

Free Play, Risk and Social and Emotional Development

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Dr Mary O’Kane is a Lecturer in Psychology, Early Childhood Studies and Education. Her research interests include childhood transitions; resilience and self esteem and the value of play. She is a regular contributor on The Anton Savage Show on Newstalk Radio, RTE Drivetime, Ireland AM, and other national and local radio stations discussing a broad range of parenting issues. She gives public talks on a range of topics related to child mental health and wellbeing, parenting and education. Her first book: Perfectly Imperfect Parenting: Connection Not Perfection was published April 2021. It can be purchased on: www.drmaryokane.ie

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Social and Emotional skills are some of the most important skills for young children to develop in terms of their personal wellbeing. Free play is very important in this regard. It is the primary way in which children learn to solve problems, engage in conflict resolution, and become emotionally resilient. However, in our culture today children are often deprived of freedom for exploration. In this webinar, Mary explores the value and impact of opportunities for free play and encourages us to re-think our attitude to risk.

We are facing a mental health crisis in the Western World. Teens are more lonely, anxious and depressed than ever before. Some changes that have taken place over the past few decades could help to explain this issue.	By 13, 1 in 3 children will have experienced a mental health difficulty. By 24, this will have risen to 1 in 2 (Cannon et al, 2017). Mental health issues in Irish teens are higher than their counterparts in the UK and US	Prof Jean Twenge: surveys of over 11 million teens in America over the past five decades. She found huge differences between iGen and their earlier counterparts. Huge increases in anxiety and depression.
iGen are different in how they spend their time, how they behave and socialise. More focused on tolerance/inequality, but also growing up more slowly than previous generations: driving, part time jobs.	These are the first generation to spend their adolescence in the age of the smartphone. They meet face to face with friends less; spend more time alone in their bedroom; are more likely to say they often feel left out.	Social Media an issue. However, many suggest that these generational increases in externality, extrinsic goals, anxiety, and depression are also caused by the decline in opportunities for free play.
Free play is the primary way in which children learn to solve problems, engage in conflict resolution, and become emotionally resilient. But, today children are often deprived of freedom for exploration.	Pressure on parents to be ‘perfect’ instead of ‘good enough’ makes us controlling, instead parents need to understand the value of ‘scaffolding’ their children’s development.	We tend to overprotect children from possible dangers in play. [More risk playing sports than in adventurous play!] Many of us seriously underestimate their ability to take care of themselves and make good judgments.
Adventurous/outdoor play brings uncertainty, the need to evaluate risk, feeling nervous in a positive context. Heart rate increases etc, but the child learns that they can cope with anxiety provoking situations, then they can cope better with real life anxiety!	When exposed to uncertainty we learn to tolerate it, similar to CBT, or exposure response therapy, but much easier in play! We need to think about how we give children space and time for play, freedom and opportunity to lead their own play.	It’s about taking a risk-benefit approach. It’s OK to have some risk if there’s some benefit. Providing opportunities for children to be adventurous and creative. It is also about adults taking a step back, giving them space to explore those sort of adventure experiences.

Recommended Reading List for Educators / Parents

Perfectly Imperfect Parenting: Connection Not Perfection. Available at: www.drmaryokane.ie

Recommendations for Adventurous Play and Risk Taking

100 Adventures to Have Before You Grow Up by Anna McNuff

Thrive Outdoor Nature Activities For Children And Families (Series of Books for each Season) Gillian Powell

50 Risks to Take With Your Kids by Daisy Turnbull

Michael Rosen's Book of Play: Why play really matters, and 101 ways to get more of it in your life

Adult Reading:

iGen; Generation Me; and The Narcissism Epidemic (all three books written by Prof Jean Twenge)

Free to Learn by Prof Peter Gray

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder by Richard Louv

Rewilding Childhood: Raising Resilient Children Who Are Adventurous and Free by Mike Fairclough

Adventures in Risky Play by Rusty Keeler

Forest School Adventure: Outdoor Skills and Play for Children by Dan Westall

Cotton Wool Kids by Stella O'Malley

Anxious Kids Anxious Parents by Reid Wilson

Roots and Wings, Childhood Needs a Revolution, by Alex Koster

Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Capable Children by Alan Hanscom

There's No Such Thing as Bad Weather: A Scandinavian Mom's Secrets by Linda McGurk

The Wild and Free Family: Forging Your Own Path by Ainsley Armont

Aimed at Educators:

Adventure - The Value of Risk in Children's Play by Joan Almon

Risk, Challenge and Adventure in the Early Years: A practical guide by Kathryn Solly

Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul by Stuart Brown

The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature-Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv

Risk & Adventure in Early Years Outdoor Play Learning from Forest Schools by Sara Knight

Forest School in Practice: For All Ages by Sara Knight

Recommendations for Anxiety:

The Opposite of Worry, by Lawrence Cohen

Dr Malie Coyne, Love in Love out

The Whole Brain Child, by Dan Siegel

How to parent your anxious toddler by Natasha Daniels

Confidence and Resilience Journals for Children:

My Mind Really Matters by Lisa Kennedy (Irish publication) Primary School and Teenage Versions.

The Big Life Journal (younger kids and a teens version)

The Happy Self Kids Daily Journal

The Positive Doodle Diary, a mindful gratitude journal for kids.