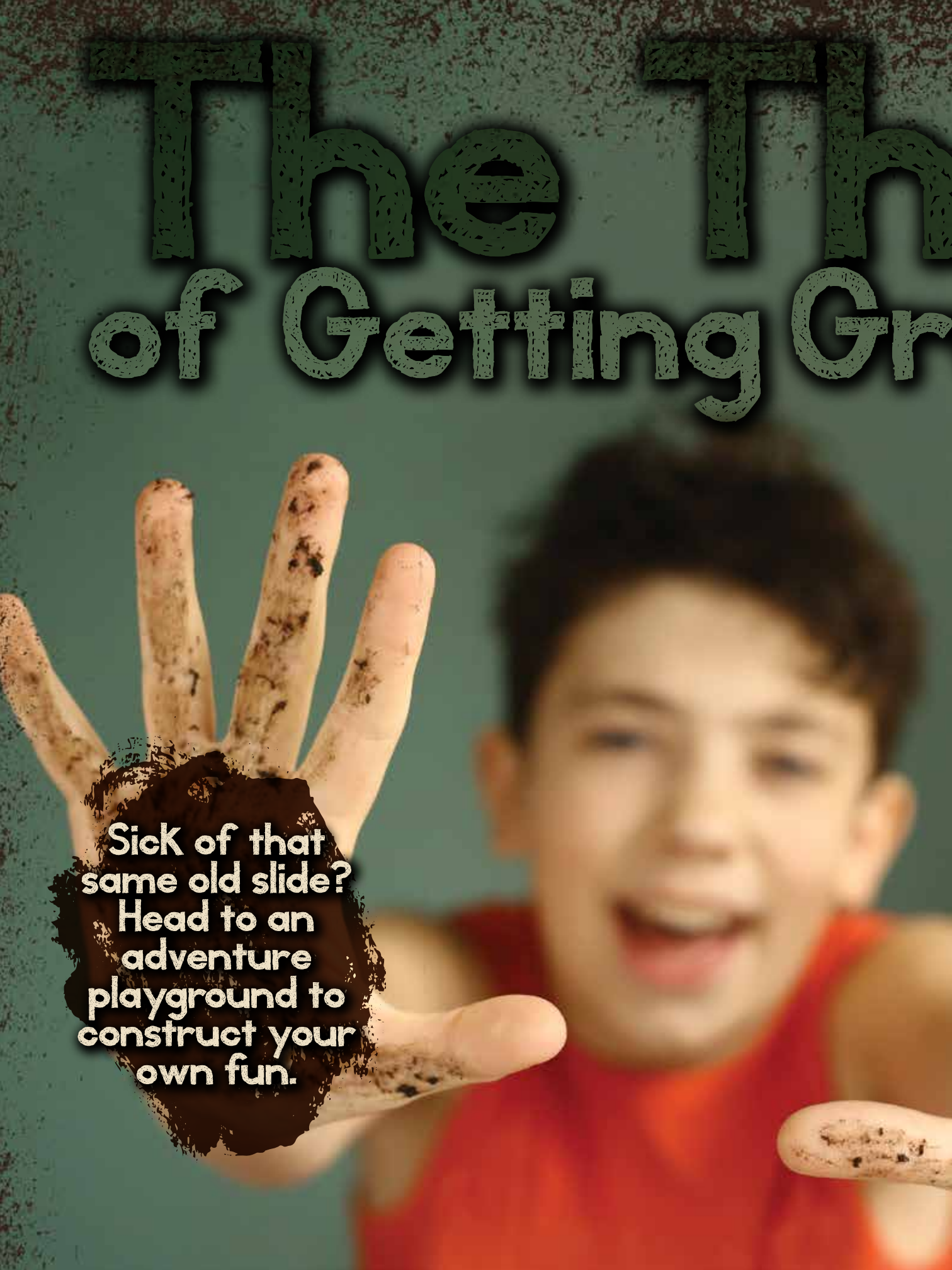


# The Thrill of Getting Gr



Sick of that  
same old slide?  
Head to an  
adventure  
playground to  
construct your  
own fun.

# Grubby

by Galadriel Watson



A boy slices through thick cardboard with a handsaw. A girl grabs a hammer, nails, and scrap wood and starts pounding. A group of kids builds a bonfire with whatever they can find, their feet slipping in mud. Broken toys and furniture clump around them.

Think “playground” and you probably see slides, swings, and monkey bars, not potentially dangerous tools and what looks like trash. And yet “adventure playgrounds” give kids just that: the raw materials they need to let their bodies and imaginations run wild.

## Trash or Treasure?

Can you pronounce this word: *Skrammellegepladsen*? No? Well, you might want to play in it anyways. That’s because it’s the name of the first adventure playground: the word is Danish for “junk playground.”

The man who created it, landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen, noticed that children preferred to play in areas like construction sites and junkyards—not in neat playgrounds that adults designed. He thought that children needed things they could move around and build with.

In 1943, he opened a new type of playground in Copenhagen, Denmark. Not one with swings and slides, but one with wood, rope, canvas, old tires, pipes, wire, abandoned furniture, broken-down cars, and other loose parts. Right away, it was swamped with excited kids.

“Of all the things I have helped to realize,” Sørensen said, “the junk playground is the ugliest. Yet for me it is the best and most beautiful.”

In 1946, a British woman named Marjory Allen saw this messy playground and took the idea back to England. World War II had recently ended, and some kids there were already playing in sites destroyed by bombs. She decided these ruins could be turned into opportunities for play, where kids had the materials they needed to create forts, walls, swings, and more. The first adventure playground in the United Kingdom opened in 1948. Since then, many more have followed around the world.





## Mastering Tools

Located on an island a short ferry ride from New York City, playgroundNYC is one of the newest adventure playgrounds. It opened in 2016. “What to many eyes

looks like junk, to us is a magic wonderland,” says Rebecca Faulkner, executive director. “It’s endless, endless fun for the imagination.”

Tools are crucial here. Visitors find saws, hammers, scissors, pliers, axes, and screwdrivers. Add to that lots of wood and old items of all types—including boats, theatre props, exercise bikes, mannequins, and even a coffin. Kids construct objects and spaces like go-carts and hideouts. They can play in ways they’d never be able to at home or in a regular playground.

Plus, parents aren’t invited in. Instead, staffers ask them to drop off their kids and remain in the grassy area on the other side of the fence. Staff members called playworkers watch over the kids but don’t step in unless needed. The goal is to let the kids make their own decisions. As a hand-painted sign attached to the fence says, “ADULTS SIT BACK AND RELAX.”

## I LOVE NATURE

Need another great reason to get outside and play? Try this: it might help the environment.

Spending time playing in nature when you’re young may mean you’re more likely to care about it. That’s what researchers at the University of British Columbia recently found out. They spoke to university students and asked them if they had spent quality time outdoors when they were children. They also asked them if they loved nature and thought protecting it was important.

Almost all the people who had played outside as kids said they loved nature and that protecting it was a priority. While no one said they didn’t like nature, some people said they felt “neutral” about it—it wasn’t great or bad. It turns out that these people hadn’t played in nature when they were young, or they didn’t have positive experiences in it.

For reasons like this, one of the goals of the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone is to connect children with nature so they’ll grow up to care about the environment. Getting your hands dirty in nature is better than learning about it in a classroom, Erin Marteau says. “You know how important it is because you have a personal relationship with it.”



## CAUTION!

**Risky play may be good for you—but you still have to play safe.**

**Always know your limits, pay attention to your surroundings, and pick a different activity if the risk is too high.**



### Getting Mucky in Nature

Farther upstate, the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone at Ithaca Children's Garden has another approach. "We have a strong nature-based focus," says Erin Marteau, executive director. This means that instead of broken-down cars and theater props, it provides loose parts that mostly come from nature: wooden stumps, driftwood, boulders, straw bales, and piles of mulch. And while it provides gardening tools, it only offers items like hammers and saws on special occasions.

Without screws and nails, kids build forts, dens, and other structures by balancing and propping things up. They play pretend and create alternate worlds. They climb trees and hang from them in makeshift swings and hammocks. They figure out what objects and materials can and can't do.

Unlike play:groundNYC, there aren't always playworkers on site. Parents are encouraged to stick around. But parents shouldn't jump in every time their children face challenges. Instead, Marteau suggests, "Step back. Watch your child. Be amazed. This is a space for children not to be perfect, but to be learning and growing and exploring and experimenting."

### The Rewards of Risk

But why let kids take risks? Isn't wedging yourself in a tree or hammering nails asking for trouble?

Kids at play:groundNYC haven't had any more injuries than you'd find on a regular playground. "We've found, with support and guidance, that children can learn to use tools

## 6 EXCITING WAYS TO TAKE A LITTLE RISK

**CLIMBING HIGH TREES.** Sledding down steep hills. Jumping off boulders. When children run free outside, they often find risky ways to play. It's not that they want to get injured. Instead, they want the thrill of being on the edge of danger, testing their limits—and using their smarts and skills to come away safe.

### HERE ARE SIX TYPES OF RISKY PLAY:

#### 1. Great heights

Kids climb up high, whether in trees, on rocks, or on climbing towers. Once there, they may balance with the ground far below, dangle from their legs or arms, or jump back down.

#### 2. High speed

Kids go as fast as possible, by running down hills, zooming headfirst down steep slides, or spinning on swings.

#### 3. Dangerous tools

Kids use tools like knives for whittling, or saws, hammers, and nails for building with wood.

#### 4. Dangerous elements

Kids play near places and objects that could hurt them, like a burning fire pit, a deep lake, or the top of a cliff.

#### 5. Rough-and-tumble

Kids play roughly with each other: wrestling, boxing, fighting, or fencing with sticks.

#### 6. Getting "lost"

Kids play in unknown places, like woods, where adults can't supervise.

very quickly, are very adept at using tools, and take their own risks," says Faulkner. "And that sometimes involves a child maybe hammering their thumb accidentally. But it doesn't happen very often because what you'll find is even children at the age of six, they will be careful and risk-assess their own behavior."

People encounter risks throughout life. Marteau says, "In a place like the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone, children can practice how to approach and manage risk. These are learned skills, and kids need turf to practice if they are to develop mastery."

Risky fun also encourages kids to stay outside longer, keep their bodies moving, and socialize with others. Falling from up high hurts. That's something kids may not learn if they fall onto the soft, rubbery surface of a typical modern playground. Learning the hard way may help them become better at facing risk as they grow up.

Adventure playgrounds trust that kids are smart. If you let them be, they can figure out what they should—and shouldn't—be doing all on their own. And they'll have a heck of a good time while they're at it.

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Canadian writer **Galadriel Watson** has never played in an adventure playground, but she loves combing beaches to collect cool rocks, driftwood, and broken glass. Check out what else she writes about at [www.galadrielwatson.com](http://www.galadrielwatson.com).