We value and encourage independence and creative thinking. For children to develop these traits they need the freedom to explore and experiment in their own way and in their own time. To this end, our program specifically provides two time periods (morning and afternoon) in which open-ended, child-guided activities are intentionally provided for in both the indoor and the outdoor classrooms. Our focus in this paper is on the outdoor, child-guided activities because that is where the concept of risk assessment is the most obvious, but the following also applies to both the indoor and outdoor classroom.

Our three community rules are:

- We take care of ourselves.
- We take care of each other.
- We take care of the things around us.

If we truly encourage exploration and experimentation, children need to be in reasonable control of themselves and others to maintain a safe environment. The question, “What is reasonable?” trips up many programs who lay out 57 clear rules for safe behavior on the playground. These rules appear arbitrary to the child, and often to adults implementing them, and serve to undermine the development of independence and creative thinking.

Let’s take the common rule, “You may only slide down the slide.” The concern is that a child trying to climb up the slide would get hurt by a child sliding down. In fact, the speed that would need to be generated by the child sliding down would mean the slide was somehow unusually long, steep and well oiled. In reality, the child collision described produces nothing more than, at worst annoyance, at best hilarity between the two parties. As long as the children are taking care of each other, in this case not purposefully trying to harm each other, there really is no need to require the “down the slide” rule. By allowing children to figure things out for themselves, situations are created where children must actually negotiate with each other, as in, “Please move so I can slide down.” Also, the up-climber is creating gross motor skills in balance and coordination important for physical and mental growth. Finally, the child-community gets to participate in rule making, “What can we do when Johnny keeps setting up a tea shop at the bottom of the slide?”

We allow children to climb trees. Adults often forget the times when they were unfettered by constant adult supervision and allowed to climb trees or carry big branches to build forts. As long as they are taking care of themselves and others, there is no real reason why children cannot try these things. Children may need a bit of guidance on what is safe. We ask children to consider stability issues. Is the branch solid? Do they have three points touching (usually two feet and a hand)? Would you feel safe dropping from that height? You would be surprised at how high some children feel safe in climbing, so we generally say that if they are beyond the adult’s reach maybe they should move lower. By allowing the child to practice making continual judgments on safety, we are encouraging the child to continually think about safety issues. We also encourage children to trust themselves, and to listen to their feelings. They are more aware of themselves and their

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environment, the impact the environment has on the child, and the impact the child has on the environment. Most playground rules are designed to reduce conflict and make things easier on the adult, but they also limit the interactions children can have amongst themselves and between themselves and their environment. At some point in time we need to trust the child.

**What It Looks Like By Age**

**Age 2 to 3**

At this level children are encouraged to try new things and are given a wide variety of materials to experiment with. We identify times when they are clearly not taking of themselves, like poking themselves with a stick, or taking care of each other, like poking someone else with a stick. These instances, repeated so very often, help the child develop a personal set of criteria with which to judge appropriate and non-appropriate behavior.

**Age 3 to 4**

Because children are more aware of others and their environment, though in a very egocentric way, they begin to take more chances without considering the consequences. We therefore adjust our feedback to help the child consider issues of safety and risk using questions that require the child to practice thinking ahead. “What would happen if ...?” “What do think will happen next?” “How could you tell if that is strong enough to hold you?” “How do you feel up there?”

**Age 4 to 5**

At this level children are often ready to take on greater challenges. They will stack crates and other materials to stand taller, jump from greater heights, and shimmy up poles to hang from crossbars. Adults therefore challenge to child to define in clearer terms where the limits of safety lie from a personal perspective, and to compare their limits with others. Because we value our relationships, comparisons are from a position of acceptance not competition.

**Mixed Age**

By focusing on risk from an individual perspective, there will be some in a group who will seek to push themselves and some who will seek to avoid risk. These ends of the spectrum get to be discussed as a community that values diversity. Additionally, specific issues can be addressed as a community, giving the child a sense of personal relevance to every rule created and enforced by the community.

**Suggested Reading**

*Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv
*Childhood and Nature* by David Sobel

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