

ACTIVATING AURORA: The 'Everyday Uncertainties' of Play

By Ron Weese

One of the greatest threats to the development of a child's self-confidence, their competence in skill development, participation in healthy physical activity and general happiness is community and parental attitude towards risk, according to Brandy Tanenbaum, Program Coordinator of the Office of Injury Prevention at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre.

'Every parent wants a happy and healthy child,' she states, 'and providing children with opportunities to experience physical activity that is sometimes risky, benefits children's confidence and resilience.' She continues, 'children flourish when they 'approach and explore' rather than 'flee or freeze'.'

Ms. Tanenbaum ought to know. She works at helping people avoid catastrophic injury and is an expert on the cause and prevention of injury. She has worked extensively in sport in Canada.

One would think by where she works that she would be the most risk-averse person on the planet but she isn't. In fact, she is a proponent of measured risk-taking. She believes, as many others in the field do, that healthy risk-taking is a part of the human experience and that play is an important part of that experience.

E.B.H. Sandseter, in the 2009 paper 'Characteristics of Risky Play,' suggests that children are drawn to 'risky play' where they experience what is called a 'scary-funny' feeling. This emotional experience results in exploring personal boundaries and thereby strengthening physical, cognitive and emotional skills. Sandseter also reports that some adults tend to 'get stuck' in a risk-protective mode, and constrain children to controlled, predictable and 'safe' play. Tanenbaum, a certified risk manager, refers to this as 'safety creep' and it can be reversed.

No one is advocating the exposure of children to injurious conditions or activities, but there is a difference between risk and hazard. Encouraging children to explore rather than avoid new experiences that might result in a scraped knee or shin is valuable. For one thing, it teaches kids about how to approach new activities and manage risk effectively. They learn their limits and can therefore test them safely, knowing consequences.

So what is a parent to do? According to the experts, it really requires a 're-framing' of the notion of play and risk. And it isn't easy, particularly for a risk-averse parent. Parents are encouraged to choose happiness that comes from play, good health and physical fitness that comes from physical activity, and confidence and resilience that comes from unsupervised play, particularly outdoors, as a high priority for their kids.

Choosing to let kids learn from mistakes, recognizing the good intentions in others such as coaches, teachers and leaders, and being able to make one's way in the world is also important. Play and participation in sport also does that. Having friends, belonging to a group and having something to feel passionate about while contributing to the 'world' are important 'lenses' through which we encourage a child's participation in activity and sport.

Ms. Tanenbaum will be exploring these topics at the Sport Aurora Sport Summit on February 23 and 24. Parents, coaches and sport leaders are invited to attend and engage in this important and personal topic. Our kids need to be safe, feel safe and have the confidence to explore and develop. It is our job to provide the right environment for that to occur.