

Working with Challenging Behaviours: Setting up for Success

Step 1. Anticipate

- Visit the space
- Think of your group of children. What are they going to want to do (that is worrisome to you)?
 - Hint: what are they going to want to climb/throw/swing?
- Where are they going to want to run?

Step 2. Think through the boundaries

- Are these obvious physical boundaries or will you need to set visual reminders?
 - Strategies: Look for treelines, fences, creeks, sidewalks!



- If none of these exist, consider using traffic pylons, rope, coloured tape.



- Try walking the boundary line with your group. Have the children hit the boundary line with a stick!
- Hang a brightly coloured backpack (could be your first aid backpack!) from a visible place (e.g. from a tree). Ensure that the children know they must be able to see the backpack at all times. This may require regular checking-in with your group:

“Can you see the backpack?”
If not - “Ok, please move closer so you can see it”.



Step 3. Empowering

- Talk to your group of children about all the thing they CAN do, instead of fixating on rules and what they CANNOT do:

“You wanna run? You’re allowed to run! Please stop at the X”.

“You wanna climb? You’re allowed to climb! Please get an adult first if you’d like to climb something”.

“You wanna throw rocks? I know it sounds so fun to do that. We can’t throw them but we CAN stack them, paint them, build with them, etc.”.

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Step 4. Dynamic Risk Assessment

- When you see or feel something escalating, try to catch it early. Bring the calm. Don't shout. Move closer. Speak in a calm voice. Think - what is the need that is not being met? Is it that they want to be heard? Is it that they want to be seen? Try to respond to that need.
- Get on the same team. What emotion is there? *"I can see you're mad. I understand."*
- Read the energy and mood of the group. Before something reaches a boiling point, try to adapt your plan (e.g. change location).
 - Need to expel energy? *"Let's start a running game"*.
 - Need to bring energy down? *"Let's bring out clay/beads/a story"*.
- Try to notice and understand the group's needs - emotional and physical. Are they hungry/thirsty? What is the need behind the behaviour?

Runners

Have a protocol in place in the case that a child runs away (e.g. someone being proximal to the runner at all times). If a child does manage to slip away/run away - notify your people (administrator, colleague, etc). One person stays with the group and determines if they are safe to stay put or if they need to return to school/homebase.

4 Strategies for Preventing Running:

1. Never work alone
2. Have a plan
3. Have a stopping mechanism (e.g. wolf howl)
4. Once you know you have a runner, get to know their triggers. Stay close to this child.

If a child is not listening

- This is relationship dependent - how well do you know them? Does someone know them better?
- Stay with them
- Try to de-escalate
- Stay calm - don't get into a power struggle

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- Be on their side - repeat “I hear you. I see you’re upset AND I need you to come down”.
- This will take time and space. Be prepared to stay awhile.
- Make sure your team members/colleagues are aware of what’s going on.
- Be prepared to call for backup. Remove yourself and call in someone else who has a better rapport with the child.
- Remove the audience. Move the children away from the ‘scene’.
- There may be a point where you need to intervene - know your organizations’/school boards’ policies on interventions.

Possible scenarios where you might encounter challenging behaviours

This list is not exhaustive, of course there is a plethora of scenarios where challenging behaviours could happen!

Tree Climbing

As an educator I am constantly shifting and learning about my boundaries and “trusting my gut” when it comes to risky play. I recognize now that risk-taking in play leads to learning and honouring a child’s own interests, self-regulation and motivation. It helps to develop their physical and cognitive abilities, and increases self-awareness. The value shows up in so many ways.

Tree climbing will always make my heart skip a beat, and my gut will fill with butterflies. That feels fine to me when supporting emergent risky play. Those markers are important when we collaborate and consult with children to make safe and smart decisions. Including the child in assessing risk is so valuable for them!

I have learned, “When in doubt, talk it out” - be it with the child, or the team of educators.



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Here is a possible dialogue you could experience when tree climbing...

Child: WHOA! Look at that tree! I want to climb!

Grown-up: I hear that you want to climb...and I want to say yes! That would be so fun! Let's go check it out together, and we can make a plan?

Child: YEAH!

Grown-up: What is our first step?

Child: Ask an adult, then check the tree to make sure it is safe?

Grown-up: M-hmm, what do you think of that branch?

Child pushes down on the branch and it snaps

Child: OH! Maybe that one is not that strong!

Grown-up: Shall we test the other side for size and strength?

Child: YES!

Grown-up: What are some things we can do to make sure we climb safely?

(There is so much to consider here, the weather - is the tree wet? Slippery? Are they wearing winter boots? Are there rocks underneath...dynamically co-assess the risks in the moment with the child. Talk it through).

Grown-up: How are you feeling about your plan for climbing?

(After confirming that it feels strong, with lots of spots for foot/hand holds, and having discussed that they will only climb twice their height, and that they will talk with the grown-up who is there to help and guide them).

Child: Good! I am going to start here, and move up along that side where that hole is.

Grown-up: *(Continue checking in).* Are you feeling safe? Comfortable? What can you see from up there? I'm here if you need me, okay?

Child: Wow! I feel so strong! I can see a caterpillar eating a leaf right here! I'm looking right at it!

(Also check in on how YOU are feeling. Listen to that feeling. Ultimately, if you are feeling like something is not safe, find a way to make it safe. It could be asking the child to come down, and that is totally okay. Trust that intention. Perhaps the child starts climbing a little too high for your comfort zone and risk tolerance...)

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Grown-up: I notice that you are getting higher than twice your body height (a gauge sometimes used for allowing climbing to certain heights) and I am feeling nervous about your plan to get down.

Child: But I want to keep climbing, you said I could climb this tree! This isn't fair!

Grown-up: I hear you. I can see you may be frustrated. You are so strong, and capable. And, for me, this isn't feeling safe anymore. AND I need you to start coming back down.

Child: Hmpf. **Slowly comes down...**

Grown-up: I saw another tree on the other side of the yard, can we go check that one out together?

(Continually check in, and gauge the feelings/body language of the child. Maybe it is time to switch it up to something like reading or looking for salamanders. Or maybe it feels right to find another tree to climb...that is a judgement call).

Emergent risky play is complex, active, and requires constant care and intention. When we let children determine their next steps (in a safe way) it can result in such self-accomplishment and joy. They are competent and capable of making decisions about what feels good, right, and safe to them. It is our job as educators/caregivers/parents/friends to support that decision-making process, while ensuring that they are safe.

For further reading on tree climbing and dynamically assessing risk, check out [this blog post](#).



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Stick Play

Sticks offer such rich and deep learning opportunities. “Sticks need space” is a commonly used phrase in a forest school approach. It is something that is clear and direct, and easy to remind folks if they are playing with long sticks too close to other children’s bodies. “Sticks need space” is a phrase that makes sense. It can then lead to folks moving somewhere where they have more room, or can take some time apart from the group (while still in sight) to de-escalate or regulate.

You can also establish safe zones where sticks can be swung about in a bigger capacity, or transformed into wizard staffs, swords, and/or fire breathing dragons to ride on.

Sticks can often cause conflict or tension between children, “That was my stick!” “Nooooo! I found it” “Because I put it there” “Well, I found it!” “It’s mine!!” “Nooo...” I think you know where this is going...

There is a lot to dig deep about in those conversations - about ownership, entitlement, sharing, etc. And mostly, it is a totally normal thing to encounter in our day-to-day work with children. It can be tricky to navigate those conversations.

Resolving conflicts amongst children is very hard work! And it requires time, space, and lots and lots of patience. Sometimes de-escalation/calming strategies work really well, and sometimes they don’t. That’s okay!



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Here is a possible dialogue that revolves around stick use and play...

Child: WHOA! Look at this branch I could build with!

Grown-up: That stick is so cool, and HUGE! Let's move your body so you can have more space to play without hitting anyone else's body!

Child: Yeah!

Grown-up: For a stick that big, what can you do to be safe?

Child: Keep one end touching the ground, and drag it. THE FOREST SCHOOL DRAG!

(This is something we like to do with sticks/branches that are longer than the length of the child's arm - one end touching the ground, and drag it along).

Grown-up: What's your plan with this branch?

Child: I am going to make a shelter! With lots of branches!

(Continually check in on the child and the space they are holding...does the play feel settled, creative, focused, or perhaps unpredictable and could escalate fast? Dynamically assess the risk and benefits of the large stick play).

The child continues to circle back to the group, seemingly unaware, with the large stick coming close to many other children's bodies.

Grown-up: I see that this branch is hard to move, remember that sticks need space. Please keep the long sticks with one end touching the ground! Forest school drag!

After 2 or 3 reminders (giving chances to do the safe, kind thing), the child keeps bringing long sticks/branches close and lifting them in the air near children's faces/bodies (not using the forest school drag).

Grown-up: I notice it is hard for you to use the forest school drag right now. I feel worried about the safety of your friends when you lift those big sticks in the air and I need you to put that stick down for now.

Child: BUT I DON'T WANT TO! I'M BUILDING!

Grown-up: Totally, I see your amazing shelter and I hear you. You must be feeling upset. AND I need you to take a pause from big sticks for now. OR...For now, I need you to put down that long branch, and find one that is the length of your arm and take some space.

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(At this time, assess the group dynamics, feelings, responses, body language of the child, etc. If it feels right, pursue with some other stick options...)

Grown-up: **Finds an open space** Maybe this could be a 'training area' for your sword practice? What do you think? Maybe you could find a stick that is the length of your arm?

Child: Yeah, I can do this and this **swings smaller stick around and around.**

Use your discretion about what feels kind and safe for the child, the group, and yourself. Perhaps the child is not ready to use/play with sticks for that day. Revisit stick play for this child later in the day, "I want to say yes, can you show me how you would use this stick safely?". If they can, great. If not, that's okay too. Maybe sticks need a pause for that day. "We will try next time!"

For more information, check out this blog post: [Trusting children to resolve conflicts in play.](#)

Snowballs

Sometimes when encountering challenging behaviours, it is because there is a need not being met. Here is a scenario wherein a group of children (some of which have more challenging moments) collaborate to meet everyone's needs in the form of play. This dialogue showcases the value in honouring a child(ren)'s autonomy and agency. This dialogue also highlights topics like consent - asking and checking in to see if "everyone is still having fun".

This group of children wanted to be able to throw snowballs at each other (a very common theme in wintertime). They asked me if they could. I told them "I want to say yes. In order to do so, what are some things you can do to stay safe? What's your plan?"

The group of children went away, then came back to me holding up a piece of paper. They created a list of guidelines to ensure, when they are having a snow 'battle', or snowball game, that they are having fun and doing so safely.

Here is the list of guidelines, which emerged organically from the group, on how to stay safe...

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How to Play a Snowball Game

- No face shots. Bellies, backs and legs ONLY!
- Find a spot that can be the “safe throwing zone” (a space to play the game)
- Fluffy snow only. No sticks or leaves or ice inside the snowballs
- Every person for themselves (no teams)
- If someone isn't having fun anymore, they can say STOP and leave the game. They can join in again at any time
- If hit 5 times, you sit for 30 seconds and then you can get back up again
- Listen for the 'Howl' for the game to be done



Collectively, they discussed things like consent, or “checking in to make sure everyone is having fun”. How empowering for these children to, on their own, create the safety guidelines for their game!

When they began to play, I observed closely and listened to changes in behaviour and feelings amongst the participants. In this instance, I did not have to step in – the children involved were able to communicate with each other when one felt something was unfair, or if someone needed clarification on a certain guideline for the game.

The collaboration, care, fun, empowerment and expression that emerged in the snowball game was something truly magical. Instead of saying no to a request to throw snowballs at each other, I asked the children how they could do so kindly and safely. They found a way, and it was wonderful.

My experience watching risky play emerge in the forest has shown me that risk-taking in play helps children to learn how to make decisions, problem-solve, exert self-control, regulate emotions, and develop and maintain peer relationships. Very meaningful connections form when children take risks, learn about their own boundaries and feelings, as well as acknowledging the boundaries and “gut feelings” of people who care about them (the educators, grown-ups in their lives, family members, friends, etc.). We strive to say ‘yes’ and want to allow for children to take risks, all the while honouring their ability to make safe choices for themselves. Risky play provides that opportunity.

If you're curious for more, check out these blog posts about a memorable [Risky Play workshop](#) and [Risky Play on the Schoolyard](#).