Risk and Challenge in the Early Years
- Laying the Foundations of Success.

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Introductory thoughts

“A ship is always safe at the shore – but that is NOT what it is built for.”
Albert Einstein

‘Babies would never learn to crawl, negotiate steps, stand up, or children learn to run, ride a bike and so on without being prepared to take a risk, to tumble and to learn from the consequences. Learning to navigate space, people and objects requires risk and a willingness to try things, have a go and make mistakes.’
Dweck, 2011
Why are you here?

• A need to understand more about outdoor play, risk-taking, challenge and adventure play.
• An opportunity to gain further confidence in strategies to challenge children in developmentally appropriate ways indoors and out.
• A chance to explore ideas, reflect upon leadership, practice and ways to enhance and promote adventurous play.
Aims

• To consider different ways of seeing children - powerful, active and adventurous in outdoor environments.
• To reflect upon how we can ensure our outdoor spaces provide for these confident risk-takers and adventurers.
• To consider aspects of leadership outdoors in order to optimise the quality of learning and teaching all year round.
• To enhance practitioner confidence in challenging children indoors and out in providing adventurous play.
A bit about COA

• Started as a private nursery in 1928.
• Based in a building dating from 1587.
• In 1978 it became a state maintained nursery school and later a phase one children’s centre.
• Part of RBKC.
• Magical building and garden.
• Diverse and very inclusive intake.
Facts about Play.

1. Play is ubiquitous in human societies and is present in all cultures.
2. Children’s rights and opportunities for play are often constrained in modern urbanised societies who are risk-averse.
3. Play enables us as a species to be highly adaptable.
4. Playfulness is strongly related to cognitive development and emotional well-being.
Why play matters!

Through play, children:
• learn societal roles, norms, and values
• develop physical and cognitive competencies,
• develop creativity,
• develop self-worth and efficacy.

Play helps develop intrinsic interests, learning how to make decisions, problem-solve, exert self-control, follow rules, regulate emotions, and develop and maintain peer relationships.
Is risky play, play?

Three main types of free play have been well described in the literature:
- physical activity play (e.g. rough-and-tumble play);
- object play (e.g., manipulating objects);
- and pretend play (e.g., socio-dramatic).

Risky play fits within physical, object and pretend play and has been defined as thrilling and exciting and as there is a physical and mental challenge.
Risk-taking and play

Risk-taking in play helps children:
• test their physical limits,
• develop their perceptual-motor capacity, and
• learn to avoid and adjust to dangerous environments and activities.
• play is biologically based and provides an evolutionary contribution to human development and changes.
• children also report being happiest when at play.
Child-initiated free play

The playing child feels free to try things out in a pretend world that would be too risky or impossible to try in the serious world.

Peter Gray
*(Free To Learn)*
The importance of play

Much of the joy of play lies in the challenges. A playful activity that becomes too easy loses its attraction and ceases to be play. The player then modifies the activity to make it harder or moves on to something different.

- Adults fine-tune children’s experiences by feeding ideas, pointing out resources.

- Adults act as catalysts by providing appropriate challenges.

- Adults provide the ‘palette of opportunities.’

Peter Gray
(Free To Learn)

Abbott and Nutbrown (2001:112)
Physicality Matters

• ‘To move, to run, to find things out by new movement, to feel one’s life in every limb, that is the life of early childhood.’
Margaret McMillan (1930:23)

• ‘It amazes me how quickly and how often we forget that we are embodied, that we see the world the way we do because we live in these bodies.’
Sir Ken Robinson (2012)

• ‘Young children learn about themselves and their environment through movement. ...movement is ‘thought in action.’
Marjory Ouvry (2003:12)
Do you provide these?

• Tree climbing
• Exploration through undergrowth which may include nettles, brambles etc.
• Filling/emptying the water tray
• Coming down the slide head first
• Building higher than head height
• Using real tools
• Building a fire
• Gardening, cooking, sewing
• Never?, Maybe? Sometimes? Often?
So what is risky play?

‘Any behaviour in which there is uncertainty about the outcomes. It involves a consideration of the benefits against the possible undesirable consequences of the behaviour as well as the probability of success or failure.’

Little (2006)
Risky play is really...

• A risk is a challenge a child can see....
• A hazard is something a child does not see..
• Eliminating risk leads to a child’s inability to assess danger for themselves.
Characteristics of risky play

• Play involving height, motion and speed.

• Inverting the normal order of things – tipping, hanging, spinning, rolling, etc.

• Joy in precariousness, unpredictability.

• Playing ‘on the edge’ of capability-testing skill, speed, endurance etc.
Frameworks for risky play

- Geertz – deep play
- Csikszentmihayli – flow
- Lyng – edgework
- Caillois - Ilynx or ‘dizzy play’
The risk continuum

Risk is....

- Problematic to society
- No longer about probability
- Value-laden and socially constructed
- Frequently equated with ‘danger’
- Rarely balanced against benefits.
Reduction of freedom over time

Benefits of risky play

• Positive learning dispositions (Katz)
• Part of tool kit of effective learners (Claxton)
• A mastery approach – an ‘I can do it’ attitude (Dweck)
• Playing at the edge of capabilities – pushing out limits (Vygotsky)
• Emotional well being and resilience - ‘steeling’ experiences (Rutter)
• ‘Training for the unexpected’ (Spinka, Newberry and Bekoff)
• Links between movement and thought (Athey, Greenland)
Growing up safely

What we learn about the world early on can influence the way that we interpret new events, and help determine what we will learn next. That, in turn, can influence our further theories about the world, right up to adulthood. And those particular adult theories, those ideas about how the world works, will determine what we think and do.

Alison Gopni
(The Philosophical Baby)
However, we need more...

1. Excitement—to do something for the thrill of doing it
2. Novelty—to hunt for, find, and express their unique identity
3. Risk—to pursue unfamiliar territory with unknown outcomes
4. Connection—to explore social hookups with peers

Most teenagers chase after these four goals. Why? Their brains, as they form (between childhood and adulthood), are preparing them for life on their own, without the safety net of Mom and Dad. This process occurs between ages twelve and twenty-five, when the brain undergoes extensive remodeling, with a wiring upgrade. Neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and oxytocin, cause these drives that adolescents experience.

Tim Elmore
(Artificial Maturity)
How to encourage flow

• It doesn’t have to be complicated - start by fostering a calm, relaxed but stimulating environment.

• Engage in what brings out delighted fascination. If you’re not sure what that is, fool around with something hands-on: - tinker, paint, write, sculpt with clay, deconstruct, dance, experiment - whatever feels enticing.

• Let go of worry and pressure.

• Welcome mistakes as well as challenges.

• As much as possible, don’t interrupt - just observe.

• Remember that 

  flow isn’t really separate from play.
The outcome of flow

• Deepened learning and stronger confidence.
• A drive toward complexity, luring us to increase challenges, broadening our range of abilities, even helping us to face anxiety and boredom as we access an ever more profound state of engagement.
• Dr. Csikszentmihalyi’s work tells us achieving the flow state regularly is a key component of happiness.
What do children need beyond having their physical needs satisfied?

**Agency:** influence over what they do and some choices.

**Belonging:** being cared for, part of a community.

**Competence:** the feeling of being successful.
Motivation and the brain

• Even if a learner is personally motivated to learn a topic, if the learning content itself isn't motivating, the learner's brain will do everything possible to look for something more interesting.

• This applies to both getting and keeping attention, as well as memory. Remember, you can't do anything until you get past the brain's ‘is this worthwhile’ filter!

• And to the brain, a dry, dull explanation is definitely not very worthy of attention (regardless of how much your mind cares about the topic or content).
Movement and the brain

• Physical development is central to wellbeing, development and learning. It creates ‘school-readiness.’
• Children need to be active in everything they do.
• Particular ways of moving matter- floor play, tummy time.
• Adults are critical in ensuring children get the movement experiences.
• Freely available spontaneous movement is much more valuable than adult devised activities.
• All planning and provision should consider movement, physicality and physical development.
• Every child is unique and will follow its own pathway of physical development.
Vestibular

- The first sensory system developing 16 weeks after conception.
- Linked to the inner ear.
- Maintains balance and detects motion.

Provide: slopes, steps, slides, low walls, A frames, upright poles, bars to hang upside down from, uneven surfaces, space to run and bicycle, grass, carpet and soft surfaces.
Proprioception

- Let’s us know where our limbs and bodies are in space.
- Receives messages via muscles and joints to learn about the force of movement.
- Why children want to push, pull, carry things around, hang by their arms, roll on the floor, stretch and integrate body systems via cartilage, muscle, bone.

Provide: wheeled vehicles, ropes, pulleys, watering cans, buckets, brooms, spades, hose-pipes, tyres, logs, crates & hollow blocks, Lycra, parachutes, skipping ropes, balls, bubbles to chase.
Children even as young as two want not just to learn about but to be a part of our adult world. They want to become skillful, careful, able to do things and make things as we do. They want to talk as we do, that is, communicate ideas and feelings, and in that sense they do talk even before they know any "real" words, which they learn not so that when they have enough of them they can begin to talk, but so that they can talk even better right now. In the same way, when a little older, they often want to write to other people even before they know how to make letter shapes or spell words, and they learn real shapes and spellings not so that later they may begin to write but so that other people may right now be able to read their writing.

John Holt
(How Children Learn)
They show us what they are thinking...

• through their actions, pre-occupations or schemes of thought which are seen most often in their self-chosen play;
• in their questions (both verbal and non-verbal) which are based on their search for explanations;
• in their talk while they are ‘doing’ - pole bridging.
• Young children are highly complex thinkers, and they need to be equipped, and challenged, to play and to think as well as to know.

• No-one can teach effectively without professional knowledge about how children’s thinking and knowing develops...

• Knowing about schemas enables professional educators to extend their own thinking and further refine and develop their practice.’

Cathy Nutbrown, 1994
Dr. Susan Isaacs – ‘The Children We Teach’ 1932.

- The love of bodily movement and perfecting bodily skills.
- The interest in actual things and events, the discovery of the world without.
- The delight in make-believe and the expression of the world within.
Playing and exploring

• Finding out and exploring matter.
• Playing with what they know.
• Being willing to ‘have a go.'
Active learning - motivation

• Being involved and concentrating.
• Keeping on trying.
• Enjoying achieving what they set out to do.
Creating and thinking critically

• Having their own ideas.
• Making links and connections.
• Choosing ways to do things.
Adult adventure skills

• Passion
• Perseverance
• Willingness to take risks/rise to challenges
• Compromise and pragmatism
• Patience
• Flexibility
• Respect
• Creativity
• Genuineness
• Love of learning
• Stamina
• Sense of humour
At the end of the day is...

• the practitioner is smiling

and the children are, quite rightly, more tired because they have worked harder.
Historical background

- Comenius (1592-1670) originator of the concept of ‘natural education’.
- Rousseau (1712-78) created the image of the ‘free child’.
- Pestalozzi (1746-1827) - ‘education according to nature.’
- Froebel (1782-1852) created the first kindergarten and the concept of first hand experience.
- Steiner (1861-1925) fostered social development through the rhythm of the day and the seasons.
- McMillan (1860-1931) fostered well-being via the nursery garden.
- Isaacs (1885-1948) fostered natural curiosity, children’s relationship with nature and learning in the real world around them leading to them learning via discovery, reasoning and thinking via exploration.
So why don’t they happen?

• Changing perceptions
• The move to more formal learning indoors
• Loss of outdoor play spaces
• Risk-adverse culture
• Increasing urbanisation
• The ‘marketisation’ of childhood
• Fear of litigation and lack of confidence.
A risk adverse society?

- Risky society - Beck
- Culture of fear - Furedi
- Perceived culture of blame and litigation - Gill
- Increased emphasis on ‘keeping children safe’ - Moss & Petrie
So what is safety?

• Can children be too safe?

• Safe from .... or safe to ...

• Safe as possible or safe as necessary?
Definitions

• Adventure is ‘an exciting, daring or unusual experience’. It involves richness of interest and imagination.

• Risk is sometimes defined as ‘a situation involving some exposure to possible harm.’

• Hazard is ‘a danger or risk.’

• Challenge is ‘a task or situation that tests someone’s abilities.’ In play it involves that which children thirst for and create for themselves.

Oxford University Press Compact Dictionary online (2011)
So what is safe enough?

• Hazard is anything or anyone who could cause harm. So everything is potentially hazardous but its the way that you deal it that matters.

• Risk is the measure of the possibility that someone might be harmed by a hazard and hence you need to make a judgement about whether or not damage is likely to occur.

• So it comes down to being responsible and making a professional judgement of risk-benefit analysis.
The danger of safety

The biggest risk is that there is no risk at all.

Bundy et al (2009)
Growing up is risky!

Several crucial facts about risk:

- Children need to know about, and experience risk in order to cope with it, as risk and uncertainty are key features of contemporary society.
- Being at risk unintentionally is not the same as knowingly taking risks.
- Taking risks is a normal part of growing up.
- Most children see risk-taking as positive.
- Learning to manage risk is a useful skill and an essential tool for the entrepreneur.
- Attitudes to children and risk are closely linked to views on the position and role of children in society.
- Childhood is about gaining independence and making decisions and hence taking more risks!
- The risks children take depend upon their age, gender, where they live and their cultural/social background.
What opportunities should be available?

There are certain categories of risk which attract children worldwide as Ellen Sandseter, (2011) a Norwegian Professor has identified:

- Height
- Speed
- Tools
- Elements
- Rough and tumble
- Hiding and privacy
EYFS support

• EYFS (2012) Development Matters: Characteristics of Effective Learning – Support for children to take risks and explore... Encourage children to try new activities and to judge risks for themselves... Always respect children’s efforts and ideas, so they feel safe to take a risk with a new idea.

• PSED – Be aware of and alert to possible dangers, while recognising the importance of encouraging young children’s sense of exploration and risk-taking. Physical Development – Ensure children’s safety, while not unduly inhibiting their risk-taking.
The benefits

“Children want space at all ages, but from the ages of 1-7, space, that is ample space, is almost as much wanted as food and air. To move, to run, to find things out by new movement, to feel one’s life in every limb, that is the life of early childhood.”

McMillan 1919
More views

Tovey (2007) takes the view that risk is a natural part of life: "bumps, bruises, tumbles and falls are part of learning and we must nor succumb to overwhelming anxiety or recklessness."

Till Gill (2007) in ‘No Fear; Growing Up in a Risk Adverse Society’ notes that children naturally seek risk and challenge as an “essential part of living a meaningful and satisfying life.”
Another view

• Judith Hackett: Chief Executive of the Health and Safety Executive (2015) has insisted that children should not be wrapped up in cotton wool becoming ‘risk-naïve’ later in life.

• She insists that risk avoidance has come from well-meaning but over zealous teachers who have misinterpreted the H&S guidelines.

• She also blamed the compensation culture of blame. She said ‘Children should be able to play, fall over and hurt themselves.’
Who is fearful?

“We were told ... to get rid of the slide ‘cos it was too high. Now we have a small plastic one which the children hardly use. It’s so boring but who am I to argue? We didn’t have a choice.”

“The manager told us to stand by the climbing frame all day but I don’t agree with it because there’s just as likely to be an accident on the brick wall (of the sand pit) but I have to do it and I do get scared that someone will have an accident and the parents will sue.”
A professional process

‘Offering opportunities for risk, challenge and adventure which have been suitably risk-benefit assessed and considered as purposeful by the setting is far safer than children seeking out those not designed for them in places which are far from ideal and may lead to serious harm.’

Solly, 2015
So what is the responsibility?

- People who work in schools and settings are not responsible for making sure that no child ever gets hurt.
- What the law demands is we protect people as far as is “reasonably practical.”
- **Striking a balance** between the child’s right and need to play and possibility of them doing serious damage to themselves in doing so.
- So the decision is ours as to what is reasonably practical and thus safe enough for one group of children in one context on one day will not be right for another group.
- Thus the adult should **assess the hazards** by carrying out a risk-benefit assessment.
Good and bad risks?

• ‘Good risks in play provision are those that engage and challenge children, and support their growth, learning and development. These might include... loose materials that give children the chance to create and destroy constructions using their skill, creativity and imagination.

• Bad risks and hazards are those that are difficult or impossible for children to assess for themselves, and that have no obvious benefits. These might include sharp edges or points on equipment, weak structures that may collapse, and items that include traps for heads or fingers.’

(Play England, 2007).
Risk – benefit assessment

Main Form: Risk-benefit assessment

Benefits:

Risks (*taking into account any technical information supplementary form below)*:

Local factors:

Precedents &/or comparisons:

Decision:

Actions taken:

Ongoing management and monitoring:
Common sense helps too!

• Children, technically speaking present a hazard themselves in that they do unexpected things which you could not have predicted. So before you shout at them STOP! - think risk benefit assessment.
• Communicate and build confidence by involving parents early on in discussing safety issues.
• Listen to concerns and be ready to learn. Avoid saying “Don’t worry!” You are in loco parentis but some freedom is vital.
• Finally, children luckily are biologically programmed to take risks. So we have to be very good at explaining to parents and colleagues why they need to do so!
Others concerns

- Strangers
- Getting dirty/suitable clothing
- Physical safety
- Illness, first aid and accidents
- Fulfilling curriculum requirements
- Fear of litigation
- Ratios
- Leadership
- Bullying, rough play and friends
- Conflicts
More worries....

- Bare feet
- Clothing
- Climbing and sliding
- Heights, drops and surfaces
- Tyres, crates and boxes
- Wild animals
- Domesticated animals
- Plants
- Natural materials, sticks and stones
What does challenge look like?

- Novel, creative, imaginative and productive experiences.
- Cognitively complex involving several elements, materials, actions or ideas.
- Carried out in a systematic and purposeful manner.
- Child devotes care, mental effort and a great deal of attention - is deeply engrossed.
- Often indicated when learning a new skill or trying to improve an established one.
First hand challenging experiences involve

• Using real things for real purposes.
• Handling authentic, real things and theorising.
• Going out and about on expeditions.
• Meeting new and exciting people.
• Discovering new books and resources with creative ideas.
• Using new and meaningful words, skills.
What else matters?

Children playing adventurously need:

• **Time** to explore, observe and make sense of things before they start to experiment, discover and form their own ideas.

• **Freedom** from stress about getting wet or dirty.

• Easily **accessible** equipment and clothing.

• As much **context and meaning** as possible via repetition and consistency so they learn the rules and boundaries.

• **Quality experiences.**

• **Adults who** talk with them, value their ideas and extend their learning and who enjoy being outside.
Leading adventures

• A written **risk-benefit analysis** of the environment both indoors and out and the core experiences within it.

• An **Outdoor Play policy** agreed as a whole staff and ‘tested’ on parents which draws out the varied benefits and practices of outdoor play, expeditions and visitors to extend learning.

• Agreeing a daily, weekly, quarterly, and annual **structure of monitoring audits** of the environments, activities, equipment and resources.

• Ensuring that all staff and children are involved in **understanding risk benefit** so they can use it dynamically.

• An ethos of involving all parents and carers and bringing them into to the setting to **build stronger social capital**.

• **Walking the talk yourself!**
What are the implications?

• Engage with the ‘edginess’ of play.
• Environments which are **satisfyingly scary**, flexible, with varying terrains and resources which offer sensation of instability.
• **Increased practitioner/leader confidence** and competence to take risks.
• Need for a **wider debate** on the place of risk and challenge in play.
• Shift policy emphasis to focus on risk/benefit and developing children’s resilience and the skills to be safe.
Words of wisdom

‘If you are going to keep children safe ...you must provide places in which they can get the thrills they need; there must be trees they can climb and ways in which they can safely get the experience of adventure and the sense of challenge that they crave.’

Susan Isaacs 1936
Bundy, A; Luckett, T; Tranter, P; Naughton, A; Wyver, S; Razen, J; Spies, G (2009) *The risk is that there is no risk: A simple, innovative intervention to increase children’s activity levels*. International Journal of Early Years Education Vol 17 (1) 33-45
Questions and comments