



Articulating outdoor risky play in early childhood education: voices of forest and nature school practitioners

Nevin J. Harper & Patricia Obee

To cite this article: Nevin J. Harper & Patricia Obee (2021) Articulating outdoor risky play in early childhood education: voices of forest and nature school practitioners, *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 21:2, 184-194, DOI: [10.1080/14729679.2020.1784766](https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2020.1784766)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2020.1784766>



Published online: 11 Aug 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8013



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)



Articulating outdoor risky play in early childhood education: voices of forest and nature school practitioners

Nevin J. Harper  and Patricia Obee 

School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada

ABSTRACT

Outdoor risky play provides developmental and health benefits for children, such as risk-assessment skills, increased physical activity and well-being and promoting social competencies and resilience. Modern Western society is highly risk-averse and many children are protected from risks more commonly experienced by previous generations. Forest and nature schools (FS) are one approach encouraging unstructured outdoor play in natural environments including the inherent risks; falling, cuts and bruises, sun exposure, etc. Ten early childhood education FS practitioners were interviewed to explore their articulation of outdoor risky play, pedagogical practices pertaining to risk and how they navigate tensions between regulatory policies and idealized practice. This research serves to bring practitioners' voices to the literature on how the risk associated with outdoor play is being defined, rationalized, and enacted in FS programs. Findings from this study inform recommendations for practice and further inquiry into risky play and its benefits.

KEYWORDS

Risky play; early childhood education; forest schools; practitioners; child development

Introduction

A growing body of literature suggests new thinking about risk as it relates to healthy child development. Today's modern Western society is highly risk-averse (Sandseter, Little, Ball, Eager, & Brussoni, 2017). Children, especially in the early years (ages 3–5), are protected from many risks experienced by previous generations through improved practice and increased efforts at injury prevention (Harper, 2017; Sandseter, 2007). The terms 'hyper-parenting' and 'helicopter parenting' are reflective of these changes; the former where parents over-program/over-manage their children's lives, and the latter in which parents hover close by their child to ensure no harms come to them (Gere, Villabø, Torgersen, & Kendall, 2012; LeMoyné & Buchanan, 2011; Rosenfeld & Wise, 2010). Canadian studies have suggested that a lack of risky, unstructured and sometimes even unsupervised play, may, in fact, be at a cost to healthy child development (e.g. reduced capacity for judgement, creativity, confidence and potentially increase phobias), and that the perception, or actual risk of injury is an essential element (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Tremblay et al., 2015; Ungar, 2009). Forest and nature school (FS) for children in the early years is one approach encouraging unstructured outdoor play in natural environments—with inherent risks of falling, getting cuts and bruises, sun and cold exposure, etc.—quite similar to international expressions of adventure education where risk and challenge are commonly accepted components (Harper, 2017; Humberstone, Prince, & Henderson, 2015). FS are more frequently being developed in education and childcare realms internationally to address health and education in a holistic model—an expression of facilitated human–environmental interactions—guided by outdoor and experiential

education practices and formalized trainings (Kahn, Ruckert, Severson, Reichert, & Fowler, 2010; Leather, 2018). In this study, we explore FS practitioners' articulation of risk in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings, pedagogical practices pertaining to risk and how practitioners navigate tensions between regulating bodies' policies that limit risky play and idealized practice. Additionally, this study aims to centre and privilege practitioners' voices on the topic of children's outdoor risky play specifically in FS ECE settings.

Risky play

Risk-taking is defined as a behaviour with the potential for both rewards and cost, and where the outcome is uncertain (Holton, 2004). Risky play has been defined as thrilling and challenging forms of play with the potential for physical harm (Little & Wyver, 2008; Sandseter, 2007). In studying children, Norwegian and English researchers defined eight categories of risky play: (a) play with great heights (danger of injury from falling); (b) play with high speed (uncontrolled speed and pace, potential for collision); (c) play with dangerous tools (with potential for causing injuries); (d) play near dangerous elements (where one can fall into or from something resulting in injury); (e) rough and tumble play (where there is potential for children to harm one other); (f) play where children can 'disappear/get lost'; (g) play with impact (risk of injury through impact); and (h) vicarious (watching other children in risky play) (Kleppe, Melhuish, & Sandseter, 2017). Summarising the findings of a systematic review, risky play was cited as a necessary component of healthy child development and promotion of physical, social and mental health in children (Tremblay et al., 2015).

Role of outdoors in risky play and child development

Outdoor risky play fits within the category of physical play and is described as active, exciting and having elements of risk (Sandseter, 2007). Sandseter and others (e.g. Brussoni et al., 2012) have argued for the developmental benefits of the less predictable and dynamic outdoor play spaces for children over the artificial coloured and less stimulating CSA approved playspaces (Herrington, Lesmeister, Nicholls, & Stefiuk, 2007). Research suggests a broad range of benefits from outdoor activity and risky play. Some of the most well-referenced benefits include stress reduction, increased physical activity and creativity, improved mental health and well-being, the development of risk-assessment, resiliency, self-regulation, and emotional expression, improved motor skills, increased self-esteem, environmental awareness, nature-connection and improved supportive social environments (Bagot, Allen, & Toukhasati, 2015; Brussoni et al., 2015; Chawla, Keena, Pevec, & Stanley, 2014; Elliot, Ten Eycke, Chan, & Müller, 2014; Little & Sweller 2015; McArdle, Harrison, & Harrison, 2013; Robson & Rowe, 2012; Sandseter, 2010; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011; Tremblay et al., 2015; Wyver, Tranter, Naughton, Sandseter, & Bundy, 2010). While not suggesting any international consensus exists on the benefits of risky play for children across cultures or social locations, these findings have been articulated by researchers in North America, Scandinavia, UK and Australia.

Children's playspaces have been increasingly designed to eliminate injury rather than to support child development (Ball, 2002, 2004). These CSA playspaces have been found in one Canadian study to be used by children during less than 13% of their playtime, and only 'as designed' a mere 3% of the time (Herrington et al., 2007). The voice of authority for health and safety appears to side with the argument for reducing or eliminating childhood injuries at the cost of positive exposure to risk for child development. Our inquiry aimed to help address hegemonic influences over public opinion, and raise the voices of FS practitioners through asking them to articulate their perspectives on outdoor risky play, and to provide valuable information on how they incorporate risky play into their pedagogical approach, and last, risky play's relationship to regulatory policy.

Aim of the study

This research serves to address a tension in the literature between child injury prevention and child development. While not mutually exclusive fields, the conversation regarding benefits of risky outdoor play and child development are becoming more common in academic and public arenas (Harper, 2017). A deeper understanding of practice, values, and intentions of FS practitioners may assist in finding common ground between those who desire to never see a child get hurt, and those who believe that healthy child development (i.e. developing resilience, tolerating anxiety, making judgements, taking calculated risks, etc.) includes risk, and in a way, serves an important purpose in growing up (Brussoni et al., 2015). Our research question was: How do practitioners define, rationalize, and enact children's risky play in the context of FS ECE programs?

Theoretical framework

Risk-taking in this research is defined as a behaviour having an uncertain outcome with the potential for loss and gain (Connolly & Haughton, 2015; Holton, 2004). Risky play is conceptualized in accordance with Sandseter's (2009) research which focused on children's experience of risk, rather than the potential for physical harm. Sandseter and others (Brussoni et al., 2012; Little & Eager, 2011; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011) theorize that risk-taking in children's play serves as an integral part of healthy psychosocial development. By children being exposed to situation and stimuli that instigate a fear response, in a thrilling and playful manner, they gain coping skills that are necessary for inevitable risks associated with life (Little & Eager 2011; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). This study asserts the theoretical positioning of risky play as a mechanism for healthy child development which sits in alignment with the evolutionary developmental psychology premise that functional adaptations in development occur more often and more rapidly in early life, and in relationship to environments (Jason-Grotuss & Bjorklund, 2007).

Drawing on Knight's (2013) framing and description of FS, this study considered FS programs to include experiential and nature-based learning, where children spend at least half of their time at the ECE program in outdoor and natural settings. We did not require practitioners to have official FS training for this study as the intent was to explore practitioners' conceptualization of risky play in FS programs, rather than evaluate existing FS risk-protocols, policies and training.

ECE in this research refers to an educational theory and field of work associated with supporting children's development from birth to 8 years old (Gordon & Browne, 2013). An ECE institution is an educational center for children 0–5 years of age (in Canada) that aims to provide age-appropriate and stimulating learning opportunities, with an emphasis on socialization, language development, cognitive and physical development and transitioning to primary school.

Methods

Participants ($N = 10$) were recruited through a snowball sampling approach starting from an online search for Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) programs across Vancouver Island, British Columbia and the four CCRR programs were then asked to provide a list of FS ECE programs. FS programs in this study are defined by ECE programs that spend at least half of the day in outdoor natural environments and identify with employing forest and nature approaches to pedagogy. We aimed to have regional representation from ECE centers across lower, middle and upper Vancouver Island, and to include practitioners from both licensed (BC Child Care Licensing, Island Health, 2019) and unlicensed facilities. This decision was made to expand and contrast perspectives relative to licensure. To be included in the study, participants were required to have at least 1 year of work experience in FS programs, as well as currently work in a FS program which (1) includes outdoor play as a part of healthy child development, (2) designs programs allowing for outdoor play (including the inherent risks), and (3) communicates these risks to parents of participating children.

Semi-structured interviews (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Patton, 2002) were the primary data collection method in this study. Interviews were 40–60 min in length and completed by phone, recorded and transcribed for analysis. Questions were formulated following the completion of a literature review and included:

- How do you define risk and how is that definition informed?
- How are your practices surrounding risk and risky play informed? What pedagogical approaches, practical learning and trainings, risk-assessment tools, literature or materials do you draw on?
- How do you see the role of risk in children's experience and development?
- Do you sense tensions between practice and policy? And if so, how do you manage this?

A constant comparative approach to analysis (Fram, 2013) identified data saturation following the 8th interview, and led to our data collection stopping at 10 participants to increase content validity (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019) was used to guide analysis for the four interview questions. The transcribed interviews were initially analysed according to research questions, by developing codes that described the essence of the practitioners' answers. Themes were generated through 'hermeneutics of empathy' (Willig, 2017) aiming to understand the meaning of a practitioner's responses without importing theoretical concepts from outside to make sense of it. Characteristics and patterns within participant responses were coded and placed into themes in order to express a fuller understanding of practitioner's articulation and enactment of risky play in FS context. Prior to commencing research, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board (protocol #190,244), informed consent was attained from all participants, and anonymity was ensured.

Participants' ages ranged from 31 to 60 years and each had between 2 and 36 years of experience in ECE. Of the 10 interviewees, two were male and eight were female. ECE programs interviewees worked with children ages 2–6 years and in groups ranging from 6 to 64 children. Participants' representation included northern (4), middle (3), and southern (3) Vancouver Island. Program models and pedagogical frameworks were consistent across participants and included Canadian Forest School outdoor approaches (MacEachren, 2013), Reggio Emilio (Hall, 2010), Montessori (Smith, 1912), Waldorf (Nicol & Taplin, 2012), play-based (Moore, Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie, & Boyd, 2014) and experiential learning (Kolb, 2014). Given the primary focus of this paper and length restrictions, please see listed references for further description of above pedagogical approaches. In the following presentation of findings, study participants are identified as follows: gender (M/F), age, years of experience, licensed (i.e. recognized and certified by a governmental authority as meeting health, education, and safety standards) or unlicensed childcare center (L/UL) (e.g., M32.9.L).

Findings

In our analysis of the data, four themes were identified to describe the essence of practitioners' articulation, rationalization, and enactment of children's risky play. In the following section, themes are presented with practitioners' quotes exemplifying each theme.

Risk of social and emotional harm

For the most part, practitioners' definition of risk and risky play was congruent with existing research and literature—forms of play that involve the potential for physical injury.

children partaking in activities that could lead to injury or potential of physical injured while engaging in that play be it climbing a tree or balancing on rocks or walking through a river. (F34.10.UL)

However, many practitioners extended this definition to say that risky play not only poses potential for physical injury, but also *emotional and social harm*.

Within the kids categories of risk, for them I think there are different categories of social and emotional risk in the group context is present too. With kids in the forest without toys and then there is also the physical risks. It was surprising to see that social and emotional risk of being in the forest. (F31.7.L)

Anything that takes the child out of their comfort zone and challenges them. That has potential for to have a physical injury, not always just physical risk though. (F43.10.L)

Risk is kids putting themselves in situations that make them vulnerable be that physical or emotional, emotionally, or physically, socially, actively putting self in situation where they are vulnerable. (M36.23.L)

Children as competent

We anticipated practitioners responding to inquiries as to how they learned about risky play by providing a list of professional resources used (conferences, training, literature, etc.). Although some practitioners did identify professional training (such as FS Canada) and non-specified literature (articles and books) on outdoor and risky play, the majority of practitioners (8/10) referenced watching children as a primary way that they developed their pedagogical practices around risky play. They stated that through watching children play they learned how capable children were in managing their own safety. There was a distinct underlying assumption that *children are competent* beings; that they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to manage in activities and environments they are exposed to when developmental norms are taken into consideration. Quotes exemplifying that include:

sometimes as adults we tend to think of kids as running around recklessly and trying things that are dangerous, but if you really look and pay attention they want to be safe just like all of us, kids are naturally safe (F31.9.L)

Children are so much more SO MUCH MORE capable than what we believe as typical adults. (F60.36.L)

It is rare that a kid will do something by choice that is really really unsafe. (M36.23.L)

Really trust in children to be able to guide themselves and we are safety and support for all things, but we really can trust kids ... I believe this and I have seen it over and over again, kids know what is too far and what is far enough, so trusting children and keep them safe and accidents will happen and we need to accept that. (M42.5.L)

We believe children are very competent and that they are our teachers too. We have all these things—we all learn from each other and children teach us a lot. They are very competent in what they want to know and knowledgeable in how they feel. We let them guide us through our journey and we are there to ask questions and dive deep into what they want to experience, we explore together in an organic kind of way, making us a team out there. (F34.8.L)

They are more aware of their bodies and the potential for risk if you let them do it. (F40.20.L)

We trust in the child's capability and understanding of their consequences. (F43.10.L)

A few practitioner responses push back on risky play discourses and common societal views of risk-taking in children play.

I think risky play is what children have always done. To me risky play is a new catch phrase, children have always had risky play, before everything became so adult run, children were just playing outside their house, or in gardens, and not that long ago. (F62.30.L)

Risk is not an outcome ... I do not think getting hurt is inherent to risky play (F31.9.L)

Risk as essential learning process

Practitioner responses to questions investigating the role of risk in child development centered around the necessity of risk for children and people to grow and progress. The emphasis in most responses was on emotional, social, cognitive development, and less frequently explicitly about

physical development (e.g. gross motor skills). *Risk was identified as an essential learning process* by all practitioners in this study; in that, there is a dignity in children having opportunities to experience risk and its inherent lessons. This is exemplified in the following quotes:

I don't really understand how we can grow as human if we don't take risks. It is built into the natural evolution of a person's development—its apart of every step of developing. (M42.5.L)

So to cross a log, their sense of accomplishment once they have done that, you can see them just grow from that and then they will be ready for the next little challenge. (F60.36.L)

We find that children are more stagnant in their development if they are not taking risks. They are not thinking that they can be successful in doing something and with that comes damaged emotional connections with self, self-concept and feelings of success. (F34.8.L)

The skills they learn are unbelieve and perseverance in the process too. In the forest risk is pretty individually suited for each child, and some kids may not be able to climb on a log and they just won't be able to get up onto it until they can, so they have to learn, we won't lift them up if they can't do it on their own. So they keep trying, and after a week or so of trying, learning and encouraging each other, they can do it! And the learning is so imperative for them. (F31.7.L)

I think it is essential for not only physical but also emotional development in a child, it builds confidence and it plays a huge role in how a child views their own physical capacity to navigate their surroundings. (F40.20.L)

Learning happens right outside of our comfort zone and it is really hard when we assess risk for someone else . . . I understand people have to be safe, but it is crucial that kids learn, and growth can only happen when they take a little bit of risk. (F31.9.L)

Other benefits of risk identified include physical development, proprioception, sensory integration, and social competencies (specifically in rough and tumble play). However, these appeared in isolation and so were not identified as themes.

Tension between policy and risky play

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that all practitioners perceived tension between policy and risky play. The restrictions placed on children's risky play by policy was explicitly stated, as well as expressed as frustration between idealized pedagogical practices for healthy development, and allowable risk by BC licensing (VIHA, 2019).

We don't understand because we know how important it is for healthy development to take risk, to have rough and tumble play, to have all of those types of play, running, climbing, jumping, balancing, bike riding, skating. We have a mandate from another body that says we can't do these things and sometimes we can do them with having a major workload of a health and safety plan and most of the time we do this so we can implement the program we want to (F34.8.L)

The fact that we are so penalized as providers who are licensed if we have any incidents. It's ridiculous . . . We all want to be a low risk facility, but we are seeing that? We want to be allowing more risk play, but if we are being penalized for it, it doesn't make sense for us to allow that to happen. (F40.20.)

Everything is pretty dynamic in the forest, it's always changing in the forest. So, it's hard to fit into a box. Policy is often a little box that you have to fit into it. I try to follow as closely as I can and follow what I have learned throughout my certificate program in ECE, but there are some things that don't necessarily align for play outside. (F34.2.U.L)

100% there is tension everywhere with it. How can a policy maker, who doesn't know the child or the risk experience, how can they write a policy about that experience. I get it and I support it and respect and understand it and they need to be in place because at the end of the day we can't just rely on how the educator feels about a risk, that's not going to stand in court if a child falls from a tree and breaks their neck. I am with the policy makers and parents and the whole other side of this debate. The problem is the tension that I find is how do we standardize risky play, while allowing children to play at the ability that they are able to play, that's the golden question. (M42.5.L)

I see huge tension, because you want to allow risky play to happen but licensing needs to set some basic standards, and sometimes they minimise what children can do. (F31.9.L)

The thing is of course there is tension and we are always going to have this because VIHA [Vancouver Island Health Authority] as the licencing body, comes from a medical perspective. They don't want anyone to ever have a sliver or a bump and they also have to be very aware of the fact that every center that they gave a licence to, if anything happens, it will come back on them. I know that there are licensing officers that feel the same way I do about risky play, because they can say it to me, but they can't really allow it in their position. (F62.30.L)

Creative approaches to navigating policy

Practitioners had *creative approaches to navigate policy* while still providing opportunities for children's risky play. These innovative ideas include: being firm in your rationale for, and practice of risky play, keeping detailed documentation of risk assessment including all possible scenarios and solutions for risk-mitigation, engaging in constant risk-assessment that involves the children in the process, being transparent with BC licensing officers and conveying the intent of practice, inviting the parents to risky play activities, offsite field trips, and looking for the grey in policies.

The following quotes provide more depth and context to these creative approaches:

always have 3 really firm and true reasons why you do what you do, and if you can tick off 3, you are in a good place, you have done your research, you know the reasons for why you are doing it, it's easy to explain. (F31.9.L)

We have done full days and tons of homework about risk and drawing out massive risk assessment basically. We have documents where I have written down the likelihood of tripping over a root is high and we can talk about it in our morning meeting and that will actually significantly decrease the risk because they are aware. We have thought of minor things that could happen and lead to bigger things; tree branches falling down, or high winds, or animals, or public area, so people can be walking through, most often our biggest risk is dog poo. We find a solution for everything and what we would do to mitigate risk. (F31.7.L)

Definitely we are constantly doing risk-assessment to see if what we are doing is actual worth the risk. Making sure the kids are involved in that risk assessment as well, getting them to tune in to what is going and gauging whether it's too wet or slippery or the creek is running too fast etc. (F34.2.UL)

There is a back and forth relationship [between educator, child, and risk experience] and once an educator has an understanding of all the relationships, it is at that point the educator can make the call if they are feeling safe and comfortable in that child engaging in that type of play. (M42.5.L)

It has been helpful for us to work with licensure officers and be really available and really open ...Then your licensing officer understands that you are coming from a place of trying to follow rules, we aren't trying to get way with things, we are really trying to provide the best chance for child development that we can. The understanding is mutual, and we can work together to find that common space where risk can be safe. (F31.9.L)

We are able to do the things that won't be allowed by inviting parents that day (F34.8.L)

That's the hard part, I probably look for the grey, how much room for discretion, some are strict and some have room for discretion for teachers. I try to look how I can work within the policies and look at my group and what are the needs of my group and sometimes no conflict, but if the needs of my group are falling outside then I will try and find the grey and work within it. I probably break some of the rules sometimes, the parents and kids know what we do, nothing secret and hidden and that's what parents say they want and are happy with, and I imagine sometimes there are some rules I outright break and don't realize, and mostly I look for the grey. (M36.23.L)

A few practitioners noted that the BC licensing for childcare (Vancouver Island Health Authority, 2019) regulations only pertain to the licensed ECE site itself; therefore, field trips off-site are not required to adhere to safety policies that all practitioners deemed limiting for risky play.

Licensing looks at our school as if we are on a field trip and I think that their perspective about us, because you know a regular pre-school might go on a field trip to the ocean or the forest ... More lenient rules on field trips so it is to our benefit. (F31.7.L)

In my licensed facilities, we have all these policies we have to put in place. These children in my backyard, can't have something for them to jump on, not have logs etc., so my backyard would have to be quite restricted, but go across the field to the forest and now licensure goes out the window. If they actually realised that I was taking kids to the creek, they would think water, children, danger, but they don't inquire about field trips. (F60.36.L)

Discussion

Practitioners defined risky play similar to our research definition and in alignment with the current risky play literature (Sandseter, 2007). Practitioners also proposed a broadening of the definition for risky play by taking into consideration emotional and social risks. This is novel to existing literatures and is an area deserving further inquiry. Currently, risky play is considered a sub-category within physically active play (Sandseter, 2007), however, in recent years, vicarious play, meaning inactive children watching active risky play, has also been considered a form of risky play (Kleppe et al., 2017). Given this finding, we suggest further research exploring children's expressions of risky play (Sandseter, 2010) in scenarios with the potential for emotional and social harm. It may be the case that some of the widely referenced benefits of risky play (e.g. self-esteem, self-regulation) can be obtained through emotional and social risk-taking during play, and do not require a physical risk to be present.

The majority of practitioners emphasized that they learned about risky play *from* the children. This disrupts ideas around adult-child roles in ECE (Anglin, 2002) and advocates for children as agents over their own safety and learning. These findings provide an experience-informed perception of children's risky play and their capacity to keep themselves safe. To the best of our knowledge, a responsive approach to pedagogy surrounding risky play is not present or privileged in risky play literature and may be a useful addition. Meaning, how do children guide our knowledge and facilitation of risky play? What are the cues and information that children are giving practitioners to process and respond to during risky play? And, how do we create a responsive approach to pedagogy regarding risky play (policies, licensing regulations, training, etc.)?

In posing the question about the developmental role of risk, we assumed that participant responses would align with risky play literature, citing physical skills, resilience, risk-assessment, etc. However, participants spoke of risk in broader terms as a necessary learning process. This finding is particularly interesting when considering responses to our question regarding learning about risky play from watching children. It seems that practitioners in our study learned about risk through watching children, and in that process came to understand that risk was a mechanism for growth. Practitioners' responses were thoughtful and demonstrated intent, rather than reciting benefits they had read in articles or from online resources.

When contrasting licensed with unlicensed childcare facilities, there was no distinct difference for questions, one, two and three. Meaning, the way practitioners articulate, are informed, and how they include risky play in their pedagogical practices does not appear to differ between licensed and unlicensed childcare center practitioners. When practitioners from the unlicensed childcare centers answered question four they tended to focus more on protocols for children's safety and relationships with parents of children, rather than compliance to a regulatory body.

As researchers, we were inspired by the innovative and creative ways practitioners navigated tensions between policies regarding child injury prevention and child development in their practice. The majority of risky play literature focuses on the benefits of risky play for children's health and development (Brussoni et al., 2015; Connolly & Haughton, 2015), and the need for policies to reflect this. In this study, practitioners highlighted their own resilience and creativity in their ability to uphold beliefs about the necessity of risky play for healthy child development, regardless of limiting policies. That said, the unanimous response 'yes' to the question of whether there was tension between risky play and policy, suggests a need for further investigation.

Finally, we selected practitioners from FS programs as this is one approach to encouraging risky play given the inherent risks present in natural environments. Throughout the interviews, narratives and examples of risky play were always set in outdoor natural settings (e.g. walking on a slippery log,

playing near a stream, climbing a tree). The cited benefits for children of spending time in natural settings, such as increased well-being, resilience, and social competencies (Mygind et al., 2019), was articulated by practitioners as being influenced by the risks associated with the natural environment. This begs the question; are some of these benefits commonly associated with children's time in nature attained through the mechanisms of risky play?

Conclusions & further research

In this study, practitioners shared creative strategies for navigating risky play within confines of their provincial (versus national) ECE licencing regulations. Strategies include: being firm in the rationale for and practice of risky play, keeping detailed documentation of risk assessment, engaging in constant risk-assessment involving children in the process, being transparent with licensing officers and conveying intent of practice, inviting the parents to risky play activities, engaging in offsite field trips, and looking for ways around unclear policies. These findings may inform practitioners interested in incorporating children's risk-taking into their pedagogical practice.

We suggest further research into how practitioners respond to children's risky play as this may better inform practitioners on how to ethically and effectively facilitate risky play with some level of assurance in their process. Currently, practitioners may be enacting a responsive approach to children's risky play, however, this has yet to be considered a pedagogical practice. With safety regulations leaning in the direction of injury prevention, the discussion of how to let risk happens in ECE in a way that promotes healthy child development while ensuring safety, has been limited. Additionally, we suggest research that investigates children's expressions of risky play as defined by Sandseter (2009), that occurs when they may be experiencing a social or emotional risk, and how this relates to cited benefits of risky play.

Limitations

ECE practitioners in this study volunteered following our call for participants which may constitute a response bias. This was deemed acceptable to us as we wanted practitioners who had thought enough about the risky play that they could articulate their pedagogical approaches. Although the sample was chosen with intent, it poses a limitation, as the findings may be only representing a small portion of ECE practitioners' articulation of risk. Further research exploring ECE practitioners outside of FS programs may provide more depth to this preliminary inquiry. Additionally, these participants only represent a small region, Vancouver Island, Canada, and it would be beneficial to repeat this study to represent a larger geographical area.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the University of Victoria.

Notes on contributors

Nevin J. Harper, PhD, is an associate professor of Child & Youth Care at the University of Victoria and a long-time outdoor adventure educator interested in human-environmental relationships.

Patricia Obee, MA, RCC, is an interdisciplinary PhD student at the University of Victoria and a registered clinical counsellor. Her research has explored outdoor risky play and now centers on adolescent mental health.

ORCID

Nevin J. Harper  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7828-2349>

Patricia Obee  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6548-2106>

References

- Anglin, J. P. (2002). Risk, well-being, and paramountcy in child protection: The need for transformation. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 31*(4), 233–255.
- Bagot, K. L., Allen, F. C. L., & Toukhasati, S. (2015). Perceived restorativeness of children's school playground environments: Nature, playground features and play period experiences. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 41*, 1–9.
- Ball, D. J. (2002). *Playgrounds-risks, benefits and choices*. Sudbury, ON: HSE Books.
- Ball, D. J. (2004). Policy issues and risk–benefit trade-offs of 'safer surfacing' for children's playgrounds. *Accident Analysis & Prevention, 36*(4), 661–670.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2019). Thematic analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 843–860). Berlin: Springer.
- Brown, A., & Danaher, P. A. (2019). CHE principles: Facilitating authentic and dialogical semi-structured interviews in educational research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education, 42*(1), 76–90.
- Brussoni, M., Gibbons, R., Gray, C., Ishikawa, T., Sandseter, E., Bienenstock, A., ... Pickett, W. (2015). What is the relationship between risky outdoor play and health in children? A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 12*(6), 6423–6454.
- Brussoni, M., Olsen, L. L., Pike, I., & Sleet, D. A. (2012). Risky play and children's safety: Balancing priorities for optimal child development. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 9*(9), 3134–3148.
- Chawla, L., Keena, K., Pevec, I., & Stanley, E. (2014). Green schoolyards as havens from stress and resources for resilience in childhood and adolescence. *Health & Place, 28*, 1–13.
- Connolly, M., & Haughton, C. (2015). The perception, management and performance of risk amongst Forest School educators. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 38*(2), 1–20.
- Eager, D., & Little, H. (2011, August). Risk deficit disorder. In *Proceeding of IPWEA International Public Works Conference, Canberra, Australia*.
- Elliot, E., Ten Eycke, K., Chan, S., & Müller, U. (2014). Taking kindergartners outdoors: Documenting their explorations and assessing the impact on their ecological awareness. *Children, Youth and Environments, 24*(2), 102–122.
- Fram, S. M. (2013). The constant comparative analysis method outside of grounded theory. *The Qualitative Report, 18*(1), 1–25. Retrieved from: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol18/iss1/1>
- Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(9), 1408–1416. Retrieved from: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss9/3>
- Gere, M. K., Villabø, M. A., Torgersen, S., & Kendall, P. C. (2012). Overprotective parenting and child anxiety: The role of co-occurring child behavior problems. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 26*(6), 642–649.
- Gordon, A. M., & Browne, K. W. (2013). *Beginnings & beyond: Foundations in early childhood education*. Boston, MA: Cengage learning.
- Hall, K. (2010). *Loris Malaguzzi and the Reggio Emilia experience*. London: Continuum.
- Harper, N. J. (2017). Outdoor risky play and healthy child development in the shadow of the risk society: A forest and nature school perspective. *Child & Youth Services, 38*(4), 318–344.
- Herrington, S., Lesmeister, C., Nicholls, J., & Stefiuk, K. (2007). Seven Cs: An informational guide to young children's outdoor play spaces. <http://www.wstcoast.org/playspaces/7Cs.pdf>
- Holton, G. A. (2004). Defining risk. *Financial Analysts Journal, 60*(6), 19–25. doi:10.2469/faj.v60.n6.2669
- Humberstone, B., Prince, H., & Henderson, K. A. (Eds.). (2015). *Routledge international handbook of outdoor studies*. London: Routledge.
- Jason-Grotuss, D. F., & Bjorklund, A. C. (2007). Evolutionary developmental psychology: Developing human nature. *Acta Psychologica Sinica, 39*(3), 439–453. <http://journal.psych.ac.cn/xlxb/EN/>
- Kahn, P. H., Jr, Ruckert, J. H., Severson, R. L., Reichert, A. L., & Fowler, E. (2010). A nature language: An agenda to catalog, save, and recover patterns of human–nature interaction. *Ecopsychology, 2*(2), 59–66.
- Kleppe, R., Melhuish, E., & Sandseter, E. B. H. (2017). Identifying and characterizing risky play in the age one-to-three years. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 25*(3), 370–385.
- Knight, S. (Ed.). (2013). *International perspectives on forest school: Natural spaces to play and learn*. London: Sage.
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Leather, M. (2018). A critique of "Forest School" or something lost in translation. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education, 21*(1), 5–18.

- LeMoyne, T., & Buchanan, T. (2011). Does “hovering” matter? Helicopter parenting and its effect on well-being. *Sociological Spectrum*, 31(4), 399–418.
- Little, H., & Sweller, N. (2015). Affordances for risk-taking and physical activity in Australian early childhood education settings. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43(4), 337–345. doi:10.1007/s10643-014-0667-0
- Little, H., & Wyver, S. (2008). Outdoor play: Does avoiding the risks reduce the benefits? *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33(2), 33.
- MacEachren, Z. (2013). The Canadian forest school movement. *Learning Landscapes*, 7(1), 219–233.
- McArdle, K., Harrison, T., & Harrison, D. (2013). Does a nurturing approach that uses an outdoor play environment build resilience in children from a challenging background? *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 13(3), 238–254.
- Moore, D., Edwards, S., Cutter-Mackenzie, A., & Boyd, W. (2014). Play-based learning in early childhood education. In A. Cutter-Mackenzie, S. Edwards, D. Moore, & W. Boyd (Eds.), *Young children’s play and environmental education in early childhood education* (pp. 9–24). Berlin: Springer.
- Mygind, L., Kjeldsted, E., Hartmeyer, R. D., Mygind, E., Bølling, M., & Bentsen, P. (2019). Immersive nature-experiences as health promotion interventions for healthy, vulnerable, and sick populations? A systematic review and appraisal of controlled studies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 943.
- Nicol, J., & Taplin, J. T. (2012). *Understanding the Steiner Waldorf approach: Early years education in practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation method*. London: SAGE.
- Robson, S., & Rowe, V. (2012). Observing young children’s creative thinking: Engagement, involvement and persistence. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 20(4), 349–364.
- Rosenfeld, A., & Wise, N. (2010). *The over-scheduled child: Avoiding the hyper-parenting trap*. St. Martin’s: Griffin.
- Sandseter, E. B. H. (2007). Categorising risky play—How can we identify risk-taking in children’s play? *European Early Child Education Research Journal*, 15(2), 237–252.
- Sandseter, E. B. H. (2009). Children’s expressions of exhilaration and fear in risky play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 10(2), 92–106.
- Sandseter, E. B. H. (2010). It tickles in my tummy!: Understanding children’s risk taking in play through reversal theory. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 8(1), 67–88.
- Sandseter, E. B. H., Little, H., Ball, D., Eager, D., & Brussoni, M. (2017). Risk and safety in outdoor play. In T. Waller, E. Årlemalm-Hagsér, E. B. H. Sandseter, L. Lee-Hammond, K. Lekies, & S. Wyver (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of outdoor play and learning* (pp. 113–126). London: SAGE.
- Sandseter, E. B. H., & Kennair, L. E. O. (2011). Children’s risky play from an evolutionary perspective: The anti-phobic effects of thrilling experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 9(2), 257–284.
- Smith, T. L. (1912). *The Montessori System in theory and practice: An introduction to the pedagogic methods of Dr. Maria Montessori*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Tremblay, M. S., Gray, C., Babcock, S., Barnes, J., Costas Bradstreet, C., Carr, D., . . . Herrington, S. (2015). Position statement on active outdoor play. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12(6), 6475–6505.
- Ungar, M. (2009). Overprotective parenting: Helping parents provide children the right amount of risk and responsibility. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 37(3), 258–271.
- Vancouver Island Health Authority. (2019). *Childcare licensing regulations*. Retrieved from http://www.bclaws.ca/Recon/document/ID/freeside/332_2007#ScheduleE
- Willig, C. (2017). Interpretation in qualitative research. In C. Willig & W. S. Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 274–288). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Wyver, S., Tranter, P., Naughton, G., Sandseter, E. H., & Bundy, A. (2010). Ten ways to restrict children’s freedom to play: The problem of surplus safety. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 11(3), 263–277.