

Let's Play America Encourages Risky Play One Play Day at a Time

Pat Rumbaugh and Jeremy Hoffner

Pat Rumbaugh, known as *The Play Lady* is the Co-Founder and Executive Director for the nonprofit, Let's Play America (LPA). Rumbaugh and summer intern, Jeremy Hoffner share their personal risky play experiences; highlight experts in the field, and provide concrete ways for stakeholders to offer risky play to others. The authors encourage communities to not only start localized play coalitions but follow the mission of LPA—bring risky play into the lives of both children and adult nationwide.

Editor's note: As a co-authored article, initial references to *I* belong to Rumbaugh. Hoffer's commentary begins on page 45.

If everyone pondered, “*What risks did I take as a child?*” I propose more than a few memories might surface. For me, several in particular come to mind: At the age of four, maybe five, relatives shared how I rode off on a neighbor's bike for a solo adventure. Around ten, my family lived in Monongahela, a western college town in Pennsylvania. Monongahela was full of fitness gyms with training equipment like thick ropes hanging from the ceiling. I recollect the feeling of great accomplishment after scaling and reaching the top of a long and knotted one on my own.

A third recollection—as a tomboy, I enjoyed games of pickup basketball, baseball, football and more high speeding, hill-topping bikes rides that took me to risky places. Places like the Monongahela River, a 130-mile-long waterway. Such childhood nostalgia of creative, brainstorming, risk-taking adventures not only shaped me into my present person, but prepared me to promote philosophies and encourage children and adults to play in similar ways. Fortunately, many of my ideas are now a reality.

Nowadays, a major challenge for many parents is watching their children take such risks as briefly outlined in my introductory statements. However, when permitted to do so, children gain the necessary skills to cope and navigate throughout an ever-changing world. As a parent, I encountered instances of risk with my son, Alex and daughter, Sarah.

Before Alex reached his first birthday, his strong-willed play choices were often considered cruel by onlookers—striding through the mall “strolling the stroller” next to his father; pushing heavy and clunky chairs around our apartment to walk on his own.

Another illustration occurred years later while at a playground with Alex and Sarah. Alex climbed up a swirly slide with steep stairs. Of course, his younger sister wanted to keep up, which made me nervous for her safety. Though small, Sarah was equally mighty. I quickly realized she was capable of the climb, so I observed from the sidelines.

Criticism was on the sidelines as well, and suddenly chided, “*Who’s watching that baby?*”

A lady openly disapproved of my permitting Sarah to venture down the slide on her own. Despite the public pushback, I allowed Sarah to test her boundaries, tolerate discomfort, and gain personal competence through the risky play. Doing so was in her best interest—insulating her from it was not.

What LPA Provides

As the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the nonprofit, Let’s Play America, since 2009 my passion for play advocacy exists nationwide, and more specifically in Takoma Park, Maryland. LPA organizes play days, closes streets for play, and unites other activities and organizations by adding play to event menus and venues.

Additionally, I was fortunate to know and hear the late Joan Almon, Co-Founder of the nonprofit Alliance for Childhood speak on risky play. Almon penned a detailed (2013) guide on the topic, *The Value of Risk in Children Play* available at <https://liinkproject.tcu.edu/wp-content/uploads>.

Almon was also an advocate of International Mud Day and urged LPA to get on board. Upon her suggestion, LPA now includes mud play such as mud pie making in its activities. A brief summary of our many risky play possibilities is listed below in figure 1. For further information visit our website www.letsplayamerica.org. ¹*The Let’s Play America Play Day Handbook* and *Let’s Play America Virtual Play Day Handbook* are available online as well.

¹**IPA play extension:** LPA handbooks -<https://www.letsplayamerica.org/handbooks>

Risky Play Opportunities - Let's Play America (LPA)	
Booking The Play Lady	Pat Rumbaugh, The Play Lady presents to organizations, groups and schools on the value of play. Workshops are playful, participatory and interactive.
Renting play equipment	Organizations can rent LPA play equipment such as the following: Corn Hole, dress-up clothing, giant chess sets, giant Connect Four games, mini tennis, floor hockey, hopscotch mats, hula-hoops, puppet theatres, and more. Pricing varies based on equipment.
Adding play to an event	LPA can add play activities for all ages and abilities to an existing event such as a community art show, church picnic, health and fitness fair, concert or neighborhood gathering. Equipment is included depending on the activity. Added play includes but not limited to Double Dutch jump roping and mud pie making as well as options above.
Planning a play event or annual play day	Play events can be private, corporate or communitywide. LPA will provide equipment, guidance and facilitate the event. Annual events can include activities such as Touch-a-Truck, where attendees of all ages can experience risky play while climbing into large vehicles like dump trucks, backhoes, and other equipment.

Figure 1. Let's Play America Opportunities

The Covid-19 pandemic turned the world upside down; LPA was not immune. Summer play events and internships were forced to unfold in the virtual world. One intern, Jeremy Hoffner, who attends Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore co-authored this article. His abundance of talents and knowledge on risky play was evident in the brief time we worked together promoting risky play. I asked him to share his knowledge and experiences, which appears in the second half of the piece.



Figure 2. Pat Rumbaugh, known as The Play Lady and community members participate in the 6th Annual Adult Play Day held March 6, 2022. To review a full menu of LPA services, visit www.letsplayamerica.org.

Assisting LPA

Assisting Let's Play America in the summer of 2020 was a tremendous honor. Working alongside Pat opened my eyes to the benefits of risky play for both adults and children. The knowledge gained specifically about risky play is priceless—thus, my co-authorship of my risky play adventures as well.

Growing up, two of my favorite play activities were baseball and floor hockey. In elementary school, my friends and I organized baseball and floor hockey games during recess. Our schoolyard had a large open field with a baseball diamond and blacktop, a privilege we took full advantage of during recess. Collectively, we decided on the equipment and organized who brought balls, bats, and gloves from home. Instead of dividing into teams or keeping score, we played as a giant team without an MVP. We took risks, formed rules and enjoyed our time together.

Floor hockey was our favorite activity to play after school. We played wherever and with whatever. During the winter of my freshman year of high school, my friends and I turned a frozen pond into a hockey rink. Although a couple falls occurred, we had a blast engaging in risky play.



Figure 3. LPA internships teach participants to plan play day events and much more,

As previously mentioned, Joan Almon, Alliance for Childhood wrote an amazing guide about risky play that outlines its childhood benefits. Several include—children learn from their own experiences and mistakes during risky play. They need to explore and gradually take more responsibility, even if struggling along the way. Struggling is a key component of the learning experience because it allows children to comprehend and challenge their perception of risk. Risk allows children to see their abilities grow and become more confident about pushing their boundaries and taking appropriate chances (Almon, 2013, pp. 5-9). Personally, it is my belief that had I not been allowed to experience a childhood full of risky play, I question whether or not I would be the person I am today.

With that disclosure, my childhood was not completely without supervision. However, I was given the space and freedom to make decisions for myself and test my limits in the face of inevitable stress. Referring back to my recess and floor hockey ventures, school aides only involved themselves in schoolyard games upon invitation or for safety concerns.

Moreover, Joan Almon uses the United Kingdom Playworkers description for play as “a set of behaviors that are freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated” (2013, p. 7). Play, and specifically risky play is rewarding. Children experience fear, surprise, joy and bond with a community in a way that promotes play amidst self-discovery. In her writings, Almon also highlights steps stakeholders can take to encourage adventurous, risky play such as involvement that begins at home and extends throughout neighborhoods and communities. LPA actively embodies and engages in these steps through the organization of play days, as mentioned in the above section. The play events organized by LPA provide opportunities for communities to not only play together but challenge themselves in a supportive environment.

In the mentioned handbooks, communities are encouraged to develop Play Day committees to plan and arrange events. The handbook also gives community support through a transformative model to create amazing events. Almon equally emphasizes how communities can build a coalition for play that brings people together, as well as consider how much risk a group can handle and offer play opportunities within that range. At LPA play days, the activities can be organized and offered to perfectly accommodate this goal. Depending on location and space availability, the possibilities are endless. Play Days can easily scale the amount of risky play opportunities available to children while maintaining safety as necessary (Almon, 2013, p. 30).

Like Almon, Peter Gray, a renowned psychologist at Boston College advocates for risky play and writes extensively on the topic. In *Risky Play: Why Children Love It and Need It* (2014), Gray describes *thrill* as the joy of freedom

plus the right amount of fear. As a child, I experienced *thrill* while in the batter's box and goalie net. Fear was present during both play illustrations—a ball or puck hurdling at me with considerable force. Yet, earlier, similar childhood experiences where I had the freedom to experience success during risky play combatted the fear. I understood I could respond by hitting the ball or stopping the puck without injury.

Conclusion

I'll echo my co-author's acknowledgement that while the Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed life worldwide, it provided opportunities for everyone to more freely play. Christina Caron explains in *The New York Times*—during the pandemic, children found the space to play freely despite lacking the usual scheduled activities and adult supervision (2020). I find myself in this group. My siblings and I reclaimed free time to play tennis on local courts, take our dog on long walks in the woods and play frisbee in the backyard. We even ventured back to play on the field where I played and combatted fear as an elementary school student. In moving forward with the pandemic lingering, I encourage continued play and discovery of its many forms. Play is an amazing unifier and when new opportunities to play freely amidst risk are sought after, the *thrill* and joy associated with some of our most memorable childhood moments become a natural and everyday part of our lives.

References

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