

## **Encouraging Safe Risk**

Recently, someone asked us “if a kid falls from the stump being unstable, do you absorb the responsibility?”

This is how I responded.

No, we do not absorb any responsibility if a child falls from a stump during normal play.

If you always want to protect children from things moving under their feet, how are they ever going to learn how to balance themselves, protect themselves from falling, or use their proprioceptive instincts to keep their balance?

If the stump was 8 feet off the ground and unstable, that’s one thing, but my goodness, a stepping stump that sits on the ground?

How will they learn how to catch themselves if they step on an 8 inch rock that rolls? What happens if they’re on a hiking trail and something dislodges underfoot and they need to catch their balance to stop their fall? What happens when they trip on a curb? What happens if they lose their footing coming down stairs?

Children absolutely need safe risk in their play environments. Not that it is designed to do this, but an unsecured stepping stump may vary occasionally provide that much-needed experience that allows children to understand their bodies and how to react to the unforeseen.

Overprotection of children during play has kept them from experiencing and managing safe risk, which has led to young and mature adults having trouble managing risk of any kind.

You might be interested in reading English writer Tim Gill's extensive research on risk aversion and the debilitating effects of overprotectiveness affecting a whole generation. <http://rethinkingchildhood.com/about/>

*“Tim Gill rejects the premise underpinning almost every anxious, interventionist impulse of modern parenting – that children are more at risk than ever before from adults!” Decca Aitkenhead in The Guardian.*

If you should ask the principal whether he/she is concerned about childrens' safety, naturally they're going to say yes. If you frame the question around the stump in a way that increases their anxiety about injuries on the playground, naturally they going to say no to the stump.

So this is really a question of whether you want to use this as a teaching moment for yourself and for the principal or hide behind the overprotective rhetoric that does more harm than good.

Also keep in mind that both the overreaching ASTM and CPSC playground safety guidelines that tend to scare everybody into submission were written for the playground equipment industry and have very little to do with the natural playground industry. Injuries on typical, equipment-based playgrounds cost the US almost \$14 billion a year; in our 20 years of designing and building natural playgrounds, we had never heard of any injuries on them.

Recently the ASTM board has admitted that they've gone too far in trying to protect children during play, that their guidelines have become so restrictive that children are no longer having fun. ASTM is now in the process of reevaluating everything so that safe risk (nonhazardous risk) can be encouraged.