

NATIONAL VICTORIA EDUCATION

# Playing with fire: the childcare centres exposing children to risk

By [Henrietta Cook](#)

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Kinder kids learn all about fire at the East West Child Care Association in Fitzroy. EDDIE JIM

Five-year-old Remy has been lighting fires at his Fitzroy child care centre and his teachers haven't batted an eyelid.

Instead of shielding children from every hazard, East West Child Care Association is among a growing number of centres that promote what is known as “risky play”.

Toddlers cut fruit with knives, sew pieces of material together with needles and climb trees in the centre's rambling yard.

On Friday, Remy struck a match and ignited a scrunched up piece of newspaper in the outdoor firepit.

After a few minutes, flames started licking the kindling that his peers had carefully assembled and Remy stepped back to watch.

“I like the flames,” he says. “It keeps us warm and we can cook on them.”

About two years ago, and under the close supervision of adults, the centre introduced its 45 children to fire.

They started with candles in jars at mealtimes before moving onto weekly outdoor fires.

“We have always allowed them to experience risk,” said Ruth Harper, one of the centre’s coordinators. “You have to respect and trust children.”

Children have learnt how to extinguish flames with a bucket of water, monitor heat by carefully tapping the firepit with the backs of their hands and cook jaffles in the coals. Most importantly, staff say they’ve learnt how to play safely around fire.

“Do not run around fires or play funny games around the fire,” Remy tells his classmates, who are sitting around the firepit warming their feet.

The benefits of this approach to play are highlighted in research by University of Newcastle academics and early childhood educators, who found exposing children to risk boosted their confidence, teamwork skills and awareness of safety and danger.



Some of the handiwork from children at the East West Child Care Association in Fitzroy. EDDIE JIM

The research involved 60 babies, toddlers and preschoolers at Adamstown Early Learning and Preschool in Newcastle, a centre where children light fires with flint sticks, use knives and splash in deep tubs of water. They have also built a cubby with powertools.

The centre's director, Kate Higginbottom said concerns around litigation were deterring early childhood educators from risky play.

“It definitely is still somewhat controversial in early education services,” she said. “We know we have regulations, but they don’t involve eliminating all risks.”

Project leader and associate professor Linda Newman said helicopter parenting could lead to a situation where children lacked the skills to deal with danger.

“If kids don't learn how to take risks safely then sometimes they can take risks dangerously,” she said.

“They haven't been prepared for monitoring their own actions and don't think about what might happen.”

While many educators sing praise for risky play, a spokeswoman for the Metropolitan Fire Brigade questioned whether such young children could retain information about fire safety.

“MFB does not deliver structured fire safety programs to children below primary school age. This decision is based on research which found that children under five experienced a low retention rate for the information taught,” she said.

North Fitzroy Childcare Co-operative also teaches children about fire, and toddlers and preschoolers love sorting kindling, tinder and logs into piles.

While staff light the fuel in the firepit, assistant director Anthony Morris said the experience taught children about danger and gave them a “real experience”.

“In today's society some of the way we access cooking and heat is through the press of a button,” he said. “This lets them get back to nature.”

On the other side of town at St Kilda Balaclava Kindergarten, children gather sticks and pinecones every day during winter in preparation for the fire.

They assemble logs, kindling and paper in the centre's two fireplaces and use the coals to cook damper, chestnuts and even pancakes.

“They've learnt that it's not a good idea to touch fire, that it was used for cooking before electricity and that it creates warmth,” said the centre's early childhood educator Andrea Cubic. She said staff lit the fires, but children were very involved in the process.

During winter, children will often sleep in front of the fire behind a large screen.

“It smells beautiful,” said Ms Cubic.



**Henrietta Cook**



Education Editor at The Age

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