – blog on outdoor play

<http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca/2017/07/25/a-blog-the-importance-of-increasing-childrens-outdoor-play-opportunities/>

Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years (ages 0-4)

<https://www.participaction.com/en-ca/thought-leadership/benefits-and-guidelines/0-4>

Early Years Physical Literacy Research Team

<https://www.earlyyearsphysicalliteracy.com/>

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Available from: <https://www.macleans.ca/society/we-need-to-stop-worrying-and-just-let-our-kids-play/>

ParticipACTION: Healthy Kids Report Cards

<https://www.participaction.com/sites/default/files/downloads/2016%20ParticipACTION%20Report%20Card%20-%20Presentation.pdf>

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