

INTERVIEW

Risk is not the enemy: a child psychologist explains why kids need to take on challenges

Visiting Buenos Aires, Mariana Brussoni, a specialist in child play and professor at the University of British Columbia, explains how adults' fear is limiting children's ability to learn, explore and grow.



Brussoni was born in Uruguay and moved with his family to Canada at the age of five.

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“There are risks that are interesting for kids. They can end in something positive or negative. They can make them say, ‘How nice it is to climb the tree!’ or, ‘Oh! I fell and broke my arm.’ And that’s the way the world is.” The author of the quote is not a fearless teenager or a child looking for thrills. It’s Canadian developmental psychologist Mariana Brussoni, who is visiting Buenos Aires this week.

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The award-winning researcher works on children's free and outdoor play, focusing on both the way adults perceive risks and the design of environments conducive to play. She is a professor at the University of British Columbia, director of the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) centre and founder of the Outside Play Lab, a space for innovation on these topics.

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Risk is often viewed negatively because it is confused with danger, according to this author. The latter is a serious threat that children cannot recognise, much less manage, such as broken playground equipment. The former, on the other hand, is a challenge that they can assess, such as climbing trees. This distinction helps to limit dangers without eradicating risks: she proposes instead to manage the latter so that children participate and challenge themselves.

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Born in Uruguay, Brussoni moved with her family to Canada at the age of five, but she still has a good Spanish. Today she returns to South America after not setting foot on Buenos Aires soil for 15 years. The reason is the International Meeting “Sustainable Cities and Societies” this Thursday and Friday at the Legislature. An opportunity to hear her talk about playing outdoors and how it fosters creativity, resilience and the ability to solve problems, skills that are difficult to acquire if you are locked up all day with your cell phone.

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The positive side of risk

In an interview, there is a journalist who asks questions, and an interviewee who answers. In this conversation with Brussoni, the roles are reversed. It is she who first asks: “What is your favorite memory from when you played as a girl?”

–Climbing the trees in the square.

–They all tell me things like this: playing outside, with other children and without parents around. Without anyone telling them to calm down or be quiet. Taking risks. The things that children do when they play outside are very important for their development. They are more physically active, they don't use phones and they move more, in a way that would be impossible if they were inside. They incorporate what we call “Physical literacy” in English, the ability to understand how to move the body in space.

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–It would be like a physical self-knowledge.

–Yes, understanding the body in motion, like how to throw a ball or kick a ball. Very basic things but you can't learn them sitting down reading a book. It also helps you understand yourself. When you were climbing the tree as a kid, you were discovering what you liked and how far you could go, if it was too high or if it seemed unsafe. In other words, you were learning to manage risk. You need those skills for situations that are more dangerous, like crossing a street, driving a car or deciding whether to take drugs or not. Kids are overprotected and don't know how to take risks. When they start college or a job, they don't have the skills to make decisions about the risks they encounter.

–I understand then that you do not see risk as something negative...

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–Exactly. I started my career working in injury prevention, where the official view was that risks were bad. But then I understood, as a developmental psychologist, that there are risks that are interesting to kids. They can end up in something positive or negative. They can make them say, ‘It's so nice to climb the tree! ’ or, ‘Oh! I fell and broke my arm. ’ And that's the way the world is. We've gone from a perspective of keeping kids as safe as *possible* and preventing all injuries, to keeping them as safe as *necessary*. Only the most serious injuries are permanent, and they're generally very rare. We're afraid and protecting ourselves from something that statistically doesn't happen often.



Brussoni arrived in Argentina to participate in the International Meeting “Sustainable Cities and Societies”, which takes place this Thursday and Friday in the Legislature.

Through these plains

In Argentina and other countries, there is a belief that children will be assaulted or kidnapped if they are alone or with their peers. For many parents, it is difficult to accept the idea of playing without adults around. “Partly, this is believed because we hear horrible news that makes us think that we have to be aware of the children all the time, when in reality this is not the case,” says Brussoni. And he says that, according to statistics, kidnappings by strangers are very rare: in general, they are perpetrated by people who know the children. “We are limiting their movements for something very unlikely, and without realizing it, we are doing something that harms them 100%,” he laments.

–As a psychologist, where do you think this need for control and overprotection comes from?

–In the late 1980s, the idea of a good father or mother began to change, partly because there was a greater gap between the poor and the rich. Parents who had gotten a good job as soon as they graduated or bought a house realized that their children needed more education to have an equivalent or worse lifestyle. Then the idea was born that a good parent is one who prepares his child for success, in competitive terms: he sends him to the best school and the best university, he makes the child get the best job. On that “road to success,” gambling began to be seen as a waste of time. You have to send the child to English classes, piano, soccer, whatever. So also the idea arose that a good parent does not let anything bad happen to his child, so he has to be around all the time, just in case. Children begin to be seen as incapable.

–What is the difference between the parenting of other times, to which we can no longer return, and what you propose with free play?

–Today we all have cell phones, including children. If they go outside to play, there are no other kids to play with them, because they are all inside with their phones. They can find their friends on their cell phones, but not outside. The idea is not to go back to an ideal past, but neither is it to continue like that. We need more in-person, social, independent time. We need children to be able to spend their time no matter what they do. They can invent something on the spot. Those who are finishing kindergarten were two or three years old during the pandemic. At that time they could not see other children and, when they went outside, they had to wear masks, so they could not see the expressions of others. So they are not used to being in a classroom, concentrating and spending time with other children. That is why outdoor play is so important: it allows them to understand what it is like to get together with others and share with them.

–How do cultural differences between the northern and southern hemispheres influence children’s upbringing and free play?

–I am a little disappointed to see that the same thing is happening here as there. That particular idea of what it means to be a good parent originated in the United States and spread throughout the world. You had the siesta, such a divine thing. That this is being lost makes me very sad, because the siesta represents the idea that you need time to relax, to just be and chat, drink mate with others, do nothing. And this model of being a parent takes a lot of time and work. If you look at the data on time use of women in the sixties and seventies, you see that they were at home for many more hours but less hours mothering than now.

–These days, graduating teenagers celebrate their “last first day” of high school (UPD). In this context, parents go as far as to hire ambulances in case their kids drink too much alcohol. What do you think about this?

–We see that children have been so controlled that later, when they have a chance to make their own decisions, they don’t have the skills to do so. They go to college and there are no parents around, so they drink excessively, they use dangerous drugs. And now drugs are more lethal. All this also generates a lot of depression and anxiety. It’s like Americans who come here and see that they can drink, then they go crazy. If you have staggered opportunities to manage risks, you make better decisions.

–Does this situation also affect children in the workplace or in academia?

–Yes, I see it with my students. I spend much more time than before holding their hand to teach them to take intellectual risks. As a teacher, I feel more like a mother than ever. They don’t know how to make mistakes or fail. They always want to be given the solution, the answer.

In the future

On the road to freedom of play, there is one obstacle that always arises: cars. “Since World War II, we have put them above people. We have to take back all that space we gave them,” Brussoni proposes. And he gives Sweden, Norway and Finland as examples: “They have put in cycle paths, they separate pedestrians from cars, they have many places where children can play without it necessarily being a playground.”

Although we sometimes forget, children are part of society. It is not just about them playing in places designed for that, but also about seeing where they are going and imagining how to make that path more “playful” and interesting. “You can put in small ramps, benches or loose things, like sand, water, leaves or sticks,” Brussoni suggests. “Have things so that children feel welcome in that space and can make it their own. You need the places and then the social conditions for people to use them.”

–What social conditions do you think are most important?

–For children, it is key to have time, space, freedom and other children. Parents need bathrooms. Old people need shade and places to sit. In Canada we have the School Streets initiative: around the school, the streets are closed to traffic when children enter and leave. This way, children feel safer to walk there and, when they arrive, parents stay and chat with others. This creates a community. There is also the concept of Play Streets, which is the same but in neighbourhoods: you close the street once a week for two or three hours and that makes people feel safer to go out and chat.

–What is the biggest learning you have had so far at Outside Play Lab?

–People working or researching from different angles end up in the same place: they all want kids to get outside. Health professionals, so that kids can run around and be more physically active. Education professionals, so that they can be creative and flexible. Climate change experts, so that they can connect with the field and understand why it is important to save the world. Ophthalmologists, so that they do not have myopia. Psychologists, so that they can better manage their depression and anxiety. People like me, so that kids learn to manage risk and for reasons of child development. It doesn’t matter what anyone writes about: we all want kids to get outside and play.

The International Meeting “Sustainable Cities and Societies” takes place this Thursday and Friday at the Legislature. It is organized by the latter together with the Institute for Future Urban Challenges (IDUF), UN-Habitat and the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF). Brussoni will participate in the panel “Playing and growing in cities: habits, care and urban spaces” this Thursday, as well as in one of the “Initiatives that transform” laboratories on Friday, with the presentation of her case “The experience of Outside Play and guidelines for the design of urban policies that promote free play.”

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