

Risk and safety in outdoor play

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Abstract

The importance of stimulating and challenging outdoor play for the health and development of children, as this Chapter describes, is now the topic of copious research. Play provision has, however, been set on a different trajectory in recent decades; one which has been more preoccupied with the creation of injury free or 'safe' environments and is in part driven by the fear of litigation. An unintended consequence has been the curtailment of essential childhood developmental opportunities. The workplace model of zero tolerance to accidents and associated risk exposure is inappropriate in the context of children and play. It is proposed that a more balanced approach to play provision is needed which recognizes that risk exposure is not entirely bad and that children benefit from and require risk-taking opportunities. This has implications at all levels of play provision, from policy formulation to play practice.

Key words: Children / childhood, development, health, play, risk, safety

Introduction

In this chapter we discuss and apply Sandseter's (2007, 2009a) concept of children's outdoor risky play and discuss its conditions in light of the need to provide children both safety and challenges. We will argue that with increased discussion regarding the appropriate balance between play safety on the one hand, and the benefits of giving children challenges and risks on the other hand, the need has grown for more knowledge on children's risk-taking in play.

You cannot give a person knowledge in the way a doctor gives a shot for measles. Rather, each person learns for himself or herself through the process of growing up in contact with nature and society; by observing, watching, listening, and dreaming. (Peat, 1996, p. 59).

Physicist David Peat wrote these words after an encounter with the Blackfoot Nation in North America during which a young boy, steering a motor fishing boat with his father on board, was clearly heading toward submerged rocks, yet the father remained silent. At the last moment the boy saw the rocks and cut the motor.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead similarly observed that in the Manus society of New Guinea, children were typically exposed to a world of rickety, uneven boardwalks situated above the shifting waters of a marine environment. Maternal or sibling supervision was ever-present but intentionally unobtrusive, allowing children to make small mistakes while not being plagued by parental control. Mead noted that the children grew to be 'physically dextrous, sure footed, clear eyed, quick handed' (Mead, 1931, p. 21).

Risky Play

Recent studies have worked on identifying characteristics of outdoor risky play. Stephenson (2003) found, through observations and interviews of four-year-old children on the issue of risk-taking in play, that this included activities such as sliding, swinging, spinning, jumping, climbing and bike riding and that it was associated with ‘attempting something never done before, feeling on the borderline of ‘out of control’ often because of height or speed, and overcoming fear’ (p. 36). Outdoor activities, such as climbing up steep hillsides and sliding down, climbing up and jumping down from large rocks or small cliffs, climbing in trees, shooting with bows and arrows, rolling on the ground, balancing on stones and fallen trees, etc., and using a knife to whittle sticks are seen as examples of such risky play among children (Kaarby, 2004; Sandseter, 2010).

From observations of three- to five-year-old children, Sandseter (2007, 2009a) identified six categories of risky play: a) Play with great HEIGHTS – danger of injury from falling, such as all forms of climbing, jumping, hanging/dangling, or balancing from heights; b) 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); c) Play with dangerous TOOLS – that can lead to injuries, for instance axe, saw, knife, hammer, or ropes; d) Play near dangerous ELEMENTS – where you can fall into or from something, such as water or a fire pit, e) ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE Play – where the children can harm each other, for instance wrestling, fighting, fencing with sticks, etc.; f) Play where the children can DISAPPEAR/GET LOST, for instance when the children are without supervision and where there are no fences, such as in the woods.

The pursuit of safety and its impact on children's play

As the introductory stories highlight, Manus and Blackfoot children were evidently allowed direct and personal experience of hazards. The same is likely true of the children of most western cultures probably up to the middle of the 20th Century. From that point, however, beliefs began to change and accidents, previously assigned to carelessness, bad luck or destiny, began to be seen as foreseeable and preventable (Green, 1997). In 2001 the influential British Medical Journal went so far as to mandate eliminating the word 'accident' from the pages of the journal, as well as the safety profession's lexicon:

We believe that correct and consistent terminology will help improve understanding that injuries of all kinds—in homes, schools and workplaces, vehicles, and medical settings—are usually preventable. Such awareness, coupled with efforts to implement prevention strategies, will help reduce the incidence and severity of injuries. (Davis & Pless, 2001, p. 1320).

Thus, there was a strengthening and spreading notion that hazardous situations were foreseeable and measures should, necessarily, be implemented to prevent injury occurring. This notion is, generally speaking, valid and as such the primary purpose of the now prolific discipline of risk assessment is to identify such situations and assign them a probability of occurrence. However, at this point of having identified hazardous situations, alternative philosophies on what should ensue may come to bear. In the context of play provision, the dominant discourse from the mid-20th Century is that identified hazards should, if at all possible, be eliminated and, if not, at least reduced. This is sometimes known as a hazard-based approach and its origins can be traced in western countries to workplace settings (Ball, 2002). In some countries, though, the dividing line between practices in industry and public

life were not highly differentiated and so the concept of hazard elimination spread to public life, including provision for children and their play. An example of this is formal risk-management strategies that have emerged in several countries. These primarily entail advice on the physical features of children's play environments and playground equipment, such as maximum fall height, impact absorbing surfaces, sharp edges, unstable equipment and the likelihood of being trapped, pinched, crushed or struck (Ball, 2002, 2004; Chalmers, 2003; Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection and Emergency Planning (DSB), 1996; Little, 2006; Mowat, Wang, Pickett, & Brison, 1998). These recommendations have been made on the basis of injury prevention research and experience showing that the majority of playground injuries result from falls from swings, slides, climbing frames, and bicycles or other equipment and from being hit, pinched, or crushed in swing equipment (Ball, 2002; Bienefeld, Pickett, & Carr, 1996; Chalmers et al., 1996; Illingworth, Brennan, Jay, Al-Ravi, & Collick, 1975; Mack, Hudson, & Thompson, 1997; Peterson, Gillies, Cook, Schick, & Little, 1994; Phelan, Khoury, Kalkwarf, & Lamphear, 2001; Rosen & Peterson, 1990; Sawyers, 1994; Swartz, 1992).

An unintended outcome has been that play provision has increasingly lost its capacity to offer challenge (Play Safety Forum, 2002/2008; Little & Eager, 2010), even for children as young as four to five years, and especially affecting older teenagers who are left with little, if any, ability-related challenge. A second outcome has been that play equipment began increasingly to resemble the inside of a factory with its steel crash barriers, railings, evenly-spaced stairways and safety surfacing; an approach anchored in the belief that people cannot be trusted and that environmental (i.e. engineering) controls are more likely to work in terms of reducing injuries than behavioural measures (Gielen & Sleet, 2006).

This regulation of play spaces has had a detrimental impact on play in two main ways. First, insufficient challenge and novelty in the playground can lead to inappropriate risk-taking as children seek thrills in a fearless manner (Greenfield, 2003). This has links with sensation-seeking as highlighted in the literature relating to risk-taking and unintentional injury (DiLillo, Potts & Himes, 1998; Potts, Martinez & Dedmon, 1995). Secondly, it is associated with risk-compensation behaviour whereby individuals are thought to engage in greater risky behaviour when safety measures are applied to an activity (Morrongiello, Lasenby & Walpole, 2007). Research reveals that both children themselves and the adults supervising them change their perceptions of the risks involved in activities when safety gear is worn (Morrongiello & Major, 2002; Morrongiello, Lasenby & Walpole, 2007; Morrongiello, Walpole & Lasenby, 2007). A study of children's behaviour on an obstacle course whilst wearing safety gear (helmets, wrist guards) showed increased risk-taking behaviour (greater speeds and recklessness e.g., tripping, bumping into things, falling) compared to when they were not wearing safety gear (Morrongiello, Walpole & Lasenby, 2007). Whilst all children in the study exhibited this risk compensation behaviour, it was greatest for children whose temperamental characteristics (low inhibitory control, high thrill seeking) predisposed them to greater risk-taking.

This drive to tackle play safety has been further enhanced by the casual use of statistics. National accident databases exist in many western countries. These frequently identify play as high risk on the basis of the number of cases in comparison with those in other places that children visit or things that they do, and this is often taken as identifying this sector as a priority for remediation. One problem is that injuries and the resulting health care costs are easy to quantify whereas the benefits of risk are intangible and difficult to measure directly.

What this also fails to do, in part, is take account of the duration of exposure to the play environment, that is, how much time children and young people spend in activities classified as play. When this is done the risk of harm per exposure turns out to be remarkably low in comparison with other sport and leisure activities in which children are encouraged to engage (Ball, 2002; Nauta, Martin-Diener, Martin, van Mechelen, & Verhagen, 2015; Play Safety Forum, 2012). Statistics of playground injuries from several countries actually show that despite recent safety legislation to govern playground equipment in order to make play safer, playground injuries have not decreased (Ball, 2002; Briss, Sacks, Adiss, Kresnow, & O'Neil, 1995; Chalmers, 1999, 2003; Phelan et al., 2001). The most serious playground injuries that result in death or severe disablement are rare and are not increasing (Ball, 2002; Bienefeld et al., 1996; Chalmers, 2003; Chalmers et al., 1996; Phelan et al., 2001).

In recent years the impact of the 'safety focus' on children's play has begun to be challenged. This challenge has been prominent in the United Kingdom. In the 1990s, the Play Safety Forum (PSF), a collective of agencies from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with interests in play provision, child safety and well-being, was formed to debate the issues. The outcome has been a series of publications which took a different stance from the hazard-based approach described above, and instead adopted a risk-based approach which saw childhood exposure to managed risk as both positive and necessary (Play Safety Forum, 2012), in effect, perhaps, recovering the ancient wisdoms of the Manus and Blackfoot cultures.

A significant achievement by the PSF in its move to rethink safety and risk in play provision has been to win the support of the UK's chief safety regulator, the Health and Safety

Executive (HSE). For example, in 2008 Judith Hackitt, chair of the HSE, included the following passage in her speech to the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health:

If we don't allow children to experience managed risk I have grave concerns about the future for workplace health and safety. If the next generation enter the workplace having been protected from all risk they will not be so much risk averse as completely risk naïve – creating an enormous task and dilemma for their employers – how to start that health and safety education process *or* to continue to try to protect them from all risk which is of course impractical and impossible (Hackitt, 2008).

The contest between, firstly, hazard- and risk-based approaches and, secondly, alternative visions of what might constitute good play provision is by no means over. On the one hand there is a strongly entrenched position amongst many play providers, predominantly local authorities, that play provision is synonymous with manufactured play equipment and in turn that play equipment must comply with national or international safety standards. The European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) member bodies and countries that have adopted the CEN Playground Standards such as Australian and New Zealand, have only recently begun to explicitly endorse the notion that within the play context there is a trade-off to be made between risks and benefits and that safety should not necessarily trump other considerations such as play value and the need to provide elements of real risk in play. It has been further proposed that the territory currently occupied by Standards bodies extends, in fact, beyond its legitimate remit (Spiegel, Gill, Harbottle, & Ball, 2014). That is, while it would be quite legitimate for Standards to stipulate on, say, the construction of foundations for supporting equipment and the strength of ropes, their role in deciding how much challenge

and risk should be present in a specific play setting is problematic. Such decisions should be made in the context of the local environment, the types of user, and the local policy agenda.

Play provision is also subject to other potentially highly significant developments. These derive from the realisation that physical activity is good for health, and possibly even being the ‘best buy’ in public health (Donaldson, 2000; Walker, 2013), and secondly that encounters with more natural environments should be encouraged, being health-beneficial in numerous ways (Bowler, Buyung-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010; Gill, 2014; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St Leger, 2006). In both cases, where better to start any such campaigns than with the young?

Benefits of risk in outdoor play

Although we face situations where we expose ourselves to negative outcomes, there are also many situations where we take risks in order to achieve positive outcomes. The question is how risky play, where the possible outcome may potentially be injury and sometimes even death, can be developmentally and evolutionarily important. If the benefit of the behaviour outweighs the costs (injury or death) the behaviour should be naturally selected (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2000).

As adults we depend on our ability to adapt to new situations and problems and conquer challenges. As illustrated in the examples from the Blackfoot and Manus children, we obtained these skills by engaging in risk-taking behaviour during our formative years. If we never took a risk we would never have learned to walk, to climb stairs, swim, ride a bicycle, boil an egg, ask someone out on a date, drive a car, and many more far ‘riskier’ activities

(Eager & Little, 2011). All these activities have one common element – for each there are unknown factors that make success uncertain. Therein lies the risk.

Children approach the world around them through play; they are driven by curiosity and a need for excitement; they rehearse handling real-life risky situations through play; and they discover what is safe and not (Adams, 2001; Apter, 2007; Gill, 2007; Smith, 1998; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Ball (2002) and Stutz (1999), emphasize the importance of letting children develop a sound sense of risk through taking risks in play. From a risk-theory perspective, by engaging in risk, children gain a realistic notion of the objective risk in the situation (Adams, 2001), rather than being limited to a subjective understanding (Ball, 2002; Boyesen, 1997; S. J. Smith, 1998; Stutz, 1999). Through experiencing risk situations children gain a broad perceptual memory of both the level of risk involved in different situations, and what actions are necessary to handle the risk in an appropriate way (Boyesen, 1997).

While risky play involves potential costs through the chance of physical injury, research has indicated a myriad of benefits. Through risk-taking in play, children show increased physical activity, improved motor and spatial skills, as well as learning risk assessment and risk mastery (Ball, 2002; Boyesen, 1997; Fjørtoft, 2000; Grahn, Mårtensson, Lindblad, Nilsson, & Ekman, 1997; S. J. Smith, 1998; Stutz, 1999). In their 14-week risky play intervention study, Lavrysen et al. (2015) found that children in the experimental group significantly improved reaction times in detecting risk compared to a control group, as well as their own pre-intervention performance. Likewise, observational studies of children at play found that they exposed themselves to risk, but displayed clear strategies for mitigating harm (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Mikkelsen & Christensen, 2009; Sandseter, 2009b). The benefits of risky play involving activities related to height and speed, such as sliding, swinging, spinning,

falling, climbing and bike riding, may be relevant to practicing and enhancing different motor/physical skills for developing muscle strength, endurance and skeletal quality (Bekoff & Byers, 1981; Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2000; Byers & Walker, 1995; Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). These kinds of play also involve training related to perceptual competencies, such as depth-, form-, shape-, size-, and movement perception (Rakison, 2005), and general spatial-orientation abilities (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002). These are important skills both for survival in childhood (immediate benefits) and for handling important adaptive tasks in adulthood (deferred benefits). Risky play may also be relevant to learning about one's ecology, and exploring the environment (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002). Venturing out on their own away from the surveillance of caretakers is a way for children to explore their worlds and increase their comfort level (S. J. Smith, 1998). Bjorklund and Pellegrini (2002) similarly argue that children come to know their environment through continuously exploring new areas and objects. It seems that children attain enhanced familiarity and competence about their environment, its potentials and its dangers through exploring its features (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002).

Several human fears and phobias, such as fear of heights, fear of water and separation anxiety, appear naturally at a developmentally relevant age as a part of the child's maturation, yet subsequently diminish as part of normal development as a result of regular interactions with the relevant environment and the anxious stimulus (Poulton & Menzies, 2002a, 2002b). Poulton and Menzies suggest that the tendency to these fears and phobias is non-associative innate, originating as adaptive fears that are necessary to keep the child safe, alert and careful when dealing with potentially dangerous situations.

Research on fear of heights has shown that play at heights, even resulting in injury due to falls, both before age five and between ages five and nine is associated with the absence of fear of heights at age eighteen (Poulton, Davies, Menzies, Langley, & Silva, 1998). Thus, risky play with great heights may provide a desensitizing or habituating experience, resulting in less fear of heights later in life (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Similarly, research on separation anxiety shows that the number of separation experiences before age nine correlates negatively with separation anxiety symptoms at age eighteen (Poulton, Milne, Craske, & Menzies, 2001). Research on fear of water has concluded that there is no relationship between experiencing water trauma before age nine and the symptoms of water fear at age eighteen (Poulton, Menzies, Craske, Langley, & Silva, 1999). These findings suggest that risky play where children experience heights, separations and/or water may also have habituating effects on these innate fears (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). As such, Sandseter and Kennair (2011) suggest that an important aspect of risky play is the anti-phobic effect of exposure to typical anxiety-eliciting stimuli and contexts, in combination with positive emotions (thrills, excitement and fearful joy) and relatively safe situations.

A recent systematic review examined the relationship between risky outdoor play and health (Brussoni et al., 2015). The 21 relevant articles examined getting lost, play at heights, rough-and-tumble play, and risky play supportive environments. The results showed mainly positive outcomes. Play where children can get lost and risky play supportive environments were positively associated with physical activity and social health, and negatively associated with sedentary behaviour. Great heights were not related to fracture frequency or severity, and no head injuries were recorded. Rough-and-tumble play did not increase aggression, and was associated with increased social competence for boys and popular children, but results were mixed for other children.

Aldis (1975) points out that much of children's play is related to fear and that young children actively seek out the thrills of fearful situations such as swinging and jumping from high places. Hansen and Breivik's (2001) study of 360 children aged 12-16 years with a high need for sensation seeking indicated that they engaged primarily in healthy risk-taking behaviours; but if they lacked opportunities for healthy risk, they were more likely to engage in unhealthy risk-taking (e.g. substance abuse, petty crime, drinking, speeding, self-harm). In interviews, adolescent boys in custody for delinquent behaviour indicated that they engaged in deviant behaviours because they lacked access to socially acceptable, thrilling and exciting activities, in part owing to a paucity of stimulating outdoor recreational opportunities (Robertson, 1994).

Risk is not always about being reckless but rather about engaging with uncertainty in order to achieve a particular goal. Risk events require us to weigh our likelihood of success or failure based on relevant knowledge or information related to each particular situation and our individual abilities. It is only through facing challenges that we learn to appraise risks and make appropriate judgments about our likelihood of success (or failure) (Aven & Renn, 2009; Little, 2006), therefore risky play should not just be viewed for the developmental opportunities it offers children, but rather as life's training for the unexpected (Eager, Little, & Nasri, 2011). Children need frequent opportunities to engage in activities where they will be able to learn from their mistakes. Outdoor play provides a vehicle for children to both develop and demonstrate knowledge, skills and concepts. Outdoor play allows children to actively construct their own understandings of their physical and social world and to understand their own capabilities in relation to their developing skills (Little & Wyver, 2008).

Handling risk in children's outdoor play

There is an increasing disconnection between the promotion of children's autonomy and agency as espoused by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1990) and children's everyday reality in which their lives have become increasingly regulated and controlled (James & James, 2001). Contemporary theories of child development and early childhood education, such as socio-cultural theory and post-structuralism, acknowledge the multiple influences in children's lives, view children as being capable, active in their socio-cultural contexts, and as agents in their own learning (A. Smith, 2002). This view of children as competent and capable is inherent in many early childhood curriculum documents, e.g. in Australia, New Zealand, England and Norway (DEEWR, 2009; Ministry of Education, 1996; NMER, 2006/2011). From this perspective, we would expect children to be actively engaged in constructing their own worlds, and able to negotiate and contribute to matters that affect them, including learning how to recognise and appraise risk (Kelley, Hood, & Mayall, 1998; A. Smith, 2002). Yet a number of international studies on outdoor play suggest that children's opportunities for learning about risk and safety are often limited (Bundy et al., 2009; Little & Eager, 2010; Little, 2015; Tovey, 2007; Waters & Begley, 2007).

Early Childhood Education

Little and Wyver (2008) identified a number of factors that potentially lead to risk minimisation in outdoor play including: high child-staff ratios; external regulations restricting activities; poor outdoor environments; inadequate understanding by educators of the benefits of risk-taking; and fear of litigation. The extent to which these factors impact on outdoor play environments and approaches to risk and safety needs to be considered from a socio-cultural theoretical framework.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is embedded within and reflects the values, attitudes and priorities of its socio-cultural context (Waters & Maynard, 2014) and consequently influences opportunities for outdoor play generally, and approaches to risk and safety in particular.

Waters and Maynard (2014) note the differences in the UK policy context. They contrast Scotland's strong commitment to the provision of outdoor experiences, as evidenced by the publication of a school curriculum for learning outdoors, with the situation in the rest of the UK. Whilst the Welsh government has a similar commitment to the provision of outdoor experiences for children, this is countered to some extent by the content-based outcomes associated with the Foundation Phase curriculum. Waters and Maynard note the even more limited prominence given to outdoor learning in the Northern Ireland Foundation Stage curriculum and Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum in England.

Similar variations in the status of outdoor learning environments are also outlined in the curriculum documents in other countries. Sandseter (2014) explains that the prominence of outdoor play within Scandinavian ECE curricula reflects the importance of outdoor life as a core value underpinning Scandinavian ECE provision. Similarly, the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), National Quality Standards (ACECQA, 2011), and Regulations (ACECQA, 2013) recognise the importance of outdoor play environments as an integral part of the early childhood curriculum with attention given to promoting access to, flexible use of, and interaction between indoor and outdoor environments, as well as ensuring that outdoor spaces allow children to explore and experience the natural environment.

Similarly, Stephenson (2014) discusses the integral role of the outdoors in the learning environment but notes the shifting focus within the New Zealand context with changes to licensing criteria having a detrimental impact on children's free-flow access to the outdoors as well as space allocation for outdoor play provision. The importance of outdoor play appears to

be less visible in other curriculum and accreditation documents. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation criteria in the USA requires early childhood services to have a curriculum or curriculum framework that includes the provision of both indoor and outdoor experiences on a daily basis ‘when weather, air quality, and environmental safety conditions do not pose a health risk’ in environments that include natural elements (NAEYC, 2016, p. 50). The accreditation criteria also stipulates that materials and equipment ‘provide for children’s safety while being appropriately challenging’ (NAEYC, 2016, p. 11) and that children are protected in the outdoor area from injury from falls, and sharp or protruding points, and tripping and entrapment hazards. Children should also be provided with opportunities to learn safety rules associated with both indoor and outdoor learning spaces (NAEYC, 2016). Notable within all these approaches are the differences in how risk-taking is viewed and the extent to which the emphasis is on safety over the developmental and learning benefits associated with risky play.

Few curriculum documents appear to make explicit mention of risk-taking and its role in children’s learning and development. Cevher-Kalburan (2014) notes that the Turkish National Early Childhood Education Program emphasises creativity, problem-solving and learning through discovery in stimuli-rich learning environments, both indoors and outdoors, but makes no statements in regards to risky play. The New Zealand early childhood curriculum makes mention of children having the confidence to ‘participate and take risks without fear of harm’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 52). This is the only explicit mention of risk-taking, although in relation to children’s wellbeing there is reference to programs providing ‘a balance between events and activities that are predictable and certain and those that provide moderate surprise and uncertainty’ (p. 51). However, generally the benefits of risk-taking are

not discussed and the term risk is used in the context of children experiencing environments where they are kept safe from harm.

In contrast, the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) explicitly acknowledges children's need to take risks and cope with the unexpected in developing their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, social-emotional wellbeing, resilience and sense of agency. Children's development is supported when educators 'plan learning environments with appropriate levels of challenge where children are encouraged to explore, experiment and take appropriate risks in their learning' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 35). However, as with the New Zealand context, the Australian National Quality Standards (NQS) and Regulations also focus on requirements for children's safety. These documents discuss the need for effective supervision when children are participating in high-risk activities, as well as the need to monitor hazards and safety risks in the environment and being alert to the potential for injury (ACECQA, 2011). These dual messages within the curriculum framework and quality standards present challenges for early childhood teachers. A recent study (Little, 2015) suggests that some teachers felt they now had more autonomy in being able to do their own risk assessments and make a case for some of the experiences they wanted to provide than they did previously. However, for others there was still an issue with the seemingly contradictory messages within the EYLF and NQS where risk-taking is encouraged compared with the emphasis on safety within the Regulations. For these teachers, the effort involved in undertaking a lot of risk assessments meant that it was easier to just keep things 'safe'. This latter attitude reflects that of teachers in previous studies who felt their practice was constrained by the regulatory environment (Little, 2010).

To explore the impact of different regulatory environments, Little, Sandseter and Wyver (2012) considered the beliefs and practices of early childhood teachers in Australia and Norway. Interviews with teachers from both countries revealed that both recognised the importance of risky play for children's development and wellbeing, but differences in the way these beliefs are translated into practice were apparent. The Australian teachers identified factors associated with the quality of the outdoor environment, regulatory requirements, and a litigious environment as constraints for their teaching practice. Consequently, there was greater focus on compliance with regulations than the provision of challenging play environments for children due to the risks that might be associated with this type of play. In contrast, the Norwegian teachers exercised greater professional judgment in managing children's risky play and took a more flexible approach.

These differences in how external regulations restrict activities and fear of litigation impact on children's opportunities for risky play are evident in other countries as well. Waters and Begley (2007) found that the Welsh preschool teachers in their study focused on the negative aspects of risk-taking and felt the need to exert a high level of control in order to ensure the children's safety and meet curriculum goals. Tovey (2007) found variations in the impact of external regulations on teaching practice. Whilst some English teachers expressed anxiety about the risk-taking behaviour of the children, others openly encouraged risky play.

A few studies have examined variations in pedagogical approaches to risky play. Nah and Waller's (2015) cross-cultural study of pedagogical practices in relation to outdoor play in England and Korea revealed that whilst in both countries outdoor play is emphasised within the curriculum documents, this is not always reflected in practice. Reflecting on each other's practices, the English and Korean preschool teachers noted very different responses to

particular scenarios. For example, the English teachers reflecting on children's play involving climbing trees and swinging from branches believed that 'appropriate "risk-taking" and "challenging" behaviours were a necessary disposition for the children to acquire' (Nah & Waller, 2015, p. 8). The Korean teachers reflecting on the same play behaviours voiced more risk-averse attitudes, focusing on safety. Although they did concede there were benefits to be gained from such play, and that Korean children might gain from having the opportunity for greater physical challenges. Another difference that emerged from this study was the way teachers responded to parents' safety concerns. Although both acknowledged parental concerns, the English teachers were more likely to defend their pedagogical decisions whereas the Korean teachers were more likely to adapt their practice to take account of the concerns of parents.

Sandseter, Little and Wyver (2012) considered the influence of different theoretical approaches on the pedagogical practices of early childhood educators in Norway and Australia. The authors argued that the emphasis on dynamic systems theory and Gibsonian-based approaches inherent in Norwegian pedagogical practice supports teachers in achieving a stronger alignment to their risky play beliefs and practices. On the other hand, the focus on socio-cultural theory within the Australian EYLF may not provide the same theoretical support for teachers in making decisions about risk-taking in outdoor play since it does not emphasize direct engagement with the environment in order for learning and development the same way the Norwegian approach does.

It is apparent from this discussion that there is considerable variation in the way in which risk and safety in outdoor play is viewed. It is also important to note that there is as much variation within particular countries and cultures as there is between them. As the study by Little

(2015) illustrates there are diverse perspectives in teachers' understanding of risky play as well as inconsistency in the way quality standards and regulations are interpreted and implemented. Furthermore, there is considerable variation in the extent to which teachers feel confident in their ability to manage risks and articulate to regulatory authority assessors their decision making and rationale for providing children with opportunities for risk-taking.

Summary

Children in most parts of the world have never been safer and yet many societies have a misguided perception that they are being exposed to unacceptable risks when they play outdoors. The trend over the last two decades to attempt to remove all risk from activities within our society has paradoxically created risk. Children play to learn. They push their boundaries and when they do, mistakes happen and injuries occur. The cost of risk in outdoor play is normally measured as a negative. This view only addresses one side of the risk equation. It looks at the injuries and the negative consequences of these injuries. It fails to take into account the benefits of risk and the positive side of the equation (Little & Eager, 2008, 2010). This judgment needs to be made in balancing the likelihood of serious injury, with the developmental and health benefits that come from risk-taking in play.

As previously discussed, serious injuries are rare in the context of play. Children need to know what is safe and what is unsafe (Eager, 2008). Playing in the safety of their backyard or in a nature play setting is most likely safe. Injuries will and do occur during play in these settings but this does not mean that backyards and natural play are inherently unsafe. Society's role is to provide both safeguards and opportunities; limiting exposure to hazards, while maintaining exposure to risks.

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