

Play, Safety, and the Zone of Uncertainty

A child at play is constantly pushing at his or her physical boundaries—and undoubtedly that’s going to cause a few tumbles along the way. So there are important matters of physical safety to consider when guiding a child in the early years.

Now, of course, when it comes to safety, the final call must always be yours—hour by hour, day by day, situation by situation. After all, no one knows your child better than you do. And while safety is your primary job, encouraging your child to stretch and grow through play is also an important factor to consider.

Most adults see safety on a straight line continuum:

The Risk Continuum



Chances are, with young children you spend a part of each day in the “Zone of Uncertainty”—that gray area between what’s obviously safe and what’s obviously dangerous. And it’s an important zone for children because, quite often, it’s where possibilities for new exploration and new learning occur. How you handle these situations is critical not only for your child’s physical safety but also for his or her intellectual and emotional growth.

Which leads to the question: *How do I strike the right balance between the potential risks and learning rewards of play?*

Continued →

The Balance of Play

Moving and Learning



Big Moves and Big Ideas



Intriguing and stimulating

Complete safety
No supervision required

Zone of uncertainty
Supervision required

Extreme danger!
Off limits!



Quiet Concentration

No stimulation

Continued →

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The “Balance of Play” diagram illustrates what happens when we evaluate both the physical risk *and* the learning rewards of movement and play. Note how this approach considers two dynamics that both need to be completely off limits to young children: (1) activities that pose extreme physical danger, of course, and (2) those that provide little to no active stimulation.

When children play, they often strike this balance for themselves, from big, broad adventures to quiet concentration and everything in between. Naturally, depending on their current abilities and interests, each child’s balance of play will differ. *The important thing to keep in mind is providing children with safe and stimulating opportunities to play and explore each day.*