

OUTDOOR PLAY

Outdoor Risky Play

¹Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, PhD, ²Rasmus Kleppe, PhD

¹Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education, Norway

²Kanvas Foundation and Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

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Introduction

Risky play has emerged as a topic of interest for researchers, parents, early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners/teachers and policymakers and authorities over the last twenty years. The reason for the emergence is manifold, but one point of departure might be the ambivalent wording of mixing the positive connotation of “play” with the more negative intuitive connotations attached to “risk.” Nevertheless, a growing body of research investigates various aspects of risk taking, including playful activities, indicating that the concept reflects a basic aspect of human life.

Subject

What is Risky Play?

Risky play shares some characteristics with various play types included in prior categorizations of play. For example, it could involve elements from locomotor¹ and physically activity play,² rough-and-tumble play,²⁻⁴ as well as play with objects.² It also shares characteristics with deep play (confronting risks and fears and interfacing mortality/death), exploratory play (exploration of the unknown) and mastery play (testing own physical and psychic abilities).⁵

A common definition of risky play is: “thrilling and exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury.”⁶ Eight categories of risky play have been identified through observations and interviews with children and ECECs:⁷⁻⁹ 1) Play with great heights – danger of injury from falling, such as all forms of climbing, jumping, hanging/dangling, or balancing from heights; 2) Play with high speed – uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to a collision with something (or someone), for instance bicycling at high speeds, sledging (winter), sliding, running (uncontrollably); 3) Play with dangerous tools – that can lead to injuries, for instance axe, saw, knife, hammer, or ropes; 4) Play near dangerous elements – where you can fall into or from something, such as water or a fire pit, 5) Rough-and-tumble play – where children can harm each other, for instance wrestling, fighting, fencing with sticks; 6) Play where children go exploring alone, for instance without supervision and where there are no fences, such as in the woods; 7) Play with impact – children crashing into something repeatedly just for fun; and 8) Vicarious play – children experiencing thrill by watching other children (most often older) engaging in risk.¹

Research Context and Results

Initial research on children’s risky play was situated mostly within ECEC contexts (preschool, kindergarten, child care centers etc.). Smith,¹⁰ Greenfield^{11,12} and Stephenson¹³ were early in pointing out how children sought risk in their play; how staff handled the risk in children’s play and what benefits this kind of play might have for children. Building on this research, Sandseter⁶⁻⁸ explored the phenomena of four to six-year-old children’s risky play and how it can be defined and categorized. Recently, Kleppe et al.^{9,14} identified such play among even younger children, down to one year old. Overall, the existing research shows that children between the age of one and six years all are engaged in risky play in some way, and on a level that suits their individual competence and courage. The concept of risky play is studied in a range of countries, indicating some cross-cultural commonalities of this type of play.^{15,16}

Both observations and interviews reveal that children’s emotional experiences in risky play range from pure exhilaration, through exhilaration and fear at the same time (exhilaration bordering fear), to pure fear. This ambiguous feeling is probably what makes this type of play attractive to children.^{6,13,17} The highly aroused feeling children have when engaging in risky play is expressed by joyful, happy and enthusiastic facial expressions, children looking ecstatic and verbal expressions, such as laughing, shrieking, showing their exhilaration and expressions of fearful joy.^{13,18} However, these typical expressions are individual and suggested to be partly related to age,

as young children's risky play might appear subtler and less exhilarated.⁹ Regardless of age or level of expressed arousal, such activity seems to be repetitive and induce deep engagement.^{18,19}

Despite this well-documented interest and willingness among children towards risky play, there are indications that this type of play is being restricted in ECEC settings.^{20,21} There are probably several reasons for this, but, first of all, restrictions are affected by ECEC practitioners' perceptions, attitudes and practices, which often are influenced by societal factors, not least parents' opinions.^{22,23} Although some research indicates that ECEC practitioners allow children to test their abilities, thereby developing necessary skills to cope with real-life challenges,²³⁻²⁷ practitioners face an obvious balancing act between the potential short- and long-term benefits of such play and the cost of injuries. This balancing act is not an easy task, and it is understandable that both ECEC practitioners and parents want to avoid injuries. However, the trend of a general decrease in children's opportunities for risk-taking in play,^{28,29} might have wider negative consequences. First, it is already documented that an increased safety focus has resulted in more restricted freedom of movement, but also, more specifically, in more boring playgrounds.^{21,30-36} Second, albeit less documented, there is a worry that this lack of play opportunities might result in negative long-term consequences such as reduced well-being, excessive risk taking or, on the other hand, increased anxiety.^{37,38} In many ways, the growing research on children's risky play, and its possible benefits, might be seen as a reaction to the safety discourse.

Saliently, there is not one similar way that the safety discourse has been noticeable in different cultural contexts. How to handle and practice risk in children's play seems to be highly culturally dependent. Studies from central Africa describe common child-rearing practices with risk levels that would be unacceptable in the present Western context, such as eight-months-old infants playing with knives, helping to chop tinder for the household fire³⁹ or two-year-olds independently roaming the village and the surrounding forests and fields.⁴⁰ However, comparative studies indicate variations also between Western countries. New, Mardell and Robinson⁴¹ compared Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Italian and American ECEC-teachers and found that the European teachers are less worried about children's risk-taking than are their American colleagues. Similarly, Little, Sandseter and Wyver²³ found that Scandinavian, and particularly Norwegian ECEC practitioners are more liberal towards children's risky play than practitioners in Australia. Explanations might be found in different theoretical-pedagogical approaches,⁴² but certainly also rooted in cultural beliefs and values, often related to varying emphasis on outdoor play and learning between countries.^{41,43}

However, regardless of cultural context, play appears to be an ideal context to develop the ability to assess and handle risk, where the pretend- or nonliteral aspect allows the players to test out behaviour, situations or actions without the severe consequences of real-life. With this as a backdrop, studies have argued that the ability to handle risk has been a favorable evolutionary trait.³⁸ Additionally, it is found that experience from risky play will result in children being able to assess risk in a better and more accurate way,⁴⁴ and that outdoor risky play have several positive health effects among children.⁴⁵ From a different angle, there are indications of negative effects of children being overly protected; that curbing risky play and autonomy will increase the likelihood of anxiety, both in childhood^{37,46} and in adolescence and adulthood.^{38,47-51}

Key Research Questions and Gaps

The existing research is largely descriptive and less is documented regarding actual benefits of risky play. This knowledge gap invites further investigations, particularly regarding benefits to health, development and learning. We assume that engagement in risky play in childhood protects against anxiety, faulty decisions and/or excessive risk taking later in life. However, most studies consist of small samples and/or lack the appropriate longitudinal design, randomization and control groups, rendering them unfit to properly address this assumption. Not least, this assumption is difficult to test empirically. There are obvious ethical issues with conducting studies designed to let children take risk (with the potential of injury), while restricting children from playing freely and thereby assessing long-term effects of play deprivation would be equally problematic. Creative methods such as Kretch and Adolph's^{52,53} experiments with the visual cliff (allowing children to cross narrow bridges without the real possibility of falling) should be further developed, suggestively with virtual reality as a promising methodological field. However, transferability of results from laboratory conditions or controlled environments to real life contexts will be an apparent issue. There are also challenges in finding appropriate ways of measuring long term effects of risky play considering what to measure in adolescence and/or adulthood, and finally, to have comparable control groups. Notwithstanding, research on risky play is a rather new and promising field, but future projects need to handle these methodological issues to move the field forward.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

The existing research base could be used to guide both parents and ECEC practitioners in how to appropriately support children engaged in risky play. The best available evidence suggests that

allowing children a certain level of autonomy strengthens children's self-awareness and ability to self-regulate and reduces the likelihood of anxiety – present and later in life.

ECEC owners, playground developers and policymakers should include knowledge of risky play in the development of play environments.⁵⁴ Research suggests versatile, complex and flexible play environments to accommodate children's diverse interests, varied competence and risk tolerance.

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