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REFLECTIONS

Reflecting on Risky Play



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Exchange Reflections are designed to help a team of people, in-person or live online, think deeply together about a topic using an article from *Exchange* magazine as a guide. Here are the steps:

- 1.** Find a date and time that your team can meet for a discussion, and designate a facilitator.
- 2.** Email or print and distribute *Exchange Reflections* to each team member prior to the discussion.
- 3.** Read the article with an open mind, paying attention to any emotional reactions you may have. You may find you agree with some parts and disagree with others.
- 4.** During your meeting, use the suggested Discussion Questions to guide your reflections. Agree to abide by these guidelines during the discussion:
 - Allow everyone a chance to speak — Listen respectfully and actively
 - Commit to learning about each other, not debating
 - Embrace differences of opinion as healthy, and always support each person's authentic self expression
- 5.** End by looking together at the ideas in the Making Commitments section. Encourage participants to create their own commitment or choose one of the ideas provided.

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Audrey and Her Old Chairs

A Story of Creativity, Teamwork and Adventure

by Eliana Elias and Yuwen Ye

As an early childhood coach, I have the privilege of working with many teachers across the San Francisco Bay area. I often get excited about projects that evolve as a result of the partnerships children and teachers form with one another. I think the best projects come from small experiments, from using old materials in new ways, and from looking for the extraordinary in the ordinary moments. It takes attentive teachers to see how to use ordinary instances during the school day and transform them into exceptional moments of discovery and innovation. For these sensitive teachers, the quality of their teaching is closely connected to the ability to reflect on their own practice, to listen to the children, to observe closely and to plan for the unexpected. The story of Audrey, a 4-year-old who invented a challenging game by positioning old chairs in new ways, illustrates the brilliancy and resourcefulness of children. But it is in Yuwen sensei's reflections that one finds a teacher who is capable of creating the conditions for Audrey and her friends to show how creative, smart and capable they are.

We offer this story as a small example of how we as educators can make decisions on behalf of children, thus allowing their daily routines to become full of the sense of adventure and exploration that should permeate their days at school. We can decide to observe silently, to take notice of shifts in ideas and moods, to comment on what we see, to offer new materials and, more importantly, we can choose to not automatically intervene when we sense a challenge

or a risk. What we choose to do, in any given moment, can determine how we shape children's experiences and how we help them build their own identity as learners. Yuwen sensei has generously offered Audrey's story as an example of how she has intentionally made choices during her time with Audrey and her friends.

"In our rooftop playground, we keep some old plastic chairs," starts Yuwen sensei. "On this particular day, I saw Audrey and her friends lining up the chairs and jumping and walking over them. I immediately started to have an internal dialogue: What if they got hurt? What if I had to call the parents because someone had an accident? Should I repeat the automatic 'Chairs are for sitting' request? If I do not stop them, and something happens, will I be labeled as a neglectful teacher?"

When Yuwen sensei tells me this, I can immediately relate. When I was a preschool teacher, I was often fearful of injuries. We live in an era of lawsuits and concerns over licensing standards and safety. No teacher wants to see someone get hurt. This feeling, however, when gone unexamined, forces us to stop children from doing what they need to do to grow and change. It is particularly concerning when we continuously stop children from exploring their ability to move their bodies. In her book "Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident and Capable Children," pediatric occupational therapist and author Angela Hanscom

explains the importance of movement. She highlights the vestibular sense, which only develops as a result of children's natural need to move: "That sense is key to all the other senses. If that is not working right, it can affect everything." She also discusses how movement is essential to helping us develop proprioception and core strength. Without these, our bodies have a difficult time understanding where we are in space. As a result of excessive sitting and lack of natural movement, our children are suffering from myriad issues, including lack of ability to focus, lack of coordination, back problems, and so on.

Our adult fear of injuries is also coupled with our own bias against what might be appropriate play for girls. I often see teachers and family members stopping girls from engaging in "risky" play, while allowing boys to engage more often. "Boys will be boys," we still hear. The fact that Yuwen sensei's story involved three girls made me wonder about how we might also discuss these differences in teachers' reactions to "boy play versus girl play," and how thoughtful teachers like Yuwen sensei can support our field in understanding how reflection might help us overcome our knee-jerk reaction to "protect" girls. I was still thinking about this when Yuwen sensei continued, "At this point I had to examine my own fears. I paused and I told myself: I need to trust the girls. Let me observe them closely and look for their competence."

Instead of imagining all that could go wrong, Yuwen sensei was a thoughtful observer, looking for the children's competence; this allowed her to see the development of a remarkable story. As she moves closer, she sees how Audrey uses four old chairs and an old foam "couch" to create six different ways to play, creating walking and jumping games with Mackenzie and Mina. As we study children's thinking process, we keep returning to the fact that children's brains are still so flexible that they are wired to see possibilities that we, as adults, no longer see. Chairs, for most of us, are functional objects designed for sitting. Not so for children. Simple chairs present an infinite number of possibilities, as illustrated by the girls' play.

We have been learning more about the importance of following children's desire to explore materials in ways that present infinite possibilities. The work of Allison Gopnik, author of "Scientist in the Crib" and "The Gardener and the Carpenter" summarized the research on the importance of open-ended play, not only for individuals, but for our species. She points us to endless studies and experiments in which children naturally act as scientists, able to playfully set up experiments that will lead them to form theories about the world. The early childhood years, she claims, are vital for our species because it is during this time that we exercise our ability to think up ways to transform and engage with the world. Children, she claims, are natural scientists. She goes as far as to say, "It is not that children are little scientists but that scientists are big children."

As we work with young children, we must learn from the research on brain development and play. And, as we spend more and more time with children, we must ask ourselves, What is our role in guarding and preserving children's right to play and explore the world? How must we, in our classrooms, act and think around explorations that might initially make us nervous? How can we navigate the demands placed on us as early childhood educators while still fiercely protecting children's right to play?

Through Audrey, Mackenzie and Mina's story, Yuwen sensei shows us the ins and outs of an experienced and extraordinarily thoughtful teacher, as she observes and tries to make decisions that preserve children's right to engage in play.

Game One: Wobbling Through the Line of Upside-down Chairs

"Once I gave myself permission to file away my fears, and observe closely," Yuwen sensei explained, "I was able to see the first game. The girls intentionally placed the chairs upside down. As they carefully walked through their obstacle course, I could see that they created the challenge of navigating these

barriers. They placed their feet in ways that controlled the movement of the chairs, which wobbled this and that way. Their attention and determination is visible in the intensity of their gazes and the placement of their hands. At the end of the line, Audrey had positioned an old “couch,” also upside down, giving them a soft ending point for their journey. As I observed, I reassured myself more and more: these girls are competent. They know something I do not. They know what their bodies and brains need to grow and learn. I can take the role of supporter, by standing close and watching.”

As Yuwen sensei tells me this story, she points to the pictures as evidence. Her observations are filled with visible excitement; as she describes the children’s engagement, she is also describing her delight for her own learning as a teacher. I encourage her to continue.

Game Two: The Side Jump

“I noticed that the team was working silently, observing each other’s body language and responding to nonverbal cues. I stood close, also silently, waiting for their next move. After repeating the first game a few times, Audrey adds a change that makes the game a bit more challenging. Rather than lining all the materials in a straight line, Audrey places the foam wedge on the side, adding a curve. A final jump is required to

end the obstacle course. Delighted with these changes, the girls continued to play.”

Yuwen sensei’s astute observation about children’s body language made me think about how much can be lost when we focus too much on verbal communication. One of the unintended consequences of assessment tools, such as CLASS for instance, has been classrooms where teachers are constantly asking “open ended questions” or “extending the children’s language,” or simply talking and insisting on verbal expressions. Well-meaning teachers are then flooding the children with questions such as, “What will happen if... or What have you done to... Or tell me about...” Even though I understand that teachers need to intentionally think about language development as a worthy and important goal for the early years, I cringe when I see children being interrupted over and over again by a teacher who is asking too many questions and offering too many ideas. It takes someone experienced and sensitive like Yuwen sensei to understand the power of silence and of reading the messages clearly expressed in children’s body language. Children often need those moments of silence, because their actions are deeply connected to their thinking, and our silence allows for the space children need to act out their thoughts. When I share that idea with Yuwen sensei she nods in agreement.

“True. I tried not to disrupt their thinking... I was fascinated and wanted to see what would happen next.”



“What we choose to do, in any given moment, can determine how we shape children’s experiences and how we help them build their own identity as learners.”



Game Three: Alternating Heights

As Yuwen sensei observed, her own delight in the children's play activated memories of her childhood. "I grew up in a small village in China," she shared. "I was transported there for a moment, remembering how I often challenged myself by climbing trees and rocks. The adults who surrounded me, my parents and grandparents, did not try to stop me. In fact, they celebrated my discoveries, strength and resiliency. These memories made me wonder about my role in the children's lives. Yes, I need to keep them safe, but also need to protect their childhoods. I cannot offer them trees to climb, or return to the idyllic rural landscape of my childhood—after all we are in a vibrant city, with limited opportunities for tree climbing and exploration of natural environments—but what we do have is the ability to see children's resourcefulness. In order for children to challenge themselves, we must create opportunities to develop their bodies and minds. It is within our reach if we are willing to be flexible like they are."

As Yuwen sensei continued to observe, she thought about the simplicity of these materials: old chairs and a foam couch, and how easy it was for the girls to create excitement and new opportunities for their own learning with these materials. What else could the girls do with these old chairs?

"The next phase of the game involved a pattern. Audrey carefully placed a chair upside down and one right side up and repeated the pattern until all four chairs were lined up. This demanded balance and careful movement to go from a flat surface up high to a wobbly surface lower down. Audrey coached Mackenzie and Mina, who graciously accepted support and help. I remained silent, watching this collaboration in amazement."



"True. I tried not to disrupt their thinking... I was fascinated and wanted to see what would happen next."

Photos by Yuwen Ye

Game Four: Long Jumping

"The old chairs were then all arranged in a straight line. Again, Audrey did this silently, and the other girls seemed to understand that form of communication. They trusted her and acted as if they already knew what to do. This prompted me to think about how willing they were to follow Audrey's leadership."

I listened intently to Yuwen sensei's account of this, and thought about the complexity of the learning that was taking place. These small moments that happen in the classroom, the moments when some children are willing to relinquish control of the play and to follow someone's ideas, all of a sudden take on a different level of importance. These moments, I thought, gave the children practice in the art of collaboration. I encouraged Yuwen sensei to proceed.

"The children started to carefully line up, balance on the chairs and wait in line for a turn. As if willing her body to take flight, Audrey propelled herself into the air and landed with a thud onto the foam couch. The others giggled and a new idea started. After many jumps, Audrey started to increase the distance between the chairs and the couch. The girls then proceeded to practice their long jumps, and they kept moving the couch further and further away. I continued to silently observe and take pictures. I confess that all my fears disappeared as I watched these

delightful games unfold. The laughter! The sense of pride! I was now deeply engaged. As I moved around, supervising what was going on around me, I continued to wonder: what else will happen?"

Game Five: Higher and Higher

Yuwen sensei did not have to wait long to have that question answered. This time, she saw that Audrey was stacking the chairs up. Yuwen sensei smiled as she recalled what she felt during that moment.

"My fears came back. I felt uncertain about allowing this to go on, the four chairs stacked together seemed to be way too high and unstable. This is when I decided to be transparent about my feelings and I broke my silence. I told the girls that I had been watching their fun game and that now I had noticed that the four chairs were stacked. This, I claimed, was making me nervous. I also told them that I thought the couch seemed too far for the jump. Willing to appease my fears, the girls made the needed arrangements to make me feel comfortable. They left three chairs stacked and used the fourth as a step. They moved the couch a bit closer and looked at me for approval. The game continued, with all three girls propelling themselves joyfully into the air onto the couch. The jumps got fancier as the girls tested their abilities. As I observed, I could almost "taste" their delight. They encouraged each other: "That was so high!" At that point, I too joined in the celebration. "Amazing! You are so strong!" I repeated.

As I study the pictures and listen to Yuwen sensei's excitement as she recalls that moment, I too join in the pleasure of seeing the powerful message the girls were sending as they engaged in this play. I wish I had been there too, to witness the moment of the launch, to hear the crashing sound of their bodies onto the couch, to see their hair flying with the force of the wind. I am certain that moments like this, if repeated over and over, build in children an unshakable trust in themselves, in their ability to overcome fears and to try new challenges. And when teachers like Yuwen sensei, pause to respond to these moments with thoughtfulness and reverence for children's play, they too join in the learning, and activate their own

abilities to be confident teachers and to take on new challenges and risks. This parallel learning process is often present in my coaching, as I see teachers and children forming partnerships to learn together about how to learn.

Game Six: Will You Let Me Fly?

To describe the last part of Audrey's game with the chairs, Yuwen sensei digs through her notes and pulls out her final pictures. She continues,

"Adjusting the chairs again, Audrey was able to create two columns of chairs, two chairs high each. Then all three girls started to balance on this line together, negotiating the tiny space before one of them would jump off. I could not help but think that they were pretending to fly... and that I had been brave enough to let them."

Yes! I agree in excitement. We often stop children from "flying." I proceeded to share the beautiful poetry I could "read" in her story and in the pictures she shared. "Yuwen sensei," I said, "maybe this should be in teachers' job description: 'Able to hold back fears and allow children to fly!'" We chuckled, and then on a more serious note, we proceeded to discuss the thought process that allowed Yuwen sensei to make the minute by minute decisions that allowed her to open the possibilities for Audrey and her friends.

"You, Yuwen sensei, you are flying too," I concluded.



Photo by Yuwen Ye

"Yuwen sensei's astute observation about children's body language made me think about how much can be lost when we focus too much on verbal communication."

References

Hanscom, A.J., (2016). *Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident and Capable Children*. First edition. New Harbinger Publications.

Gopnik, A. (2016). *The gardener and the carpenter: what the new science of child development tells us about the relationship between parents and children*. First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



Yuwen Ye started teaching at Nihonmachi Little Friends in San Francisco, California, while she was earning her degree in liberal studies over 20 years ago. She is passionate about her work. She feels very fortunate to work alongside colleagues and wonderful families at Nihonmachi Little Friends. Outside of school, she enjoys gardening, traveling, hiking, cycling and spending time with her friends and family.



Eliana Elias has been working as an educator for the past 30 years. She works in the San Francisco Bay area in publicly funded programs. Elias feels very excited to work alongside talented and caring teachers who are willing to take risks.

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Exchange Reflections

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reflecting on Risky Play

- 1.** Elias and Yuwen write, "What we choose to do, in any given moment, can determine how we shape children's experiences and how we help them build their own identity as learners." Discuss what this means for you as an educator.
- 2.** How does fear come into play in the decisions teachers make on children's behalf? Think of a time when you were afraid about children's explorations or play. What role did fear play in your response? Does this article make you reconsider any decisions you've made on behalf of children?
- 3.** The authors touch on the role of movement in developing vestibular sense, proprioception and core strength. Re-read this portion of the article (p 81), then discuss to reach a shared understanding of what each of these mean and how they impact other aspects of development. Reference outside sources as necessary.
- 4.** The authors discuss gender-based differences in how educators respond to children's risky play. Do you feel you respond differently to boys and girls? Why or why not?
- 5.** The authors state, "As we study children's thinking process, we keep returning to the fact that children's brains are still so flexible that they are wired to see possibilities that we, as adults, no longer see." Share a time when you've witnessed children's out of the box thinking that reflects this statement.
- 6.** The authors ask, "How can we navigate the demands placed on us as early childhood educators while still fiercely protecting children's right to play?" Discuss how you navigate children's right to play as it specifically relates to concerns you have around learning standards, legal liabilities, schedules, or other issues.
- 7.** Is it possible to ask a child too many questions? Discuss what the authors mean by "the power of silence and of reading the messages clearly expressed in children's body language."
- 8.** Consider the games the children invented with the plastic chairs and the old foam. What do you think they were learning as they played? Brainstorm a list of skills, concepts and life lessons.
- 9.** Discuss the pros and cons of natural or household items – like these old plastic chairs – compared with purposely designed educational materials – such as puzzles, blocks or educational apps – as learning tools.
- 10.** How would you communicate the ideas in this article to parents and guardians? Do you believe it's appropriate to encourage risky play at home? Why or why not?

Exchange Reflections

MAKING COMMITMENTS

Reflecting on Risky Play

We encourage each person to make a commitment, write it down, and then share it with the group. What action step(s) might you take after reading this article? Create your own commitment, or choose one of these ideas:

- 1.** Make a concerted effort to bring more SOUL – silence, observation, understanding and listening – into your work with children (or adults). Come up with at least one strategy to remind yourself to do this.
- 2.** Learn more about the role of movement in brain development, in particular the importance of vestibular sense, proprioception and core strength.
- 3.** When you are with children, commit to noticing your own responses to their risky play and whether you are responding differently to boys' and girls' risky play.
- 4.** With consideration for the other demands you face, articulate the actions you or your program take to protect children's right to play. Make this statement publicly available.
- 5.** Commit to journaling about your own observations of or interactions with children, paying particular attention to the materials they use, the flexibility in their thinking (and yours), the elements of risk, and how you respond.
- 6.** If it speaks to you, post this sentence in a visible place, particularly near where you interact with children: "What we choose to do, in any given moment, can determine how we shape children's experiences and how we help them build their own identity as learners."

Now write *YOUR* commitment below: