

Risky outdoor play in early childhood: Feel the fear and learn from it

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Risky outdoor play has been a natural and important part of children's lives for generations. However, changes in attitudes to exposure to risk is having a negative impact on the opportunities for children to play freely in the outdoors (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016). This aversion towards risky play has become a modern-day dilemma as it denies children opportunities to learn valuable lessons.

Teachers play a fundamental role in allowing children to engage in acts of risk-taking; however, some teachers struggle with balancing the health and safety of the children in their care with providing challenging and risky play opportunities. This article examines risk-taking from an appreciative perspective and offers opportunities for reflecting on factors that may influence teachers' abilities to provide children with valuable learning experiences.

Risk versus hazard

When working with children, it is important to understand the difference between a risk and a hazard in a play context. Stephenson (as cited in Nicol, 2013) explains taking a risk as involving a challenging experience, where safety is balanced against the challenge and there is no likelihood of serious injury. A hazard, on the other hand, alludes to a dangerous situation where there is potential for serious or fatal injuries. Greenfield (as cited in Little & Wyver, 2008) draws an alternative distinction, where hazard is seen as something a child is not aware of, while a risk is when the child is uncertain "about being able to achieve the desired outcome, requiring a choice whether to take the risk or not" (p. 37).

In early childhood education (ECE), risk taking must be considered in context; considering the stage of development of the child and viewed through a social and cultural construct, as behaviour can be dependent on individual personality differences and temperament (Sandseter, 2007). Risk taking is a natural and inherent part of play as children seek to experience new sensations and experiment to test their limits (Little & Wyver, 2008). Because risky play often lacks structure and boundaries, there is the chance of getting hurt. Hence, children must be encouraged and enabled to assess risk as during this type of play, children are rehearsing real-life risky situations, to discover what is safe and what is not safe (Little & Wyver, 2008). It is therefore important to find a sensible balance between protecting children and allowing them to take risks that are worth taking (Stevens, 2013).

Categorising risky outdoor play

The term risky outdoor play is broad and can encompass many different types of experiences. Sandseter (2007) provides a useful framework to consider in relation to categorising risky play. Through observation on young children aged three to five years old, Sandseter (2007) suggested the following six categories of risky play: "play with great heights; play with high speed; play with dangerous tools; play near dangerous elements; rough-and-tumble play; play where the children can 'disappear'/get lost" (p. 243). A New Zealand study conducted by Greenfield (2004) found that one of the most frequent types of risky play was climbing, which aligns with Sandseter's (2007) category of playing with great heights. Stephenson (2003) in support adds, that for a young child height or speed is a key factor for choosing to participate in risky play or not.

Advantages of engaging in risky outdoor play

Hanrahan's (2018) study found that, "children need 'managed' opportunities to explore and engage in risky play as this will enable them to manage future risks independently and to develop an understanding of safety" (p. 13). Exposing children to a range of opportunities to engage in risky play in the outdoors promotes their ability to assess risk and learn how to self-regulate (Hanrahan, 2018). The development of these skills supports children's growing confidence to manage risks as they mature into adulthood (Little, Sandseter & Wyver, 2012). However, the outcome of engaging in risky outdoor play can be either positive or negative.

A positive outcome of a risky play venture can be the delight in overcoming fear and mastering a specific skill, whereas a negative consequence can be failure or physical injury. While skill mastery and overcoming fear are rewarding in themselves, failure from risky play endeavours also helps children learn to cope with disappointments, builds resilience and promotes self-confidence (Little et al., 2012). Risky outdoor play is predominately-physical active play, which has many potential benefits. DiCarlo, Baumgartner, Ota and Jenkins (2015) purport that rough and tumble play can result in positive holistic outcomes for children. Little and Wyver (2008) concur, outlining that participation in physical activity may help to prevent chronic illnesses and childhood obesity.

Challenges of not engaging in risky outdoor play

Restricting children's ability to engage in risky outdoor play may contribute to risk-taking that is more dangerous as children mature into adolescents (Gill, 2007). Risk-averse practices can lead to an environment that does not provide sufficient challenges, inevitably resulting in children becoming bored. This boredom can lead to children seeking out unsafe ways to get a thrill. If children have limited opportunities to learn to self-assess and manage risk, then they may make poor decisions in the future, which can in extreme cases, result in them participating in reckless or criminal acts (Gill, 2007).

Risky outdoor play and children's holistic learning

Brussoni, Olsen, Pike and Sleet (2012) use the expression free play when examining risk in play. They define this as intrinsically motivated play, often lacking boundaries and structure, which can fundamentally benefit a child's holistic growth and development, especially when taking place in adaptable natural environments. Valuable learning happens in the face of uncertainty, where trial and error is required, and an element of risk is involved. Risk taking in play situations encourages children to challenge and test their competence levels and display their skills as they explore boundaries (Little, Wyver & Gibson, 2011). Children need to be given the opportunity to learn to calculate risk in safe and managed situations and taking risks during play allows children to continually self-assess the level of their physical, emotional, spiritual and cognitive development (Little & Eager, 2010; Stevens, 2013). The desired outcome of participating in risky play is for children to grow into adults who have competent decision-making and risk assessment skills and who are able to consider the wellbeing of others while celebrating their own endeavours (Curtis, 2010).

Teachers' and adults' roles

In modern westernised society, challenging play opportunities for young children are decreasing due to growing concerns around safety and risk of injury or harm (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016). Teachers need to be cognisant of the subjective nature of risk assessment when making decisions around risk-taking in children's play (Carter, 2014). At the same time, they need to be aware of hazards, to ensure a safe play environment. Tovey explains that safe environments are not necessarily those that ensure children are safe from all harm; more so they are settings that

are safe for children to explore, test their skills and have a go, while being asked to calculate the risk involved (as cited in Carter, 2014). Little and Wyver (2008) believe that it is important for teachers and adults to consider how children are supported, while testing their skills and abilities, “to allow for the gradual transfer of risk management to children” (p. 34).

Teachers need to be able to identify a positive and healthy risk and provide valuable and challenging experiences and environments that adhere to the ECE regulations. They also need to be aware that due to rules and regulations their roles can become prescriptive, with little room for their own decision-making around the environments and experiences they would like to provide for children (Little & Wyver, 2008). We must remember that accidents can happen no matter how hard we try to control or remove risk. Therefore, the key is to manage safety in preference to eliminating risk. Teachers need to adopt an ecological approach to safety, and consider the characteristics of the children, environmental factors, and the values and attitudes of the ECE community (Little, 2006).

Positional change in *Te Whāriki*

The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017), first published in 1996, made minimal reference to risk (MoE, 1996). In fact, in the context of play, risk was only mentioned once in the curriculum as a learning outcome for children. Along with this, no guidance was offered to teachers in relation to how they can actively support risky play. The revised 2017 version of *Te Whāriki*, on the other hand, appears to have acknowledged the modern-day dilemma of provision of opportunities for risky play and has made a welcome positional change resulting in more prominence for risk and risk-taking (MoE, 2017). In contrast to the previous version, *Te Whāriki* mentions risk or risk-taking seven times and provides suggestions and recommendations for what children should experience or how kaiako/teacher(s) can support children to engage in risky play. This provides teachers with valuable guidance surrounding their role in relation to supporting children with risk-taking in early childhood settings. Teachers need to be “alert to possible hazards, [while encouraging] ... healthy risk-taking play with heights, speed, tests of strength and the use of real tools” (MoE, 2017, p. 30). This aligns closely with the six categories of play previously mentioned above.

Recommendations to support practice

Teachers have a pivotal role in supporting children to engage in risky outdoor play. A key consideration for teachers is to “ensure that playground safety checks remove hazards that may result in serious injury or death, but do not remove all challenges and opportunities for children to engage in safe risk-taking” (Hanrahan, 2018, p. 73). As outlined in *Te Whāriki*, it is important for kaiako/teacher(s) to provide an optimal environment that supports “healthy risk-taking play” (MoE, 2017, p. 28).

In line with this, *Te Whāriki* outlines a range of reflective questions to encourage pedagogical dialogue around risky outdoor play:

- How might kaiako/teacher(s) provide opportunities for children to develop and extend their physical capabilities with confidence?
- How do kaiako/teacher(s) empower all children to pursue challenges in ways that acknowledge their current physical and cognitive abilities and strengths?
- In what ways can real tools (such as gardening tools, saws, microscopes) be used confidently for exploration that leads to meaningful learning and sense making?
(Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 50).

In conclusion, risky outdoor play assists children to grow into adults who are competent and confident to calculate risk while considering the consequences of their actions and how they may affect others. Metsuru believed that “children must learn to avoid great danger by being exposed to small dangers” (as cited in Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016, p. 355).

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