Risky Play Outdoors: Embracing the possibilities to support active play

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Unpacking risk

**RISK = DANGER**

- Risk equals the expected loss (Willis, 2007)
- Risk is the probability of an adverse outcome (Graham & Weiner, 1995)
- The engagement in behaviours that are associated with some probability of negative outcomes (Boyer, 2006)

**HAZARD VS RISK**

- Identifiable source of harm
- High probability of serious injury or death
- Situations where the outcome is uncertain regardless of whether that outcome is predominately positive or negative

**RISK ≠ DANGER**

- Risk is equal to the combination of events/consequences and associated uncertainties (Aven, 2007)

**RISK = UNCERTAINTY**

- Risk is a situation or event where something of human value is at stake and where the outcome is uncertain (Rosa, 2003)
What is risk-taking?

• Uncertainty
• Benefits vs undesirable outcomes
• May result in positive or negative outcomes
• Calculated risk
• Children engage in self-chosen challenging activities that promote development
Potential outcomes of risk minimisation

Minimisation of risk-taking play

- High child-staff ratios
- External regulation restricting activities
- Inadequate understanding of benefits of risk-taking
- Poor outdoor environment
- Fear of litigation

- Reduced opportunities to develop skills in risk evaluation
- Increase in unsafe risk-taking
- Fewer benefits from physical play
- Underdeveloped motor skills
- Risk of chronic illness associated with low levels of activity

(Little & Wyver, 2008)
Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments. They offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors. Play spaces in natural environments include plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water and other elements from nature. These spaces invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 15-16)
Outcome 1
❖ Children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency when they **take considered risks** in their decision-making and cope with the unexpected *(DEEWR, 2009, p. 22)*

Outcome 3
❖ Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing when they make choices, accept challenges, **take considered risks**, manage change and cope with frustrations and the unexpected *(DEEWR, 2009, p. 31)*

Outcome 4
❖ Achieved 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)*
National Quality Standards (NQS) and Risky play

**Quality Area 2:**
- Educators
  - “...plan to ensure that all areas used by children are effectively supervised, including when children are participating in high-risk activities” (ACECQA, 2011, p. 70)
  - “ensure children are alerted to safety issues and encouraged to develop the skills to assess and minimise risks to their own safety” (ACECQA, 2011, p. 70)

**Quality Area 5:**
- “Having supportive relationships with educators enables children to develop confidence in their ability to express themselves, work through differences, learn new things, and take calculated risks” (ACECQA, 2011, p.124).
Positive Outcomes of Risk Taking

• Health and developmental benefits:
  • try new physical activities;
  • test the limits of their physical, intellectual and emotional development;
  • develop a wide range of manipulative and motor skills
  • gain mastery over their bodies
  • develop muscle strength, endurance, skeletal strength
  • enhances perceptual development
    • depth, form, shape, size, movement perception
    • general spatial-orientation abilities
  ❖ Satisfies children’s innate need for risk with reasonable risks in order to prevent them finding greater unmanaged risk themselves
  ❖ Helps children learn how to manage risk (understanding safety)
  ❖ Children gain a sense of accomplishment
    • fosters greater confidence and competence
    • encourages children to seek new challenges and learn new skills
  ❖ Promotes life-long participation in physical activities
THE POSSIBILITIES
What might risky play look like?

- NZ research - describes 3 types of outdoor physical play (Stephenson, 1998)
  - **Coaching** – children seek teachers’ assistance to learn specific physical skills or attempt a particular physical activity
  - **Combination of physical and dramatic play** – incorporating role-play into physical activity; also includes chasing games such as ‘What's the time, Mr. Wolf?’
  - **Risky play** – obvious desire to challenge themselves and extend their skills; children acutely aware of their skill level and competence – aim is to test their limits and display physical skills
  - Elements of ‘risky' play – attempting something never done before; feeling on the borderline of being out of control (due to height or speed); overcoming fear.
Categorising Risky Play

- Norwegian research (Sandseter, 2007)
  - Play with HEIGHTS (risk of falling)
  - Play with high SPEED (uncontrolled speed and pace leading to collision with person or object)
  - Play with TOOLS (risk of injury)
  - Play near dangerous ELEMENTS (possibility of falling into or from something)
  - ROUGH and TUMBLE play (where children can harm each other)
  - Play where children can ‘DISAPPEAR’/GET LOST (exploring unknown areas or areas where there were no fences to limit their adventuring)
UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN CHILDREN’S PATTERNS OF RISK-TAKING

- Gender
- Age
- Temperament
- Sensation Seeking
- Risk perception and appraisal
- Adult socialisation practices
- Injury proneness
- Development and learning
Environments that Support Risky Play
Affordances

• The physical environment affords different actions and behaviours (Gibson, 1979)
• Actionable properties - features of the environment that invite us to do something or to undertake a particular action.
• Encompass characteristics of both the environment and the person
• Unique for each individual and correspond with the individual’s body size, strength, skills, and motivation.
Climbable features
Jump-down-off-able features
Balance-on-able features
Swing-on-able features – play with heights and speed
Flat, relatively smooth surfaces – afford cycling, running, and rough-and-tumble play

Slopes and slides – afford sliding, running, cycling
Opportunities to experience increasingly fast speeds e.g. swings, slopes for wheeled toys, slides positioned at increasing gradients
Uneven ground; rocks for clambering; grassy slopes for rolling
Loose Parts

Sydney Playground Project

Creative play and physical activity: children using buckets for helmets and pool noodles for swords

Physical activity: kids pushing a barrel with another child inside

Creative play, teamwork and physical activity: children in a cubby house they made from a tarpaulin

Teamwork, cooperation, physical activity and creativity: multiple children constructing a building out of various materials
The challenge for educators
….. Is to provide the best possible play opportunities, and to create play spaces that will attract children, capture their imagination and give them scope to play in new, more exciting, and more creative ways
Whilst….ensuring safety

• Quality Area 2: Children’s Health and Safety
  • 2.3 Each child is protected.
    • 2.3.1 Children are adequately supervised at all times.
    • 2.3.2 Every reasonable precaution is taken to protect children from harm and any hazard likely to cause injury

... But avoiding ‘surplus safety’
Remember.....

• “The National Law does not require services to eliminate all risk and challenge from children’s play or environments” (ACECQA, 2011, Guide to the National Law and National Regulations, p. 67)

.....as safe as necessary not as safe as possible (RoSPA)
• The focus of the NQF is OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN
  • Risk Assessment
  • challenge the concepts of acceptable risk
  • be able to identify why spaces can be too controlling; hence limiting challenge
  • rethink the strategies of being hazard aware rather than risk adverse
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “That’s not safe”</td>
<td>2. “Someone may get hurt.” “You know better than that”</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. “You know the rules...you can’t place the boards higher than the second rung”</td>
<td>4. “How do you think we can be sure that the board is stable and no one will get hurt?”</td>
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Rethinking risk taking

|---|--------------------|----------------|------------------|---------------------------|

Typical Approaches to Risk Assessment

**LEVEL OF RISK**
- Risk score calculated by multiplying likelihood of accident by the likely severity of injury
- *Injury severity rating x probability of injury = risk*
  - Minimum possible score = 1; maximum = 25

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Likelihood of Injury</th>
<th>Severity of Injury</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Little likelihood</td>
<td>Little or no injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>Low likelihood</td>
<td>Injury possible requiring minor medical attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Low – medium likelihood</td>
<td>More significant injury (involving time off school)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>Medium – high likelihood</td>
<td>Serious injury with long term consequences</td>
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<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>High - Very high likelihood</td>
<td>Death or major disability</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Level of Risk</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 3</td>
<td>Very low risk</td>
<td>Set a time to review risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - 7</td>
<td>Low risk</td>
<td>Monitor risk on ongoing basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 12</td>
<td>Medium risk</td>
<td>Make plan to control risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 20</td>
<td>High risk</td>
<td>Immediate control required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>Unacceptable risk</td>
<td>Rectify immediately</td>
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Managing risk in play


Risk-Benefit Approach

Policy Framework

Sets the underpinning values and principles for

Risk-Benefit Assessment

Sets the brief for

Technical Inspection (hazard identification)

Sets the brief for

Dynamic risk-benefit assessment

Sets framework for

FEEDS INTO

Feeds into

Ball, Gill & Spiegel (2008)
Policy framework

• Establishes values, criteria and understandings (play policy)
• Makes explicit the rationale for establishing the positive duty centres have for offering children risk-taking opportunities
• Provides a context for making judgments in particular circumstances
  • Steps taken to eliminate hazards (e.g. Schedule for routine inspection and maintenance of equipment)
  • Steps taken to take reasonable precautions to avoid injury (e.g. supervision, discussions with children about safety issues)
• Reflects need for a balanced approach
Risk-benefit assessment

1. Technical inspection
   • routine checking of equipment and the environment to identify and eliminate hazards
     • wear and tear, damage, cleanliness to identify potential sources of harm.
     • includes an indication of the relative risk
     • program of repairs and maintenance
2. Dynamic risk-benefit assessment

- Minute-by-minute observations and potential interventions by adults supervising children
- **Based on a sound grasp of how children learn and grow through play**
  - In-depth knowledge of children, play and its role for learning and development
  - Understanding of the different types of risk
## Risk/benefit framework

*(Adapted from Ball et al., 2008)*

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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Evidence/Sources</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Benefits**           | Outline the reasons why an activity is planned and how children will benefit from it | Research  
Experience;  
Children's interests |
| **Risks**              | Identify the risk of harm and evaluate how likely and serious they are | Experience  
Other similar situations |
| **Expert Opinion**     | Advice from experts of appropriate | Specialist reports |
| **Local Factors**      | Other environmental and social factors that might affect decision | Local knowledge of place, individual children, values regarding children’s learning |
| **Options**            | List possible ways to proceed to manage risks | Experience |
| **Risk/Benefit Judgment** | Weigh up benefits and risk to choose optimal compromise | Discussion with staff, possibly parents, knowledgeable others, children |
| **Implementation**     | Action taken | Whole-setting awareness |
| **Review**             | Date for next review | Use knowledge from this risk/benefit analysis and any incidents to inform next review |
Risk-Benefit Assessment in Action

HAY BALE JUMP

Location: Loch Pre-School, South Gippsland, Victoria
Context: Regional (Pre-School Program)
Site Type: Centre Outdoor Play Area

Source: Getting the Balance Right, 2015
Overall Philosophy on Risky/Challenging Play

• Directors own childhood experiences growing up in regional area
• Large outdoor space – families involved in working on it; saw value in the project
• Educators have not had issues adding more risky elements as families understand their importance in the program & how educators assess & negotiate risk

Activity

• Children’s interest in jumping from platforms of different heights
• Discussion with children re safe area to develop a jumping platform & about other areas of playground that afforded the height to jump from
• Parent related personal experience of jumping from hay bales; had hay bales available at farm

Risk Identified (Actual or perceived)

• Need to use equipment individually rather than large group
• Children jumping on top of children playing in sandpit
• Injuries resulting from these

Benefits Identified

• Test motor skills
• Gain confidence
• Negotiate more challenging activity
• Assess risk independently
• Take turns

Risk/Benefit Approach taken

• Alternate location for activity found
• Children organised way of making activity work – adding mats to land on; ladder to climb up
• Branches laid in line on ground for children to line up & take turns

Source: Getting the Balance Right, 2015