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Parents hesitate to play too safe

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Cotton-wool era may be over

Talara McHugh

Kids need to play outside and take risks, but many parents have been too scared to let them stray into the next supermarket aisle, let alone climb a tree, experts say.

In the 1980s, parents would throw open the door and tell their kids to “go out and play, be home for dinner” but childhood looks very different now.

It’s become the norm for parents to take a “cotton-wool approach” to protect their kids from harm while rarely, if ever, letting them out of their sight.

Professor Tonia Gray, of Western Sydney University, has done extensive research and says parents are open to the idea of risky play.

This includes rough and tumble play (such as jumping or chasing), play with heights (such as climbing logs or trees), and speed and motion play (playing on a swing or slide).

“There’s risks on so many levels,” she said.

“Whether you buy a house for the first time or you scale a mountain, there’s your perceived risk versus real risk.

“And what we do is play with that to find the sweet spot. Of course, a lot people may say that’s nasty and dangerous, but in reality if it’s managed correctly you can mitigate risk.”

The overprotective approach has sparked a countermovement of free-range parenting, which encourages kids to test their limits and be independent.

Lenore Skenazy, founder of Let Grow, has advocated free-range parenting since her 2008 newspaper column “Why I let my 9-year-old ride the subway alone” appeared.

“Parents want to give their kids independence and recognise its importance,” she said.

“But the majority of parents of kids aged nine to 11 – which is tweens – will not let them play in the park with a friend, will not let them walk to a friend’s

house. And if they’re at the store shopping together, only 50 per cent will let them go into another aisle.

“We’ve got to get brave enough to send our kids to the canned food aisle or to the park before their voice changes.”

Professor Gray said risky play was embraced by more and more parents to nurture resilient and capable children.

Her newly published research found parents supported the use of a nature park due to the “high-risk involvement”.

“Parents are realising we’ve cotton-wool wrapped our children way too much,” she said. “Those teachable moments are actually smackbang in the middle of a mistake and ask ‘what went wrong, is there another path we could have taken?’

“It’s about helping guide them, not directing their journey. Learning from mistakes is the only way we learn. So allow them to fail and embrace risk.”



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But when it comes to putting risky play into practice, she said it was important for parents and educators to “build it up slowly”.

“There’s little things like when a child is climbing up a

ladder, always remind them two feet or one hand or two hands and one foot – that’s your safety mechanism,” she said.

“It’s about building their own capacity to judge, their resilience, their problem-solving and their creativity.”