

THE DANGEROUS SIDE OF USING TERMS LIKE RISKY PLAY AND FREE RANGE KIDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

REFLECTIONS ON THE PLAY FIRST SUMMIT, 2020

I feel worried about the way we are talking about risky play and free range kids as we see the pendulum begin to swing and we see more and more parents and teachers defending play and taking a stance as “Guardians of Childhood”. Thank you [Lisa Murphy](#) for offering us this image of ourselves during [The Play First Summit by Fairy Dust Teaching](#). I am reflecting upon what it means to be guardians – and what we can claim in this role for teaching and caring in a way that protects and empowers children.



I am proud to stand alongside all the people in this community of play practitioners. As a young teacher, I was fortunate to be mentored by a group of wise women who told me in graduate school (28 years ago) that I would encounter inappropriate practices in the field as they bolstered me to stand strong for play. Everyone who has ever worked with me knows me as the teacher who takes children on nature walks, lets them run in fields as fast as they can, encourages them to climb trees, catch frogs, and sit in the grass for story and snack. I have directed schools serving high needs communities with block grant funding, and schools with big private endowments serving professional working class parents. I have written grants to outfit every child in full body rain gear for outdoor-play-every-day-in-all-seasons, and I have broken down the little 10x10 sand-box on the playground to build a giant sand theater with a water spigot for big-body-messy-sensory play. At a school I directed in North Boston, the parent board generously built a children's garden in my honor and they laughed at me when I asked them to please stop planting vegetables and flowers and just leave a big pit in the center of the garden exclusively for digging and mud play. I don't say any of this to toot my own horn, but just to say that I am deeply rooted in play, in risk, in freedom. I also say this because I am concerned that what I am going to say next will be misunderstood and misconstrued.

I don't believe we should adopt the term "free range" for early childhood. I certainly will not be using this language to describe my program. As a counter example, I will point out that just as early educators should have never borrowed "calendar time" from the elementary school *math their way curriculum*, which was not designed for early childhood, neither should we borrow the term "free range" as it was intended for elementary school aged children. [Lenore Skenazy's brilliant movement](#), Free Range Kids, began as an approach for older children. Unfortunately, the broad impressionistic stroke it paints for our youngest citizens is one that is easily confused with permissiveness. In fact, there have even been articles shared after the Play First Summit that talk about [benign neglect](#) as the best parenting

model. Those of us who have been children of neglect or who have worked with children in neglect, know that neglect is real, and neglect is dangerous, and it is not a term we should be tossing about and especially not associating with our play work.

I was riveted as I listened to Lenore Skenazy talk about her journey as a parent and discuss her pioneering work with [Peter Gray](#) and their organization, [Let Grow](#). What hit home for me, was how Lenore made a point that her [book](#) and her crusade to let her child have autonomy and independence (such as riding the NY subway alone) was directed towards her 9 year old child. She emphasized that she is a parent who cares deeply about safety and protection for young children. She actually flinched when [Sally Haughey](#) said that she remembered running free and wild at age three (Sally later explained that she had siblings watching over her). Lenore says on her website, [we are not daredevils. We believe in life jackets and bike helmets and air bags. But we also believe in independence.](#)

As we embrace [Lisa Murphy's](#) invitation to be Guardians of Childhood, we do so with appreciation for this very unique time of life called early childhood when young children are emerging from babyhood and are simultaneously vulnerable and capable. Vulnerable does not mean weak or fragile - but it does remind us that part of our human evolution and survival is based on protection and care of our youngest citizens.

I once heard [David Sobel](#) talking about how teachers are like cultural anthropologists and we have the close up opportunity to preserve the dynamic complicated world of childhood play. Getting out of children's way, orchestrating schedules and environments where they play deeply, and collaborating with them with respect, requires us to know many things. I find myself leaning in when children play – I want to listen and marvel, catch their stories, and reflect upon their discoveries with my colleagues. I believe the Play First Summit supported us as researchers of play. This is the opposite of ignoring kids or standing by idly while we let them range, romp,

roam and run wild. Well, yes, I really do value ranging, romping, and roaming but I worry that the words and images we are throwing around about play do not respect the art and science of the play practitioner. I worry that as the play pendulum swings, play will BOMB because people will not know how to see play, and people will think that successful play environments are as simple as sitting in a lounge chair, putting our feet up, and letting little kids be.

We work with parents and teachers to help them develop self-awareness about their role in the lives of children. We look at the broad continuum of guidance approaches from a punitive-rigid-my-way-or-the-high-way approach on one end, to permissive-neglectful-lacking-all-boundary approach on the other end. I heard many wonderful speakers at the summit, such as [Janet Lansbury](#) and [Teacher Tom](#), speak of an appreciation for the journey of developing self-awareness as we find a role for ourselves and an image of ourselves that is supportive of the young child's play. When we are beginning to open our minds and shift our perspective from reward/punishment approaches to partnership/listening approaches, we find our best footing in the middle ground. The same is true as we shift from developmentally inappropriate practices to child centered play based practices. It takes real work and study of child development. Parents and teachers in the midst of this shift often swing far to one side or the other of the continuum. In play based programs there is commonly a misunderstanding that we are advocating for no limits. We counter this misperception by encouraging parents and teachers to see themselves as leaders and to see boundaries as synonymous with love and care.

Since the Play First Summit, I have noticed a surge of articles and discussions railing against helicopter and snowplow parenting. I understand the sentiment, but I am growing weary of hearing educators label parents this way. It seems there is nothing the media loves more than to publish smug articles that shame parents, rank parenting, and pit parents against one another. This is the very thing Lenore Skenazy is working against, as she

herself was harshly judged as the worst parent in America. I just want to caution educators not to step into that trap. Labeling parents, labeling children, labeling humans –labeling is never a practice that works in our favor.

The other thing we are seeing right now are images of barefooted toddlers wielding power tools and educators posting comments such as “risky play” and “this is brave and beautiful!”. The video I saw on Facebook with a diaper clad child and an electric drill was, honestly, charming and alarming at the same time. The child's joy and intelligence was evident, and I respect the pride of the parent who posted this. But, let's all be clear this video was posted by a parent who was with her child in the back yard and made a decision for her own son to let him explore a power drill. This was not an image that early childhood teachers should take as a stamp of approval for an early childhood experience in a group care setting. I've seen other such images that cause me concern of barefoot children with adult sized tools. Again, some images that are circulating in the early childhood discussion groups come from adventure playgrounds with much older children building fires and using saws. I've done a good deal of wood working and fire building with children, as a parent and as a teacher, and I've always taken these risks at age appropriate milestones while teaching common sense safety.

Images are powerful! Again, as a counter example, I have written letters to NAEYC in the past, protesting their sterile photos of teachers standing in front of groups of young children pointing to a calendars and charts because I believe educators need to see images of children getting messy and images of adults wiping noses and rubbing backs, because that's what teaching really looks like.

Images, as well as words, inform our collective identity.

Now as I hear the discussion about free range risky play, I find myself on what feels like the opposite side of the conversation saying, *please don't post photos of barefoot babies wielding power tools, because this is not a good image for early childhood teachers who are developing their judgement for risky play to lock onto.* I want to protect teachers who are growing their play advocacy legs and learning to really see children. I want them to trust their gut to keep kids safe and find firm ground under their feet as they defend play and child autonomy and also care for other people's children with smarts, love and limits. I don't want to have a lengthy discussion here about whether or not you believe you should give children in your program electric drills, but I do want to assure you that there are many ways to give children reasonable playful risks that don't involve power tools and don't give their caregivers heart attacks.

The concept of young children as both vulnerable and competent, which I learned about from the work of [Ron Lally](#), reminds me to find the middle ground. We are constantly seeking balance. Children run towards us for comfort, safety, and limits and then run away from us for autonomy, risk and adventure. This push and pull continues all through the early childhood years. We find footing on the precarious terrain that requires us to be ever ready to receive them and to let them go. In this middle ground, I want to advocate for language and images that also reveals the vulnerability of teachers who must constantly evaluate their practice, know themselves, and know their children, to find the spot that is both safe and free for the children in their charges. Being Guardians of childhood includes boundaries and clear judgement and we can't leave that out of our conversations or of the image we hold of ourselves. The dangerous side of using terms like risky play and free range kids without attention to the unique period of early childhood and with-out special care and discernment threatens to give play based programs a bad name and could even unintentionally place children and their caring teachers in harm's way.

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