The Power of RISKY PLAY in the Early Years

ZOE SILLS & SARAH WATKINS

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For all of you who recognise how remarkable children are and how important play is.

Sarah

For the wonderful members of my 'tribe' – the outdoor learning community friends who have supported me on this journey and beyond. For my husband – my roots and my rock, always believing in me. For our daughter, whose existence led me to find a new path and dare to dream of new adventures.

Zoe

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Sarah

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Zoe

About the authors

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Sarah Watkins is a Forest School leader who runs an outdoor learning company called Dandy Lions. Sarah was previously Head of School and is now an Associate Lecturer at the University of Worcester, in the Education department.

About this book

The research shows that children need to run, climb, dig, swing, roll, and push the boundaries. Picking up this book shows your commitment to enabling children to play in the way they need to. In the following chapters you'll find useful advice about what constitutes risk in play, why it is beneficial, how to support it, how to risk assess it, and how to support staff to support children on their journey.

We'd like to leave the final word in this section to Ingrid Wilkinson, mother of Billy Bolt, winner of world championships in one of the most dangerous sports in the world. Enduro riders must travel at high speeds over difficult terrain in remote areas, often in challenging weather conditions.

"As parent to a four-time world champion who is living his dream, I dread to think what his life might have become if he had been raised by adults who were risk averse. I applied one key element to Billy's life and that was trust.

Billy wasn't born with resilience, endurance, strength and the ability to ride a bike, he developed these skills over time. His father and I trusted his ability to risk assess a situation and we gave Billy permission to act on this. If I had stepped in daily and said 'Stop! Don't! Be careful!' I would have been destroying his capacity to work it out for himself. It is the adults who must change, not the child.

Billy was often classed as the wild child, reckless and crazy. He was fearless and driven, but not destructive. What I knew deep inside was that every close encounter he had increased his ability to focus, respond in the moment, concentrate, manage the risk at a deeper level. He developed a relationship with nature, he learned what the environment would enable him to do and what was impossible. His relationship with himself and the world around him developed, his ability to conquer situations grew and his thirst for even more risk increased.

My belief as a parent is to help each of my children develop the skills and capacity to achieve their hopes and dreams, to encourage them to fly as high as they possibly can. At times it makes me nervous. My natural instinct is to step in, stop and protect each one, but by doing this I would be denying them the autonomy of being themselves and reaching their full potential. My job is not to protect, it's to support each one to develop skills for life. A child cannot buy independence – it is developed over time by the situations they encounter.

Mistakes are essential and part of life because they are learning experiences from which we grow. Resilience, competence, confidence, self-regulation, a zest for life, we can help our child develop these skills or we can over protect and allow our own fear and anxiety to limit their capacity for growth."

Part 1
Exploring risky play

In this section, we dig down into risky play, starting with the controversial opinion that we don't like the term 'risky play'! If you work in Early Years, and particularly if you manage staff, it's important to understand what this term means in all its complexity. In this first section, we discuss the context of risk in play, presenting the views of prominent theorists and exploring barriers that can prevent children taking ownership of their own play.

3

Why does it matter?

This is the place I like playing in. Here. It's hidden. They can't see me.

Stella, 4

This chapter

- Productive uncertainty (enabling children to engage with challenges)
- Risk deficit disorder which can lead to developmental issues
- Building resilience, enabling children to handle uncertainty and adapt to challenges in later life
- Barriers to risk in play such as climate change and urbanisation

Figure 3.1 Children need to access challenging environments

Productive uncertainty

I have coined the phrase 'productive uncertainty', borrowing this term from my husband, who's a financial advisor. I'm not sure I could explain what it means for those working in the financial sector, but, in play terms, I see it as children having access to an outdoor play environment where they can select challenges that are engaging and instructive (in the broadest sense). Outdoor play tends to be more unpredictable than indoor play.

A few years ago, I was asked to teach in higher education, a sector that was totally new to me. I tend to tell myself to approach these tasks 'one step at a time' to instil inner calm and I draw on my experience as a child, breaking down challenges such as riding my bike to 'just master this bit … then the next bit …'. I spend much of my day-to-day life outside with children and it's fascinating to see the way that each child will select the challenge they need. One child may feel a huge sense of accomplishment at touching mud whereas another wants to climb even higher than before.

The *just right challenge*, or *adaptive challenge*, devised by occupational therapist and psychologist Jean Ayres in the 1950s is central to my practice: providing activities and experiences that are appropriately challenging for each child. Rather than a level of challenge that is too overwhelming or too easy, the aim is to create the conditions for a just right level of challenge. Child development is not linear and the just right challenge ensures that each child is in that zone between boredom and frustration.

If you are reading this book, you are evidently thoughtful about the opportunities available to the children you work with. Unfortunately, some outdoor environments for children don't offer enough potential for productive uncertainty. Sterile, manicured spaces dominated by fake grass and fixed structures can limit children's creativity and development. Is the space inviting to children or just attractive to adults? As we will explain later on in the book, a huge space with expensive resources is not required.

There can be barriers to enabling children to move out of their comfort zone in play and start to challenge themselves physically and mentally. Below, we'll outline some of those barriers.

Reflective questions 3.1

Consider an outdoor space you are familiar with.

Does the space offer a just right challenge to children? How could it be improved?

Case study: Ellie Hodgkinson, lead practitioner at Lady Margaret Primary School

Our setting has very high numbers of children in the early stages of language acquisition; also, because of where we are in London and economic circumstances, children who come to us often really haven't had many experiences of anything at all beyond the family home/group. Many will have never been to the park for a variety of reasons.

So for children in our setting, risk begins with leaving parents on that first day, exploring a new space, communicating with adults who don't speak their home language, trying food they may have never seen before, playing with unknown children – let alone feeding the chickens, walking across the road to Forest School etc. That's why for us it's so important that we get those first few weeks right; we offer support and care and a gradual exposure to different types of experiences and the children learn that it's OK to take a risk, because they know that inherently it's a safe space where if something does go wrong there are trusted adults who can help if needed. We also need to work with parents to educate them about risk as many of our parents are completely risk-averse.

Risk deficit disorder

> *At school, we can't play Bulldogs, football is banned cuz they said it got too rough, we can't climb trees. The place where I live, there's a sign: 'no ball games'. My flat doesn't have a garden, there's just this bit of grass but you can't play ball games.*
>
> Sam, 8

As a young child in the 1970s, I often played outside without supervision, climbed trees (and occasionally fell out of them), used tools, cycled at great speed down steep hills and made wild dens. The world of children's play has changed a great deal since I was a child. Professor David Eager and Dr Helen Little have coined the term 'risk deficit disorder' to describe the context of modern play. They talk of 'the growing and unhealthy trend of attempting to remove all risk from within our community and the problems that this risk removal indirectly creates' (Eager and Little, 2011, p. 3). They believe that risk deficit disorder can lead to obesity, mental health issues, a lack of independence and a decrease in learning, perception and judgement skills.

At the Parks and Leisure Australia National Conference in 2011, Eager and Little emphasised that children are naturally drawn to play with risk. They desperately want to find out things for themselves, experiment and test their abilities. Eager and Little discuss the danger of creating a society of risk-averse citizens who have difficulties coping with situations with a normal level of challenge: risk in play is about engaging with and training for uncertainty. As adults, we face risk every day; Eager and Little believe that by making things too safe, children miss vital opportunities to learn about their physical and social world and their own capabilities. It can also drive children to find more dangerous locations to challenge themselves.

David Eager is Professor of Risk Management and Injury Prevention; in his opinion, many existing playgrounds are dull and uninspiring – playground designers need to consider opportunities for positive risk to ensure good outcomes for children. Eager suggests replacing the risk-averse mindset with a mindset that embraces the benefits of risk. Humans increasingly need the ability to tackle challenges and adjust in the face of changing situations, and these skills will become even more crucial as we face climate change emergencies.

Resilience doesn't prevent difficulties from happening in life, but it can make them easier to cope with. Studies show, on the one hand, that resilient children tend to be competent and more positive about themselves and life in general (Souri and Hasanirad, 2011). Adults with low levels of resilience, on the other hand, are more likely to resort to unhealthy and destructive coping mechanisms.

Climate change

We need to save the earth because we need nature.

Ella, 8

As well as resilient children, we now need to develop more resilient play spaces to take account of our rising temperatures, increased drought and more frequent flooding. I've had to change plans to cook over the fire with groups due to long periods of dry hot weather and warnings about increased fire risk. Heatwaves are making outdoor play more uncomfortable for young children in the UK at times. There has been an increase in extreme weather events, and I have had to cancel more and more outdoor sessions due to high winds. Water play can be a key part of risk in play, but water is a scarce commodity now in some areas whereas other areas struggle with flooding. The quality of water in our rivers and lakes is at an all-time low and this impacts on swimming or playing in rivers or lakes. Climate change has also had an effect on plant and animal species, so children won't be able to spot as many minibeasts and birds outdoors any more.

Ella Kissi-Debrah was a young girl who lived in London and tragically passed away in 2013 at the age of nine. Her death was initially attributed to acute respiratory failure and severe

asthma. However, in 2018, a groundbreaking legal ruling in the UK concluded that air pollution, specifically traffic-related pollutants, contributed to her death. Poor air quality is already restricting children's outdoor activities, particularly for those with respiratory conditions.

Reflective questions 3.2

Are there any instances in your own practice where you have had to change plans or strategies due to sustainability concerns? How did you address these concerns?

What are some ways you might be able to address sustainability within your setting?

Urbanisation

> *I'm happy when I'm outside. I'm good at running and kicking, kicking the football and climbing, I'm good at climbing. When I go back from school, I'm indoors. I can't go out because J (kinship carer) has a new baby. I'm stuck … stuck in the house with the little ones.*
>
> Tom, 7 (not real name)

Increasing urbanisation in the UK has had an impact on outdoor play. As urban areas have become more densely populated, there are fewer green spaces for play, limiting opportunities for unstructured outdoor play in nature. This is what renowned author Richard Louv has labelled *nature deficit disorder*, where modern lifestyles, characterised by increased screen time, urbanisation and a decrease in outdoor activities, contribute to a lack of connection with the natural world.

Writer Tim Gill has raised concerns about the impact of increased urbanisation on outdoor play and he calls for urban environments that prioritise the well-being and play needs of children. Gill wants to see suitable spaces for children to enjoy physical activity, exploration and social interaction outdoors. Many community groups in the UK and beyond are working to address the so-called *play gap*, creating or reclaiming spaces for children's play. For example, Playing Out is a parent- and resident-led movement that reclaims streets for children's play: neighbours come together to organise and temporarily close their residential streets to traffic for a few hours. Children can then play freely, ride bikes and play physically without worrying about traffic hazards. The scheme has been successful, but it's not been without its detractors. As stated in the *Guardian* newspaper, some of the organisers of low traffic sessions have been threatened or even attacked (Wall, 2020).

Figure 3.2 Natural environments are at risk

Over protection

> *It's worth considering the language we use for staff. If they are called playground supervisors, they are going to be supervising. If they are called playground facilitators, they will facilitate play.*
>
> Felicity Robinson, Landscape Architect.

Over-sheltering children from all risks and micromanaging their lives can limit their opportunities to challenge themselves in play. For example, always stepping in to resolve conflicts or challenges denies children the chance to develop vital problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. We do need to risk assess, but overprotection can prevent children from exploring, taking risks, making decisions and choices, and experiencing failure. This can reduce children's opportunities to develop resilience and the ability to adapt.

David Ball, Professor of Risk Management, calls for balance, arguing that an overly risk-averse approach can deprive children of valuable learning experiences. Ball argues (Little and Eager, 2010) that an excessively cautious approach can hinder children's ability to learn how to navigate challenges and make decisions. He suggests that society tends to overestimate the dangers associated with certain activities and states that some level of risk is a normal part of childhood. Understanding and managing this risk is essential for healthy development.

Reflective questions 3.3

How has outdoor play changed since you were a child?

In your view, has the widespread use of social media by parents and carers affected children's access to risk in play? In what ways?

Lack of confidence of adults

If somebody feels unconfident about risk in play they are unlikely to encourage it and this lack of confidence can contribute to a more controlled and risk-averse educational environment. Children often take their cues from adults about how to approach new experiences and they can internalise anxious attitudes and become more risk-averse. This lack of confidence can be rooted in a range of factors, including limited experience of unstructured play. It can also come from untenable pressure from management and an overly high level of accountability. If practitioners work in a setting that does not support informed risk-taking, they can begin to doubt their understanding of child development. It's crucial that parents and careers are involved in the dialogue to avoid misunderstanding.

I find that there are specific areas such as climbing, tool use and rough-and-tumble play which can cause anxiety. Practitioners can worry about how to manage activities such as woodwork, for example. There is more guidance on this later in the book.

Fear of liability

There is sometimes significant pressure to use an overcautious approach or provide written documentation for every decision. This may lead to disproportionate procedures that undermine good judgement and leave children worse off, often indoors (Gill et al., 2019).

In our research for this book, a parent got in touch to tell us that play with sticks was banned in her child's playground and that children would have a stick taken off them if they were seen with one. Concerns about safety, liability and pressure to adhere to curriculum requirements have contributed to a more risk-averse culture in some educational settings. Staff may feel constrained in providing opportunities for risk in play due to fears of accidents, injuries, or potential backlash from parents or carers. In some settings, outdoor play has become overly structured and closely supervised due to fears of liability. Adults are playing a more active role in organising and overseeing activities and the environments are more adult-controlled. Practitioners can be put off by increased paperwork requirements and different policies that need to be written and maintained. (Working in Early Years during the lockdowns, I was almost overwhelmed by the ever-changing requirements of the government paperwork.)

However, in recent years, there's been a growing recognition of the importance of risk and the value of benefit–risk assessments where educators evaluate the potential benefits of an activity against the risks involved. In most settings staff encourage a nuanced approach to risk management that allows for healthy challenges while ensuring safety. We will explore this in more detail later in the book.

Reflective question 3.4

Research shows that we all have subconscious bias around risk.

How could you try to ensure that your health and safety policies represent different viewpoints?

Decreased outdoor playtime

Children today tend to spend less time playing outdoors compared to previous generations. Increased academic pressures, structured schedules and the rise of indoor entertainment, including gaming and streaming services, have contributed to a decline in outdoor play. A study by University College London (UCL) found that school break times have decreased significantly over the past two decades, leading to children missing out on valuable opportunities for social interaction, physical exercise and free time.

The study compared data from over 1,000 primary and secondary schools. It revealed that children at Key Stage 1 have 45 minutes less break time per week compared to 1995, and Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils have 65 minutes less. There has been an almost virtual elimination of afternoon breaks, with only 15 per cent of Key Stage 2 children and just over half of Key Stage 1 children having an afternoon break. In 1995, 13 per cent of secondary schools reported an afternoon break period, compared to only 1 per cent now. Lunch breaks have also been cut down, with 82 per cent of secondary schools reporting lunch breaks of less than 55 minutes. A quarter of secondary schools have lunchtimes of 35 minutes or less. Almost 60 per cent of schools withhold breaks from children as a consequence of poor behaviour or incomplete work (Baines and Blatchford, 2023). The researchers suggest that the reduction in break times could have serious implications for children's well-being and development and have found that children are now half as likely to meet up with friends outside school.

Sedentary lifestyles

I run and I run and I run, fall on the grass, and roll down!

Jed, 4

Angela Hanscom, an occupational therapist based in the US, became increasingly concerned about the dangers of limiting unstructured play. She went on to found TimberNook, an outdoor play-based programme designed to encourage children's creativity and independent play. Hanscom believes that modern society tends to overprotect children, leading to a lack of opportunities for them to engage in activities that involve risk, challenge and problem-solving. According to Hanscom, these experiences are crucial for the development of physical, emotional and cognitive skills. Through activities like climbing trees, balancing on uneven surfaces, or engaging in other physically challenging activities, children learn to develop their proprioception (awareness of their body in space), problem-solving skills and self-regulation.

Studies indicate that less time outdoors is causing higher levels of short-sightedness. Following one of the largest studies of its kind, it was established that more than one in three children and young people are shortsighted, prompting calls for less screen time and more physical activity. There has been a dramatic increase in myopia over the last 30 years (Gregory, 2024). Hanscom suggests that exposing children to manageable risks during play also helps them develop essential life skills and face challenges in the future. She argues that well-intentioned but overly protective parenting and constantly shuttling children between different activities can limit a child's opportunities for appropriately challenging play. A lack of physical activity and outdoor play can contribute to developmental issues and diminish a child's ability to assess and navigate risks.

Financial considerations

Schools and nurseries are working with reduced budgets; this has had an impact on outdoor play. For example, many settings are struggling to afford wet-weather clothing for children and staff. Outdoor space is also at a premium. A lack of funding can lead to a shortage of staff, which can mean that educators are hesitant to allow risky play. When teaching in Reception, I often did not have a TA in class with me. Insufficient resources can also limit staff training so that staff feel less confident about enabling play that has an element of risk.

Reflective question 3.5

Consider your own setting. What might be some barriers to risk in play in your setting?

Key takeaways

- Providing opportunities for productive uncertainty in outdoor play is crucial for healthy child development
- Encouraging risk in play helps children learn essential life skills, including resilience and problem-solving
- Climate change and urbanisation are creating barriers to outdoor play, making it essential to develop resilient play spaces
- We need to balance safety and learning to avoid overprotection, which can limit children's opportunities to grow and challenge themselves
- Supportive environments – both physical and social – are necessary to foster a child's natural curiosity and risk-taking in play