

What might risky, challenging learning opportunities offer children as they build learner identities infused with courage, creativity, resilience, reflective risk assessment, and empathy—focused reciprocal social relationships?



Kia ora from Aotearoa, New Zealand. My name is Lorraine Sands and I have worked with the Educational Leadership professional learning team since 2001 in conjunction with my learning, teaching, and research team at Greerton Early Learning Centre, a family-focused early years setting. This blog offers an insight into our work together to nurture children's courageous, empathic, resourceful learning identities.



adventure awaits



Progressively, our team has underpinned our curriculum with opportunities, both in our setting and in the wild spaces of the Atearoa New Zealand bush, rivers, mountains, and ocean, to engage in risky play that we see has the capacity to build children's competence, and capability as learners-in-action.



We want our children to experience elements of surprise and wonderment in our space (and beyond). Our intention is to provoke children's curiosity and allow them to feel a sense of ambiguity and awe in their surroundings. We work to create a space that is rich with possibilities, where questions are asked and explored, and where risks are taken. Our shared understanding, gained over 14 years of these adventures, is that if we want to encourage flexibility of the mind, we must provide a flexible environment and agency for children to choose to investigate the people, places, and things that matter to them.



We track children's interests through writing formative assessments, grounded in the context of children's lived experiences, and consider ways to provide provocations to widen and deepen our engagements with children's learning investigations. This means that we regularly go out into the community in search of meaningful experiences.



We are very aware of the safety issues around excursions; therefore, we carefully plan to ensure we are 'hazard aware' but 'not risk averse'.



Most importantly we wish to be a community connected to the wider environment. This is why we made the decision that all work in our centre would happen in real time, space, and effort, so that children would see experts in action. We must also go out into the community to follow things of interest to us.



Our Centre philosophy has always encouraged healthy exploration and respect for the outdoors, and we think regular excursions in nature are an essential way to foster and extend these ideas. Being out in an open space, immersed in nature, supports unlimited new opportunities for children to learn. As a result, a love of nature grows. We have found, as we see the ways children treat the natural world—with care and respect—that children learn to protect what they love.

During these repeat experiences to our favourite natural sites children develop a thirst for learning and a passion to push themselves to research and explore possibilities not tackled before. They learn to be eco-citizens and culturally responsive learners. They learn to see themselves in relationship with the natural world.



When do the adventures happen? How will we get there and who gets to go?

- Each day, during the school term we travel from the centre in our van. We leave at around 9:30am and return at approximately 2:30pm. The van is fully compliant and anchored with 5 point harness car seats. We complete a comprehensive risk assessment/risk benefit analysis for each site we visit.
- The group size is 10 children or less and two teachers, giving us a ratio of 1:5 or less.

We have put a lot of thought into how we organise the structure of these trips and we wish to offer this opportunity to every child. Continuity of learning has always been an important part of our learning culture, and we make sure that this culture is supported in the natural world too. For this reason, we would like children to have as many continuous opportunities to revisit our natural landscapes as possible so they can build on prior knowledge and return to their plans and research each week.

We are unhurried and have no preset agenda.





Our interpretation of risky and adventurous play is that opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries, and learning about risk are embedded in the way our learning community, children, teachers, and families, think about learning opportunities.

Thrilling, often surprising and uncertain, adventurous play provides tamariki with an avenue to not only feel 'butterflies in their stomachs' but also to:

Test ideas, be thoughtful, assess, and try again (reflectiveness). When faced with a challenge, we encourage children to think about possibilities, test them, observe carefully the results, and adjust their actions.

- Assessing risks (being reflective) Children thoughtfully consider what a particular action could mean to their safety and to the safety of their friends. This means they are problem solvers and seek multiple ways to achieve a self-set goal.
- Make mistakes and bounce back (resilience). Making mistakes is an intrinsic part of the learning process so, when they happen, as a collective, we unpack them and work through different strategies without contemplating giving up.(A growth mindset learning identity)
- Struggle through difficulty and problem solve (resourcefulness). Children often take on immense challenges that require more than one go to overcome them. For example, climbing to the top of the steep slopes takes time, sustained effort, and perseverance. It involves making step by step decisions with courage and grit. “Success is in the doing” (Gerver Tully).



Grow a deep sense of camaraderie in the face of challenge (reciprocity).

The memory of sweet victory achieved at times with grazed knees, feelings of uncertainty and tired bodies are long lasting. So, when a friend decides to embrace a similar challenge, there is a moving sense of collective empathy and encouragement that cannot be replicated by any other learning experience. To hear your friends say to you: "You can do it!" The role of a trusted companion becomes one of affirmation and celebration and the pleasure of a shared experience."

The 'shoulders' of such learning dispositions rest the complex skills of risk assessment, robustly evidenced in the shape of Learning Stories.



Risk/challenge as a pedagogical concept is viewed not through a deficit but credit lens. In the wise words of Tim Gill, a UK scholar, advocate and consultant on childhood, "We need to start by thinking about what might go right...about what children learn about themselves and their capabilities," rather than on what might go wrong.

Therefore, a fundamental difference between risk and the way it is managed/assessed and hazard which is something the teaching team is daily involved in identifying, eliminating or minimising. Hazards (seen or unseen) and deemed to cause serious harm are removed promptly. The hazards' register is a 'living' document which is filled in at the beginning of each day. However, if hazards occur throughout the day due to children engaging with our environment, they are quickly identified, eliminated and recorded in this register as well as our centre diary.



The research....

The urge to feel 'knots' in their stomachs, to overcome fear and practice bravery, to experience success at the end of a challenge and to stretch the boundaries of learning, are irresistible aspects of risky play. Gever Tully, the creator of the Tinkering School in America warns us: "When we protect children from every possible source of danger (risk), we also prevent them from having the kinds of experiences that develop their sense of self-reliance, the ability to assess risk and their sense of accomplishment" (2010).





Claire Warden, the author of *Nature Kindergartens* and *Forest Schools*, strongly believes that, "If we remove all challenges, children lose the feeling of aspiration which is so very important in terms of the drive to move forward in life." She is talking about the disposition to be inquisitive, to wonder and test limits, and fuel children's explorations and the type of experiences they choose to engage in.

So at Greerton, we feel a strong sense of responsibility to design, craft, produce and utilise resources that allow children to action their curiosities and ideas in a managed risk manner.

How does the teaching team at Greerton nurture children's urge for risk and challenge?

Helle Nebelong (2002), a world renown playground designer writes: "I am convinced that standardised playgrounds are dangerous. When the distance between all the rungs in a climbing net or a ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where to put his feet. Standardisation is dangerous because play becomes simplified and the child does not have to worry about his movements. This lesson cannot be carried over to all the uneven and asymmetrical forms with which one is confronted throughout life.

The ability to concentrate on estimating distance, height and risk, requires a lot of practice and is necessary for a person to be able to cope successfully with life" (2002).

With that in mind, the teaching team is constantly designing and crafting challenging provocations that are never set in stone and follow the uneven feel of natural resources used. The structures we decide on, are the result of robust professional conversations which take into account our children's unique strengths, interests, and passions.

Children reminded us that we pick but don't lick.

Duxton: "But sometimes you touch something its poisonous and you can't put your fingers in your mouth."

Tanya: "Especially mushrooms. Interesting to look at but we don't know enough about them for eating."





Where will this learning_
lead children?

We think emotional and social learning are important undercurrents for all other learning—they open doors for more learning experiences—they enable children to latch onto learning because they are able to regulate their own emotions and provide a safe harbour for others to co-regulate their emotions with them.

In this way children can stay focused—they can be determined to find a positive way through experiences and set learning goal after learning goal that stretches both their imaginations and abilities.

