

How unrestricted play could help a child's developmental needs and wellbeing



Manisha Bumma, Bobby Bola; University of Sheffield

Introduction

With the expansion of urban areas, we are becoming more separated from nature. At the same time, the climate crisis leads to the adoption of greener forms of prescribing for health and wellbeing. If social prescribing has to be considered for children, there are enhanced improvements when spending time immersed in more stimulating activities in nature or even in adventure playgrounds.

Method

Aim of the report

- Highlights the benefits of play & risky play
- Summarises the difference between normal and adventure play
- Provide recommendations for practice

Studies related to "risky play", "adventure play" and "adventure playgrounds" were reviewed for this poster.

There is limited recent literature on this subject and the recommendations were derived from the information we collected. These should not be interpreted as being against other forms of play or activities.

Background – Play promotes mental health

"Play is essential for children's intellectual, physical, emotional and social development." – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹



Consequences of play deprivation

- Children may not acquire the social and emotional skills that are essential for healthy psychological development.⁴
- Increasing prevalence of psychological distress.²

Results – Adventure play & its benefits

Adventure play – a form of **unrestricted play** with an element of **controlled risk**, whether it is within an adventure playground or nature (e.g. in a forest).³

Adventure playgrounds –

- Places where children can build dens and artistic structures with tools and scrap materials in a designated place supervised by a trained playworker.³
- On some, children also can care for animals and work in community gardens.³

In comparison to traditional play, children taking part in risky play... (in adventure playgrounds for example)

- Engage in social interactions with people from different age groups and from different backgrounds.⁶
- Have better risk detection, creativity and self-esteem.⁸
- Have the cognitive skills to make more accurate judgment than children taking part in normal play.⁹
- Have a higher degree of freedom and choice available to them.⁴
 - They have the cognitive skills to make more accurate judgment compared to children taking part in normal play.⁹
- Are more independent and physically active.⁷

How to implement this?

Adventure play should be considered a mainstream intervention for children's wellbeing.

Prescribing outdoor play

- 1 Nature parks & nature exposure¹⁰ & encouraging children to take part in "risky" play. The benefits of adventure play will have to be explained to overcome the possible barriers.
- 2 If 1 is not possible, e.g. if access to nature parks is limited, encourage the child's guardian to accompany them in an "adventure" playground and let the child play and take part in risky play.
- 3 If 1 & 2 are not possible, encourage the child's guardian to bring them in a "regular" playground or to spend more time playing outside in general (e.g. in a park)

At the institutional level,

- According to the *Playwork Foundation*¹¹, out of the 147 adventure playgrounds in the UK, more than half were in London. Work can be done to **implement** these everywhere, by working with city councils for example.
- **Campaigning** to spread awareness about the benefits of risky play & encourage nature time in general.
- At school, **recess time** should be prolonged so that children can be encouraged to spend more time outside

Conclusion

This poster summarises the benefits of risky play and highlights different options to encourage children to take part in outdoor play. In general, young people should be encouraged to spend more time engaging in activities outside in general. If nature is to be prescribed to them, we believe that it is important to consider the quality of the time they spend outdoors, particularly in urban areas where nature parks or forest are not as accessible, to ensure that they fully benefit from it.

References

