



**Episode 206: Your Parenting Mojo on Why We
Need to Let Our Kids Take More Risks**

Child: Welcome to my Mommy's podcast.

This episode is brought to you by Thrive Market... you probably already know just how much I love Thrive, but I want to share a few special tips to help you save money and keep your pantry stocked this time of year as we head toward the holidays. So, first tip, I keep a running list of items I need to order from Thrive in the notes app on my phone. So, for me, this usually includes things like coconut aminos, baking ingredients, almond butter, mayo, tuna, granola, condiments, raisins, etc. Once I have a list, I place a bulk order about once a month. This lets me take advantage of the free shipping and it also means I always have the ingredients and supplies that I need on hand. Second tip, I always start by shopping the Thrive Market brand line first because these products are as high of quality or often better than name brands and are much less expensive.... In fact, sometimes half as much as store brands. They aren't available anywhere else besides Thrive Market and they are staples in our home. And today, just for being a Wellness Mama Podcast listener, you can save an extra 25% off of your first purchase, plus a free 30-day membership to try it out. You can grab both of those and lock in the discount at thrivemarket.com/katie

This episode is sponsored by Genexa- a full line of cleaner and healthier medicines that are all organic and non-GMO and free of all common allergens which is a big deal. Their homeopathic and OTC medicines are extensively tested and use a patented system to avoid the harmful preservatives and fillers in many similar types of products. Here's a tip- they have a homeopathic formula called sleepology and it is amazing for kids and adults. It uses natural ingredients to promote restful sleep and it has been a lifesaver, especially when we travel or change time zones, or when I just have a kid who is having trouble sleeping. To shop their full line of organic and non-GMO medicines, go to Genexa.com/WellnessMama and use code WELLNESS for 20% off of your order.

Katie: Hello, and welcome to "The Wellness Mama Podcast." I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com, and I could not be more excited about this episode because it is about one of my favorite topics, and we're gonna jump right in. I'm here with Jen Lumanlan, and I hope I said that right, I am terrible at names. But she is a parent of an almost four-year-old, and she realized that she had no parenting intuition whatsoever, but amazing research skills, I can identify with that. And she decided to bridge that gap by getting a master's degree in psychology, and later followed it up with that a master's in education, so super qualified parent.

Along the way, she started a podcast called "Your Parenting Mojo," that link will be in the show notes, you can check it out, so that she could share what she was learning with others. With over 60 episodes, the show is a reference guide for parents of toddlers and preschoolers based on scientific research and the principles of respectful parenting. I've been checking out her podcast and I love it and I can't wait to jump in. So welcome, Jen, and thanks for being here.

Jen: Thank you so much. And you did say my name right.

Katie: Yay, that's kind of great.

Jen: Not everybody gets it the first time.

Katie: Awesome, I'm excited. So, we started on a good foot, that's awesome.

Jen: Yes.

Katie: So, let's start with the basics, I alluded to what the topic would be. But as parents, of course, we all want what's best for our kids. And I think that can make it really difficult to let them take risk and make mistakes because we, obviously, it's hard to see them hurt in any way. And personally, I am very much in favor of kids being able to take calculated risk at a young age, and I've written about this, and I know that not everyone agrees with me. So, can you start off by kind of explaining, based on your educational background and all the knowledge you have, why kids need risk?

Jen: Mm-hmm, yeah. And I think there are a couple of ways to actually address that question and rephrase it a little bit, and I can actually split it into two questions. So, when I think about why kids need risk, I think, "Okay, what do children gain from taking risks?" On one side. And then on the flip side of that is, "What happens when children aren't able to take risks?"

And so, on the "what do children gain" part, I think it's pretty clear in the psychological literature that managing risk is just part of becoming a fully autonomous member of society. Because if you can manage the risk that's associated with just being alive, then you're a competent person. And accidents play a key role in learning. And one psychologist said, "The duo of deliberation and accident is at the heart of the creative process. Accident, or the unexpected during opportunities for being creative, encourage flexibility, perception of new possibilities and discovery beyond the fixed or disciplined."

So, I think that what we need to understand is that children learn about their ability to cope with situations that induce fear through engaging in situations that induce fear. I think, as parents, we worry that if our child has some kind of really scary experience, they're gonna develop a phobia. But the research shows that actually phobias aren't born from scary experiences. Instead, children who are exposed to scary experiences learn that they can manage these risks, and they seem to experience fewer phobias than children who aren't exposed to scary experiences. So that's on the "what children gain" part.

And then on the "what happens if they don't have the opportunity to take risks" part, well, children today, they play a lot in play spaces that we would probably call fairly sanitized, they have fences all around them and rubberized play areas. And because children perceive these play areas as unchallenging and uninteresting, they actually tend to take more risks in their spaces. And I also learned when I was researching this that rubberized flooring, which we think, "Oh, yeah, that's gonna keep my kids safe," actually turns out not to be the case. Once you get above a certain height, rubberized flooring is no better at protecting your child from injury than non-rubberized flooring.

So, we think we're making conditions safer by giving our children opportunities to play in these sanitized play spaces, but we're really not. And so, when children don't have this opportunity to engage in risky play, they seek out more extreme risk. And so, a survey of almost 2,000 children who were aged between 11 and 14 in an area of England where children don't have a lot of opportunities to play, found that more than 40% of them regularly played in wastelands and building sites, underpasses rivers, abandoned buildings, and quarries, kind of all the places that you really don't want your kids to play. And they were also more likely to have sustained an injury in the previous month. And they played in those areas because there weren't any more desirable places to play.

And I think, finally, on the "what happens when they can't take risks front," it's important to note that anxiety disorders are now the most prevalent mental disorder in children and adolescents, and that parental overprotection has been associated with increased rates of those anxiety disorders.

Katie: Wow, I did not even know that, that's really staggering. And I agree with so much of what you just said, it's so logical that they learn to manage risk by taking risks, it seems so practical, but I think it's easy to forget when you're a parent trying to protect your child. And with all of your research background, is there also a lot of research on risky play in the literature that you're seeing?

Jen: Yeah. Actually, there's not as much as I would like. And a lot of it has been connected, and I think that you've found this as well, by Professor Ellen Sandseter, she's at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education in Norway. And typically, I get kinda nervous when one researcher gets overly affiliated with a particular concept because I think it leads to them kind of making a name for themselves, and they get really attached to this theory even though contradictory evidence might come out. And I'm thinking specifically of research on grit and mindset which growth/ mindset, which has been promoted as the key to solving all of our children's struggles with education. And it turns out that there is some evidence that these are qualities that are good for children to have, but they are not the be-all and end-all that they're made out to be.

So, despite the fact that a lot of the research has been conducted in Norway by this one researcher, my overall impression of her work is that she's a careful scholar who's looking at really helping children, in Norway mostly and within playgroups and daycares, to make better decisions and to help the adults who care for them make better decisions rather than in giving "TED Talks" and getting famous. So, there's not as much research as I would like, but what is there has been corroborated outside of her work as well, and so I feel relatively confident in the conclusions.

Katie: That's good, and I'm with you. I hope that there's a lot more research, but I'm guessing it's not a super popular research topic as there's probably not a lot of money in telling children to go outside and play.

Jen: Yeah, you're right, that's exactly it. Where's the money? You always have to follow the money. And nobody makes money off children playing by climbing trees and in natural spaces. And so, unless some kind of outdoor council is going to fund the research, it's very difficult to get the money for it. And I agree with you, I think that's basically the reason why we haven't seen as much research as we would like.

Katie: It's sad to me, too, that we actually need research just to like get back to the idea of children playing outside, you know?

Jen: Mm-hmm.

Katie: And like you talk about, like what you said in the first point about children need experiences that induce fear to be able to manage fear. Like that, I love that so much, and it's a good reminder because I think sometimes we can think, "Oh, if I just tell them to be careful, then they'll know to be careful," and it doesn't really work that way.

Jen: No, it doesn't at all. And I think we'll probably talk more about that as we get further in, but at worst, it distracts your child. And where they were previously being careful, they're now thinking about what you're saying instead of what they're doing, and it could potentially cause them to fall.

Katie: Agreed. Okay. So, before we go any further, I would love for you to define what risky play actually is because I wanna make sure we can delve into all of these topics. But I am guessing there may be some parents

listening who are like, "Oh, I'm fine with my kids running around in the grass." So, what actually defines risky play?

Jen: Yeah. So, we're actually gonna use Professor Sandseter's definitions and I'll give some examples as I go through. So, there are, I think, six of them. The first one is play with great heights. And we're not talking about massive heights here, but she gives an example where she followed some preschoolers around for a period of several weeks, and the teachers took the children out of the school area and to some local cliffs above a beach. And they were about 7 to 10-feet high. And some of the children said, "I'm gonna go climb those cliffs." And the teachers just said, "Okay, go for it."

And the teachers were standing probably 20 to 30-feet away, so it's not like they're standing right underneath and spotting. And they're just kind of watching without interfering, and the children are climbing up these 10-foot high cliffs over and over again, so that's the first one. The second is play with high speed, which I think we can all sort of intuitively understand that probably means things like toboggans, and tricycles, and things like that.

Play with harmful tools is one that's particularly interesting to me. And some of the examples that Professor Sandseter saw, with her own eyes, being done in a preschool, were using knives for whittling, using saws for cutting down branches, and hammers and nails for carpentry. And we're talking about children who are aged four to five and they're using these tools to make things with, they're using hammers and nails to make little boats to float on a pond, and even potentially by two to three-year-olds. So, these are things that we would not typically associate with a preschool environment in the U.S., or the UK, or probably even Australia, but they are just a normal part of preschool in Norway.

So, the fourth is play near dangerous elements like deep water. The fifth is rough-and-tumble play. And the final one is play where children can disappear or get lost. And so, an example that she gave on that is on one field trip, a five-year-old says to the teacher, "I'm gonna go on and walk all by myself." And the teacher says, "That's all right, go ahead." And it turns out that two other children actually go with the first and there's no teacher following, but the researcher does actually end up following, and they walk for a short while. And one of them goes back to the group while the other two go through some bushes. And they say to the researcher, "Goodbye, we'll be back at 12:00," and it's pretty clear that they're going by themselves and they don't want to be followed anymore. And so that I think is also a very strange situation for somebody who is not based in Norway to think about, where you are typically within eyesight of your child the vast majority of the time that you're with them.

Katie: Yeah, I think that's definitely a mental shift because I'm certainly not...While we're sitting here talking, I've seen a couple of my kids ride by on a bike in our neighborhood out my window. But in the summertime, the vast majority of the day, they're off in the woods, and I could find them probably if I needed to, but they're safe and they're there. But I also think, so one thing I'd love to delve into, that, for parents, it's like they hear you talking about why kids should play with knives, and climb things, and jump off things, and even get lost. And it's easy to think like, "Oh, that's great, other parents can do that, but I'm just still gonna keep my kids safe because really there's no risk of keeping them safe."

Like, on the one hand, if I let them do that and they die, then something horrible has happened, whereas if I just keep them safe, nothing bad has happened. So, I'd love to actually like look at the flipside a little bit deeper, is there research on the disadvantages of kids not taking enough risks?

Jen: Yeah. I think it really goes back to what kind of adults are we raising here? Are these adults who are going to be adequately able to judge risk? Are these adults who are going to be able to listen to their peers and say, "You know what, that doesn't sound safe to me," because they've been practicing that decision-making process throughout their lives, where they think, "Is this thing safe?" These children are gonna be much more likely to be able to when a peer says, "Hey, let's jump down this 30-foot cliff," to be able to say, "You know what, that's higher than I've ever done it before, and frankly, in my own body, it just doesn't feel safe."

Whereas if this is a child who has had their parent next to them within touching distance for most of their lives, and they've never really had the opportunity to explore in that way, then they just don't know the limitations of their own body. They don't know to look at something and say, "Does this feel safe? How does it compare to experiences that I've had before? My friend is telling me to do it, so I'm gonna go ahead and do it."

What we need to have our children doing is having these experiences on a small scale when they're young and the stakes are really low. And then they develop these skills as they go through life, and they learn sometimes to take bigger risks, sometimes they have bigger failures. They might fall out of a tree and break a leg, they might engage in some behavior that we would consider very risky. But they learn this in a more low-stakes environment than they do as they get older and go out into the world by themselves where you're not there to hold their hand, you're not there to say, "Be careful," to say, "That's too dangerous for you." And ultimately, what we're doing is we're raising adults here. As Julie Lythcott-Haims says, "We're in the business of raising adults, we're not raising children here. We need these adults to be self-sufficient, and so we need to be allowing them experiences that enable them to do that."

Katie: Yeah, such great points. And you have mentioned Norway a couple times. So, I'm really curious, Norwegians, is there a difference in the culture there? Do they perceive risk in a different way than us in other countries?

Jen: Yeah. To some extent, yes, I think so, and in other ways, maybe not so much. So, from my own personal experience, I traveled to Reggio Emilia, Italy, which is a town in northern Italy that a specific theory and approach to early childhood education is based on the approach that they use there. And I have seen, with my own eyes, a basket of pruning shears out in the covered porch area where the Wellington boots are for wet weather play. And there's 20 pairs of them there, so I didn't actually see the children using them, but there's enough that every child in the class could have their own pair of pruning shoes. And so, I don't think it's unique to Norway.

And if we look beyond Italy, beyond Norway, to other countries, I typically like to take an anthropological perspective. And I look to David Lancy who's a famous anthropologist, he's written a book about childhood. And he's written on this topic and I quote him, "Serious injury is rare in village societies, children there die most often of malnutrition and illness, not accidents. Meanwhile, village children take the initiative in learning how to use common tools like knives, setting their own pace and keenly observing those who are more competent. If parents were to play a more active and protective role in the child's development, the child might be safer from injury, but that sense of autonomy and ability to learn independently would be undermined."

So, I do think that what we call our weird, Western education, industrialized, rich democratic approach to thinking about risk, is very different from the way risk is seen in a lot of the rest of the world. Because we

seem to see all risk as a bad thing, and if only we could eliminate all that risk, then our lives would be better, the world would be a better place. But we don't think about, what are the positive connotations, associations with that risk and why we need risk.

And I was also interested to note in the literature that Norway seems to be shifting more towards us. There were more instances of kind of parent-made play equipment being ripped out, trees being torn out of playgrounds. There was one instance that I particularly enjoyed, where a teacher had commented that due to new safety regulations, it was no longer permissible for children to jump off the school fence unless there was deep snow. And so, there was no mention of any line of tape along the fence to indicate what constituted deep snow, so I guess the children were still allowed to make that judgment. But there's definitely a cultural shift moving towards the way Americans, British people might be at risk.

Katie: Yeah, I think you're right. I've seen that in a lot of places as well, and certainly in the U.S., for sure. What kind of risk would be considered good risk? I know we've talked about the ones with kids, but I'm assuming that this even technically applies to adults, but how can one kind of define what a good risk is?

Jen: Yeah. So, when I think about that, I think about all the different types of risks that Dr. Sandseter described. And, you know, each of those can potentially be very scary, but each of those can also be considered a good risk. And when we go back to the idea of phobias, if we think about children who are injured in falls between ages five and nine, the research shows that those children are actually less likely to be afraid of heights than ones who weren't injured in a fall. So, it's actually the young child who doesn't fear heights, who's more likely to behave in a risky way in high places. So, I think, some of the ways that we think about risk, or actually have hit back to front.

And same goes for water, children aren't more afraid of deep water if they had a traumatic event in the water before age nine. That seems to actually have some kind of protective effect, and it shows them that they can come out of this experience and that water is not necessarily something they should be afraid of. So, moving beyond the kind of phobias angle, I think risky play is really positively associated with physical activity and social health, and both of those things are great for children's development, and is negatively associated with sedentary behaviors, with sitting in front of a screen that we don't want our children to necessarily do more of.

And then, finally, I think there are possibly associations between risky play, and learned risk management, and self-confidence, and mental health, and independence. The literature is a little more not quite as on solid ground on those parts, but I found the last part particularly to be ironic, the independence, because western parents put such a premium on encouraging independence in their children, and yet, we're stopping them, we're preventing them from engaging in risky play, which is a key opportunity for them to learn about and practice skills that would really benefit that independence that we so value.

Katie: I agree. And I look at this correlation because my background being in nutrition, that I think we often underestimate kids and their ability to understand and to make actually educated choices on food when we explain to them, and treat them with respect and teach them, and don't assume that they only want to eat chicken nuggets and French fries and pizza, and I feel like this is another one of those scenarios. So, I'm curious, is there an age at which children can kind of accurately judge risk or is it more of like, as they grow, they are able to judge risk in whatever way they need to even when they're learning how to walk?

Jen: Yeah, I think it's more the latter, there's not sort of an age where that ability really switches on. And so,

it's not that we're just 100% suddenly gonna back off and say, "All right, you're on your own," you can judge risks for yourself right now. So, we want to expose the child to risks without exposing them to unnecessary risk. And so, there definitely are circumstances where children are really not very good judges of risk. And there was one paper that I read, where a boy reported a conversation that he'd had with his father to a researcher, and the father was trying to get the boy to wear a helmet when he went cycling.

And so, the boy said, that he replied, "I don't need to wear a helmet because I have very good reflexes." And then he told the researcher, "One time, I fell down the stairs over by the music room at school, I fell down on my tummy and then I covered my head quickly," and he demonstrated by covering his head with his hands and his arms. "Then I did just like this, and I was not hit on my head, but on all the other places," meaning his hands and arms. And so, this boy was thinking, "Because I had fallen down the stairs and protected my head, if a car were to come along, my reflex is good enough that I could just jump out of the way."

So I think it's definitely true that children are not necessarily 100% accurate about judging their own capabilities and how risk impacts them, but I think what that does show us is that the campaign that was running, I believe it was in Norway at the time, to persuade children that wearing a helmet is the only logical safe thing to do, is probably not likely to be very successful because this child was not approaching it in a way that was very focused on logic.

So, what we need to take away from this, I believe, is that children can learn to judge risk if we give them appropriate opportunities. So, another paper gave an example of two kids, Robert and John, and they're gonna slide down a snow-covered hill on a plastic sheet. And so, Robert goes first, and he loses balance and he falls and tumbles, but he runs back up the hill to do it again. And John is getting ready to go, and Robert says, "Wait, John, move a bit to the left to avoid skiing into the brick wall." And I'm thinking, "There's a brick wall at the bottom of this hill?" So, they took a chance, but they judged their own and each other's limitations, and they use that first trial run to judge the environment and to shift their response to the environment to stay safe.

And so, ultimately, that's what we want our children to do, to be able to judge this risk for themselves. And if we never give them this chance to practice, you know, walking along the curb by themselves without holding our hands, these really low risk situations where we try and de-risk them completely, then if they don't get that chance when they're young, they may not be able to do it themselves later when it counts.

Katie: I agree. And no one is proposing obviously that we let children be in actual dangerous situations or ride in busy streets without a bike helmet, of course. I think it's easy, though, to make that leap of, you know, a child playing outside in certain situations is equally as dangerous as them riding a bike on a highway without a helmet by themselves. So, I'm curious if you've seen, especially from you being in the UK and us being in the U.S., and then reading research from other countries, if there's a difference in how adults are perceiving risk and if that's what's causing this shift.

Jen: Yeah. So, I think the CDC in the U.S., that's the Centers for Disease Control, reports that around 200,000 children are treated in emergency room departments annually for injuries that are sustained on playgrounds, but that rate of injuries is actually decreasing. And the rate of both injuries and deaths on playgrounds remains minuscule compared to the injuries and deaths that are sustained in traffic accidents. And I think that you've raised this point in the past as well, that our children are in considerably more danger on the drive to the playground than they are in the playground themselves. But these accidents do get massive publicity when

they occur.

And so, our natural human instinct is to respond by attempting to de-risk play by taking really extensive measures to prevent any kind of injury from occurring, no matter how minor it is, whether or not any lasting negative effects occur, because the vast majority of those emergency room visits are nothing more than visits, and the child gets treated and released, and we also disregard the positive effects that might occur. And we do this whatever the cost. So, we transform these playgrounds at massive cost, at financial cost, and we don't keep in mind the social cost that is being left on the table by de-risking playgrounds.

So, we sort of mentioned earlier the idea that when a when an adult says, "Be careful," which is I think almost reflexive, it's sort of like, "Good job," among western parents at this point. But if we see our child doing something that's even a tiny bit risky, the words, "Be careful," we don't even think about them, they just come out of our mouths. And so, as the child's attention shifts from the challenge to the adult, her focus is no longer on the challenge, and it actually increases the potential for an accident.

And I don't think that we, as adults, are very good at understanding that, and at keeping it in mind and using that information in the moment. So, one of the pieces of information and advice that I would like to leave with parents today is related to that and how we can damp down that tendency to have the words, "Be careful," be the first thing that comes out of our mouths.

Katie: Yeah. Actually, like let's delve into that now, because I know, even me, wanting my kids to take risk, it's so hard not to encourage them to be careful, so what's the antidote?

Jen: Yeah. So, I think the antidote is something that I've used elsewhere in parenting actually, and it's a carefully placed pause. So next time you feel the urge to say, "Be careful," when you feel those words making their way from your brain to your mouth, just pause for just a second, and then ask yourself if you think that your child hearing that will help your child, and whether the benefits of saying it outweigh the risk of not saying it. So, are they not being careful in that moment? Is there really legitimate danger of broken bones or serious injury, or potentially death from what they're doing at this moment? And if there is, then that is a moment to intervene.

At that point, the words, "Be careful," are potentially not going to be something that's going to be useful. But it would either be, "Get down from there right now," if there's legitimate danger that they're actually going to die from what they're doing. But what I would typically say is do you see that steep drop-off on the other side, or what's your plan, or how will you get down? And so, I wouldn't say those things as they're making a tricky maneuver because, again, I'm taking the focus away from the thing that they're trying to do and putting it on me, which is not where we want their focus in that moment.

But when they get to a point and they say, "Hey, look at me," and they're showing you how proud they are, then that's the moment to say, "That's awesome. How are you planning to get down from there?" And so, what I would basically try and encourage parents to do is to eliminate the words, "Be careful," from your vocabulary because, ultimately, they are not going to help a child who's already being careful, and there are other things that you can say that will better help your child to manage risks than be careful if there is a legitimate risk.

Katie: I love the, "What's your plan," so much because that is respecting them, and then saying like,

"Obviously, I'm assuming that you have a plan. And I'm not telling you not to do it, I'm just really curious what your plan is, please share." I love that so much.

Jen: Yes. So yeah, absolutely, and it's very respectful of your child, it is making the best assumption about their intent and their abilities. And sometimes they won't have a plan, and sometimes you might need to suggest to them, "Well, what if you put your foot right there and then you spun around a bit, do you think you could reach that thing down there?" And then they can use that information, and you're helping them to understand the limitations of their own body, but also their capabilities, and that's information they can really use to improve their confidence, to improve their skills. All of those things are things that we want to encourage in children, and none of those things are achieved when that reflexive "be careful" happens. So that's the first thing.

And so the second thing I would say that's important is encouraging children to play in areas that are outside of playgrounds, and particularly in areas that have sort of natural built-in risks, things like hills that can be run up and rolled down, or spun down, or toboggan down, or however your child wants to get down, things like trees, preferably trees with low branches that they can climb. And you want them to be able to climb this tree without your help, so that's why the low branches are great. If you have to put your child in the tree, then they're not really exploring the use of their body and how their bodies' skills can get them into the tree in the first place. So, you really want it to be something that they can completely get into and get out of by yourself. You might be standing close by and just checking in and making sure that everything looks okay, but, ultimately, you want your child to be able to get into and out of the situation by themselves.

And then I would say the third thing is - try and ignore the other parents at the park who might be on the "be careful" bandwagon because it seems like almost everybody is. Unless you've really had the opportunity to think deeply about this, and really understand what are your deep feelings about risk and what you believe that your child should be able to accomplish, and can accomplish and your goals for them, pretty much, the default position is the "be careful" position.

And so, we sort of assume that this parental guilt about allowing your child to take risk is going to lead to a good outcome for children, but in reality, this is not the case. So, it's definitely possible as you sort of proceed down this path of allowing your child to take more risk that you're gonna get side eyes from other parents at the playground. And I'm in a number of groups on Facebook where parents do allow their children to take more risk and they report that that's one of the things that they find most difficult to deal with, is the looks from the other parents, the comments from other parents, potentially even strangers stepping in to take your child down from a situation that they think is unsafe, so you're sort of watching out for a whole different kind of interaction there.

So, I think, making sure that other parents feel that you are present when there are other parents around, and that you're paying attention, and that you see what's going on, you're okay with what's going on, is a key to overcoming that issue. So that's the third suggestion. I think there are two more things that I really use in my own life and that I think is very helpful to encouraging children to take more risk. The first of those is substituting some scheduled activities that you drive to with just spontaneous outdoor play, with whatever friends happen to be around. So, actually, we're in our first swim class right now, and this is the first class of any kind that my almost four-year-old has been signed up for.

And so, we have really prioritized free play over-scheduled activities throughout her life, and especially free

play with people who happen to be around. And the way we live lives today, sometimes that has to be manufactured a little bit and you have to invite people over. But, you know, invite a bunch of friends over to play in the sandpit and just hang out. And don't have the parents be right next to the children all the time, have them be in a bit of a distance, and just let it play out and see what happens. And allow the children to determine their own play, and determine what risks they think are appropriate, and to manage that for themselves.

And then, the final thing that I've really had to catch myself doing is being sure to adjust your perception of risk as your child gets older and becomes capable of doing more things by themselves. So obviously, there are ages where your child just can't do something for yourself, and I think the one that really stuck out in my mind is getting out of your car seat by yourself, obviously, an infant cannot do that. And even once you sort of first transition out of the infant car seat, your child may not be able to get out of the car seat by themselves, but it gets to a point where they can.

And I think there's a tendency for the parental brain to sort of get stuck on what your child was doing a few months ago, and to assume that that still works and that's still the best way to handle the situation when in reality, your child has moved on. And so, yeah, there are times when your child is seeking a moment of connection and they really want you to help them out of the car seat, and there's nothing wrong with that at all. But acknowledging that they have the ability to get out by themselves and to encourage them to do that, I think is a real parallel to the way that children take risks and the way that we should encourage them to take risks. Just because something was really dangerous for them six months ago, and they weren't able to do it six months ago, doesn't mean that that is gonna stay the same way forever, and so I really make a point of noticing when these things shift.

So, if there's a playground close to us that has some equipment for older children on it, and we were there recently, and my daughter who is well under I think the age six at bottom limit, was able to climb up the play structure. And I said, "Hey, do you remember when we were here a few months ago and you got almost to the top and you couldn't figure out how to get to the top, and you just wanted to come back down again?" And that, of course, was fine at the time, and I guided her back down, but now she's able to get to the top. And we just kind of celebrated that for a minute and she was able to see how her skills are progressing. And I sort of talked away in the back of my mind, "Yeah, she can do that now. I wonder what else she can also do that I hadn't realized."

Katie: That is such a good point, and that's an idea that we try to carry over to all aspects of parenting. And I know you have a lot of knowledge there, but with six kids, it's also more important just logistically. But we have a rule that we won't do anything for them that they can do themselves. So, once they get out of their car seat, we won't get them out of their car seat. And once they can go to the bathroom alone, we don't follow them into the bathroom, and all those things and it's hard as a parent. Because I think also there is the nostalgia for us of the baby phase and them growing out of that, but acknowledging that that's in us, not in them and that our job as parents is, like you said, to raise adults, not to raise children.

Jen: Yes.

Katie: As hard as that could be.

Jen: And with six, in a way, it's easier for you because you can't be on one of them all the time. So, they have

more freedom just by dint of your time and your energy being spread across multiple children. I think that it's much more difficult for parents of one child like me, or maybe two children, who can potentially be there for the majority of their child's time out of daycare or preschool, and to not try and exert that "be careful" influence over every aspect of that child's day. So, in some ways, you have a built-in advantage over us.

Katie: I totally agree. When people ask me that who only have a couple of kids like, "I don't know how you could ever have six, I can't imagine." I'm like, "Really, it forgives a lot of my potential parenting faults because I can't physically spoil them, and I can't physically do everything for them, and they have to like have built-in conflict resolution all day long. So, I think they both have their advantages and we all have to learn how to navigate our own situation for sure.

So, we live in a neighborhood now where there's a ton of kids, and most parents are very free-range, and the kids are outside, and it's wonderful. And I'm curious because we're kind of tossing around the idea of designing kind of a play area for the kids that is off to the side, that they have their own space. And you've mentioned playgrounds and how they've changed and gotten safer, what would be some guidelines for even in a backyard play structure, something that would be really friendly to the child's growing brain?

Jen: Yeah, that's an awesome question. And we're in the process of trying to create something like that in our back garden. And I'm not gonna give you a list of things you should go out and buy because I don't think that that's helpful. I think that the most helpful thing, if your child is old enough, is to sit down with your child and ask them what kind of the things they would like to see in a playground.

We actually did that with my then three-and-a-half-year-old, and she wanted a sandpit and a hot tub. So, she did not get the hot tub, but she did get the sandpit. And so due to the circumstances in our garden, our previous homeowner was a stonemason and he had built this pit and filled it with gravel and rubble and all kinds of stuff and leveled it out. And had put some Adirondack chairs on it, which we have not used in the seven years we've been in this house. And so, we ended up excavating it and filling it up with sand, so that worked out well for us, not everybody's going to have that.

Some people are gonna have a patch of dirt, which is an awesome plaything. Sticks are amazing playthings. Tree rounds are amazing playthings. So, if there is a landscaping company in your area that cuts down trees, if you give them a call, they often have to pay to dump that stuff. And so, if the next time they're cutting down a tree in your area, you ask them to bring the cut-up pieces to you, then they will often do that for free. So those kinds of toys and "current toys" encourage balancing, and children can set up obstacle courses on them, that kind of thing. If you have any old tires laying around, as long as mosquitoes aren't a concern because they can get water in them and then mosquitoes can breed in them.

But ultimately, I think the focus should be less on equipment and more on just allowing your children the space to do what they want with the time. I'm actually in the process of researching an episode for my podcast right now on fantasy play, and there seems to be a real theme in the literature about how having toys that have one function really impedes children's ability to engage in fantasy play. And so, we think we're doing our children a favor by having props that they can have for this fantasy play, and have costumes for this, and for that, and the other, and all kinds of other equipment.

And now, what children really need are a few pieces of fabric, they can make up the rest for themselves. A piece of fabric can stand in for almost anything in a child's imagination, and they benefit so much more from

that than they do from having a library of costumes that they can pick from. And so, I extrapolate that out to the outdoor environment and think, "What can a child do with a stick?" I mean, a stick. When I did an interview with an expert on play, he pronounced the stick as the best toy that a child can have with no sense of irony whatsoever, because the child can imagine onto it pretty much anything.

So, I think all that is to say that no matter what space you have outside, no matter how much of a disaster you might think it looks, and frankly, as I peer out at my back garden, it kind of looks like a disaster. But those kinds of environments have such an enormous potential for really rich play. And if we just back off and let our children do whatever the heck, they want to do out there, then that is really going to benefit their growth and development.

Katie: That's such a great point. And I think of our dress-up bin, but also our backyards, in some ways, sometimes it looks like a trashy because you have all these like old pieces of cloth, and ribbons, and all this stuff, and they will tie themselves up into all these crazy costumes, but it's so fun for them. And the same with the backyard. And I get the parental impulse to wanna give our kids nice things and to have like shiny pretty playset. But I agree with you, I think we're definitely leaning towards more of like a nature type concept with like stumps and maybe a tree house they can climb. But not anything fancy.

Jen: Yeah. And that really carries across to playgrounds as well, I think. I was just reading an article in "The New York Times" last week about this super, super fancy playground that's just opened in Brooklyn, I believe it is, where, of course, it has rubberized flooring wall-to-wall, but it sort, of takes its architectural cues from the former sugar factory that was on the site. And I think the children are supposed to imagine the process of making sugar as they go through the site.

And I'm thinking, "All right, how much more would they have gotten if the architects had just left a pile of wood, and a bunch of nails, and hammers, and other assorted essentially junk on the site, and told the children to have at it. You know, in Berkeley, we're so lucky to have an adventure playground, where literally the children can go and have hammers, have nails, and build things out of wood that maybe they don't have access to elsewhere. And that kinda play is so much better for a child's development than this manufactured playground that looks beautiful in the pictures, but it's really not designed of a children's development in mind.

Katie: I agree. And I'm gonna throw a little bit of a curveball at you could because I don't think I put this on our list of questions. But another huge objection I get from parents that I'm hoping you can speak to is that it's not safe for kids to play outside because they're gonna get kidnapped. I get this so much. In fact, like I have had people call me like a negligent parent for letting my kids play outside without me helicoptering. So, I'm curious, is there research on this, are kids actually at risk of being kidnapped in their own yards?

Jen: Yeah. In their own yards, I would say, is even less risky. And I think you've looked at the same statistics that I have, which essentially says that the risk of being kidnapped by a stranger is infinitesimal, the risk of kidnapping is actually overall much higher by someone that the child knows. So, if you're in a difficult divorce situation or there's something going on in the family, the risk of kidnapping is much greater by a family member that your child knows than it is by someone snatching them off the street.

And I think it's so hard for our parents to get their heads around because we see all of these crime drama shows, we see all the publicity that happens when a single child goes missing, and we think, "I would never

want that to happen to my child." But the chances of it happening are so, so, so tiny that it's essentially a non-risk. The far bigger risk, if your child is playing alone in their yard, is that someone's gonna call CPS on you, unfortunately. So, I think it pays to have good relationships with your neighbors as well and to have them understand your philosophy and your approach to parenting, and that you're really taking a thoughtful approach.

And it probably also bears mentioning that we are both fortunate to be white, to be relatively privileged members of our society by benefit of being white and that people make assumptions about parents from other backgrounds. And there was a famous case where a woman, I think she was African American, had a shift in a fast-food restaurant. And she asked her maybe seven to nine-year-old to play in a local playground like just around the corner from the restaurant while she was working, and he was fine with that, and somebody called Child Protective Services on her.

So, I think that we also need to recognize the privilege that we have that, by and large, if we do have good relationships with our neighbors, that somebody probably is not going to call Child Protective Services on us, but that not all parents have that luxury.

Katie: Yeah, agreed, and that's an important point. And sadly, that's where we are as a society. But I'm hopeful that with all of us starting to understand this, and maybe letting our kids be more daring, that we'll start to shift that a little bit more.

This episode is brought to you by Thrive Market... you probably already know just how much I love Thrive, but I want to share a few special tips to help you save money and keep your pantry stocked this time of year as we head toward the holidays. So, first tip, I keep a running list of items I need to order from Thrive in the notes app on my phone. So, for me, this usually includes things like coconut aminos, baking ingredients, almond butter, mayo, tuna, granola, condiments, raisins, etc. Once I have a list, I place a bulk order about once a month. This lets me take advantage of the free shipping and it also means I always have the ingredients and supplies that I need on hand. Second tip, I always start by shopping the Thrive Market brand line first because these products are as high of quality or often better than name brands and are much less expensive.... In fact, sometimes half as much as store brands. They aren't available anywhere else besides Thrive Market and they are staples in our home. And today, just for being a Wellness Mama Podcast listener, you can save an extra 25% off of your first purchase, plus a free 30-day membership to try it out. You can grab both of those and lock in the discount at thrivemarket.com/katie

This episode is sponsored by Genexa- a full line of cleaner and healthier medicines that are all organic and non-GMO and free of all common allergens which is a big deal. Their homeopathic and OTC medicines are extensively tested and use a patented system to avoid the harmful preservatives and fillers in many similar types of products. Here's a tip- they have a homeopathic formula called sleepology and it is amazing for kids and adults. It uses natural ingredients to promote restful sleep and it has been a lifesaver, especially when we travel or change time zones, or when I just have a kid who is having trouble sleeping. To shop their full line of organic and non-GMO medicines, go to Genexa.com/WellnessMama and use code WELLNESS for 20% off of your order.

Katie: Okay. So, a couple questions I usually ask as we start to wrap up that I would love to hear your take on, especially because you are a researcher like me, I'd love to ask if there is a favorite book or a book that's had a huge impact on your life that you would recommend.

Jen: Yeah. And it's maybe a bit of a curveball because it's actually in some ways not research-based. But the book that I would recommend is called, "Your Self-Confident Baby" and it's written by Magda Gerber. Are you familiar with Resources for Infant Educators or RIE?

Katie: Yes.

Jen: Okay, great. So, judging by the respect-based language that you would use, I assume that that was something you were familiar with. But that's a book that's so profoundly shifted my parenting by bringing this respect-based relationship to my relationship with my daughter. And I'm so proud of what the relationship that we have right now because I always believed that love was a necessary component of a relationship with a child, but I thought that it was necessary but not sufficient, and I didn't know what was gonna fill the gap.

And so, the book, "Your Self-Confident Baby" really gave me the tools that I needed to build this relationship with my daughter that has since sort of blossomed onto this path of scientific research. And I actually, a couple weeks ago, I recorded an episode that will be live shortly on the research that supports the RIE approach. And there's no research that says, "If you raise a baby a respectful way that they're going to come out better than a baby who's not raised in that way." But there is a lot of research from a lot of different arms of psychology that can kind of combine together and really examine different aspects of the RIE philosophy and that provide a lot of research-based support for it.

Katie: I love that. And the last question is, if there was a way you could magically wave a wand and give a piece of advice to everyone in the world, what would that advice be?

Jen: To everyone in the world, well, knowing what I know about psychology and also anthropology, I would not be so hubristic as to give one piece of advice about parenting to everybody in the world because it wouldn't be relevant. But I believe that we all have within us the ability to be awesome parents, and that we can raise confident, competent adults. And because those qualities are valued in our society, and whose company we really enjoy, and I think that that's so important as we're thinking about what kind of people are we raising here? Are we raising someone whose company we're just gonna enjoy for as long as they're children, and also when they're adults? And sometimes we need some tools to help us recognize and develop those skills and abilities in ourselves, and those are the kinds of resources that I try and help provide through my podcast.

Katie: I love that. And speaking of your podcast, of course, I'm gonna have links in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm. But let everyone know where they can find you online.

Jen: Mm-hmm, yeah. So, there are, as you mentioned, more than 60 episodes on other issues related to topics like this at yourparentingmojo.com. And if your listeners are interested in risky play, they're interested in the kind of lifestyle that you have, they may also be interested in homeschooling, which I know is something that's important to you. And I actually developed a course to help parents understand whether homeschooling is right for their family. And if you go to yourhomeschoolingmojo.com, there's a free seven-question quiz that will return personalized results to you to assess your readiness for homeschooling.

Katie: That is awesome, and we will make sure those notes are in the show notes as well. But, Jen, thank you so much for being here. I, like I said, this is one my favorite topics, I love how well you've researched it, and I love that you're out there spreading the word to parents and giving practical advice.

Jen: You're so welcome, thanks for your time.

Katie: And thanks to all of you for listening. And I hope to see you next time on "The Wellness Mama Podcast."

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.