

Counterpoint to Dr. Sue

A Tree Climbing Advocate Speaks Out

by Karen Stephens

In "Tree Climbing and Care of Sand Play Areas" (March/April 1993 **Child Care Information Exchange**), Dr. Susan Aronson suggests we ban tree climbing in early childhood play yards. This child care practitioner says: NOT!

To Dr. Aronson tree climbing is hazardous to children's safety because "... trees are not uniform, are not safety tested, and are surrounded by unforgiving surfaces." She believes climbing heights are difficult to control. "Children will want to climb higher and higher without realizing how hard it will be to come down again." Based on these suppositions, Dr. Aronson therefore believes risk of injury is too great to allow children to climb trees. She recommends cutting low branches from trees so children cannot reach them to climb. Her rationale: "Caregivers are unlikely to be able to control or reduce the risk of tree climbing."

I adamantly take issue with Dr. Aronson's assertion that early childhood professionals are not capable of helping children learn to cope with the challenges of tree climbing. For 17 years I have worked in a child care program that serves children two through ten years of age. Our play yard is blessed with a lovely, very climbable, apple tree. In appropriate weather, the tree is climbed daily. As a climbing apparatus, the children take much more delight in the tree than in our artificially produced, safety tested, financially pricey climbing structures. And I'm proud to say NOT ONCE have we had an injured child as the result of climbing that tree. (Knock on a tree . . . I mean wood!)

How could we have such a good safety track record with this "potentially" hazardous activity? Our staff believes tree climbing is a developmentally appropriate challenge which children can learn to cope with and master. We have created basic, understandable tree climbing guidelines (rules). As professional caregivers, our teachers patiently, consistently (yes, and frequently) communicate these rules to children. The rules are communicated to paid and volunteer staff through training and posted reminders. And guess what — our accident log has proven these PRACTICED guidelines work! Let me share the guidelines our staff follow.

Tree Climbing Guidelines

1. Children may ONLY climb trees when they can scale them alone. No child may be lifted into a tree by a teacher or another child. (This results primarily in children four years old and older climbing our tree.)
2. Children may not use blocks, tires, milk crates, or other items to help them mount into a tree. These materials also may not be under a tree when a child is climbing.

3. Two children are allowed in the tree at one time.
4. A teacher must stand near the tree whenever children are climbing.
5. Teachers are expected to **coach** children whenever necessary. Example: "Good job of using two hands! Step on the thick branches that are stronger. Stop where you feel most comfortable."
6. If a child begins to climb unsafely, the consequence of losing the privilege to climb the tree at that time is enforced without reservation.
7. Teachers are encouraged to climb the tree, too! This models good climbing techniques.

As an educated staff, we know we can support children as they strive toward mastery, or we can wrap them in cotton balls and shelter them in a cocoon of guaranteed safety. If we do the latter, we believe we convince children they are incompetent and too fragile to explore the exciting world around them. We want to help children develop a sense of adventure, not squelch it in the name of a risk-free play. Children are exposed to POTENTIAL danger every day in a child care program. Blocks, trikes, wagons, swings, and scissors are all potential hazards. Do early childhood professionals ban children from using them? Never! We don't want children to believe we don't trust them to learn to cope with life's developmentally appropriate challenges. Our staff believes children learn to manage life's dangers by experiencing them in gradual degrees. If we didn't believe this, we never would let children climb period . . . in trees or on commercial climbing apparatus.

For 17 years children have taken great pride in their abilities to scale our tree. Since we require children to hoist themselves onto branches,

the first time they achieve the feat it is like a "right of passage." I have seen children beam with self-confidence, new found self-assurance, and emerging competence as they learn to complete the problem solving process of proper foot and hand placement. Likewise, their friends and teachers applaud their skill and achievement. How could our staff forfeit such exhilarating moments as these just in case we might have a fall once in 17 years?

In the beginning of her article, Dr. Aronson states, ". . . children are often injured when they fall from trees." She's right. IF a child actually falls out of a tree, injury may result (just as when they fall from other climbing equipment). But we have to take into account risk factors. How often do children actually fall from trees? Humans have a basic instinct that makes them very cautious of heights. (I've never seen a child mindlessly scurry to the weaker branches of the tree tops.) Coupled with children's innate wisdom, reasonable opportunities for children to develop sound judgment, and well trained teachers, we CAN reduce the chances that a child will fall from a tree.

So I would like to offer advice that counters Dr. Aronson's. DON'T cut off those low branches! Instead, train your teachers to PREVENT accidents. Guide children in acquiring the physical and intellectual skills required for SAFE tree climbing. And just in case you ever do need to cushion a fall, make sure you have impact absorbing material on the ground from the base of the tree trunk beyond the outside edges of the tree canopy.

I do hope programs will put away the saws. Don't take away the source of childhood pleasure, excitement, and often the peaceful

solitude that the perspective of a tree perch provides! For I truly believe (barring severe injury) that it is better to have climbed a tree and fallen than never to have climbed one at all. (Excuse my "piggybacking" the phraseology of someone more eloquent — and romantic — than myself . . . it's a lingering "trade skill" from my years of music time with preschoolers.)

Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center which is accredited by NAEYC. For the past 18 years, she has worked in programs for young children. She readily admits her bias for the subject at hand. In childhood she was, and continues to be, an avid tree climber.