

But...but...but... *Isn't It Dangerous?*

Risk and Reward in Nature Play

“Risk averse” barely seems to do justice to the expansive fears of our modern American society. “Risk paranoid” might be more accurate. So it’s not surprising that when considering nature play, risk is an often-passionate topic and a frequent roadblock.

Naturally, all parents want their children to be safe; all teachers want their students to be safe; and all organizations want their clients and visitors to be safe. Yet it seems as though our strict standards for workplace safety – that is, **no** risks, **no** injuries – are now being applied to children’s outdoor play. When taken to these extremes, the understandable desire for safety can morph into a harmful burden, especially for children. This is a gross error that our society needs to re-consider.

But first, let’s be clear: nature play is dangerous. Children can and do get hurt in nature-based play – as they have throughout human history, and as they always will. Is this valid cause to keep kids away from nature play? Is it in their best interests to do so?

Life itself is dangerous. Life is full of risks, and we should hope it remains so. Without taking risks, no child would ever learn to walk or ride a bike. No adult would ever take up a new sport. No company would ever create new products. Risks are an integral part of progress. Thus, the goal shouldn’t be to eliminate all risks from our children’s lives, but to manage them and keep them in perspective.

Ahhh, the challenge of perspective.... What is the most common cause of accidental death for American children? Give yourself a back pat if you know that it is automobile accidents.¹ So, is our society calling out for a ban on carrying kids in cars? Do concerned parents routinely decide not to drive the family out for ice cream cones because it’s too dangerous? Or consider this inconvenient truth: more teens’ emergency room visits are caused by organized sports than anything else.² Should we ban these sports for the harm they are doing to American youth? One last example: nearly



Unacceptable danger? Or healthy challenge?

90,000 U.S. children are injured annually on stairways.³ In fact, a U.S. child under five is treated in an emergency room for stair-related injuries *every six minutes!*⁴ Perhaps a ban on multi-story homes is called

continued on page 3

Bully for Boxelder, or The Plentitude of Plain

It's a second-class tree, so say the arbor-culturists. Boxelder (*Acer negundo*) is the outcast of the maple family. Its leaves look nothing like other maples, its wood is weak with no commercial value, it is considered "weedy" in its growth patterns, and its sap is low in sugar content and thus hard to boil into syrup. Plus it nurtures boxelder bugs: those harmless black and orange bugs that make a nuisance of themselves by invading homes in mass during the fall. Without a doubt, boxelder is the ugly duckling of maples.

Yet, in fairness, it is fast-growing for a tree, reproduces easily from its winged seeds ("samaras"), and tolerates both drought and cold. Consequently, boxelders are a significant part of the landscape in much of the country – even if they are unheralded and largely unrecognized. The multitude of birds that use them for nesting and roosting presumably don't consider them trashy, nor do the various insects and small mammals that live on, in, or off the trees and their seeds. In the eye of the beholder, perhaps....

I have boxelder trees in my backyard viewscape, along with a different Boxelder: the small creek that flows through that same scene. Like its namesake, the creek is unlovely and under-appreciated. Years of erosion have cut it deeply into the earth, where any accumulated trash becomes very hard to remove. It sometimes flows fast and free, but it's always muddy. There are a few places where you can sit peacefully on a fallen log and dangle your toes in the water, but only if you can manage to safely scramble your way down the steep, often-slippery banks.

But last week Boxelder Creek took a giant leap up in my estimation, for one simple reason: I heard children's laughter coming from it. There were orioles, chickadees, and goldfinches calling; a brisk wind was whispering in the leaves; and I knew that the neighborhood red foxes live somewhere down in the gully. Yet the quality that resonated with me – that actually made me smile – was the sound of unseen nature play wafting up from the streambed.

Kids have played in creeks for as long as there have been kids. Racing pool sticks, catching crawdads and frogs, dropping large rocks in with a big kerplunk, turning over stones to see what lives beneath, and just kicking their way up the shallow water – these are the joyful essence of creek play! And in quieter moments, stream-side might be the setting for a little private chat with a best buddy, or a place to just be alone for awhile and ponder the world – something children have always needed time for, but get so little of in today's digitally paced world.

Probably only a few of the neighborhood kids have ever discovered the delights of playing in Boxelder Creek, given the protected and controlled nature of modern suburban childhoods. I doubt if any of them know the creek's name. And most of those creek-players likely take little notice of the orioles, or the fox den, or even the living LEDs of the early fireflies that are just starting to get on with their warm-weather mating rituals.

On the other hand, I guarantee that no creek-playing kid has ever fretted about the soft wood and weedy growth of a boxelder tree! Much more likely: they grab handfuls of those samaras and send them helicoptering into the air; they catch/mash/finger flick the boxelder bugs; and they climb triumphantly into the canopy like it's their own Everest. Plus, that sunken creek setting is uniquely theirs, affording the special sense of ownership that arises in children's private domains – i.e., places where no grown-ups go. The trees and the creek may be comely, plain, and routine to adult eyes, but to off-the-leash, adventuresome kids they represent play a-plenty!

With a few thousand dollars, the creek-players' parents can drive up the road and buy an elaborate and impressive backyard playset for their children. But the self-discovered fun, challenge, magic, and quietude of playing in plain old Boxelder Creek, under weedy boxelder trees?

Priceless.

Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood

A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization incorporated in Nebraska.

Mission Statement

Green Hearts' mission is to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature.

Board of Directors

President/Founder: Ken Finch (Omaha, NE)
Vice President: Patti Bailie (Mequon, WI)
Treasurer: John Royster (Omaha, NE)
Secretary: Marcie Oltman (Minneapolis, MN)

Green Hearts INC

Offices shared with Big Muddy Workshop, Inc:
4502 South 42nd Street, Omaha, NE 68107-1059
402-344-8711 fax 402-344-8712

kfinch@greenheartsinc.org www.greenheartsinc.org

*This newsletter is published periodically by Green Hearts INC.
All content is copyrighted by Green Hearts unless otherwise noted.
To reprint articles, please ask our permission first.*

for? Or maybe parents should sue homebuilders who knowingly choose to install such dangerous devices?

These examples point to the important concept of “comparative risk.” We accept (and even blissfully ignore) daily dangers to our children that are commonplace and routine. In short, we are used to them. A terrible car accident can still shake us up, as can the rare death caused by a fastball’s impact on a young chest. For the most part, though, we tolerate these risks and choose to manage them in order to limit – *but not eliminate* – their dangers. We strap young children in car safety seats, have our fledgling athletes wear protective gear, and put gates at the top of the stairs. We accept the dangers of these and many other activities because we sub-consciously do risk/benefit analyses for them, and conclude that the convenience and positive impacts are worth the inherent dangers.



Public play spaces in Europe offer more risk than most U.S. playgrounds – and probably more fun!

We can approach nature play similarly if parents, teachers, and organizations are realistic about its small dangers and powerful benefits. Most injuries that arise from nature play are minor and familiar to American adults who grew up playing outside: scrapes, bruises, and an occasional broken bone. Yes, more severe injuries can occasionally occur – as they do in virtually all aspects of life for any child who is not encased in a protective bubble. For instance, each year over 8,000 American kids are injured (even sometimes killed) by falling flat-screen TVs....⁵ Remember, perspective....

But most parents’ greatest fear is of other humans: the “boogeyman” worry. Terrible things are occasional ly done to kids by adult predators. But crimes against

children are less common now than a generation ago,⁶ and most child kidnappings are committed by familiar adults, not by strangers in the park.⁷ Nevertheless, these fears have mushroomed as electronic media has grown. Sadly, horrible crimes against children make compelling news, and thus are often broadcast 24/7, day after day, week after week. No parents are immune to this barrage. Even if their left brains know the tiny odds of such crimes happening to their own kids, their right brains will likely be thinking, “That could have been my child!” Parents are not wrong to have these worries, but they should try to keep them in perspective – just as they do for the dangers of cars, sports, and stairs.

And where are today’s children most likely to encounter a predator, anyway: in the park, or on the internet at home? We all know the probable answer.

The risks of nature play are minor compared to so many other dangers that children routinely face, but what about the benefits? Research has found a remarkable range of positive impacts from frequent, unstructured play in rich, diverse natural settings.⁸ These benefits cover the entire realm of holistic child development: physical, social, emotional, intellectual, creative, and spiritual. This article, though, focuses on one specific and crucial attribute: the benefits of risk.

The bottom line: children need risk. It is a powerful catalyst for growth that helps them develop good judgment, persistence, courage, resiliency, and self-confidence. “Can I make it across the stream on that log?” “Should I climb one branch higher than I did yesterday?” “Can I jump from that boulder to the next one?” “Why yes, I can – because I’ve tried it and succeeded!” Remove risk from children’s lives, and parts of their growth may stagnate. As adults, we face risks every day – most routine, but some bigger. To deal with these risks, we use judgment which we’ve honed through years of practice, success, and failure. In effect, we go through our days making an enduring series of minor risk/benefit analyses, ranging from whether or not to eat that tempting donut to whether or not to slide through the bothersome yellow light.

However, kids are not born with the gift of informed judgment, nor with awareness of their own abilities and weaknesses. Instead, they learn their capabilities, their

continued on page 4

vulnerabilities, and their good decision-making skills through real life experiences – sometimes happy, sometimes harsh, but always instructive. Ultimately, a child can practice and learn good judgment by climbing trees at age eight, or that can wait until they are 16 and behind the wheel of a car. Either way, that learning must occur if a child is to be well-equipped to face the ongoing dangers and challenges of adult life.

For countless generations, that valuable learning is exactly what happened when kids grew up with nature as a source of adventure and challenge. For many, it was their first sanctum and testing ground: a special place away from adult rules and structure, where they could create and act out their own worlds of challenges, conquests, and fantasy. Oftentimes these took the form of exuberant physical play, infused with risk.

Today's generation of children also engage in challenges, conquests, and fantasy. Only now these are designed and scripted by anonymous adults, and are experienced second-hand on flickering screens. Did any of us want this change? Do we think it's a good trade-off, in order to avoid the tiny risks and over-blown fears of outdoor play? Regardless, that is the change we adults are presiding over, intentionally or not.

This points toward the hidden risks that don't arise from children engaging in nature play, but rather from them **not** doing so. If kids aren't allowed to play in the yard or the local park, what will they do instead? Probably more mind-numbing, plugged-in play. If schools forbid recess play in naturally diverse, stimulating playgrounds, how will it affect students? No time to "blow off" energy, no quiet place to subconsciously process what they've been learning in class, and less chance to explore nature. And if places like nature centers insist that kids stay on the trails, don't climb trees, don't dig holes, and don't collect rocks, what will be the result? Children who find nature boring and restrictive, decreasing the odds that they will develop lasting personal bonds with the outdoors.

These hidden impacts of **not** allowing outdoor risk and adventure pose more threat to children's healthy development than do scrapes, cuts, and bruises – and may derail their formative connections with nature, as well. Hence, caregivers and conservationists alike need to consider both sides of the ledger: the dangers of nature play, and the dangers of **no** nature play. We need

to allow our children to explore risks in nature that are challenging yet manageable. They need to practice identifying and assessing these challenges, and to then decide whether or not to "give it a go." And should they fail, they need the chance to try again!

At the same time, it is essential that we avoid exposing children to true **hazards**: i.e., dangers that children cannot see or foresee, and thus cannot make informed choices about. These are the real dangers – the ones which can cause serious physical harm without kids being able to consciously assess them. Parents, teachers, and child-hosting sites should aim to eliminate all such "blind" **hazards**, while still allowing children to experience the benefits of lesser, more-apparent risks.



Yikes!?! or, Yippee!?!

Can we, as a society, find the will and the way to move away from the fear-driven culture that pervades modern childhood, and that often depicts nature play as unduly dangerous? Certainly! It will take patience and much effort, but the need is too great to shy from the task. Our children are being raised in a culture that stresses dangers rather than opportunities, and that fosters helplessness more than initiative and confidence. These are not good foundations for healthy, happy, successful adulthoods.

Thankfully, these societal trends are not carved in stone; they can be changed. The necessary actions will vary among different stakeholders, but they all start with the need to speak up, and to modify your own (or your organization's) thinking. Become pro-active about the value of manageable risks in childhood, and specifically about the positive challenges inherent in

continued on page 5

nature-based play. Talk it up with friends, neighbors, colleagues, and elected officials. Challenge the knee-jerk fears, and stress the benefits of nature play for child development *and* conservation. Encourage the common-sense thinking of comparative risk analyses.

If you're a parent, make a commitment to have nature play be a regular part of your children's lives. Set a limit on their screen time, and insist that they go out and play – just as your folks probably commanded 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! Modify your own yard for better nature play (for 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 life-guard, 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 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:

- 1 - *Traffic Safety Facts*, Nat'l. Highway Traffic Safety Admin. (2008)
- 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. Department of Justice (2002)
- 8 - See research reports and collections, www.childrenandnature.org

What is Green Hearts Doing for Nature Play?

Green Hearts speaks, teaches, consults, and writes about nature play and how it can be restored to childhood. Our work takes us around the country and even around the world. Here's a summary of our recent efforts.

Educational Advocacy

A central part of Green Hearts' mission is teaching about nature-based play. In recent months we've enjoyed these opportunities for this work.

- ♥ **Oregon Association of Child Care Directors:** Keynote and workshop for their annual conference.
- ♥ **Iowa Association of Naturalists:** Keynote and follow-up workshop for their annual conference.
- ♥ **Nebraska Recreation and Parks Association:** Nature play workshop, w. Chris Kiewa of Dimensions Fdtn.
- ♥ **Conference on the Value of Play (Clemson, SC):** A "why and how" workshop about nature preschools.
- ♥ **Evansville Day School (w. Wesselman Woods Nature Center and 4C of Southern Indiana):** Public talk on the value of nature play and how to restore it.
- ♥ **Educational Services Unit #1 and Wayne State College (NE):** Talk on the value of nature play and how to restore it (also webcast to five other sites).

Coming Presentations:

- ♥ **Nature-Based Preschool Conference:** Workshop on how to affordably augment early childhood spaces for better nature play (Midland, MI; May 2012).
- ♥ **Tennessee Association for the Education of Young Children:** Keynote address and workshop for their annual conference (Nashville; October 2012).
- ♥ **Outdoor Play Environments Naturally! (OPEN!):** Keynote and workshop for their annual conference (Victoria, British Columbia, Canada; October 2012)
- ♥ **National Recreation & Parks Association's "Green School":** Instructor for natural playspace design and youth engagement (Wheeling, WV; February 2013).

Consulting

Green Hearts lends its expertise to other groups that want to bring more nature play to their audiences. Recent clients have included the following.

- ♥ **Garfield Park Conservatory, Chicago:** Assisting with a design charette for new nature play spaces.
- ♥ **Five Rivers MetroParks, Dayton:** Assisting with staff deliberations about safety and risk in nature play.
- ♥ **The Dahlem Conservancy, Jackson, MI:** Training on nature play and design advice for a nature play space.
- ♥ **Wesselman Woods Nature Center, Evansville, IN:** Assisting with design of a new nature play space.
- ♥ **Evansville Day School, IN:** Assisting with design of an expanded nature play space.
- ♥ **University of Cincinnati:** Assisting with planning for research studies about nature play spaces.
- ♥ **Natural Play & Learning Areas Guidelines Project:** Participation on the Steering Committee for this initiative led by the National Wildlife Federation.

Publications

- ♥ Completed two chapters for *Developing Environmental Awareness in Children: A Nature Studies Guide for Parents and Educators*. Ken Finch wrote "**Kidscaping Your Backyard for Nature Play.**" Ken and Patti Bailie authored "**Nature Preschools: Putting Nature at the Heart of Early Childhood Education.**"
- ♥ Green Hearts' popular booklet, *A Parents' Guide to Nature Play*, is available for bulk purchase at \$1.00 per copy plus postage. Shared branding may also be arranged. Contact: kfinch@greenheartsinc.org.

Please Become a Friend to Green Hearts!

- Schedule us for a talk or workshop.
- Visit our website: www.greenheartsinc.org
- Donate to support our work.
- Share this newsletter with a friend.
- "Friend" us on Facebook.

This newsletter can also be viewed, downloaded, and shared from Green Hearts' website: www.greenheartsinc.org.

If you'd like to receive future issues of this newsletter via email, send a message to kfinch@greenheartsinc.org. Put "electronic subscription" in the subject line.

What Can Green Hearts Do For You?

Featured Presentations about the value of nature play and how it can be restored to childhood. Our talks use thematic cartoons, research data, and anecdotes, and are tailored to their specific audiences, including:

- * Conservation organizations
- * Early childhood educators
- * Environmental educators
- * Recreation and park organizations
- * General public groups

Workshops and Training Sessions that are designed for the clients' needs. Common topics include:

- * Nature play spaces: their value and design
- * Staff and board training about nature play
- * Risks and rewards of nature play
- * Affordable nature play design for child care
- * Nature preschools – their value, structure, and development
- * Parent workshops about nature play

Consulting work, most often focused on:

- * Conceptual design of nature play spaces, and related site analysis
- * Nature preschools: business plans, site and facility analysis, budgeting, staff training

Writing: Custom articles about nature play and nature preschools

To explore how Green Hearts might be of assistance to you, call Ken Finch at 402-344-8711, or email him at kfinch@greenheartsinc.org.

Resources to Explore

New books on Green Hearts' shelves which you may want to check out, too:

Kids in the Wild Garden, by Elizabeth McCorquodale

Asphalt to Ecosystems: Design Ideas for Schoolyard Transformation, by Sharon Gamson Danks

Playborhoods – Turn Your Neighborhood into a Place for Play, by Mike Lanza

Establishing a Nature-Based Preschool, by Rachel Larimore

Forest Schools and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years, by Sara Knight

Plus a few old standards:

Natural Playscapes – Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul, by Rusty Keeler

A Child's Garden – Enchanting Outdoor Spaces for Children and Parents, by Molly Dannemaier

Nature's Playground – Activities, Crafts, and Games to Encourage Kids to Get Outdoors, by Fiona Danks & Jo Schofield

Your Backyard Wildlife Garden – How to Attract and Identify Wildlife in Your Yard, by Marcus Schneck

Supporting Green Hearts

If you believe in Green Hearts' mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature, and you appreciate the work we do, please support us with a tax-deductible contribution! Every gift truly helps, no matter what size – and every one will be gratefully acknowledged!

Name _____ Email _____

Address _____

Contribution: \$1,000 Founder \$100 Supporter \$25 Grassroots
 \$500 Patron \$50 Contributor Other: _____

Mail this form and your check to: Green Hearts INC, 4502 South 42nd St., Omaha, NE 68107-1059

You may also make a contribution to Green Hearts by using PayPal: www.paypal.com

Thank you!

More Nature Play Tips for Your Yard

A child's view of the world is small and intimate! They don't need miles of trails or spectacular vistas to explore and enjoy nature. Instead, they can be engaged for hours with tiny wonders they find right in your own yard – like twigs, pine cones, animal tracks, or small “landscapes” like rock gardens and shrub hideaways.

Here's another simple idea for “kidscaping” your home – part of our continuing series in this newsletter. (For past issues, visit the Green Hearts website: www.greenheartsinc.org).

Dirt Pile: This is one of the most basic and timeless nature play features that you can add to your yard – it's just a giant pile of dirt! Try to create a mound at least four feet high and eight feet around; larger will be even better! Its play value will prove to be endless: digging, running up and down, playing King of the Hill, rolling toys down, creating mud rivers with a hose, and whatever else your child's imagination can come up with!

To get a pile of dirt this big you'll probably have to buy the dirt and have it delivered from a local garden center (etc.), unless you just happen to be getting a pond or pool dug at home! To keep your neighbors happy, put the pile in your backyard. To keep your kids happy, just do it!



The dirt pile at Warner Park Nature Center, Nashville, TN



4502 South 42nd Street
Omaha, NE 68107-1059

www.greenheartsinc.org

Bringing Children and Nature Back Together