
Encouraging Children to Take Risks and Actively Explore During Play

INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the article, “Message in a Backpack: Encouraging Your Child Through Risks During Play,” from NAEYC. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

Goals

- ◆ Identify the ways children who have experienced trauma may approach risk-taking and active exploration.
- ◆ Reflect on your current practices when supporting children’s active exploration during play.
- ◆ Create an action plan to establish supportive relationships and create a safe, comfortable environment that supports preschoolers in risk taking and active exploration.

Activity

- ◆ Read the article.
- ◆ After reading, use the questions below to guide your development of an action plan.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support active exploration.

“Risk is an important part of developing children’s confidence, resilience, and trust in themselves, others, and the broader world.”

Ron Grady

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What caught your attention from the article? What made that fact, excerpt, or example meaningful to you?
- ◆ Active exploration involves children using their curiosity about the world around them to investigate their environment. Children who have experienced trauma may display fight, flight, or freeze behaviors in response to new or seemingly unsafe environments, challenges, or people.
 - How might each of these responses impact a child's approach to risks involved in active exploration?
 - How might children's learning opportunities be impacted when they avoid risks or exploration?
- ◆ While this article is intended for families, it provides strategies for supporting children's risk-taking that can also apply to the learning environment.
 - Reflect on your current practices.
 - How do you feel when children approach risky situations or challenges? How do you respond to their risk-taking?
 - How do you encourage safe, developmentally appropriate active exploration and risk-taking during play?
 - What strategies do you use to support children's development of active exploration skills? How do you provide a supportive, safe environment for risk-taking and exploration?
 - What challenges arise during active exploration opportunities? What supports do you need to overcome these challenges?
- ◆ Observe how the children in your care who have experienced trauma actively explore and take risks during play.
 - How do preschoolers respond to such experiences or challenges? What behaviors do you notice?
 - What supports might children need to feel safe and confident to take risks and explore?
- ◆ Develop an action plan to create a safe and supportive environment for taking risks during active exploration for the children in your care who have experienced trauma.
 - Consider how you will:
 - Use each child's strengths to support them to actively explore.
 - Develop a safe and supportive relationship with children so they feel comfortable working through risks.
 - Create an environment that safely embraces challenges and failures as learning opportunities.
 - Provide support by narrating curiosity and exploration, using comments and questions to promote exploration, and promoting child autonomy (i.e., independence).
 - Carefully monitor children's progress and modify your plan as needed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about supporting preschoolers' active exploration:

- ◆ **Source:** NAEYC
 - ◆ **Article:** The Case of Brain Science and Guided Play
 - ◆ **Link:** <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2017/case-brain-science-guided-play>
 - ◆ **Description:** This article discusses the ways that guided play supports children's development. Guided play provides a supportive context for children to feel safe to actively explore through play.
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- ◆ **Source:** Beacon House: Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team
 - ◆ **Handout:** Brainstem Calmers
 - ◆ **Link:** <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Brainstem-Calmer-Activities.pdf>
 - ◆ **Description:** This handout provides strategies for calming the nervous system for children with sensory sensitivities as a result of trauma. It offers strategies for individual children and for the whole class to engage in.