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## GIVING OURSELVES PERMISSION TO TAKE RISKS

Elizabeth Jones

*He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous.* (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar)

Well behaved children and adults, in many communities, don't think for themselves. Their parents and their teachers have trained them to do what they're told – and they do. That keeps life predictable for everyone.

Thinkers may come up with new ideas. New ideas threaten the status quo – the way things are supposed to be. Thinkers who come up with big ideas can get in serious trouble.

To have ideas is risky. To act on ideas is even riskier.

What's a risk?

It's when you don't know what will happen when you take action. Risks can be little or big, calculated or stupid.

In an era when more people live longer and healthier and more comfortably than ever before, our society seems to have become addicted to “risk-free” as a goal. If something bad happens, there's a quick search for someone to blame – and to sue. It must be someone else's fault, and they owe us.

But risk management, not risk prevention, is the only realistic survival strategy. In an era of bubble-wrapped babies and nature-deprivation, we need to remember that growth is risky – and it needs to be.

Every new idea carries risks – and the challenge to face them and see what will happen. Nobody becomes smart, creative, self-confident and respectful of others without taking risks – remaining open to possibilities and acting on them. As I said in *Playing to Get Smart* (Jones & Cooper, 2006,) “Smart is being optimistic in the face of the unknown. Every time we get our world figured out, something previously unknown comes along to confuse us again.”

“We grow, as thinking persons and as teachers, through continual play with possibilities. Learning happens when we experience disequilibrium – when something doesn’t fit our established patterns. As we question, revise, and re-test our ideas, we engage in lifelong learning.” (pp. 1-3)

We can enjoy that process, or let it terrify us.

### Children as Risky Learners

“Young children, who haven’t had enough experience to know what’s safe and what isn’t, are hard-wired for action. They *move*. This strengthens their muscles, teaches them how to balance, and keeps widening their world. They don’t spend time thinking about it; they simply act. The challenge for us, their caregivers, is to applaud all that physical initiative, while teaching even the youngest – because their physical safety depends on it – to *look before you leap*.

“As adults who are still alive, we have learned to do just that. Some of us have learned it too well; we’re cautious when daring would be better.” (Jones, 2007, p. 41)

Toddlers’ ideas haven’t yet been translated into words; they’re all conceived through action. The earliest learning is sensory-motor. As adults we do all sorts of physical tasks

without thinking about them; they've gotten wired into our neurons and our muscles. Every one of those movements had to be tried and practiced, from our infancy until we mastered it.

Toddlers have much longer attention spans than many adults. Walking, with all its variations, is a really challenging task, and yet they do it and do it and do it. Only a few adults practice with that much diligence – musicians and athletes both come to mind. (Whenever I watch gymnasts doing risky flips in the air above a balance beam, I wonder where they got the courage to do so many falls along the way.) I believe:

“Children, practicing all the things they can do with their bodies, frequently challenge us to let them take the risks that all physical learning entails. They run, they climb, they jump, they fall down, they skin their knees and cry. Do they need to do these things?

“Yes. If they didn't, they wouldn't keep growing and learning.” (Jones, 2007, p. 41)

If toddlers didn't spend their days taking risks they'd remain sedentary and silent all their lives.

### Risk-Taking as a Skill to be Practiced

Teachers and caregivers and parents are responsible for supporting children's skill learning. Is risk-taking on your list of skills to be taught and learned? It should be.

For safety, risks should be *calculated*. Sensible, courageous grownups go through these steps while considering a new risk:

1. What do you want to do? When, where, why?
2. Stop. Don't do it yet. Think: What might happen?
3. Brainstorm, preferably with others. What are all the things that could happen?
4. Act. Having thought, practice courage.
5. Ask for help if you need it.
6. Accept compassion if you get hurt.

Responsible caregivers of children teach these steps to children by reiterating them, in word and deed, over and over - and by providing help whether or not they're asked, modeling what should be asked for as children become more verbal and more reflective. Risks, like other learning, can be scaffolded – monitored and guided and eased by a more competent learner just as the gymnastics coach “spots” practice on the balance beam by being close in case of slippage.

Do risk-takers get hurt – in body, mind or spirit? Certainly.

Do risk-takers go back for more? Certainly. Climb back up on that horse – so you'll know, and the horse will know, that you are going to ride her and are brave enough to keep trying.

Does practice turn a risk into an accomplishment? Certainly. That's what life is all about.

### Adults as Responsible Risk-Takers

Adults have mastered the physical skills that preschoolers spend their days courageously practicing. We don't even notice them as skills any more, until we're so old that our bodies start reminding us to be careful.

Teaching is a risky job. No matter how much we've practiced we can be sure that some of what we try won't work. I have said before: “. . . teachers – of children or adults – can choose to think for themselves, or not. Canned curricula are readily available to make thinking unnecessary. Thinking is risky; that's why it's typically forbidden in authoritarian regimes, including some schools and child care programs.” (Jones, 2007, p. 39)

Early childhood educators have two sides of risk-taking to consider:

1. Keeping children physically and emotionally safe.
2. Taking responsibility, as adults in charge of children's lives and our own, even if we're scared to.

Adults being responsible can choose among these responses to children's risk-taking:

**Scaffold it.** “Spot” the climber and the leaper and the balancer by staying close enough to put out a hand if needed.

**Forbid it.** (But can you enforce that? Everyone sneaks when they find rules unfair or undesirable. Sneaking – breaking rules sensibly, without getting caught – is a necessary survival skill.)

**Make reasonable rules and discuss/negotiate them – with the children and with your teammates.** (In any preschool, in any home, adults will disagree on what risks are OK. That’s a good thing; there is no one right answer.)

### Where Can Desirable Risks Be Found? Let’s Go Outdoors!

How did you play as a child? Where did you play? What did you learn by playing?

Probably (depending on how old you are) you got to play outdoors, investigating a complex and often unpredictable world of nature and negotiating relationships with friends. As many adults will remember but many children today have never discovered, the richest learning environments are outdoors. In contrast, many children today spend all their time indoors, in activities programmed by adults to teach “correct” answers to children.

Children are active learners – acquiring physical knowledge and social/emotional knowledge and co-constructing cognitive knowledge not only by sitting and listening, but especially by doing. There’s more to do outdoors – more space, more sensory materials, more unpredictability, more open (in contrast to closed) tasks in which the outcomes haven’t been predetermined by adult planners. “If I do this, what will happen?” the three year old thinks, and then she does it, and finds out.

Prehistorically, much of human intelligence was developed in response to the challenges posed by the natural world: What can we do when we find ourselves cold, wet, sunburned, thirsty, hungry, or being snarled at? Children totally deprived of all such challenges simply won’t be as smart as those with opportunities to confront

nature for themselves, temporarily separated from heating, air-conditioning and non-stop video (Jones in Nelson, in press).

A thoughtful early childhood educator commented to a colleague one day:

“The risk of putting children in child care is similar in some ways to the risk of raising children in unsafe neighborhoods, isn’t it? . . . In child care, kids are watched all the time to keep them safe. If you’re trying to be a responsible parent in an unsafe neighborhood, you watch your kids all the time to keep them safe. But growing up in safe neighborhoods, or in the country, children haven’t been watched all the time; adults were busy doing other things. So children had freedom to roam (within sensible limits depending on how old they were) and were expected to be responsible. Roaming children have always sought physical challenges for themselves in the outdoors. They’ve gotten dirty and wet and cold, made choices and taken risks. That’s how kids develop physical and moral competence.

“Aren’t many children these days suffering a sort of sensory deprivation? They don’t have enough opportunity for hands-on experience with real things – the messing-about that leads to in-depth knowledge of materials, tools, bodies-in-space, and competence in predicting cause and effect. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that our adolescents crave sensory experience of all kinds but often display poor judgment in handling it. They’re trying to wake up their bodies.” (Jones & Nimmo 1994, p. 133)

Any creature that lives mostly outdoors must become physically competent, adept at living in weather among other kinds of creatures and taking life as it comes. Human beings’ historic success at constructing unprecedented levels of physical comfort, from fireplaces to down comforters to air conditioning and thermostats and home alarm systems and non-stop video amusement, has led many of us to expect uninterrupted

safety and comfort. Transferring those expectations to our children from birth leads to a great deal of baby bubble-wrapping - and to a false sense of safety forever.

Risk-taking is safer.

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### It's Safer to Take Risks than to Run Away from Them

Courage, as we've learned from the Cowardly Lion, is a virtue that is hard to sustain. New experiences are often scary; we don't know what will happen next or what we should do. Yet all new learning involves risk. The challenge is to *think* – to pay attention, to calculate, to invent new ideas, to discuss (and often argue) our ideas with our friends and our mentors, to act, to reflect on what happened – and to try again. We learn by doing – and by thinking about the past and the future.

It is safer to practice risk-taking than to run away. With children, adults are there to set outer limits but not to stop their investigation of the world. Skilled adults scaffold for children, “spotting” their action as a coach does. Fearful adults forbid action, risking any of these less than desirable consequences: Permanent fear, self-doubt and cowering obedience; or rebellion, plotting ways to do it on the sly. (All of us break those rules we believe to be unfair and unreasonable; with practice, we can become skillful at not getting caught, and enjoy the rush that accompanies sneaking.)

Risk is inevitable; it's a requirement for survival. The challenge is to name it, practice it, enjoy the rush of mastery and bear the pain when pain is the outcome.

A child who climbs may fall. But a child who never climbs is at much greater risk. Fall surfaces under climbers aren't there to prevent falls, only to make them less hard. And hugging doesn't make the pain go away, but it does make it more bearable.

Reading this, what have you been thinking? Are these good ideas? Dreadful ideas? [or Shocking ideas?] Try one of them on a colleague. Do you agree with each other? Disagreeing is how we keep learning.

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### **Bio**

Elizabeth Jones is Faculty Emerita in Human Development at Pacific Oaks College, where she has taught both adults and young children – and taken lots of calculated risks. She continues to write and think with students and colleagues about the connections among learning through play, emergent curriculum, and response to diversity, within the context of lifespan human development. The second edition of *The Play's the Thing* (Teachers College) with Gretchen Reynolds is her latest book.