

## Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives on Tree Climbing

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### ABSTRACT

Tree climbing is one aspect of nature play; however, it is limited in many areas due to fear of liability, heightened safety awareness, unclear policies, accessibility, and restrictive outdoor play time. This study investigated current practices concerning tree climbing in early childhood settings with the objective of creating recommendations, best practices, and a tool kit for incorporating tree climbing in a safe way in early childhood settings in the United States. The study used a convenience sampling technique to investigate practices and concerns around tree climbing in early childhood settings, ages two years through eight years of age. An online survey instrument was disseminated via social media platforms examining background and demographic information, tree climbing policies, rules, injuries, safety, and guidelines within early education settings with 415 qualifying respondents. The data concluded that 41.7% of early childhood educators in the United States responding to the study do not allow tree climbing due to perceptions surrounding accessibility, fear, liability, licensing, and danger. The data from 58.3% of respondents who do allow tree climbing concluded that tree climbing in early childhood settings can be safely and effectively implemented. The results suggested low injury rates, high percentage of rules surrounding tree climbing, parental concerns, and issues surrounding accessibility, liability, and licensing.

**Keywords:** childhood tree climbing, early childhood education, play and safety policies, managing risks in outdoor play

Tree climbing is one aspect of nature play; however, it is limited in many areas due to fears of liability, heightened safety awareness, unclear policies, accessibility, and restrictive outdoor play time. The purpose of this study was to investigate current practices and concerns around tree climbing in early childhood settings that care for children aged two through eight years. Early childhood settings provide a vital role in outdoor play as physical activity patterns and a range of skills are established (Little & Sweller, 2015; Ortega, Ruiz, Castillo, & Sjostrom, 2008; Strong et al., 2005) and may impact tree climbing availability. As a result of this research study, recommendations and best practices for incorporating tree climbing in a safe way in early childhood settings in the United States were created.

### Literature Review

Since increasing numbers of children spend time in formal childcare settings (Little & Sweller, 2015), investigating tree climbing within early childhood settings is prudential in understanding the complexities of this topic. The literature review explored managing risks in outdoor play, tree climbing in early childhood settings, and policies and restrictions specific to tree climbing. In this context early childhood settings include a formal setting providing care for children aged two to eight-year-olds, including, but not limited to, family childcare, public school settings, nature preschools, and other settings.

### **Managing Risks in Outdoor Play**

Children's outdoor play provides a positive experience of excitement, fun, and joy (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Outdoor play promotes creativity, environmental understanding, and critical skills for navigation (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012). Early childhood educators have noted the many benefits of risky play activities (Aldis, 1975; Brussoni et al., 2012; Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999; Kleppe, 2018; Sandseter, 2010). Outdoor risky play is an important aspect of child development and learning. Outdoor play activities, such as tree climbing, provide children the opportunity to learn new skills and interact with their environment.

Outdoor risky play can provide opportunities for exploration, meaningful moments, and positive experiences (Sandseter & Sando, 2016). Appropriate risk-taking allows children to obtain knowledge about their own abilities and limitations (Aldis, 1975; Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999; Kleppe, 2018; Sandseter, 2010). According to Coster and Gleeve (2008) risk-taking play also provides enjoyment, pride, sense of achievement, and self-esteem. However, early childhood educators must balance keeping children safe and managing risk. Brussoni et al. (2012) stated "it is appropriate to consider how to optimize play opportunities to support children's developmental needs while considering safety" (p. 3139).

There are growing concerns and debate about risk-taking play from early childhood educators. According to New, Mardell, and Robinson (2005), educators in the United States often feel restricted to exposing children to risk-taking activities like tree climbing. In contrast, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and Italian preschool teachers have fewer worries about children taking risks under their care than American preschool teachers (New et al., 2005). Policies, facility licensing, parental concerns, and fear of injury are just a few of the growing concerns of Western society's attitude on risky play activities. Despite low injury rates, Sandseter, Sando, Pareliussen, and Egset (2013) asserted the focus on safety has gone too far and has a negative impact on children's risk-managing competence.

Additionally, Sandseter and Sando (2016) looked at risky play, including tree climbing, in Norwegian early childhood settings. In Norway, where unsupervised outdoor play by children is a cultural tradition, many early childhood settings have been influenced by a more Western view on safety and need for close supervision as many injuries reported on playground equipment occur because of lack of supervision. McFarland and Laird (2018) looked at educators' perspectives in both Australia and the United States regarding risky play with three themes emerging: opportunities that supported large motor skills, free exploration of the environment, and assessment of risk. Australian educators embraced more risky play and included it as part of the national curriculum. They also noticed Australia has a lower litigious society compared to the United States.

### **Tree Climbing in Early Childhood Settings**

Little research is available on tree climbing in early childhood settings; however, Gull, Levenson Goldstein, and Rosengarten (2018) examined parents' perceptions on tree climbing, noting no major safety organizations specifically collecting information on tree climbing related injuries. Additionally, the authors reported many states adopted a Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights with many having a variation on tree climbing as a right for all children. Parents self-reported few tree climbing injuries beyond typical scrapes and bruises and shared family rules and expectations for safe tree climbing. The researchers noted current bans on tree climbing in some major cities, illustrating that regulations around tree climbing may protect the organization from lawsuits as confusion and questions around liability of the property owner exist. Additionally, they noted benefits of tree climbing, such as critical thinking, imagination and creativity, problem solving, self-confidence, social interaction, dexterity and physical strength, cognitive and emotional strength, resiliency, and risk negotiation.

Sandseter and Sando (2016) specifically investigated how managing risky play impacted tree climbing in early childhood settings, noting the following responses:

*"Fear of accidents from falling leads to no organizing or permission for climbing."*

*"We don't allow children to climb trees."*

*“Tree climbing is one example. Several parents were concerned that their children could climb our apple trees. After a chat with the local authority, we were advised to prohibit climbing; this was an activity for the children to do outside the institution with their parents. Today children are not allowed to climb those trees.”*  
(p. 186)

However, others in Sandseter and Sando’s study (2016) took a different tree climbing approach, restricting the height of climbing, having close supervision, putting regulations around the type of climbing surface, using a risk assessment, or having children demonstrate their ability to climb.

### **Policies, Procedures, and Expectations on Outdoor Play**

Risk management practices and policies for outdoor play can be challenging for early education leaders to create and enforce. Outdoor learning and play policies may play a role in keeping children safe; however, the same policies may not allow for child development and learning through risky play. In addition, childhood educators often have difficulty in locating, interpreting, and implementing these policies specific to tree climbing. Access to nature play areas, outdoor play policies, leader expectations, teaching procedures, and many other factors may dictate the management of risk-taking play.

Outdoor play is an important part of the young child’s day. This play is supervised by educators, many of whom plan time and space for creative play within the classroom day. Teachers have differing opinions about supervising children and feel that part of their supervision duty is to interact with the children, while other teachers feel that their main job is to observe and watch the children to avoid any safety hazards (Coleman & Dymont, 2013). Coleman and Dymont (2013) revealed that many educators have not been trained and do not have the knowledge about the importance of physical activity for children. Therefore, many are inclined to allow the children free, unstructured play time because the educators did not have confidence in leading physical activities with the children (Coleman & Dymont, 2013). Little and Sweller (2015) also mentioned that since teachers had to supervise the playground, they did not actively create additional play options for students. Due to the teacher/student ratio, the ability to facilitate developmentally appropriate play such as tree climbing may be limited.

Coleman and Dymont (2013) noted that educators do not often allow rough play due to unacceptable risk. Teachers regularly scanned “the playground for safety hazards, keeping children off broken or unsuitable play equipment and maintaining climbing frame height restrictions” (Coleman & Dymont, 2013, p. 213). In addition, the authors mentioned trees as a safety concern along with other natural environmental elements. Some teachers did not use the natural elements on the playground because they can potentially be too risky for the children. Coleman and Dymont (2013) recognized the risks of tree climbing, the need for increased physical activity, and suggested that policies can help promote safety.

One area that can be confusing relating to risk-taking play is the amount of mandated time outdoors for children. There are many conflicting statistics regarding the number of required minutes for physical activity, which may impact children’s accessibility to climb trees. Pate et al. (2013) reported the lack of states with standards regulating student physical activity. However, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommended that “preschool-aged children participate daily in 60 minutes of structured moderate to vigorous physical activity and a further 60 minutes or more of unstructured free play” (Coleman & Dymont, 2013, p. 204). Dowda, Pate, Trost, Almeida and Sirard (2004) also recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Pfeiffer et al. (2013) recommended that preschool-aged children should accumulate 15 minutes of physical activity every hour they are in care.

O’Neill, Dowda, Neelon, Neelon, and Pate (2017) recommended that staff should interact with the children, while encouraging physical activity and providing appropriate equipment for all children during the outdoor time. They created an outdoor policy for children ages three to five that included encouraging physical activity, yearly staff training, and allowing for 90 to 120 minutes of daily outdoor play. Additionally, they advocated for providing various play materials and not using physical activity as punishment (O’Neill et al., 2017).

The Washington State Department of Early Learning (n.d.) created a pilot program to license outdoor early learning, adapting policies and needs that are more relevant to an outdoor setting, including licensing regulations and logistics of operation. Policies from the pilot that address tree climbing include weekly visual inspections, removing broken tree limbs, and conducting a benefit-risk assessment for risky play (Washington State Department of Early Learning, n.d.). This assessment should include additional supervision, talking children through risk mitigation through questioning, limiting staff from putting children in risky situations (such as in a tree), and having educators help children own their individual level of ability.

The literature review focused on exploring concerns and issues surrounding tree climbing in early childhood settings and investigating policies and other factors that may impact tree climbing in early childhood settings. Managing risks in outdoor play settings and understanding why early childhood professionals allow/do not allow tree climbing warrants further investigation. As a result, the researchers investigated early childhood educators' perspectives and practices regarding tree climbing as risky play. Research questions for this study were:

1. What are early childhood educators' perspectives around tree climbing?
2. What best practices do early childhood settings use to allow for tree climbing?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study used a convenience sampling technique. An online survey instrument was disseminated via social media platforms examining background and demographic information, tree climbing policies, rules, and safety guidelines within early education settings. Early education providers, working with two to eight-year-old children, in the United States, anonymously answered a 29 questionnaire/survey. The survey was designed with specific questions targeted to educators who allowed tree climbing and others who did not. Based on projected sample size of the social media sites that have granted permission to post, the study required a minimum sample size of 270 total participants to have an adequate confidence level for the study.

### Selection of Participants

Participants for the study were recruited from diverse online social media groups that focus on early childhood education. An announcement and invitation to participate in the study was shared with six education and/or play related Facebook groups that spanned the targeted age ranges. The study link was posted in Preschool/Childcare Directors & Owners Networking, Play Empowers, Nature Preschool Community and Ideas, The Muddy Puddle Teacher, Early Childhood Directors Group, and Fabulous Firsties Facebook groups. The invitation was shared in the Facebook groups again after two weeks. To qualify for the study, participants needed to work in the United States in an early childhood setting with two to eight-year-old children. Participants had an opportunity to reflect on policies and viewpoints on tree climbing in early childhood settings.

### Instrumentation

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval of research, the survey was posted on social media platforms. In addition, a snowball recruitment technique was utilized. The online flyer included a request for study participants, parameters of the study, a request to share with other early childhood educators, and a link to the online survey. The flyer was distributed to the online groups that gave permission in Spring of 2019.

The survey consisted of 29 questions. Question one through four were qualifying questions to confirm respondents fit the parameters and give consent to the study. Study parameters included employment in the United States, being at least 21 years old, and working with two to eight-year-old children. Questions five through 12 asked for

demographic information, such as gender, location within the United States, level of education completed, role in early childhood education, ages of children in care, time children spend outside regularly, and type of setting. Questions 13 and 14 looked at tree climbing specifically, inquiring about accessible trees in the setting and whether the children have permission to climb trees.

Questions 15 to 19 were directed at educators who do not allow tree climbing in their spaces. Specific questions asked why tree climbing is not allowed, facility rules against tree climbing, and policies from insurance and licensing which may impact tree climbing, and open-ended questions allowing participants to share issues, concerns, and comments around tree climbing. Questions 20-29 were geared toward educators allowing tree climbing, including open-ended questions allowing participants to share issues, concerns, and comments around tree climbing. Participants were asked why they allow tree climbing, whether the benefits outweigh the risks, how tree climbing impacts the children, personal and facility rules, and guidelines around tree climbing, whether there are policies through licensing and insurance that impact tree climbing, how safe tree climbing is promoted, and injuries reported from tree climbing.

### Data, Results, and Findings

Responses were compiled using an online survey tool, applying the tool’s online analytical tools to aggregate and dissect information. SurveyMonkey was the survey tool utilized, which stored and compiled the information in a secure way and collected no personally identifiable information. A mixed-method approach to the study was used through collecting open-ended responses and quantitative data. Descriptive analytical tools within SurveyMonkey were used to calculate numbers, percentages, and charts using the quantitative data. The open-ended questions allowed educators additional opportunities to reflect on their perspectives of tree climbing in early childhood settings. The educators’ open-ended responses were coded and analyzed using a narrative analysis approach to form the findings with reflections on early educators’ perspectives on managing risks concerning tree climbing and to evaluate emerging themes.

#### Demographics

Four hundred and ninety-four respondents attempted to complete the survey; however, 415 qualified to complete the survey, due to the study’s parameters of being 21 years of age and working in early childhood with children ages two to eight in the United States. Of the survey respondents, 401 (96.6%) were female, 11 (2.6%) were male, and one chose not to disclose gender. Participants from 46 states were represented and there were a wide variety of ages that responded to the survey, ranging from ages 21 to over 55. Four hundred nine (98.6%) of the respondents had completed at least some college (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Respondents’ Level of Education*

Years of School	Number (Percentage)
At least some college	55 (13.3%)
Attending some college	169 (40.7%)
Graduating from college	55 (13.3%)
Completing post graduate school	130 (31.3%)

Diverse perspectives of educators were essential to the study. Participants had various roles in the early childhood settings as noted in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Role of Educators Responding to Questionnaire*

Role of Educator	Number (Percentage)
Teacher	288 (69.4%)
Early Childhood Administrator	92 (22.2%)
Family Childcare Provider	66 (15.9%)
Trainer/Consultant	39 (9.4%)
Teacher Educator	39 (9.4%)
Professional Development Instructor	29 (7%)
Assistant Teacher	17 (4.1%)
Other	48 (11.6%)
<i>Note: Respondents could choose more than one role.</i>	

Additionally, a variety of settings were represented, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Type of Setting*

Setting	Number (Percentage)
Non-profit Settings	120 (28.9%)
Public Schools	82 (19.8%)
Childcare Facilities	81 (19.5%)
For-profit	74 (17.8%)
Family Childcare	64 (15.4%)
Faith-based	43 (10.4%)
In-home	24 (5.7%)
Head Start or State-funded pre-K	17 (4.1%)
University Setting	9 (2%)
Other	78 (18.8%)
<i>Note: Respondents could choose more than one setting.</i>	

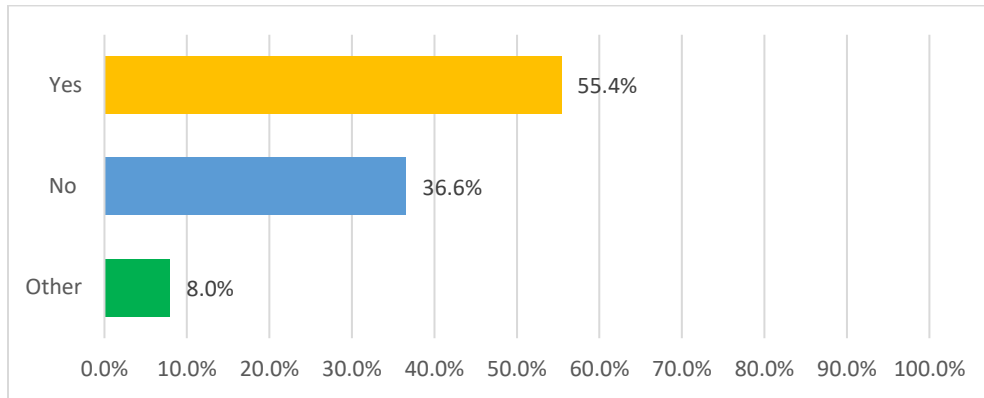
Participants were asked the ages of the children in their care (see Table 4).

Table 4  
*Number of Participants Caring for Children by Age of Children*

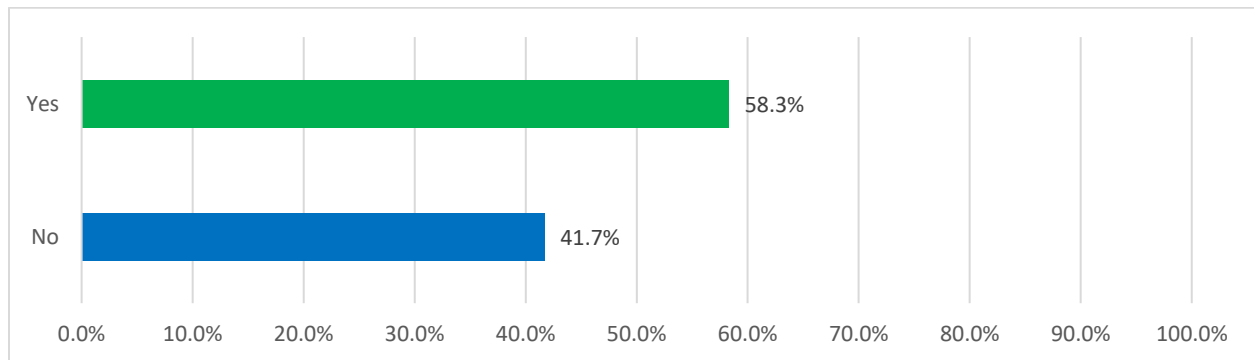
Ages of Children	Number (Percentage)
Two-year-old children	204 (49.2%)
Three-year-old children	290 (69.9%)
Four-year-old children	304 (73.3%)
Five-year-old children	301 (72.5%)
Six-year-old children	208 (50.1%)
Seven-year-old children	147 (35.4%)
Eight-year-old children	112 (27.0%)
<i>Note: Respondents could choose more than one age group.</i>	

In addition, 188 (38.1%) of the respondents answered that the children spend 10 or more hours playing outside while in their care when the temperature is between 50-85 degrees Fahrenheit. In similar circumstances, 87 (21.0%) reported spending zero to three hours outside per week, 97 (23.4%) spend four to six hours, and 73 (17.6%) spend seven to nine hours outside.

Question 13 asked respondents about access to climbable trees in their care (see Figure 1). Two hundred thirty (55.4%) reported that climbable trees are accessible while 152 (36.6%) do not have climbable trees accessible.



*Figure 1.* Tree accessibility. This figure shows the accessibility of trees in the respondents’ childcare settings. Two hundred forty-two (58.3%) allow tree climbing at their facility while 173 (41.7%) do not allow tree climbing at their facility (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Allowing children to climb trees. This graph depicts the number of childcare facilities that allow tree climbing.

Of the 41.7% of participants that did not allow tree climbing, many expressed fears around tree climbing, licensing restriction, liability, and safety concerns. One respondent mentioned that children, “Don’t touch nature basically.” Others do not allow risk taking play in their spaces in general. One mentioned that “Licensing and insurance both have me sign off that I won’t have the children participate in risky behavior.” Some are worried they will be sued if a child gets hurt tree climbing. One mentioned that tree climbing is “not in the approved curriculum hence we cannot instruct on it.” Many who do not allow tree climbing in an early childhood setting still shared pro tree climbing expressions and phrases, such as “Would love to let the kids have a more natural setting to explore but state is all over you looking for any reason to blame you for accidents” or “I personally think it’s great, but in general I feel like it isn’t commonly accepted in the childcare field.” Another mentioned, “While I believe that tree climbing is a fun, valuable and memorable experience for children I think the liability issues in today’s litigious society suggest that this activity is best left to parents providing this on their own properties.”



In Question 20, participants that allow tree climbing indicated the following reasons:

- Part of childhood 212 (95.9%)
- Fun 212 (95.9%)
- Connects to nature 213 (96.4%)
- Develops skills 218 (98.6%)
- Helps to negotiate risks 213 (96.4%)

Additional comments from the respondents indicated that tree climbing helps to build confidence, resiliency, body awareness, trust, problem solving, exploration, perseverance, and grit.

In Question 29, 62 (50%) respondents out of the 123 respondents wrote comments to the open-ended questions about the benefits of tree climbing outweighing the risks. For some, it is building resilience, “The realization that they can get past obstacles and endure a few scratches for the sake of facing a challenge and enjoying nature, is truly liberating for them.” Others see tree climbing as a rite of passage, seeing the world from a unique perspective, or as developing needed “soft skills.” Tree climbing can also build confidence and pride, as well as expand sensory skills. One educator wrote, “One little girl in particular was extremely concerned the first time and refused to touch the tree. After the third visit to the tree, she became confident so that she ran with excitement to climb up on the lowest branch.” Tree climbing can help with positive risk assessment, hand eye coordination, independently navigating risks, gross motor skills, body awareness, balancing skills, greater concentration, perseverance, spatial awareness, problem solving, coordination, strength and endurance, sense of accomplishment, self-regulation, critical thinking, and spatial reasoning. Tree climbing can help all learners, as one wrote, “The children who are most shy in the classroom are often the most adventurous in the woods.” One wrote, tree climbing is “Extremely important and far more beneficial to encounter risk than ban it all together.” Environmental benefits might also include “real connection with a living environment” and the ability to “develop meaningful relations with and understanding of trees, becoming present and future protectors.”

### **Finding 1: Conflicting Perspectives Regarding Outdoor Risky Play**

Perspectives regarding outdoor risky play came up in many responses. Question 15 inquired about the reasons why tree climbing was not allowed and 79 (51%) of the respondents answered about the risk factor. Question 18 (for those who do not allow tree climbing) explored issues or concerns with tree climbing and 71 (59.1%) responded that injury risk was one of the concerns. Some responses from those that do not allow tree climbing, included, “Climbing trees seems extremely dangerous.” One participant wrote, “I’m not against kids climbing trees; however, I just don’t think it is worth the risk of children climbing trees at schools falling and getting injured, followed by getting sued by the parents.” Another wrote in, “Unfortunately, we live in a sue happy society. Kids have to climb trees with their parents, so if they fall and hurt themselves it’s not our fault.”

Two hundred forty-two (58.3%) allow tree climbing at their facility while 173 (41.7%) do not allow tree climbing at their facility. Those who allow tree climbing had different perspectives on risk taking play in Question 21. These respondents overwhelmingly recognized there was a risk for potential injury with tree climbing; however, 129 (58.4%) strongly agree, 79 (35.8%) agree, and 13 (5.9%) agree that the benefits of tree climbing outweigh the associated risks. The participants completing the survey that allow tree climbing overwhelmingly agreed (100%) in Question 21 that the benefits of tree climbing outweigh the risks.

Participants who allow children in their care to climb trees noted many positive skills as a result of tree climbing. Children had a moderate to high impact (78-98%) on the following skills through responses to Question 22:

- Critical thinking 208 (94.1%)
- Imagination and creativity 188 (85.1%)
- Problem solving 217 (98.2%)



- Self-confidence 217 (98.2%)
- Social interaction 175 (79.2%)
- Dexterity and physical strength 216 (97.7%)
- Cognitive and emotional strength 199 (90.0%)
- Resiliency 212 (95.9%)
- Risk negotiation 214 (96.8%)
- Spatial awareness 216 (97.7%)

Additional write-in responses noted a potential shifting view on risk taking play in early childhood education with the following comments (see Table 5):

Table 5  
*Qualitative Comments Highlighting Positive Skills as a Result of Tree Climbing*

"We cannot put kids in a bubble. The rules have been taken to [sic] far in some aspects."
"I hope we can encourage tree climbing without all the fears surrounding it."
"Children need to learn about risks and safety. Then push themselves to new levels overcoming fear."
"I'm worried that other places don't allow it."
"It used to scare me. I am trying to embrace nature and some risk in playing."
"I believe adults should be there as a "safety net" but children need the chance to explore and test their boundaries."
"Experiencing nature and risk are high priority for us."
"The child who takes the most risks, is the most careful with tree climbing. He enjoys it so much he follows safety guidelines."
"We have found with young children, if left to negotiate on their own the risk, they are precautionary. When they realize a teacher or parent is watching, they are much more likely to take risks and need help."
"We are getting entirely too soft with kids. They need to feel that there is some risk even if there really isn't."
"We cannot let scary statistics about falling and getting hurt outweigh the benefits."
"I am saddened by the "overly safe" "unchallenging" playspaces created for children. Tree climbing is fantastic way to offer challenge/risk. I wish it were possible for all children."

Respondents acknowledged that other educators may have varying perspectives and different risk comfort levels (see Table 6).

Table 6  
*Qualitative Comments Demonstrating Tree Climbing Perspectives and Comfort Levels*

"We have a few teachers who are afraid to let children climb."
"It drove me crazy with anxiety. For twenty years with nothing beyond minor scrapes but there's always today."
"Thankfully my center has a liberal approach about issues and concerns pertaining to tree climbing—tending to err on the side of trusting comfort levels of the lead teacher."
"Setting up rules all teachers can abide by. Some teachers have a different comfort level when it comes to the children partaking in "risky behaviors." A child may fall and get injured while climbing."
"Director prefers no tree climbing at all!"
"Our facility has no written rules, it is up to individual teaching teams to decide if they are comfortable with allowing this activity."
"I think risks should be taken in parent's care to protect teachers. A sad reality."
"Some teachers are uncomfortable with allowing their students to climb/some do not allow it."
"Not all teachers are comfortable allowing children to take this risk. We have talked about this as a staff and in smaller groups."
"I understand tree climbing is more important than ever but also can be nerve racking at the same time."

“The director would really prefer to not have children climb but allows it because the staff has insisted that it can be a safe activity and is benefits [sic] for the children.”

“Some teachers are uncomfortable with allowing their students to climb/some do not allow it.”

Participants allowing tree climbing reported few major injuries in Question 27. Exceptionally low injury rates were noted beyond the typical scraped knees, elbows, or skin 174 (78.7%). Four (1.8%) fractures and four (1.8%) broken bones were reported (see Figure 3). Other injuries 50 (22.6%) had a space to write in; however, 30 (60.0%) of these responses were no injuries. No concussions, comas, or fatalities were noted; however, some scratches, a splinter, the wind being knocked out, a low fall, and the need for stitches were reported in the other category. Participants could choose more than one option.

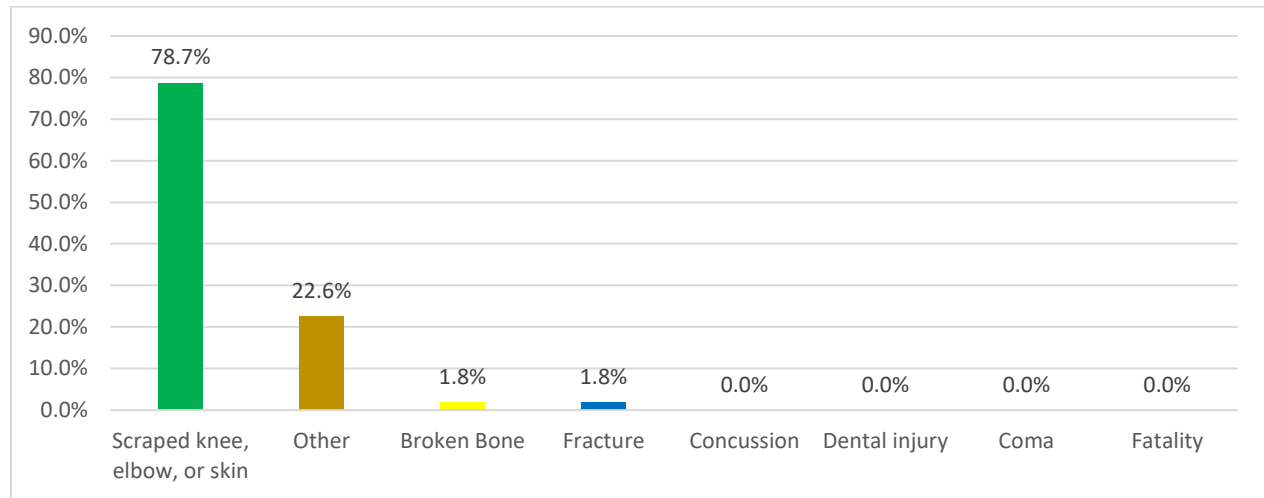


Figure 3. Tree climbing injuries. This graph shows the numbers of different injuries resulting from tree climbing.

**Finding 2: Varying Tree Climbing Policies, Facility Licensing, and Liability**

Licensing, insurance, policies, and other factors often dictate tree climbing in early childhood facilities. Question 15 inquired about the reasons why tree climbing was not allowed and 63 (40.7%) of the respondents answered due to the policies and 31(20.0%) responded with concerns about licensing. When queried in Question 16 if there were rules or guidelines related to climbing trees for the children in their care, 100 (64.5%) reported that there were no facility rules or guidelines, while 55 (35.5%) answered that there were rules or guidelines in place. Some of the comments included that they were not aware of any rules, is it not allowed per state licensing, strict no tree-climbing policy, no safe fall zone, branches not big enough, no climbing grips, trees too big, unsafe to district, other “climbers” available including downed trees, nothing higher than a step, need fall zone, all children safe at all times, and not allowed to touch or play with the branches.

Many respondents were unclear on how these factors might impact tree climbing. Question 17 inquired participants that do not allow tree climbing about policies through licensing, insurance, professional organizations, or other agents that dictate tree climbing activities and the respondents indicated they do not know how licensing 97 (63.0%), 114 (74.0%) insurance, and 102 (66.7%) professional organizations might impact tree climbing. Similarly, in Question 25, where tree climbing is allowed, respondents did not know if the following factors impacted tree climbing at their facility: 83 (37.6%) licensing, 122 (55.7%) insurance, and 94 (44.7%) professional organizations.

While there is less confusion around policies that may affect tree climbing in the group that allows tree climbing, there is still a fair amount of uncertainty as to how licensing, insurance, and professional organizations may affect tree climbing. Question 18 discussed the issues or concerns with tree climbing and 19 (15.8%) responded that

liability was one of the concerns (see Table 7). One wrote in, “I never thought about the insurance company or licensing’s thoughts.” Licensing may limit tree climbing. Respondents also mentioned:

Table 7

*Qualitative Comments Regarding Issues and Concerns with Tree Climbing*

“Licensing doesn’t allow it, but we do it anyway. My concern is getting caught.”
“It’s the playground inspector who is overly concerned. We know our kids; she doesn’t.”
“There are no policies but we as licensed providers can be sighted [sic] for unsafe play or unsafe supervision.”
“Our school is at a nature center. The woods and how we use them are not licensed and regulated. But we do have obligation to keep both children and nature safe.”

Some programs choose to allow tree climbing, knowing licensing does not allow it; others seek alternative licensing, and others buck the system and do not seek licensing which gives greater freedom for tree climbing. Licensing varies state by state and inspectors may interpret the licensing mandates differently regarding tree climbing. Programs might seek spaces outside of their licensed areas for tree climbing activities.

Insurance, licensing, and other factors may impact tree climbing in various spaces. Worries abound about getting sued, though that is typically one reason to have insurance in place. Respondents in Question 25 mentioned (see Table 8):

Table 8

*Qualitative Comments on Insurance, Licensing, and Other Factors*

“As a museum I’m certain that we have a specific liability insurance in place for child injury. However, no waivers signed like with a challenge course activity. Now I want to ask our upper management!”
“I will need to check into our insurance policy.”
“Parents may object to risk taking and may sue or remove child if injury occurs.”
“The head of the school is concerned that the risk of injury is not worth the liability of injury.”
“I never thought about what the insurance company or licensing’s thoughts.”
“The owner of our organization is very liability conscious so we have to be extra cautious and typically don’t let the kids climb when he’s visiting.”
“We have not been stopped.”
“We are part of Washington State’s outdoor preschool pilot program. There are specific rules for allowing tree climbing, and lucky for me they align with my own rules as well.”
“The playground inspector made us cut down the low limbs so the kids couldn’t climb.”
“One organization I work for prohibits tree-climbing for insurance reasons.”

For Question 23, participants allowing tree climbing were asked about their own personal rules or guidelines for climbing trees for children in their care. They could indicate as many rules as they used and could also write in additional guidelines. In Question 24, participants who allow tree climbing were asked about rules and guidelines specific to their facility, rather than their own personal guidelines (see Table 9).

Table 9  
Comparison of Personal and Facility Rules

Rules	Personal (Q23)	Facility (Q24)
Must climb up and/or down tree independently.	185 (83.7%)	140 (63.4%)
Tree must be safe (thickness of branch, weather conditions, avoid dead limbs)	185 (83.7%)	148 (67.0%)
Check for safety.	166 (75.1%)	140 (63.4%)
Common sense guidelines should be followed.	163 (73.8%)	133 (60.2%)
A buddy system or adult supervision required.	133 (60.2%)	104 (47.1%)
Impose height restrictions.	74 (33.5%)	70 (31.7%)
No tree climbing restrictions.	11 (5.0%)	21 (9.5%)
Must get permission to climb.	37 (16.7%)	40 (18.1%)
Use the three points system when climbing.	37 (16.7%)	27 (12.2%)
Other	31 (14.0%)	55 (24.9%)

Most participants that allow tree climbing have rules or guidelines around safety aspects of tree climbing. Only 11 (5%) indicate no personal restrictions on tree climbing and 21 (9.5%) had no facility tree climbing restrictions.

Question 26 investigated ways the early childhood centers promoted safety with tree climbing activities. To promote safety, participants reported:

- Being respectful of trees 201 (91%)
- Visually inspecting branches 177 (80.1%)
- Test overall tree strength 142 (64.3%)
- Avoiding dead branches 160 (72.4%)
- Using caution if wet or slippery 170 (77.0%)
- Checking branches on each step taken 131 (59.3%)
- Other 36 (16.3%)

Participants could write in responses that showed more insight into this process. Respondents mentioned having one risk/one teacher, doing a site assessment for safety, or having a provider there for guidance and safety. Some noted doing a risk benefit analysis to help assess risk and look at opportunities is needed. Additional responses included (see Table 10):

Table 10  
Qualitative Safe Tree Climbing Comments

"I watch closely when someone is climbing and position myself nearby when possible. I may ask a child if he/she feels safe if I feel the need for them to reassess."
"Children were allowed to climb until they felt safe, height restriction due to my own fear for safety of the children."
"Teachers make decisions on what they feel is safe."
"Adults often ask "do you feel safe" as a check in, we give child space to climb solo but when they get higher up will supervise closely."

Some noted doing a risk benefit analysis to help assess risk and look at opportunities. Various levels of attention may be required for various children.

Many themes came up in the written responses of Questions 23, 24, 25, and 26. The safety of the actual tree was reported in many settings, with some reporting on tree maintenance. "A tree must be sturdy. We have hundreds of trees on our property and each one is inspected for sturdiness." Some schools do a daily check, "Staff check outdoor area each morning to assess safety." Others have a quarterly inspection with an arborist. Some settings used designated trees for climbing. One setting keeps it simple, "Do a risk benefit analysis with all teaching staff. Remove hazards. Mitigate risks. Climb trees." Another wrote, "We observe climbable trees daily and over time. We track for health of tree and are aware of which branches are ill and/or dying. If we have questions, we consult with a master arborist."

Supervision came up frequently, though it may look different at various sites. Supervision ranges from being nearby to being right under the child as a spotter and may also include coaching and guidance before children are trusted with more independence. Some educators are just there to support those who need more help such as a younger or less experienced climber. Others help negotiate turn-taking in trees where multiple children can climb. In one situation, only the teacher can supervise tree climbing, not the aides or volunteers. Respondents mentioned (see Table 11):

Table 11  
*Qualitative Tree Climbing Supervision Comments*

"As with all risk in a nature school setting if proper assessment and training is put in place the benefits of the risk can overcome the negatives."
"Involve children in assessing risk rather than doing it for them."
"Ask if children have a plan should be the first step to approaching intervention."
"Since children are within the view of an adult, we frequently talk them through their climbing (especially at the beginning of the year). Do you feel safe? What do you think about that branch? How can you get down? Each child and each scenario is different, so giving them the opportunity to try things out, watch their friends and talk through problem solving are all important."
"An adult is standing by for younger or less experienced climbers. By spring we know the children's skills and which children need an adult nearby and which don't need that."

Along with the visual inspections, educators might check that it is cleared out under the space, such as being aware of the fence, watching for loose parts, or other children that might be under the tree. Others require appropriate material for fall zones underneath, such as the "Ground must be softened by wood chips or other soft surface" and "Our school has licensing approved rubber matting or deep bark below the climbable trees."

Height was often a consideration, with the sentiment, "Only go as high as you feel safe." Another mentioned, "We only have concerns about the height at which they climb, which we give visual guidelines of where to stop." Some allow no higher than 6 feet with a fall zone. One wrote, "We treat trees like any climbing structure and allow kids to climb the trees that reach the same height, fall zone, and ground depth requirements as a structure."

Gear was also reported, with many requiring proper footwear, such as tennis shoes or closed toed shoes. Weather was a factor at times with no climbing if the tree is wet, when rainy, or if it is very windy. Some choose to use an alternate option for climbing, "We have a man-made climbing structure that is more accessible for children who are still developing some skills."

Many choose to limit the number of children in the tree at a time. Others require an adult to be within arms-reach. Many children must be able to climb and get down on their own. "Strict staffing zones. We would not open the climbing tree if there was not staff in that supervision zone." Another mentioned, "One teacher, one risk."

Others have found too many rules problematic. One wrote, "I have found that the more rules you implement during their free play the more injuries you will have." Another wrote, "I feel we have to jump through so many hoops that

at times it makes it so unappealing to the adults.” Another approach was to, “If you feel unsafe, stop climbing—listen to your body.”

### **Finding 3: Differing Tree Climbing Accessibility**

Accessibility to climbable trees is potentially problematic. When queried in Question 13 about the accessibility of climbable trees at their facility, 230 (55.4%) responded favorably while 152 (36.6%) responded that they did not have access to climbable trees and 33 (8%) answered the other category. Question 14 asked if tree climbing was allowed at the facility and 242 (58.3%) responded positively while 173 (41.7%) responded that tree climbing was not allowed. If a respondent answered “NO” that tree climbing was not allowed at their facility, 88 (56.8%) answered in Question 15 that it was due to tree inaccessibility. Also, in Question 18 discussed the issues or concerns with tree climbing and 25 (20.8%) responded that accessibility was one of the concerns.

Trees may be available; however, all trees are not suitable for climbing. One respondent mentioned, “We don’t have enough trees around us that are accessible for the younger ages to try and climb.” Even in a facility with a natural playground, the trees may be “too small or too straight and tall for good climbing trees.” Others “wish we had smaller trees.” Some settings are quite unique, such as in an arboretum, posing climbing restrictions. A respondent mentioned, “The concern in my facility is that our program needs to use out-of-the-way trees to climb. Most of our trees are for display. But there is so much wild wooded space that this is not a problem.” In another setting, trees are scheduled for cutting down, “We are a nature preschool, so tree climbing is part of our program. The only issue is that our favorite climbing trees are invasive non-native bush honeysuckle, which are slated for removal for the integrity of the forest where we operate with native options to replant.”

Tree climbing access was limited in some situations, such as trees that were not mature enough, yet other respondents found ways around this writing in Questions 28 and 29 ways they allowed children to climb trees, such as on walking field trips, climbing trees during KinderForest days, climbing stumps and logs, or using a mini orchard. Others suggested, “Even fake trees would be beneficial,” suggesting the use of large stumps and logs could help fill that void. Many schools might have another climbing structure. A respondent wrote in, “I don’t have a tree in my daycare space, but our local park does;” though being aware of climbing rules can be important. “We try not to upset the parks or nature centers that we frequent by following their tree climbing rules, so as to not have more restrictions imposed.” Another chooses to allow children to “climb on the edge of our parking lot and on field trips.” Having no access to climbable trees at the early childhood setting does not necessarily limit the tree climbing, as a respondent wrote, “When we visit other places in the community where the trees are big enough the children are allowed to climb them with supervision.” Others are looking to the future, “We have trees on playgrounds at each of our sites with plans to plant more this spring.” Many expressed wishes and desires to have climbable trees, echoing the sentiment, “We need more trees to climb” and “I wish my current facility had access to trees for climbing on a daily basis.”

Some responses related accessibility to climbing trees to luck, saying, “Having the right trees for climbing at a school is partly just luck;” however, others have been intentional about it. The struggle is captured, “The biggest issue is opportunity—find the appropriate time and place to be able to actually climb trees.” Some look for other options. For those who did transition to a space with more tree availability, one mentioned, “We recently moved to a new location with trees to climb, in our old location we did not have any. With so much access to nature and climbing trees I have seen so much growth in our children.” Even when a tree is available, some schools could use more accessibility, mentioning, “We mostly have the issue with the patience of the children waiting their turn! We only have one climbable tree!” Focusing on solutions, one mentioned looking outside their space, “Climbable trees are outside of our normal play area so we are limited to a small group.”

Part of the accessibility issue considers limitations from licensing and other factors such as leadership, as respondents wrote (see Table 12):

Table 12  
Qualitative Tree Accessibility Comments

"We have trees but licensing prevents them from enjoying climbing. Children only have access on field trips."
"Someone could get hurt, someone could get hurt on normal playground equipment too though. There are no trees at the facility, if there were, I'm pretty sure the children couldn't climb them, per the boss."
"It used to not be allowed at all and I'm sorry we didn't fight for it sooner."

**Finding 4: Parental Considerations Regarding Tree Climbing**

Parental considerations came up as a concern in many responses. Question 15 inquired about the reasons why tree climbing was not allowed and 38 (24.5%) of the respondents that do not allow tree climbing cited parental concerns. Study participants mention parents as "freaking out," "uneducated parents," and "parents feeling it was unsafe." Another wrote, "I worry about getting sued by sue happy parents." Some worry about "parent buy in" and parents as "an obstacle." Additionally, other considerations involving parents were mentioned in open-ended responses in Questions 24 and 25 from facilities that allow tree climbing. In Question 28, many responses centered around parental considerations. Parents might get upset if clothing is ripped or the child has a mild injury.

At times there were conflicting perspectives. While educators may allow tree climbing, "The head of the school . . . wishes parents would take on this responsibility at home." Another participant typed in, "Parent concerns for individual children vary, and usually the children most likely to take risks have parents most apprehensive about risk taking."

Some respondents noted the need to involve parents in this decision, allowing tree climbing with parental consent and that "parents have the right to place restrictions on any high risk activity within the program—signature required for high risk activities. (I would argue is it even high risk?)" There was an underlying concern that, "Parents may object to risk taking and may sue or remove child if injury occurs." Additionally, one participant noted, "During tours parents LOVE the idea of nature rich programming and the IDEA of tree climbing and all its benefits. But often the first time they see THEIR child climb a tree at home we start to get I'm not sure, is it safe, maybe the school should get a more traditional structure." Some schools were proactive on parent education, mentioning (see Table 13):

Table 13  
Qualitative Parental Consideration Comments

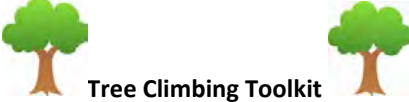
"I explain to the parent in advance and they love our system."
"My families know we believe in takings risks."
"No complaints from staff or parents yet."
"Sometimes we have to defend our position on tree climbing with parents of program participants."
"Once parents and children are familiarized with our guidelines there are few issues or concerns."

**Discussion and Further Recommendations**

The variety of responses, analysis of data, and seeing the bigger picture of how various early childhood facilities allow tree climbing enabled the researchers to make recommendations related to each finding that might allow safe tree climbing in early childhood settings. Based on the findings and recommendations, the authors created a tree climbing toolkit (see Table 14) to assist in implementing tree climbing safely in a variety of early childhood settings. Combined with a benefit risk assessment, individual settings can analyze their own sites and educate early childhood educators and parents related to risky play, policies, and safety measures around tree climbing. There will not be any one size fits all solution for tree climbing in early childhood settings, as it is based on local and state areas.



Table 14  
Tree Climbing Toolkit

 <b>Tree Climbing Toolkit</b> ©2019, C. Gull, S. Levenson Goldstein, T. Rosengarten, University of Phoenix		
<b>Findings</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Perspectives Regarding Outdoor Risky Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize fears and risk comfort levels.</li> <li>Look at benefits of tree climbing</li> <li>Consider why tree climbing might be allowed</li> <li>Investigate potential safety guidelines</li> <li>Conduct a benefit/risk assessment</li> <li>Look at low injury statistics for tree climbing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Playground Safety Handbook</a></li> <li><a href="#">Benefit/risk assessment</a></li> <li><a href="#">Parents' perspectives on tree climbing</a></li> <li><a href="#">What to say instead of "be careful"</a></li> </ul>
Policies, Facility Licensing, Liability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Know your policies (licensing, insurance, and facility)</li> <li>Communicate policies with all stakeholders</li> <li>Implement safety and injury protocols, sign waivers</li> <li>Establish guidelines and training</li> <li>Create a check list/tool kit for tree climbing</li> <li>Train on/share the benefit/risk assessment</li> <li>Create a specific plan for each facility</li> <li>Continue conversations with stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Managing risk in play</a></li> <li><a href="#">Washington State outdoor preschool pilot</a></li> <li><a href="#">Outdoor learning environments and rating scales</a></li> <li><a href="#">Outdoor play guidelines</a></li> </ul>
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess trees in current outdoor space</li> <li>Plant a tree for now</li> <li>Plant a tree for future</li> <li>Consider other natural climbing options</li> <li>Take a walking trip</li> <li>Plan fieldtrips that allow tree climbing</li> <li>Create a tree maintenance plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Arborist association</a></li> <li><a href="#">Tree resources</a></li> <li><a href="#">Field trip/walking trip permission slip</a></li> <li><a href="#">Tree maintenance/safety checklist</a></li> </ul>
Parental Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate benefits of tree climbing with parents</li> <li>Set expectations and culture of facility</li> <li>Share safety guidelines</li> <li>Train and educate on risky play</li> <li>Provide Parent Risky Play Toolkit</li> <li>Consider waivers/risky play agreement/permission</li> <li>Involve parents in the supervision of risky play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Sample parent guidebook</a></li> <li><a href="#">Risky play tool</a></li> <li><a href="#">Waiver information</a></li> <li><a href="#">Info on tree climbing</a></li> </ul>

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

Based on several limitations that were identified, additional research and future studies are necessary to add value to this important topic. The purpose of this research study was to examine early childhood educators' perspectives on tree climbing; therefore, a broad sample was used for the survey. Although the study provided a diverse mix of early childhood educators, types of education settings, and location, the results were self-reported.

Recommendations for future studies include looking at regional differences, looking at international trends, focusing on specific types of early childhood educators and settings, and developing a study to further explore outdoor play and safety policies, guidelines, and the potential liability for early education settings is warranted. Understanding how licensing impacts tree climbing may be important. Additionally, better understanding the different attitudes and fears from early education providers can add more information of the benefits, risks, and opportunities of children climbing trees.

This study used a convenience sampling technique to investigate current practices and concerns around tree climbing. Employing different research methods to gain unique perspectives is needed. Studies that also concentrate on a certain type of early education setting or specific representation of early education providers could add value to this important topic. Additionally, a follow-up study where focus is placed on one area (region, state, city, or school district) could help provide further guidance and direction.

### Conclusion

The four findings from the study were perspectives regarding outdoor risky play; policies, facility licensing, and liability; accessibility; and parental considerations. Overall, tree climbing was accessible to 55.4% of the study participants. Tree climbing was also allowed by 58.3% of the respondents because it is fun, part of childhood, negotiates risk, develops skills, and connects to nature. Additional benefits include critical thinking, imagination and creativity, problem solving, self-confidence, social interaction, dexterity and physical strength, cognitive and emotional strength, resiliency, risk negotiation, and spatial awareness. Most respondents noted personal and facility rules to promote safety within tree climbing in early childhood settings. Early childhood educators that allow tree climbing reported low injury rates, with skin scrapes being the most common. Fears, liability, and licensing were cited by the 41.7% that do not allow tree climbing. While there may be challenges to tree climbing in early childhood settings, the study suggests the benefits of tree climbing outweigh the risks. Early childhood educators can use a benefit-risk assessment and the tree climbing toolkit provided to safely and effectively promote tree climbing.

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