

Exploring how preschool teachers can secure the evolution of day care institution's culture for applying *Risky Play* and development for children's personal-, motor- and social skills

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Abstract

Risky play is defined as, 'An exciting and challenging game that involves uncertainty and the risk of physical injury.' These are activities where children balance on the verge of losing control. The play is exciting precisely because there is a risk and fear of the unknown. In order to create such possibilities, preschool Teacher need to create frameworks that both allow and contain opportunities for risky play. The research project shows, through interviews with preschool Teacher, that risky play has the potential to help individuals think about play in a different and challenging way. Risky play seems to enhance motor development, initiative, social and personal development as well as wellbeing in interactions between children.

Key words: Movement activities, risky play, health, outdoor learning

Introduction

This article highlights how preschool teachers, participating in the "Body and formation (bildung, red.)" network, with a focus on risky Play, can ensure the development of the institution's movement culture with an impact on children's personal, motor and social skills.

The purpose of this article is an interest in the risky plays opportunities in relation to children's play universe, courage, action, well-being and motor development. What is the purpose of these activities? And why are they important? The article highlights a theoretical glance at risky play in the coupling to the preschool teachers thoughts of the opportunities and challenges of risky play in practice.

This article is written on the bias of a research project "Risky Play in Day Care" (*Risikofyldt leg I dagtilbud*) which offers a look at the relationships between risky play and personal, motor and social skills, as well as the role of preschool teacher in risky play.

The research project Risky Play in Day Care Services investigates the work of 12-day care centres with courageous and risky play.

The research project was initiated in spring 2017 at UCC University College (now KP, Copenhagen Higher Education School). All day care institutions in a selected municipality sent 1-2 preschool Teacher to the Educational Diploma Program (PD) in the Body and Education (*Krop og dannelse*) module, where pedagogical work with risky play was included as a key element. After graduation, several networks were established among the participating preschool Teacher and their institutions in the

municipality studied. Through joint meetings, activities in these networks were discussed, considered, and planned. The research project has followed one of these networks (of around 15 preschool Teacher) in their efforts to set goals, plan, initiate, document, and evaluate activities based on the educational curricula as well as their follow-up reflections.

The new angle in this article is that we address the impact of an educational programme in relation to risky play. The article focuses on preschool teachers that have participated in an educational programme (Body and bildung) where risky play has been emphasized and how the preschool teachers after the program implement and consider risky play in day-care.

The method of the project – in brief

The project includes seven qualitative interviews conducted with ten selected preschool Teacher, all of whom have completed a PD module in Body and Education, which was part of the network we followed. The interviews were conducted after we had observed the preschool Teacher interacting with the children in risky play.

The interviews are carried out using a semi-structured questionnaire, where we both prepare general research questions primarily for ourselves, and specific questions for our informants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

This is based on theoretical and practical knowledge of the field and a sparingly knowledge of the informants. The focus is on being open to new perspectives and information that the interviewed can produce, and we are thus trying to understand the lives of the informants from their own perspective. The interview is thus approaching an everyday conversation, but "*(..) has as a professional interview a purpose and involves a special approach and technique: it is semi-structured-it is neither an open daily conversation nor a closed questionnaire*" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:45).

The preschool teacher and selected children met across institutions in the network, where they, in turn, arranged to initiate activities within the risky play universe (e.g. chopping wood with axes, riding cable cars, play-fighting, rappelling down a steep slope, playing on the playhouse roof, etc.). In addition, we participated in join activity days where all institutions in the network participated (also those preschool Teacher who had not been on the PD module in Body and Education). Thus, observations and spontaneous discussions with the children and adults involved were included as a background for the interviews we conducted subsequently. That way, it became possible to talk with the preschool teacher about common experiences which arose.

The primary target group is preschool teachers who have implemented PD in body and bildung. In addition, the target group is nursery- and kindergarten children in local kindergartens, where activities are carried out on the basis of the curriculum theme of body and movement.

The observations of the preschool teachers and children are carried out prior to the interviews in order to be able to 'get to know the field' and go into the work of the teachers and the target group (Hastrup, 1992). By conducting pre-interview observations, it becomes possible to have a different and more insight into the work in question with risky play.

Using observation as a method, there are both advantages and disadvantages. One of the positive aspects of the method is to observe the direct behaviour of people. One observes the individual's actions in the given situation and therefore it is not possible to lie about his behaviour. However, by observation as a method, it is not possible to question the observed and its motives for action, therefore it is advantageous to combine

observation and qualitative interviews. Finally, the behaviour of the observer can be influenced if you are aware that you are being observed, which can lead to uncertainty regarding the data (Aagerup, 2015).

Based on a thematic analysis of the empirical material (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), three themes emerged, which we will highlight in this article. As a whole, this article is about risky play's contexts and challenges in relation to:

1. Personal development
2. Motor development
3. Social development and wellbeing

In our study, we have processed data ethically, in the sense that personal information is anonymised. In addition, oral consent is given for data to be used in the project for further processing and analysis.

Perspectives and definitions of play

In the article we study two different perspectives on play that are important to keep in mind when working with risky play in educational practice: the anthropological-ethnographic and pedagogical-psychological points of view (Peitersen, 2014). In the former, play is seen as a cultural activity that has value in itself. The play does not lead to anything, it exists until it doesn't any more (Peitersen, 2014). In this understanding, it is important to be aware of the culture around risky play; preschool Teacher should reflect on the institution's norms and values around the risk – for example, what may one do and what may one not do and why? From a pedagogical-psychological perspective, play is seen as a breeding ground for wellbeing, development, and learning, and play is useful and has a purpose beyond itself; for example, it develops personal and social competencies (Peitersen, 2014). Development and learning are defined in this article in a bodily perspective (Bahrenscheer, Kortbek & Sederberg, 2018). The reason we consider both perspectives is to encourage preschool Teacher to take a look at both the play and the process (including risky play), as well as recognising the skills children can develop through play (Peitersen, 2014). Risky play can allow children to play in new ways and in new contexts.

Play is an entirely central human phenomenon, which is far from understood as a means. In a way, play is what makes us the people we are today' (Karoff & Jessen, 2014, p.9).

In pedagogical practice, it is therefore important that children learn to act within the institution's norms and values, including norms and values about play, different types of play, what is allowed/not allowed. For example, should children be allowed to crawl up onto the playhouse roof? Is it permissible to build high towers and climb them?

The theory behind risky play

Ellen Beate Sandseter, a Norwegian lecturer in sports and health and researcher in the field of children's risky play in day care institutions, defines risky play as follows: '*An exciting and challenging game that involves uncertainty and the risk of physical injury*' (Sandseter 2015: 16). We choose to adopt Sandseter's definition, in part because she is a benchmark setter in the study of risky play and partly because the preschool Teacher in our study depend on her research throughout their Pedagogical Diploma education. On

the basis of her research via observation and interviews with kindergarten children and employees, Sandseter identified six categories of risky play:

1. Play at height – risk of injury when falling
2. Play at high speed – uncontrolled speed which can lead to collision with something or someone
3. Play with hazardous tools – can lead to injury
4. Play near dangerous items – risk of falling into or from something
5. Wild play – possibility of hurting each other
6. Disappearing/Getting lost – involves hiding (Sandseter, 2010; 2015)

The risk of these types of play is not always present; it can be objective and real, or perceived to be dangerous and risky by children or by preschool Teacher. These are activities where children balance on the verge of losing control. The play is exciting precisely because there is a risk and fear of the unknown. Children participate in risky play because they experience joy, excitement, thrill, pride, and faith in themselves (Sandseter, 2010; 2015).

Taking risks can have positive consequences with regard to children's motor, social and emotional development, as well as their overall health (Gill, 2007; Gleave, 2008; Sandseter, 2015). Gill argues that the elimination of risks deprives children of the ability to develop competencies that can help them handle situations they may encounter later in life. By allowing children to manage their own risks in a controlled environment, they can learn vital skills and gain the experience necessary to counter the world's complexity and unpredictability (Gill, 2007). By denying children this opportunity, there is a risk of developing a society with less adventurous citizens, who are unable to cope with the challenges of everyday life (Gill, 2007).

What does our study reveal about the possibilities of risky play?

One of the preschool Teacher expresses her ideas on riskiness as follows:

It is important that they [the children] know their body. For example, if they get up and climb a tree, they know their strength and they can sense if the branch begins to break now or [...]. But risky play can also be tag, it's about hurrying to run between each other and get away. And risky play for nursery-age children can be a small thing like climbing onto a chair by themselves. So [risky play is a way] to make them aware of doing it and strengthening their body awareness, their senses, and their courage, and making them ready for what many people see as truly dangerous [...] And if they fall, so what? It's something to learn from.

Here the teacher illustrates the versatility of riskiness, explaining that it depends on the individual child's assumptions. It may involve a child falling down – but *'so what?'*, as she says. Obviously, it is a difficult balance: when does play become *too* risky and decidedly dangerous? One teacher says:

It's one thing to get hurt; I don't think it means anything to get a little bit hurt, but it's when they become injured that it's getting too dangerous.

The above quotes can be seen in relation to Gill's points that risky play can help them cope with situations they may face later in life (Gill, 2007). Helle Marie Skovbjerg Karoff, Denmark's first professor of play, describes the dangerous as gasoline in all

kinds of play. The dangerous helps ensure that the play remains fun and inspiring and makes sense of the play. At the same time, the dangerous poses a risk of collapsing if that sense of fear takes over too much (Karoff, 2015). Although there is a built-in fear in the play, the dominant feelings should preferably be joy and mastery, so the children seek out the play again (Sandseter, 2010; 2015). As one teacher said, *‘Thus, they [the children] grow a mile when they master something they didn’t think they could do.’* There are of course individual differences, and not all children necessarily enjoy the same level of excitement. There may be differences in how children respond to risky play in relation to the challenges they face. If the play is associated with pure fear, the child loses control of the play, and may respond with flight or resistance against continuing (Karoff, 2015).

The approach to risky play and the role of the preschool teacher are crucial. A preschool teacher describes what is required of preschool teachers to work with risk-filled play:

Firstly, I think you have the security in you, so that you express that you are in control, both towards yourself but of course also towards the children. That way, they have some safe conditions for them to challenge themselves (...) and then I think that you have to want it (...) and of course it also requires some knowledge (...). So, knowledge, security, and the will have to be there. I think it is difficult to establish safe conditions for the children, if you yourself are not secure in this “.

The preschool teacher mentions that it requires *comfort* in one self, *knowledge* concerning risk-filled play along with the *will* to work with it.

The feeling that occurs most often in children who participate in risky play is the feeling of excitement, bordering on fear, and it is this feeling and condition that is often the child's goal in the play. The art is to find the balance just before the fear takes over and the play is interrupted (Sandseter, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Of course, preschool Teachers have an important role to play here. There is a difficult balance between taking over the play and letting the children control the play, but by paying attention to the children's play, preschool Teacher can become more astute at reading the children's bodily and verbal signals and expressions.

Personal development through risky play

The research of American psychology professor Carol Dweck has shown that engaging in risky activities can have positive consequences for children's personal development. She believes that risk allows children to push themselves within their individual expectations, and in this way they can positively influence their own development. One preschool teacher, for example, talks about some children who tried to chop wood with an axe on one of the joint activity days that the network had arranged: *‘One could see some of the children discovering that they could do things. They found success where they first had been a little cautious.’* So expanding personal boundaries is part of the developmental potential of working with risky play.

Another preschool teacher talks about their institution's attempts to let the children explore their physical possibilities without being slowed down:

[...] by giving the children the opportunity to try by themselves [...] that they themselves figure out, hey, what can I do and when is it going to get a little dangerous? Because, I think children are constantly being slowed down, they're told, “Oh, this is dangerous.” Everything is dangerous one way or another, right? And then they don't learn how to

figure out how much they really can do with their body. Here, in any case, we can see that development has happened.

The preschool teacher describes the importance of giving the children the opportunity to test what they dare and can do instead of, as a preschool teacher, putting the brakes on. In this way they develop both personally (being courageous, trying things, throwing themselves into something new), but also bodily, as they learn how much they can (and dare) to achieve physically (Gill, 2007). The preschool teacher's account also mentions the development process which they, as an institution, are undergoing after participating in the PD Body and Education module, where she worked intensively with risky play, and which she has tried to implement in her own institution as well.

Sandseter recommends that *'all employees should ask themselves whether it is their own or the children's needs and limits that determine how far children may go in their exploratory and risky activities'* (Sandseter, 2015:29). According to Sandseter, it deals with the adults around the child paying attention to their own bodies and becoming aware of their feelings and fears in order to be able to work with accepting the children's risky and, at times, dangerous play.

In Dweck's view, working with challenges, risks, and an 'I can do it' attitude are the most important elements in relation to children's ability and desire to challenge the world. Dweck claims that such personality traits are not biologically determined, but are developed through interactions with one's surroundings; for example, the preschool Teacher and their attitudes towards meeting new challenges. Encouraging children to meet challenges head-on rather than withdraw from them increases their perseverance and learning skills (Dweck, 2000).

One of the preschool Teacher directly refers to the above perspective:

They [the children] experience enormous joy in it [risky play]. We can clearly see it in them. We can see that they build self-confidence and believe in themselves because they can do something.

In the quote above, the preschool teacher articulates that it is important to encourage children to participate in challenging and risky activities. She sees that the children, during interactions with each other while participating in risky activities, develop self-confidence and the belief that they can cope with challenges.

Motor development through risky play

Studies show that children develop their motor skills through risky play (Little et al., 2011; Sandseter, 2010). When children challenge themselves and throw themselves into new movements, which they might not have dared to do previously, they also develop physically. They try new movements and develop fundamental motor skills such as jumping, creeping, climbing, and running as well as coordination. Here again, it is important that they encounter adults, both preschool Teacher and parents, who urge them to dare to attempt new challenges instead of saying, 'Be careful' (Stephensson, 2003). This, therefore, allows the children to play their way to better body awareness, a stronger body, and better control over the body's possibilities and limitations, with significance for their journey through life (Sandseter, 2015). One of the preschool Teacher stated:

For example, it deals with some very small everyday things; may one climb up onto the playhouse roof? May one climb the reverse way up the slide? So sometimes I go to a colleague who stops the children and says, just wait and see what happens. Try seeing what is actually good for motor skills and daring something.

It is apparently about the ability of preschool Teacher to create spaces, both indoor and outdoor, for the children's physical development and belief that they can do new things, and thereby also develop their motor skills (Bahrenscheer et. al. 2018). The process by which the child learns new movements is seen as motor learning and is part of their motor development. Another preschool teacher states the following about the relationship between risky play and motor skills:

Yes, there's definitely a connection. Of course, it's dangerous to send a child up who does not control his body at all, just crawl. It would just be too dangerous, but if you prepare them, then give them just one good experience of success. If they just can manage to climb or to jump from one chair to another. So just strengthen them so they can experience that success.

'Good motor skills have significance for the child's self-esteem and for the child's participation in social contexts and strengthen the child's expectations of being physically active' (Smith, 2016, p.12). Thus, through educational work with risky play, motor development can be pursued through versatile, bodily experiences.

The development of children's social development and wellbeing through risky play

Based on our observations, we saw, that children often climb, swing, roll, or slide together with other children. They collaborate to get through the physical challenges they encounter together – on the way up a tree, on the way down a slope – and in those encounters they learn to read each other's social and bodily signals. Both the verbal and non-verbal languages thus affect their ability to form relationships and form part of meaningful communities (Sandseter, 2015). A teacher reflects below on how they work to bring the motor-insecure children into the play so they too dare to challenge themselves – and this is also about interacting with other children:

We've had a few who have been a little motor challenged – for example, when jumping down from places and thus, also, climbing up, because by the nature of it, they are not sure they can get down. But we haven't pushed anyone into it. Before we got the course, we made courses ourselves, and there was a boy who was a little reluctant, but the other boys were very engaged, so he participated. We don't do anything individually, but instead we do something for the group so we also strengthen those who think it might be a bit dangerous or a little difficult.

Working with risky play seems to be about adapting the activities to the individual children (as in all educational work). But keeping an eye out for the strengths and problem areas of each child, and their interactions with other children, seems to play a specific and very important role in risky play, helping it to not be perceived as dangerous and unsafe but as developing children's self-image and wellbeing (Wistoft, 2012). Through the work of movement and risky play, children can have a different self-perception and the desire to participate and be part of a community (Sandseter, 2015; Moser, 2007, Rønholt & Peitersen, 2014). One preschool teacher reflects on how working with risky play has changed since they were young and how it can help boost the children's confidence:

Children are bound up so much, and it's a pity, so we try instead to unwrap them a bit. And prepare the children for risk instead. Instead of just saying, 'No, it's dangerous,' make them ready for the dangerous because it's where they develop the most [...]. When you can do something new, then you get that YES! And that boost in self-confidence. So, it's to make the kids a little more robust that we work with the risky.

The teacher observes that it is important that children are allowed to play in a variety of new ways and with opportunities to survey and try out new and different challenges. With a view to risky play, new play cultures may arise, with focus on both the play's process (anthropological-ethnographic point of view) and the developmental possibilities that may arise through play (pedagogical-psychological point of view). The preschool teacher points out that children must be prepared for the risky so that they are given the opportunity to develop initiative and capability jointly with others.

Summary

Based on the preschool Teachers reflections and thoughts, the article provides a range of suggestions on what risky play can do and why it is important in relation to children's personal, motor, and social skills. Empirical and research project analyses show the importance of preschool Teacher ' understanding of risky play, their ability to reflect on possibilities and barriers, and of how to translate it into action in practice. Risky play can help create new and different play possibilities, but if it is to be made possible, preschool Teacher ' nuanced image of what risky play is becomes important. The focus must be on what risky play can accomplish, and so it is about creating frameworks, norms, and values for the work of risky play in the institution. The risk can be objective and real if the children are doing something decidedly dangerous. But it is also about looking beyond the risk so that the play does not stop automatically, just because the preschool Teacher think the play is risky. It's about trying to reflect on how risky play can create development opportunities for the child and making a real assessment of whether an activity is really dangerous or simply challenging. Our observations showed, that risky play often takes place in communities of practice where the children learn to read the situation and cooperate with each other to cope with the physical challenges. Based on empirical observation and the selected literature, the research project shows that it is important that preschool Teacher are aware of the new opportunities that may arise within the risky play universe. Risky play can develop children's motor skills and their faith in their own physical abilities and drive. Last but not least, risky play can strengthen the children's feeling of mastery and experience of success with significance for their personal and social development.

For other researchers wishing to investigate risky play in practice, we can recommend the qualitative survey method (here through observations and interviews). If we were to expand the project, we would take a child's perspective on risky play as well as a greater focus on how risky play and child communities mutually affect each other with an impact on children's social skills.

Below are four questions that can form the basis for reflection and discussion about educational work with children's risky play universe in relation to personal, physical, motor, and social development.

Questions for reflection

1. What strengths and challenges do you see in work with risky play – in relation to the development of children's personal skills?
2. What relationship between physical and motor development and risky play do you see on the basis of the article?
3. How would you like to organise a course of activity that encompasses risky play and the development of children's communities and social skills?
4. Discuss the interfaces between when play is risky and when it becomes *too* risky (i.e. dangerous).

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