



Dr. Mariana Brussoni

The work of childhood

Ask adults about their favourite childhood memory and many will describe playing outside, climbing trees or roaming where curiosity led. They remember the thrill of it and the feeling of having done something real. That freedom, it turns out, was doing important work.

Over the past several decades, this kind of childhood has gradually disappeared. Economic pressures, cities designed around cars, a media culture that amplified fear of danger, and the rise of social media have all played a role in pushing unstructured play aside in favour of supervised activities and screens.

The consequences are now surfacing in pediatric clinics, classrooms and mental health statistics, including rising anxiety and depression, declining executive function and

short-sightedness linked to too little time outdoors.

“Play is the work of childhood,” said Dr. Mariana Brussoni, a developmental psychologist at BC Children’s Hospital and one of the world’s foremost researchers on risky play. “When we take risky play away, we send a message: *I don’t trust you. You’re not capable.* That message is corrosive.”

Risk, she explains, is how children learn to navigate the world. In a virtual reality study conducted in collaboration with Norwegian researchers, Dr. Brussoni found children who took more risks during a play task, and fell more often, performed significantly better when navigating a simulated street crossing. Those small moments of low-stakes risk build exactly the judgment children need when the stakes are higher. The bottom line is that keeping kids safe means letting them take risks.

Yet not every child has equal access. Green space is unevenly distributed. Urban neighbourhoods can offer fewer places to roam and less places to find

playmates. Parents working long hours can’t always supervise when needed. For many families, outdoor play becomes one more thing out of reach.

Dr. Brussoni’s team is working to close that gap by embedding research into the systems where kids are. They’ve developed a suite of digital tools for parents, training for early childhood educators and video resources that help teachers move learning outside. All of it is available at **outsideplay.org**.*

TIP: The 17-second rule

THE NEXT TIME YOU WANT TO SAY
“BE CAREFUL,” WAIT.
COUNT TO 17 AND LET THE
SITUATION UNFOLD.