

THE BALANCE OF RISK

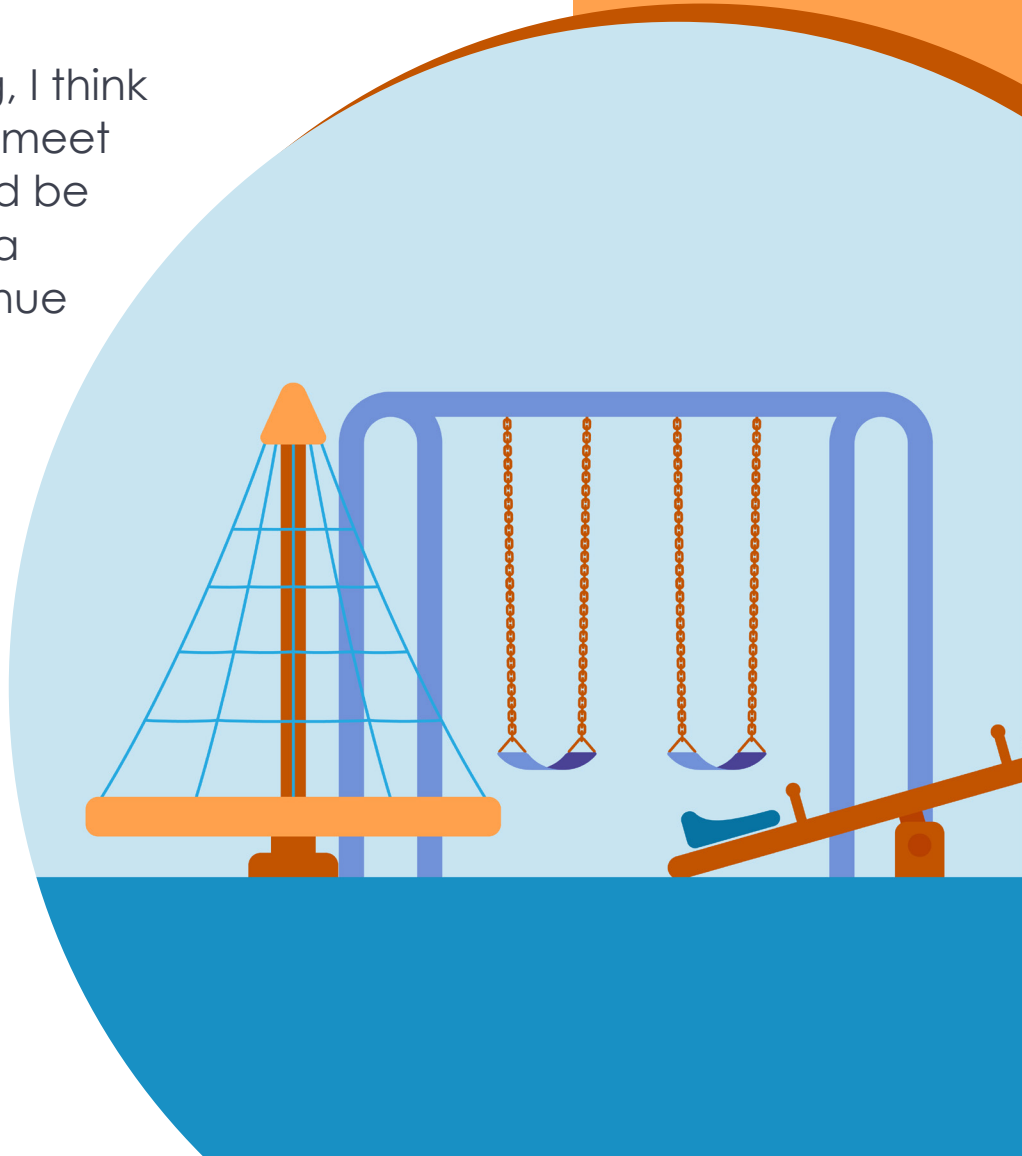
An opinion on fun, calculated risk, and why playgrounds live between danger and overprotection.



As a kid, there was nothing I looked forward to more on the playground than swinging. My school playground had a rickety old swing set that I used to go up as high as I possibly could, then, at the arc of the swing, I leapt off. Was it fun? Absolutely. Was it safe? Absolutely not. I scraped my shins, twisted my ankles, and eventually, I learned my limits. And at the end of the day, I think that's part of what playgrounds are meant to do. Allowing kids to test the upper bounds of what's safe and what's not is an essential part of growth.

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Don't get me wrong, I think playgrounds should meet safety standards and be maintained in such a way that they continue to meet them. And I don't think we need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to playgrounds. But I fear that's exactly what some in the industry are trying to do, which often comes with an elevated risk of kids getting hurt while at play.



I think, understandably, there's a fear among the playground industry that the entertainment value of playgrounds will become secondary to things like phones and tablets. After all, if I'm a 12 year-old kid, why would I climb up a jungle gym when you can play Fortnite or Roblox with my friends? The playground industry's answer to this is "Build taller structures," but all that does is ensure that kids get hurt.

There's a balance to be struck between over-emphasis on safety to the point that it keeps kids from having fun and allowing kids to take unlimited risks that could get them seriously injured.

It's precisely this balance that separates poorly-designed playgrounds from great ones. If you want the outdoor equivalent of a padded room with cushions for walls, no one will show up. If you want structures so tall they block out the sun, kids are put in a position where they're more likely to sustain preventable injuries.

So, when I design a playground, I don't just throw a bunch of equipment together that I think kids will like. I think the key is to bring together community wants and needs, then find the balance between safety and enablement of risk-taking.

"Great play lives in the space between overprotection and unlimited risk."



Not too safe. Not too dangerous.

TOO SAFE

- Overly cautious design limits challenge
- Predictable play leads to boredom
- Kids don't develop confidence or resilience
- Playground becomes an afterthought

THE SWEET SPOT

- Balanced design
- Meets safety standards
- Encourages challenges
- Builds confidence
- Always keeps play exciting

TOO RISKY

- Excessive height of playground
- Poor surfacing or lack of maintenance
- Higher chance of serious injury
- Liability, closures, and loss of community trust



OUR GOAL:
ENABLE RISK.
PROTECT KIDS.
INSPIRE PLAY.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK CREATES BETTER PLAY.

Listen. Learn. Design together.

TOWN HALL SESSIONS

Bring parents and community members together to share ideas, concerns, and priorities.

PARENT FEEDBACK

Hear what parents value most, such as safety, inclusion, durability, and fun.

SURVEYS TO KIDS

Ask kids what they want to play on! Their voices lead to better, more engaging play spaces.

NEIGHBORING PARKS

Talk to local park managers and visit nearby playgrounds to discover what works and what doesn't.



“The goal isn’t to make everyone happy; in my experience, that’s rarely, if ever, possible. Rather, you should try to incorporate as much feedback as possible while homing in on safety versus risk-taking.”

PLAYGROUNDS SHOULD ALLOW CALCULATED RISKS.

But, again, none of this matters if your playground isn't fun for kids to use. And I think it's possible to design playgrounds in a way that allows for risks to be taken and mitigates the risk of injury.

Having taller equipment like swing sets and monkey bars necessarily means that kids will fall from a potentially dangerous height. It's inevitable. But, assuming proper surfacing depth, these falls need not result in serious injuries. Rather, they should serve as a way for kids to figure out for themselves how high they should jump from, or how tall of a height is too dangerous.

APPROPRIATE HEIGHTS

Challenge kids without creating unnecessary danger.

PROPER SURFACING DEPTH

Helps absorb impact and reduces risk of serious injury.

LEARN THROUGH PLAY

Kids build judgement, strength, and self-awareness through play.

RISK ISN'T THE ENEMY. POOR DESIGN IS.

FUN STILL MATTERS.

So when I look at the playgrounds of today versus those of a few decades ago, I don't see a lot that fundamentally needs to change. Sure, bright colors are great, and play structures with lots of activity panels and other accessible amenities make it so that every child feels welcome. We already have a winning formula for fun, safe playgrounds that allow kids to take calculated risks.

At the end of the day, I don't want playgrounds to look the same as they did 80 years ago. I love seeing the different ways in which people lay out their spaces, and the fact that kids of all ability levels are able to have fun on the same playground as everyone else is something we should nurture and celebrate.

Not to make them less fun, but to strike the right balance between safety and fun.



THEORY VS PRACTICE

► THEORY

Playgrounds with tall amenities were inspected by somebody to ensure they meet safety standards.

Kids today want more thrills than kids decades ago, so it makes sense that playgrounds will become more exciting with them.

If towns and cities want to become a destination, building a large, expansive playground is a natural next step.

► PRACTICE

In most states, there is no upper limit for how high play structures can be. Moreover, they aren't legally required to meet ADA requirements for safety.

Playgrounds can be just as fun and engaging without dangerous amenities that kids can and do regularly fall from.

Destination playgrounds are great, but they shouldn't come at the expense of kids' safety.

GREAT PLAYGROUND DESIGN ISN'T ABOUT ELIMINATING RISK, IT'S ABOUT GETTING THE BALANCE JUST RIGHT.