Bang, Scrape & Tumble: Letting kids learn risky lessons in a stubbornly scripted world

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By Lael Gilbert

The vacant lot alongsidethe residential road was like athousand other lots that spoilthe aesthetics of well-trimmedneighborhoods everywhere.There was no landscaping,no turf, no splash of annualcolor—just mounds of gravel,jumbles of discarded branches,and clumps of ragged summerweeds clawing up through lastyear's detritus.

Leaves crunched underfootas the ten-year-old stepped off themowed safety of her frontlawn to pickher way through the abandoned chaos.She bent to collect an interesting rock,paused to snap a twig that looked like itneeded snapping, gave spiders a wideberth—and then stopped dead.Lodged into a hummock of dirt nearher sneakers she saw something smooth,round, and glinting of gold. When shepicked it up, it felt heavy in her hand—acoin—but not like any she'd seen before.She rubbed away the crusted dirt andfound an image of a fierce bird, and what looked like an ocean wave arching overbold text.50 GROSZY, it said.

Squeezing the find in a tight fist, shescanned the area with wide-eyed wonder.What was this place?

News of the discovery spread likewildfire. Kids from across the neighborhoodpoured in to scavenge for treasure;turning stones, crawling under branches,sifting dirt with kitchen colanders. It hadbeen an international bank heist, somesaid (since the first coin turned out to be Polish), and this is where they stashedthe loot. Or perhaps a miser buried hislife savings, andthen died.

It could have happened.

More coins turned up—silver,bronze, copper, all with foreign lettering,all with unfamiliar images stamped intobright metal—baffling, tantalizing, andout in the sun for anyone tofind.

Through a nearby window DaveFrancis peeked occasionally at the action,entirely pleased with himself. He hadcome across the forgotten Mason jar offoreign coins (worth a total of $1.50, he estimates) and decided to scatter theminto the empty lot across from his house.He wouldn't say that he had no idea thatthis act would cause such a local kerfuffle.He knew it would. Had hoped for it,in fact.

By day, Francis is USU Extension'sdirector of Utah 4-H and Youth Programs.In his freetime, he is a conniving mystery-builder in his Woods Cross, Utah,neighborhood. In both roles, he said, heis after the Spark.

There is a certain moment in childhood—you might remember it—whenyou forget about the toil, the checklist tocomplete. You set aside the uncomfortableburn of muscle, the strain of thought.It's that moment when you feel somethingpropelling your actions forward, like abird riding an updraft of air.The term "fun" is inadequate here—this is not entertainment or distractionalone. For some kids it is a sense of discovery,for others it's adventure, danger,or creativity. In 4-H youth developmentparlance, this moment is called theSpark. It is an event or activity that pullsforward a passion, deep interest, or asense of calling that provides a kid joy, purpose, and a direction. It's a force to bereckoned with.

Children tend to be quite good atfinding the Spark, if circumstances allow.It offers them the drive to push themselvesto try something new, to put themselves"out there" despite discomfort orchallenge. If they can tap into

that powerfulinternal motivation, a kid can be averitable engine of learning, Francis said.

Without it, though, picking up theskills necessary to be a functioning adultfeels more like drudgery. So finding theSpark is pretty important.

But the world where kids can do sois shrinking. Reasons for this are complex:play spaces are getting smaller,kids' lives are increasingly programmed,screens are ubiquitous. But there is anothersignificant contributor: adults.

Kids and adults tend to have significantlydifferent goals for play. Many adultsdesign opportunities for play based primarilyon keeping children safe—whichis certainly a reasonable goal. But theSpark is most often found in activitiesthat are unsupervised, exploratory, and outdoors, said Francis. It involves minorphysical and emotionalchallenges—andit's risky.

"Risky play can sometimes be hardfor parents to swallow," said Francis."They think—I'm not okay with this. Thekids are going to get dirty, they might gethurt, or … get somedisease. I mean, allthe things parents worry about."

And it can be especially hard forsome, he said, because in risky play, thechance of those worrisome things happeningis not zero. But they also aren'tzero in your own backyard, he is quick to add.When you consider that the skills earnedthrough engaging in risky play are essentialto a child's development—confidence, decision-making, social nuance, finding connectionsto the larger world—the equation for riskbegins to balance quite differently.

Life on the Lot

Consider that vacant lot across from Francis'house. Once the kids are actually present(digging for coins, say), and perhaps two groupsboth want to build forts to protect their treasure,but there aren't enough sticks to go around. Howdo they negotiate this?Whatever your ideas are on this point,adults, keep them to yourself. A parent mightbe very skilled at swooping in with tailored, practiced solutions to these kinds of complexproblems—but what a huge loss it would be totake that away from a child, said Francis. Lifedoesn't revolve around dictated rules. This isa chance for kids to learn negotiation, powerdynamics and compromise; to practice boundariesand small group structure; to learn abouthow a community works and feels. If nothingelse, this might be their chance to perfect thedesign and construction of a tiny house — whoknows where else it might lead.

That tree that is too high to climb? Childrenneed a chance to learn how to assess risk,Francis said, to experiment, problem solve, anddevelop both confidence and a healthy knowledgeof their own limits. If they try to jump froma tree that is too high, they'll know next timewhat a too-high-tree looks like. If they don't getthat chance… well, they'll only be facing bigger"trees" as they become teens and adults.It's better to try it now. Scrapes and bruises arebadges of honor in Francis' world, earned in"learning accidents" that can teach childrenwhat works and what doesn't. They are experiencesthat could ultimately preventcatastrophic accidents later through rich, nuanced practice with decision-making.

This, of course, shouldn't turn intoa Lord of the Flies situation—mentorsare essential in the process.Parents and other caregiversshould intervene when a situationis clearly dangerous, ratherthan just uncertain, saidLacee Boschetto, an assistantprofessor inFamily andConsumer Sciences Education.They could removeobvious hazards like brokenglass, but let children navigatefor themselves thornybushes and pokey sticks. Beforeintervening, adults could consider counting to 30, togive children a chance to assessthe situation and attemptto solve it for themselves.

"It's reasonable for parentsto want to protect theirchildren," said Boschetto,"but risky play establishesa space for childrento have authenticexperiences that buildtheir own resilience."

The right kind ofmentorship for riskyplay requiresthe humility toask yourself "isit wrong, oris itsimply not how I would doit?" said Michelle Clouse, also an assistantprofessor in Family and ConsumerSciences Education.

The key, they both said, is noteliminating risk altogether, but creatingboundaries where exploration can freelyhappen. Parents and caregivers cantalk through their own decision-makingprocesses and observations to help childrenbuild their own skills in that area.

"There are so many long-term benefitsof this type of skill-building," saidBoschetto. Stick with it, and parents willbegin to see beyond their own discomfortand begin to get aglimpse of the long-termbenefits for their kids.

Another pro tip: Adults can work onshifting their language away from fear-basedwarnings (You'll crack your headopen.), to facilitating assessment (Whatdo you think will happen when you trythat?), and work together with otherparents and caregivers to foster environmentswhere independent play canthrive. It takes a village to facilitate thiskind of learning.The goal is to move from an "as

safeas possible" mindset to an "as safe asnecessary" approach, letting childrennavigate challenges and build their ownskills,confidence, and emotional regulation, said Clouse.

“Adults shouldn’t let their own fearskeep a child from exploring and creatingmeaning in the world around them,” shesaid.

But the challenge of making spacefor more risky play is not just a parentproblem. Thereare deep-seated legal,design, and cultural challenges that keepour kids’ lives a little tooscripted.

“The hills and hedgerows where weran around as kids, the places that riskyplay couldnaturally happen, are persistentlydisappearing,” said Jake Powell,associate professor and USU Extension specialist in Landscape Architecture andEnvironmental Planning.

Powell, an expert in designing outdoorspaces for learning and play, hascore memories of scrambling up steepred-rock slopes in southern Utah, jumpingoff crumbling ledges intoemerald pools, digging toes into the thick mudalong flooded side-canyons.

“It’s that kind of deep connectionfrom my own childhood that defines who am, what I’vechosen to focus on professionally, how I think about these spacesand advocate for them now,” he said.

Often, professional designers tend toprioritize safety over adventure, and oftenthis results in designing play spaces withlimited options for risk, he said.“We spend thousands and thousands of dollars on highly designedmanufactured playground equipment,safety mats and splash pads, and thenthe most popular thing at the park is thebroken sprinkler and resulting mud pit,” laughed Powell.

But he is careful not to oversimplifythe situation—there are real barriers topurposefullycreating risky play opportunitiesin an open space design. Legalliability constantly looms for those who manage public spaces. Playgrounds aredesigned to be safe for any childwhodares approach—and are interesting, unfortunately,for about ten minutes to mostkids, he said. It’s easy to roll your eyes atthat from a distance … but much harderwhen you begin to ask yourself what your expectations really are when you showup in such spaceswith your children.

The shortage of risky play opportunitiescan be especially pronouncedamong low-income communities, wherechildren have fewer chances to engagewith nature. We tend tooutsource thesekinds of enriching experiences to farawayplaces like public lands and national parks, which in reality, are onlyavailable to a subset of kids whoseparents can afford to take a long, andincreasingly expensive, vacation.

“We’ve taken the opportunity awayfrom a lot of these children to go out andfindexperiences on their own,” Powellsaid. As a result, a deficit of learningrisk assessmentcauses many emerging adults to withdraw from the idea of managingrisk altogether, whichcan lead tofacing adulthood with lots of anxiety orseeking out risky experiences in lessconstructiveways.

As communities we’ve got sometough questions to ask ourselves, saidPowell. Who,ultimately, is responsiblefor keeping us safe? Which kids get toaccess open spaces to build these deep connections to the larger world?

There aren’t simple answers.

But there are a few very obtainablethings communities can do now to createmoreopportunities for important and appropriaterisky play, he said. At the top ofPowell's wish list is having new neighborhoodsreserve small sections of land asundeveloped openspace and connectthem as corridors that lead to even biggeropen spaces like canyons or hillsides to provide “empty lot” experiences.

When you consider that Henry DavidThoreau’s famous Spark, WaldenPond, was just two short miles from anearby town, the prospect of keepingaside designated spaces for kids’ inspiration, growth, learning, and maturity,it seems like it could be both valuableand obtainable.

Leave No Trace Meets Risky Play

The Leave No Trace campaign offers a framework of outdoor ethics to minimize people's impact on natural environment,but the principles have the potential to intimidate kids’ sense of exploration and adventure. When visitingnatural places, especially protected ones like state and national parks and forests, there are ways to combine thebest of both worlds, according to Jordan Smith, Director of USU’s Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism.

Plan Ahead

Visit in smaller groups and choose quiet times to minimizedisruptions. Bring the suppliesyou need to be self-sufficient,pack out trash, and know your way around.

Choose Durable Surfaces

When you are bringing kids in the backcountry, useestablished trails and campsites. Front-country areas(near visitor centers, in established campgrounds) cantake much more of a child-exploratory beating. Teach kidsthe difference between these types of sites.

Dispose of Waste Properly

Go before you go, go. Visit a bathroom before you headout. In many places in the West, it's best to dig a cat hole6-8 inches deep for solid waste, away from water, trailsand campsites. In delicate environments, such as desertsand alpine forests, it's best to pack it out.

Enjoy, and Then LeaveBehind What You Find

Enjoy that stick, stone or pinecone,but then set it down for others to enjoyand for the environment to use. Thiscan help your child build a sense ofcommunity around sharedspaces—and offers a chance to explain cycles innatural environments.

Be Considerate

Be mindful of your impact on others'experience. Help your children sharespace with the people you see now,and the other adventure-seekers whowill come after you and far into thefuture.

Risky Play: What Can Parents Do?

Make Space

• Carve out time, help kids find the space, offer tools and resources

Talk it Out

• Use language that encourages risk assessment rather than fear

Encourage Spark

• Leave random things around for kids to explore independently

Offer Freedom

• Let kids figure things out, resolve their own disputes, handle their own setbacks

The Laundry

• Don't be afraid of a little mess

Learn how Utah 4-H programs can help kids find their "spark":

View Website

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