

Handling risk as an anxious parent

I am going to be honest—I wasn't immediately thrilled to read the 2015 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth when it came to certain topics, especially the position on active outdoor play.

There are a number of recommendations that give me anxiety, but in a nutshell, this is it: **the position statement discourages close supervision while kids are playing outside and encourages risk-taking.**

Discourages close supervision!

The bottom line is, scraped ankles and knees are actually a good thing and as an anxious mom of a six-year-old, that's a hard concept to grasp.

It's easy to go down the road of the hovering, helicopter parent - hey, I've been halfway down that runway myself. Your entire life revolves around caring for your children, making sure they eat well, sleep well and are safe and away from danger, so it's hard to let them experience something that could be dangerous for themselves.

Here's the lesson I had to learn: danger and risk are not the same thing.

Here in St. John's a few years ago, a lovely pair of well-trained early childhood educators opened Cloudberry Forest School. Their very first camp was held during the summer, and it sounded amazing: lots of fun and learning in the woods, no matter what the weather, with a focus on activity and safe risks. My son has always loved the woods but has had a tendency to be nervous when it came to risk-taking. For instance, he was never a climber, or a jumper or king of the monkey bars. We enrolled him in forest school and figured he might enjoy it. It was only a week-long camp, but the difference it made was incredible! He came home muddy, fly-bitten and with a splinter, but thrilled and excited and proud and so confident in his abilities.

In just one week, he grew.

That's when I realized the benefits of letting kids explore and play without following their every move, even if they are small and even if they're nervous about it, and these benefits obviously go beyond the physical. According to ParticipACTION's [Report Card](#), children are more likely to engage in heart-pumping activity when they are less supervised, but they are also more likely to develop resilience, self-regulation, motor skills, social behaviour, conflict resolution skills and independence.

My son's skills and love of outdoor adventures continue to grow, and he has taken part in forest school three years in a row. He's all about outdoor fun. He runs with his friends on the playground and climbs on the monkey bars and jumps off swings mid-air. He

trips over tree roots with rubber boots on and comes looking for a Band-Aid every now and then.

Do I still get anxious? Absolutely.

Am I ever very far away? Nope.

But I remind myself that it's not about me, it's about him, and there are some things he's got to experience himself.

ParticipACTION and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador are working together, with support from Recreation Newfoundland and Labrador, to inspire families to make physical activity a higher priority in daily life.

