

# When You Want to Say, "Be Careful!"

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“Be careful!” Saying (shouting) that can be such a knee-jerk reaction when we see kids doing something that we perceive as dangerous. Just today, as a group of students moved further away from us and towards the edge of a big, rocky slope, three adults began to shout it, almost in unison. Sometimes there is real reason for alarm. Sometimes there isn’t. Working out the difference between the two is itself a subject for another blog post (or five).

But whether or not there is a high risk of injury at a given moment, what do we even mean when we say “Be Careful!”? It can mean, “I’m not sure what’s over there, please wait for me to come have a closer look with you”, or it can mean “slow down and watch where you’re putting your feet” when someone is running on uneven, unstable ground. It can mean, “move farther away from those other kids before you throw that rock!” or it can mean “focus on what you’re doing” when a child is making their way back down a tree.



In short, “Be careful!” can mean so much, but without the specific details, it can also be meaningless. (And when we hear something over and over and over again, we all start to tune out, don’t we?)

Here, some ideas about what we might say instead of (or in addition to) “Be Careful!”, organized according to Ellen Sandseter’s 6 categories of risky play:

## **Play with Great Heights** (*i.e. tree climbing*)

- “Stay focused on what you’re doing?”
- “What is your next move?”
- “Do you feel safe there?”
- “Take your time.”
- “Does that branch feel strong and stable?”
- “I’m here if you need me.”



### **Play with Great Speeds (i.e. tag)**

*I usually find that it's not so much the speed that gets my inner alarm bell going as what/who might be tripped over or crashed into! So, I often find myself pausing play at great speeds to say:*

- “Please find a safe spot for your stick while you’re running.”
- “I’ve noticed that this is a really busy area and I’m worried that someone not playing this game might get knocked over. Watch out for other people and give them lots of space.”  
Or, “Let’s move to this lower-traffic zone.”
- “I’ve noticed that there are a lot of fallen trees and sticks to trip on here. Watch out!” or, “Should we move this game to a more open area?”



### **Play with Harmful Tools**

*It’s important to know your students really well, to have a designated tool zone in a low-traffic area, and to take things like time of day and general energy of your group into consideration before introducing tools like knives or saws to with your students. But even things like rocks and sticks can be considered potentially harmful tools. We often say:*

- “Sticks need space. Mike, please back up from Sarah. She’s holding a big stick!”
- “Sticks need space. Sarah, look around you – do you have enough space to swing that big stick?”
- “Please keep one end of your stick on the ground!”
- “What’s your plan with that big stick?”
- “Rocks need space!”
- “Find more space!”
- “Before you throw that rock, what do you need to look for?”
- “That rock looks really heavy! Can you manage it?”

### **Play near Dangerous Elements (i.e. water, fire, ice)**

*I think it is important to front load a lot of the conversation about how to be safe around a dangerous element, before kids are near that dangerous element. Then the following phrases are more reminders and references to that initial, very focused conversation:*

- “Please move slowly and carefully near the \_\_\_\_.”
- “Please give each other lots of space so that no one feels like they need to push, and no one gets knocked over by accident.”
- “Do you feel stable/balanced?”
- “Do you need more space?”



### **Rough and Tumble Play**

*It took me some time, but I've come to see Rough and Tumble Play as a rich and authentic opportunity to learn about consent. I've found it helpful to pause the wrestling and say:*

- “Make eye contact before you tackle someone. Make sure they know you are coming so that they can get their body ready.”
- “Check in with each other. Make sure everyone is still having a good time.”
- “Ask her if she’s ok.”
- “Ask him if he’s still having fun.”
- “Did you like that? Make sure you tell her if you didn’t like that.”



### **Play where children can “disappear”/get lost**

*This is a trickier one for us, as we do ask children to stay where we can see them, so that we know if they need help. But kids do so often want to hide, or find “shortcuts”, and there are lots of ways to make that possible and safe. This has to do with due diligence – knowing our setting inside and out, knowing where poison ivy and ponds are, never taking children to places that are totally unfamiliar to us, etc. Sometimes it’s possible for kids to feel like they’re lost or that they’ve disappeared, without them being that way in truth. Here are some ways to facilitate that feeling of being unseen for a while:*

- “If you need to run, meet me at the next trail marker!”
- “Let’s check this cave/fort to make sure it’s safe to hide in.”



Sometimes intervening verbally as in the ways suggested above still doesn’t calm that gut feeling that something is too risky. Stay tuned for a future blog post about dynamically assessing risk, and including children in that process...

