

All about... risk

Risk is often associated with danger, but too much safety can create problems of its own. *Helen Tovey* looks at how to get the balance right

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The balance between risk and safety is an issue that continues to create heated debate among practitioners. Is it safe to include stinging nettles in an outdoor area? Should children be able to experience fire? Is it too risky to allow them to use a small stepladder to extend their block construction? When should children access real tools for woodwork and gardening?

WHAT IS A RISK?

To many people, the word risk is associated with danger. Risk is seen as something undesirable to be assessed, managed, controlled or eliminated. However, although risk can carry a possibility of harm it also has positive benefits and any assessment of risk has to be balanced against these benefits.

Risk is part of being alive and being human. Life is full of varied risks and we have to learn to recognise and manage them. Babies would never learn to crawl, negotiate steps or stand up, and children would not learn to run or ride a bike, without being prepared to take a risk, to tumble, and to learn from the consequences. Risk is about being prepared to have a go at something, being adventurous and gaining new experiences.

Risk-taking is not just about physical risks, although these might be the ones that worry us most. Children take social risks – for instance, when they try to join in an established game. A toddler takes an emotional risk when he moves away from a trusted adult to explore. Reaching out to touch a wriggling worm for the first time might seem very risky and daring for a two-year-old. Risk underpins creative, imaginative and scientific thinking. We ‘hazard’ a guess, ‘dare’ to be different and take ‘imaginative leaps’ in our thinking.



Risk is not something fixed and certain; rather, there are perceptions of risk. What is an acceptable risk for one child may be a hazard for another. What is acceptable in one context may be unacceptable in another. Our culture, experience and even gender are likely to influence how we perceive something as safe or risky. It is vital that early years practitioners think carefully about their own attitudes towards risk so they can make judgements that enable rather than restrict learning and safety.

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‘DIZZY PLAY’

All play includes an element of risk, but sometimes risk is the central characteristic of play – for example, when children deliberately put themselves in a position of uncertainty. Such play, often referred to as ‘deep play’ or ‘dizzy play’, involves a simultaneous experience of risk and challenge, fear and joy, and a feeling of being ‘on the edge’ of danger. We can see this in babies’ delight in being thrown up in the air or tipped backwards by a trusted adult, in young children balancing along a wobbly bridge or in older children swinging on the end of a rope.

Many children seek out such adventurous play, moving at speed, sliding head first down a slide, rolling, spinning or hanging upside down. This sort of risky, adventurous play can be restricted in some early years settings but celebrated and encouraged in others, reflecting practitioners’ very different perceptions on the value of risk-taking in play.

WHY IS RISK-TAKING IMPORTANT?

Playing adventurously motivates children to extend their own boundaries, to explore a little further, to develop a disposition to persist at something and see challenges as problems to enjoy rather than things to fear.

The willingness to take risks is an important characteristic of an effective learner. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidance *Development Matters* states that an effective learner is willing ‘to have a go’ through:

- initiating activities
- seeking challenge
- showing a ‘can-do’ attitude
- taking a risk, engaging in new experiences, and learning by trial and error.

When adults look anxious or repeatedly say to children ‘mind out’, ‘be careful’, ‘don’t do that’, ‘come down or you’ll fall’, there is a danger that they undermine this important disposition to learn by communicating their own anxiety.

There is evidence that risk and challenge in a supportive environment is positively linked with emotional well-being, resilience and mental health and that small mistakes and minor accidents can offer some protection against the negative effects of future failure.

Managing a small amount of fear and uncertainty, such as ➤

balancing along a wobbly bridge or sliding fast down a steep slope and holding your nerve when feeling on the edge of control, is important to emotional well-being. Such play can develop children's resilience and help them to cope physically and emotionally with unexpected events.

There is also evidence that vigorous 'dizzy' play, such as swinging, hanging, rolling or romping – where the normal body position is altered – is crucial for developing children's sense of balance and sense of their own body in space. Research on children's neuro-motor skills in primary schools shows that children with immature motor skills do not perform as well on educational measures at eight years old.

However, despite an inbuilt sense of danger, children who lack experience can sometimes take risks that are inappropriate, which border on recklessness or which put themselves or others at risk of serious injury.

As in many areas of learning, children need the support of experienced others who can help them recognise and assess risk for themselves, teach safe ways of doing things and also encourage a 'can-do' attitude and a positive disposition to adventurous play. Teaching skills such as testing the strength of a branch before climbing or using a stick to measure the depth of water in a stream before paddling helps children to feel confident in managing risky situations.

ARE CHILDREN OVERPROTECTED TODAY?

There is mounting concern at the state of childhood in our increasingly risk-averse society where children spend much of their time confined indoors, with fewer freedoms to



pursue their own self-directed challenges, particularly outdoors. Electronic media can offer a seductive alternative to real-life experiences. Play is increasingly commercialised in adult-led groups. Thrills can be experienced in pre-packaged theme park rides rather than everyday adventurous play outdoors.

But there is a strong movement against this risk aversion and 'cotton wool culture'. There is increasing evidence that attitudes are now changing. Publicity given to David Bond's film *Project Wild Thing*, which champions adventurous play outdoors, is just one example of this.

A challenge to the zero-risk approach to play can be found in the

The appropriate environment depends on the age and experience of children and the context of the setting

document *Managing Risk in Play Provision: implementation guide*, produced by Play England and the Play Safety Forum. Although written for the play sector, it offers a useful framework for early years settings. It urges a balanced approach to risk management that takes into account the benefits as well as the risks.

It argues that risk-benefit assessments can support play providers in offering challenging, exciting, engaging play opportunities while not exposing children to unacceptable risk of harm. The document has had robust legal scrutiny and is endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Government. It provides a positive way forward in challenging the risk-averse culture that has had such a damaging influence in recent years and which has paradoxically placed children at increased risk of harm.

THE DANGERS OF SAFETY

While we all agree with the need to ensure young children's safety and to check the environment for unsafe things that can cause harm and have no play value, such as damaged equipment, there is much less agreement as to what is meant by such phrases as 'keeping children safe'.

Most settings have a statement of aims that includes a phrase such as, 'We aim to create a safe, secure and stimulating environment'. However,

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is absolute safety an appropriate aim and can it ever really be achieved? Should environments be as safe as possible or should they just be as safe as necessary?

There is an important distinction here. An environment that is as safe as possible, where all possible sources of risk of harm are removed, is actually an unsafe environment because it offers little value in terms of play and learning and denies children the necessary experience to develop and practise the skills to be safe.

Children in such environments may seek adventure and challenge in more reckless ways or alternatively they may learn to be compliant, unadventurous and risk averse and miss out on important learning experiences. As the UK HSE has stated, 'we must not lose sight of the important developmental role of play in pursuit of the unachievable goal of absolute safety' (cited in Ball et al 2008:117).

Instead of promoting a 'safe' environment, we should focus on creating an environment that is 'safe enough' for children to act on, transform, seek out challenges and take risks. This is not a recipe for complacency – far from it. Rather, it is a plea for a balanced approach where the benefits of particular experiences are weighed against the possible risks.

For example, the experience of sliding head first down the slide provides experience of concepts of speed, friction, head first and even head first backwards. Rather than expending energy trying to stop children from sliding headfirst, we should support them in finding ways to do it safely.

Yes, there is a small risk children may scuff their hands as they reach the end of the slide at speed, but the benefits of the learning experiences far outweigh the risks, which are easily managed through discussion and by helping children understand how to control their speed if they wish to.

'HEALTH AND SAFETY'

Health and safety is often blamed for our risk-averse culture or used as an excuse for restricting play. Yet the HSE makes it very clear that children need to take risks in an effective play environment. For example, it says, 'HSE understands and accepts that... children will often be exposed to play environments which, while well managed, carry a degree of risk and sometimes potential danger', and 'HSE wants to make sure that mistaken health and safety concerns do

not create sterile play environments that lack challenge and so prevent children from expanding their learning and stretching their abilities.' (See www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childrens-play-july-2012.pdf)

Health and safety law does not expect all risk to be eliminated, but states that 'reasonable precautions' are taken and that staff are trained and aware of their responsibilities and can make sensible judgements in children's best interests.

CREATING A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

What is an appropriate environment will depend on the age and experience of children and the context of the setting. Where children have had regular experiences of challenging activities, their confidence and competence will be much greater than



where children have had little of such experience.

Our attention also needs to focus on those factors that can create situations where children's opportunity to play in adventurous but safe ways can be seriously compromised. For example, too many children in one play area, a poor adult:child ratio, and a bland, uninspiring environment are predictable risk factors for accidents yet do not always feature in risk assessments.

Here are some examples of things that could help create challenging environments:

- Resources that allow for swinging, balancing, sliding, rolling, crawling and climbing. Resources should be flexible enough to ensure challenge for the most timid and the most adventurous.
- Resources that give a sensation of instability, such as rockers, swing bridges, rope bridges, see-saws and hammocks. These offer unpredictability and a sense of risk with little possibility of harm.
- Uneven ground and varied surfaces outdoors. Mounds, hillocks, slopes and a variety of surfaces and levels outdoors can provide essential experience for crawling babies, toddlers and young children. Flat, rubberised surfaces do not allow children to develop the necessary flexibility to be able to move safely in varied terrain.
- Increasing use of real tools, such as whisks, hammers, saws, ➤

RISK AND CHALLENGE: A POSITIVE APPROACH

Here are some examples of positive approaches to risk and challenge:

- One children's centre planted teasels and thistles and left a patch of stinging nettles in the garden for under-threes. The two-year-olds were both fascinated and a little fearful of the prickly sensation of the plants and kept returning to them, even fixing clothes pegs to the stalks. They quickly learned to avoid the stinging nettles, but enjoyed rubbing the juice of dock leaves on their skin.
- A workplace nursery positioned an enclosed fabric and rope swing over a sand pit. The toddlers enjoyed pushing each other on the swing and the three-year-olds enjoyed twisting the rope and delighting in the rapid rotations as the swing unwound. The sand provided a soft landing for any falls.
- A nursery school provided an independent cooking area for three- and four-year-olds. This included opportunities to make chocolate crispies from a recipe book. The children

used a grater and a candle food warmer to melt the chocolate and to make their crispies independently having learned how to manage the grater and food warmer safely.

- A nature kindergarten involved children in carrying out a 'risk assessment' of a fallen tree. Children used pens, paper and clipboards to 'write' a list of the features that made the tree unsafe. They then used loppers, saws and sanders to trim the sharp branches from the tree to make it safe to play on.



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screwdrivers, glue guns, gardening tools and sewing tools with well-organised storage and appropriate supervision.

- A flexible, diverse environment where children can pursue their own challenges with guidance. For example, a small step ladder in the block area allows children to extend the height of their constructions but also to collaborate together to hold the ladder to ensure stability.

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR

However, the key to developing more opportunities for challenging, adventurous play rests with those who work with young children. Research in New Zealand and Norway, for example, has found that adults who enjoy being outside, who interact sensitively and take a positive 'can-do' approach to adventurous play are crucial in enabling children to find challenges that they perceive as risky or enjoyably 'scary' but which do not put them in a position of great harm.

My own research (Tovey, 2010) suggested that practitioners who felt supported within their teams and understood the benefits of risk-taking were confident to offer experiences that included some element of risk and challenge.

However, where practitioners felt unsupported by senior staff and anxious about blame and litigation, they were more likely to curtail adventurous play despite believing in its importance.

Paradoxically, these risk control measures appeared to increase children's attempts to take risks, resulting in conflict with the practitioners, who

interpreted their search for challenge as challenging behaviour.

Strategies

To promote positive risk-taking and adventurous play:

- Debate the issue of risk within early years teams. Without a shared ethos and sense of trust within the team, staff can be left anxious and unsupported. The EYFS requires providers to have a clear and well-understood policy, and procedures, for assessing any risks to children's safety. The value of appropriate risk-taking and the importance of a challenging play environment can be included in such a policy.
- Move away from the narrowly procedural 'risk assessments' to risk/benefit assessments that

MORE INFORMATION

- *Managing Risk in Play Provision: implementation guide* by D Ball, T Gill and B Spiegall (2008), Department for Children, Schools and Families. A fully revised 2nd edition was published in December 2013 and is available at www.playengland.org.uk/managingrisk
- *No Fear: growing up in a risk-averse society* by T Gill (2012), Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
- *Playing Outdoors: space and places, risks and challenge* by H Tovey (2007), Open University Press
- *Too Safe for their own Good? Helping children learn about risk and skills* by J Lindon (2011), National Children's Bureau

weigh up the benefit as well as the risk of the experience.

- Look for ways to empower children to keep themselves safe. This can include involving children in risk assessments and finding ways to help them pursue their challenges in safe ways.
- Think about the restrictions you impose. Are they always necessary? Could children be supported in pursuing what they are trying to do in safe ways?

CONCLUSION

Over-emphasis on safety creates the biggest risk of all – that of creating a generation of children who may become either reckless in their pursuit of thrills and excitement, or risk-averse, lacking the confidence and skill to be safe and also lacking the disposition to be adventurous, creative and innovative in their thinking.

We need to look more closely at our own assumptions, to be more willing 'to have a go' and model a can-do attitude.

Above all, we need to view children as both risk-seekers and risk-takers and trust in children's emerging capabilities. This means knowing children well, understanding their capabilities, respecting their intentions and supporting their desire for risk and challenge. ■

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Practitioners should focus on weighing up the benefits as well as the risks of an experience