

you! Understand the risks and be responsible about them, but if worry is about to overpower your good intents, take a deep breath and remember that nature play truly will enrich your kids' lives! Decide to modify your own yard for better nature play (for a few ideas, check out *A Parents' Guide to Nature Play* at www.greenheartsinc.org). Join or form a family nature club, to foster free group play visits to natural spaces. Take your kids to a nearby park with a patch of wild in it, and let them play without interference from you. (Think of yourself as a lifeguard, getting involved only when something dangerous is about to happen, or when your help is actually requested.) Or take frequent visits to the created nature play spaces that are quickly becoming common at nature centers and botanical gardens.

If you're an educator, use your school's existing structures to raise the issue of nature play: teacher training sessions, parent conferences, parent-teacher organizations, school landscape planning, and even playground design. Question assumptions of undue risk, and offer counter-arguments about the value of children facing and overcoming physical challenges while simultaneously building their connections to nature. Encourage your colleagues to recall their own childhoods, which almost certainly included mastery of many of these same challenges. When the inevitable liability concerns surface, ask if that isn't exactly what your insurance coverage is for – or if the school is prepared to ban the organized sports that are statistically more dangerous. And if your insurance agent or your School Board claims that nature play is too risky, don't roll over and play dead: ask to see their research data on it. They will not have any!

Finally, **if you represent a land-holding conservation organization**, consider how you can change your rules, your practices, and your grounds in order to foster more nature play – which research has identified as the most common influence on life-long conservation values. If today's kids don't get ample opportunities to play in natural areas and fall in love with them, who will protect those spaces 50 years from now? So create or designate areas for children's nature play. Do regular safety inspections of those areas to remove all *hazards*, and lessen (but don't fully eliminate) more-minor risks. Remove sharp branches and stones, keep play away from steep drops or deep water, place deep mulch beneath any designated climbing trees, etc. Write up those inspections,

along with the actions you take to lessen the identified dangers. Then extend your safety reports by pairing each identified risk with a clear statement of the developmental benefits that can arise from it. Remember, you can't do a risk/benefit analysis without both components! Finally, develop a formal policy about the value of play, and of how your organization views and deals with risk in nature play.

It's risky business, this nature play – but the greatest danger of all is that it may continue to slip away from childhood. We won't prevent that by using the same fear-infused attitudes that have caused the problem. Work for change; be part of the solution!



Speak up for sapling swinging!

Sources:

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- 2 - *Sports- and Recreation-Related Injuries: What's the Problem?* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 23, 2001
- 3 - *Hurt on the Stairs: A Child is Treated Every 6 Minutes in the U.S.*, msnbc, March 12, 2012 (reported from research by Nationwide Children's Hospital, Columbus, OH)
- 4 - Ibid
- 5 - *Falling Flat-screen TVs a Growing Threat for Kids*, msnbc, May 12, 2009 (reported from the journal *Clinical Pediatrics*)
- 6 - *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv, 2005
- 7 - *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview*, U.S. Dept. of Justice (2002)
- 8 - See research reports and collections, www.childrenandnature.org

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Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

Green Hearts is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to restoring and strengthening the bonds between children and nature.

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