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Professional attitudes towards children's risk-taking in play: insights into influencing factors in Dutch contexts

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ABSTRACT

Childcare settings offer an ideal opportunity for children to become acquainted with risk-taking in play, which promotes healthy growth and development. Van Rooijen and Newstead's (2016) model, based on a review of international literature, has identified the main challenges for childcare professionals when promoting risky play, namely; conflicting pressures from cultural and regulatory factors, parental concerns, personal attitudes and constructs of children. We used an online questionnaire to examine whether these challenges impact on children's risk-taking play in Dutch childcare contexts. Dutch professionals encounter barriers; especially in external regulations, organization protocols, and parental overprotectiveness. We adjusted the model to gain further insight in influencing factors and their interrelatedness in a Dutch context. Our findings indicate that professionals can be supported with knowledge about and openness in discussion on risky play and with the tools necessary to support autonomy in daily pedagogical decision-making which then supports children's age-appropriate risk-taking opportunities.

KEYWORDS

Risky play; professional development; outdoor play; pedagogical approach; child care; early childhood

1. Introduction

Children seek excitement and challenging situations despite the possibility of the threat of injury (Kalliala, 2006; Špinková, Newberry, & Bekoff, 2001). Challenge and risk-taking can occur within and outside of play. In early childhood education, the main focus has been on play contexts. The study of 'risky-play' has a long history, but the definition has only recently been formalised as 'thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury' (Sandseter, 2009a, p. 4). Sandseter distinguishes six categories of risky play based on observing and interviewing children: great heights, high speed, rough and tumble play, harmful tools, dangerous elements and disappearing or getting lost (Sandseter, 2007). The study of risky play has a strong foundation in affordance theory. Affordances include the environment as well as the person, signifying that play possibilities are unique for each child and can be influenced by individual characteristics (Gibson, 1979; Sandseter, 2009b). Sandseter's categories of risky play have been used in a range of studies and formed the basis of a recent systematic review, which resulted in the publication of a 'Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play' (Brussoni et al., 2015; Tremblay et al., 2015).

A range of factors in childcare contexts present barriers versus opportunities for children to engage in risky play. Systems approaches such as Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model

provide a framework for analysing the multiple levels of influence on children's risky outdoor play (Bundy, Tranter, Naughton, Wyver, & Luckett, 2009). Some of the influences relate to cultural or within-country factors such as the training of early childhood educators. Little, Sandseter, and Wyver (2012), for example, identified larger discrepancies between the beliefs and practices of Australian versus Norwegian educators in enabling risky play. Until recently, the analysis of important influences on professional attitudes towards risky play using a systems approach has been difficult. Bronfenbrenner's model can provide a useful framework for literature reviews, but it is difficult to test empirically. Van Rooijen and Newstead (2016) introduced a model to overcome this gap, and this model forms the foundation of our analysis (see section 1.1). The Dutch context is of interest because it includes a unique combination of permissive and restrictive elements regarding outdoor play, as further explained in section 1.2.

The positive influence of uncertainty and risk in play can be demonstrated in several developmental areas such as emotional wellbeing, self-confidence and adaptive capacity (Lester & Russell, 2008; Sandseter, Little, Ball, Eager, & Brussoni, 2017). Engagement in risky play is beneficial to the emotional development of the child. Play allows children to experience and express strong emotions within a safe play environment, which contributes to the regulation of emotion (Sutton-Smith, 2003). Self-confidence originates from the simultaneous experience of risk and mastery. Hence, risky play provides the child with possibilities of being in control of a situation while simultaneously being out of control, offering a safe structure for risk-taking (Gordon & Esbjörn-Hargens, 2007). Furthermore, age-appropriate risky play presents thrilling experiences that induce exhilarating positive emotions, which may prevent anxiety disorders (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011).

Despite the growing evidence for the developmentally positive aspects of children's risk-taking in play, a leading cultural discourse is that children are vulnerable and therefore in need of protection against danger and harm (Hewitt-Taylor & Heaslip, 2012). A trend of overprotection has resulted in the intensification of safety standards on playground equipment, thus setting significant limits on children's everyday play (Brussoni et al., 2015). The constraint on children's freedom to play by increasing the levels of monitoring is one of the concerns articulated in the United Nations (UN) declaration of children's rights. Through its acknowledgment of the 'right to play', the UN certifies that a degree of risk is fundamental to play and a necessary element to let children benefit from play (UNCRC, 2013). Another outcome of the overprotective tendency is intensified adult supervision on children's free time; such supervision is limited to not only parents but also practitioners in childcare and other domains of professional and voluntary youth work (Wyver et al., 2010).

Many recent changes to pedagogical approaches recognize the children's reduced opportunities to engage in risky outdoor play. Despite the benefits, children's opportunities to participate in risky play in early childhood settings are frequently considered to be too limited (Brussoni et al., 2015). A majority of children attend childcare facilities under the supervision of professional workers; thus, the manner by which a focus on protection limits outdoor risky play opportunities becomes significant. This aspect is even more essential as these settings play an important role in facilitating children's risky play in a safeguarded environment, and thus increasing children's competencies (Greenfield, 2003; Lavrysen et al., 2017). Previous studies indicate that professional workers understand the importance of risky play, but are sensitive to conflicting discourses of safety and protection (Kernan & Devine, 2010; Little, 2017). Van Rooijen and Newstead (2016) model (Figure 1) was developed to improve understanding of the complex interplay of factors that are likely to influence attitudes and practices relating to risky play.

1.1. A model for factors influencing childcare professionals

Professionals deal with these dilemmas in attempting to adopt a thoughtful approach to risk in children's play. In their daily practice, professionals experience diverse factors that affect their

*Influencing factors on professional attitudes
towards risk-taking in children's play*

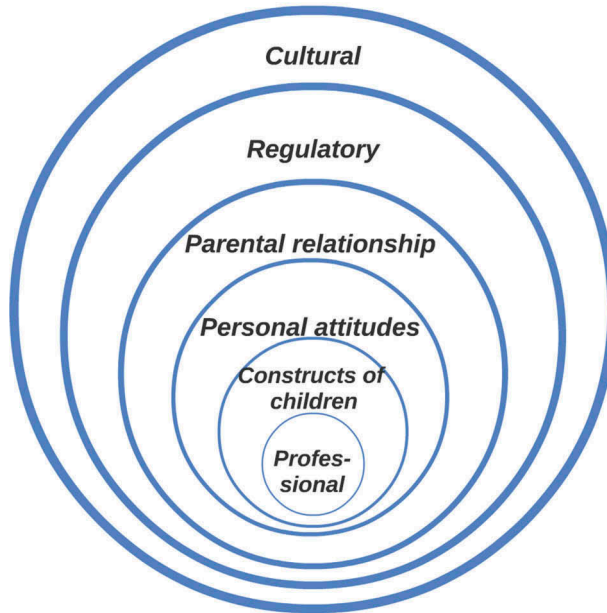


Figure 1. Model

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attitude and decision making towards risky play activities. Professionals are found to be more sensitive to the risk of injury and raise concerns about the compromised duty of care when opportunities for risky play increase, even without any evidence of actual increases in injury (Bundy, Lockett, et al., 2009). Therefore, unravelling the intricacy of contexts in which professionals operate, including factors coming from relationships, collective norms and legal matters, is scientifically and societally worthwhile.

The role of childcare professionals involves achieving a critical balance between protecting children against harm and providing them with a safe environment versus fulfilling the pedagogical assignment to stimulate children's development in independently engaging risk and challenge in their play (Bilton, 2010; Stephenson, 2003). In the day-to-day work of professionals, which includes facilitating children's play, the perception of risk and the attitude towards children's risky play are of fundamental importance (Little et al., 2012; Sandseter, 2012; Sandseter, Little, & Wyver, 2012). Professionals' beliefs and attitudes regarding risky play, with the possibility of injury, can change over time. Moreover, diverse elements affect their decision making. These influencing factors on professionals' attitudes towards risk can cause difficulties in their daily work as they continuously make decisions about children's actions, which involves balancing consideration of the longer term gains of risk-taking and the immediate safety concerns. Van Rooijen and Newstead (2016) depict the influences in a model (see Figure 1) and argue that the further exploration of these factors can be valuable for professional development. Affecting the professional from more distant to a closer connection, five factors are distinguished: cultural aspects, regulatory influences, parental relationship, personal attitudes and constructs of children.

Professional barriers to the facilitation of children's risk-taking in play depend on sociocultural contexts; thus, these factors are further illustrated by identifying the countries in which the studies

have been conducted. For example, the likelihood of litigation or even the perceived threat of litigation varies considerably across countries. The present study contributes to understanding of barriers in facilitating children's risky play in the Netherlands. To date, the Dutch context has been relatively under-researched.

1.1.1. Cultural aspects

Current research has demonstrated some cultural differences that connect to the outermost layer of the model. Culturally determined ideas towards the benefits of children's exposure to risk-taking appear to have an effect on how adults encourage children's engagement in risky play (New, Mardell, & Robinson, 2005). Australian educators might feel restricted in their practice, whereas Norwegians express a more permissive context and 'few worries' in applying their own judgement on children's risk-taking in play (Little et al., 2012; Sandseter, 2014). Furthermore, attitudes to risky play seem to be connected to positive or negative connotations to the concept of risk that is socially constructed, and hence dependent on nations' sociocultural backgrounds (Little & Eager, 2010). To reflect the current literature on risky play, cultural influences capture all of the conditions that occur within a country or other bounded contexts and have yet to be disentangled from factors that are known to influence outdoor play such as urbanization (Freeman & Tranter, 2012), socioeconomic status (Kimbrow, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2011) and weather (Eide, 2017).

1.1.2. Regulatory influences

In the Van Rooijen and Newstead model, regulatory influences include policy, regulatory frameworks and legal frameworks that may lead professionals to feel vulnerable to litigation. The possibility of litigation for disregarding safety regulations has been identified as a constraint on Australian professionals permitting or facilitating risky play (Little & Sweller, 2015). In the UK, professionals involved in primary school children's outdoor camp activities were aware of the positive aspects of risk-taking in play but felt unable to overrule safety policies (Stan & Humberstone, 2011). This situation is in contrast to Norwegian professionals who give less priority to potential liability than to their own risk-assessment capacities (Little et al., 2012).

1.1.3. Parental relationship

Another influence on professionals' attitudes towards risk, as depicted in the model, is the opinion of parents. A minority of parents can have an impact on other adults, creating discomfort about the possibilities of even minor injuries (Bundy, Lockett, et al., 2009). Although several international studies emphasize the need for the parents' cooperative relationship between parents and professionals to support children's risk-taking in play, they also reveal the difficulties in engaging in and maintaining this relationship (Hewitt-Taylor & Heaslip, 2012; MacQuarrie, Nugent, & Warden, 2015; New et al., 2005; Niehues et al., 2013). In the Scandinavian context, professionals experience the parents' stronger support; however, they allow their responsibility towards other people's children in their care to influence their approach to risky play (Little et al., 2012).

1.1.4. Personal attitudes

The individual characteristics of the professional have also been identified as a factor. Stephenson (2003) argues that educators who are interested in physical play and enjoy being outdoors themselves have a more open-minded attitude towards the risky behaviours of children in their care. Sandseter (2014) identified a connection between an excitement-seeking personality and a more permissive attitude of professionals to risky play. Furthermore, professional attitudes towards risky play may be influenced by gender. Sandseter found that male childcare professionals have a more permissive attitude and allow children to participate in greater risky play than women are willing to do (Sandseter, 2014).

1.1.5. Constructs of children

Finally, an influencing factor is the professionals' view on children's capabilities. Constructs of children reinforce professional practice; supervisors can perceive children as vulnerable and resilient individuals who are also affected by the pedagogical foundations of the organization that these supervisors work for; consequently, these aspects cause dilemmas for their supervision on risk-taking in play (Hewitt-Taylor & Heaslip, 2012; Little et al., 2012). Adult-child consultation and supported collaborations have been found to change the adults' perspectives on risky play in the Norwegian and Scottish nature-based learning contexts (MacQuarrie et al., 2015). Professionals' view on children and the effect of including the developmental benefits of risk in pedagogical foundations for facilitating risky play in practice seems to generate different outcomes and does not depend on sociocultural differences (Hewitt-Taylor & Heaslip, 2012; Little et al., 2012; New et al., 2005).

1.2. Influencing factors in the Dutch professional practice

The Dutch context includes restrictive factors that are evident in Australia and UK (Van Rooijen, 2017). By contrast, permissive elements are observed in Norway, and therefore offer an important framework for advancing the understanding of the multiple factors that influence the availability of outdoor risky play for young children. Childcare organizations obtain public funding, but they have a commercial base and a customer-led approach. Interestingly, awareness of the positive value of children's engaging in risky play, distinguished on various platforms, is growing. The Consumer Safety Institute started a campaign in 2017, in which parents were informed about the benefits of risky play and were challenged to support their children in their risky play activities (Zuizewind, 2017). This campaign was substantiated by the publication of a 'Position paper on risky play', which was endorsed by organizations advocating for children's play (Kuiper, Cotterink, & Van Rooijen, 2017). The new national law for childcare which introduced additional possibilities for risk-taking in play was exemplified in the accompanying document on 'We protect children against great risks and learn them to deal with small risks' (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2016). The advice for childcare organizations is to develop professionalization programmes for enabling pedagogic professionals to facilitate the provision of challenging learning opportunities to children (<http://www.eengezondestart.nl>). The new 'risk monitor' no longer strictly prescribes the process of conducting safety assessments, but it provides staff with space to make their own considerations, and thus connect to children's development (<https://risico-monitor.nl>).

1.3. Aim of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes towards risky play among Dutch childcare professionals. Van Rooijen and Newstead's model of influencing factors functions as a heuristic for analysing the results and allows for relating Dutch attitudes towards outcomes from other countries. This study used a questionnaire among professionals and collected factors, which could enhance the understanding of the attitudes and opinions of children's supervisors and how risk in play can be perceived by professionals regarding children in their care. In advancing the understanding of how influencing factors work on professional attitudes, these outcomes can help practice by empowering professionals to support children in their play. The objective is to gain further insight into the manner by which childcare professionals perceive children's risky play possibilities and a deeper understanding of the influencing factors that are involved in developing their attitudes. As the model is derived from theory, exploring relevant research, this study adopts a bottom-up approach. We initially verified the model in the professional developmental context and consequently evaluated it with childcare professionals through a questionnaire.

2. Method

We developed an online survey based on Van Rooijen and Newstead's model (2016). We used SurveyMonkey (Platinum edition) to create the online questionnaire and collect respondents' replies.

2.1. Participants

Up to 101 subscribers of *KindVak* fully or partially completed the questionnaire. *KindVak* is a digital newsletter for professionals working with children, which is sent periodically to 25,000 professionals. An invitation to complete the online questionnaire was incorporated in the digital newsletter on 23 July 2017. The number of professionals who actually read this newsletter is unknown.

According to the publisher of the newsletter, the majority of readers are female and working in childcare organizations; however, further population details based background variables are undetermined. Referring to a survey that the publisher conducted in 2015 among the subscribers ($n = 500$), 82% of the respondents were working in childcare, 15% in education and 3% in youth care. Subscribers of the digital newsletter expressed an above-average interest in their own professional development; hence, a risk of some positive bias cannot be excluded.

Readers of *KindVak* were invited twice to complete an online questionnaire between 23 June and 7 July 2016. Up to 101 respondents registered. Assuming the subscriber survey was identified as internal and relevant, we would expect approximately 133 returns. We achieved over 75% of that return rate. This figure exceeds the expected return rate for electronic surveys with two invitations, which is generally estimated at 58% (for health research, McPeake, Bateson, & O'Neill, 2014). In addition, Livingston and Wislar (2012) note that response bias starts to diminish at a 60% response rate; nevertheless, caution should still be exercised and the interpretation of results should consider possible bias. Not all of the respondents completed the entire questionnaire. After the first part on 'possibilities and experiences', 71 respondents continued to the second part of the survey. Fifty-nine respondents completed the third part of the questionnaire, including open-ended questions and information about personal and professional background. The loss of respondents during the study could be caused by an increase of respondent's burden, as the questions were increasing in difficulty. After the first part of the questionnaire, in which respondents were asked to tick boxes, the successive parts involved ranking and open-ended questions; these queries tapped into deeper beliefs, which could be more onerous to answer.

Among the professionals who completed the full questionnaire, 48 were working in childcare organizations, 6 in primary education and 5 in 'others' such as special needs environments, working while retired or engaged in dual jobs ($n = 59$). In percentages, these numbers correspond to the average of the population, which diminishes the probability of a biased sample. We did not find significant differences in the background variables between the respondents who answered only one part of the questionnaire versus those respondents who replied to all three parts. Therefore, despite the relatively high non-response as the percentages conform to population estimates and do not vary between groups, the probability of a biased sample is apparently within acceptable ranges (Schouten, Cobben, & Bethlehem, 2009).

The current study complies with the Association of Universities in the Netherlands codes of conduct for academic practice,¹ the Scientific Integrity code and the Dutch Personal Data Protection Act. The data management of this study conformed to the Code of Conduct from the Organization of Dutch Universities. For this research, conformance to these codes of conduct did not require the approval of an ethical review board. The respondents were provided with information about the aim, confidentiality and use of data, and their response to the digital questionnaire indicated a presumption of their informed consent. Answering the questionnaire was anonymous unless the respondents chose to share their contact details and expressed their interest in participating in follow-up research on the topic of children's risk in play.

2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire involved three parts, after which a section focused on the personal and professional background of the respondents. A definition of risky play (Sandseter, 2009a, p. 4) was provided at the start of the questionnaire to ensure that the respondents share the same concept of risk in children's play.

2.2.1. Part one: possibilities and experiences

In this part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about risk-taking in play, specifically the possibilities that children experience outdoors during the time they spend at school, in childcare or in other environments where professionals accompany them. This part addressed the following question: 'In your working environment, do children have possibilities to engage in risk and challenge in their outdoor play?' This question was asked for each of Sandseter's (2007) six categories of risky play, namely high speed, great heights, rough play, harmful tools, dangerous elements and disappear/get lost. The answers were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale labelled as very much (5), much (4), sufficient (3), somewhat (2) and not (1). Examples illustrated the categories to provide the respondents with an awareness of the types of play that pertain to different typologies.

2.2.2. Part two: attitudes

Professionals working with children develop an attitude towards risk in children's outdoor play. The focus in this section of the questionnaire was on factors that can modify this attitude. Therefore, the respondents were asked: 'What influences you in your attitude towards children's risky play?' To answer this question, we used a *ranking scale*. We instructed the respondents to provide their preferences in ranking factors from the *most important* (1) to the *least important* (10).

We derived five of the given options from the theoretical model based on a narrative literature review in international contexts and elaborated by Van Rooijen and Newstead (2016), namely cultural aspects, regulatory influences, parental relationship, personal attitudes, and constructs of children. In a small-scale pilot study, six professionals from childcare and playwork were asked if they recognized the five factors from the model in their daily practice and were offered the possibility to include additional influencing factors. The results of the study yielded five more factors, namely opinion of colleagues, play environment, the playing child, pedagogical framework and organizational protocols. In this manner, influences from international contexts as well as possible additional factors from the Dutch professional practice could be tested in this questionnaire. This approach could induce an adjustment of the model for the Dutch childcare context, as presented in the Discussion section. In total, 10 influencing factors were presented to the respondents to be ranked in order of importance, thus allowing for our adjustment of the model from Figure 1 to the Dutch context if the results are in that direction.

2.2.3. Part three: opinions

This section of the questionnaire included four open-ended questions to assess the professionals' opinion towards children's risky play. Respondents were introduced to these questions asserting that children's supervisors have a dual responsibility: on the one hand, the provision of a safe play environment and protection against danger and, on the other hand, the pedagogical assignment to support children's development in independently engaging risk and challenge in their play. Weighing these two elements in the professional duty of care can engender a 'balanced attitude' towards helping children to reach their developmental potential. The questions were as follows:

- (1) *What is your opinion on children's risky play?*
- (2) *What positive and negative aspects on children's risky play can you indicate?*
- (3) *What dilemmas towards children's risky play do you encounter in your daily work?*
- (4) *What is helpful for you to develop a balanced attitude towards children's risky play?*

In the second question, we provided two answering cells, *positive* and *negative*, to offer space for writing comments on both options.

2.3. Analysis

We transferred the quantitative data from the online program SurveyMonkey to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 24) software. We analysed the questions from the first part using means and independent t-tests for the differences between various professional settings. We conducted tests for potential dissimilarities between groups of respondents in terms of childcare environment (childcare versus after school care). We did not find any significant differences between respondents who filled out all of the quantitative questions versus those respondents who only completed the first section; hence, we decided to include all of the respondents in the first analysis.

The rank-order questions in part two were handled as multiple response questions using SPSS multiple response options. Frequency tables for the three most important influencing factors were created ($n = 71$).

For the analysis of the four open-ended questions in part three, the focus was specifically on the opinions of respondents of childcare as a homogenous group of professionals ($n = 48$). As question two is divided in two segments, five answers were provided by the respondents. For the analysis of these qualitative data, we adopted the steps used in the approach of Gläser and Laudel (2013). First, the raw data were linked to prior theory and the research question. The raw data were subsequently structured in categories that were derived from empirical information in the text and supplemented according to theory. Three researchers, including the first two authors of this article, coded the answers to accomplish optimal triangulation (Creswell, 2007). This procedure allowed for the enhancement of inter-rater reliability and the identification of the main key issues.

3. Results

3.1. Part one: possibilities and experiences

The professionals were asked to what extent, in their working environment, children have possibilities to experience risk and challenge in their outdoor play. Table 1 presents the mean score for each of Sandseter’s (2007) six categories of risky play. The respondents reported *high speed* as giving the most opportunities for children to engage in their play in the setting. If we further compare the categories, the second most scored is *great heights*. The lowest scores are found for *harmful tools* and *dangerous elements*. Using a five-point Likert-type scale, we determine that with the exception of one outcome, all of the outcomes are below *sufficient* (3.0). Table 1 also includes frequency tables that illustrate the percentages of the scores of the different scale categories. For four of the six categories on risky play, 68% or more of the professionals working with children in their care observe no opportunities of any significance, scoring not or somewhat, for *rough play* (68.4%), *disappear/get lost* (74.7%), *harmful tools* (89.1%) and *dangerous elements* (93.1%) in their practice. Approximately half of

Table 1. Descriptives risky play: percentages (%), means and skewness (N = 101).

Risky play possibilities	1 not	2 somewhat	3 sufficient	4 much	5 very much	Mean	Skewness
Speed	5.0	19.8	37.6	27.7	9.9	3.18	-.08
Height	12.9	32.7	33.7	16.8	4.0	2.66	.22
Rough play	34.7	33.7	13.9	10.9	6.9	2.21	.86
Harmful tools	76.2	12.9	5.9	4.0	1.0	1.41	2.29**
Dangerous elements	83.2	9.9	3.3	4.0	0.0	1.28	2.81**
Disappear/get lost	38.6	36.1	9.9	7.9	6.9	2.08	1.28*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

them perceive no or somewhat possibilities on *great heights*. For the *high speed* category, nearly 25% notice no or somewhat possibilities of children's risk in play. The categories of *harmful tools*, *dangerous elements* and *disappear/get lost* are significantly skewed to the left.

In a further exploration, the categories on independent variables were verified to identify significant differences. A segmentation between professionals working with children aged 0 to 4 years and professionals working with children of primary school age (4 to 12 years) was conducted. This analysis denoted a statistically significant difference in the *harmful tools* category, in which professionals indicated substantially more possibilities for older children ($t(57) = -2.03, p < 0.5$).

Another significant outcome was in the comparison between respondents working in childcare ($n = 32$) and those respondents working in primary education ($n = 26$). Significant differences between both groups of professionals were found in *harmful tools* and *dangerous elements*, in which professionals from primary education perceived more possibilities than from childcare ($t(56) = -2.30, \text{ resp. } -1.93, p < 0.5$).

3.2. Part two: attitudes

The influencing factors derived from the model and the pilot study combined are cultural aspects, external regulatory factors, parental relationship, personal attitudes, constructs of children, opinion of colleagues, opportunities in the play environment, knowledge of the playing child, pedagogical framework and organizational protocols. Professionals have ranked these factors from 1 to 10, where 1 pertained to the most influencing factor, whereas 10 the least influencing factor. Data were used as multiple answers and frequency tables were utilized. As the middle category is known to be less valid and reliable (test–retest), analyses were performed for the most important (counted value 1) factors, the second most important factor (counting value 2) and the third most important factor (counting value 3). The least important influencing factors were analysed as well (counting value 10).

As Table 2 demonstrates, a strong rank order is not evident: the mean of the most important factor is not close to 1, whereas the least important factor's mean is not close to 10. Most of the respondents believed that their own knowledge of the playing child was the strongest influencer (ranking first) of their behaviour towards risky play ($n = 17, 23.9\%$ first ranking), followed by the organizational rules and protocols ($n = 10, 14.1\%$ first ranking) and external influences ($n = 9, 12.7\%$, first ranking). The analysis of the *second* most important influencing factor confirmed these results. Fourteen respondents (19.7%) ranked own insight in the playing child in second place; by contrast, nine respondents (12.7%) ranked external rules and protocols in second place.

When we analysed the third ranking order, 12 respondents ranked their own insights in the playing child (16.9%), but most of the respondents ranked the possibilities of the playing environment as the third most important influencing factor ($n = 14, 18.3\%$).

Table 2. Ranking influencing factors.

Ranking factors	Mean (lower is better)
The playing child	4.59 (Most influencing)
Pedagogical framework	4.75
Play environment	4.85
Organization protocols	4.96
Constructs of children*	5.00
Parental*	5.41
Personal*	5.77
Regulatory*	5.79
Opinion colleagues	6.86
Cultural*	7.02 (Least influencing)

*: factors derived from the model (Van Rooijen & Newstead, 2016)

Finally, we evaluated the factors that were perceived as the least important influences. The outcomes were clear: neither the culture of risk avoidance was believed to be very influential ($n = 25, 35.2\%$) nor was the opinion of colleagues ($n = 18, 25.4\%$).

Further exploration did not indicate any differences between groups, such as age of children and childcare/education.

3.3. Part three: opinions

Analysis of the responses from the 48 participants identified key issues regarding opportunities in and barriers to supporting children's risk-taking in play. The results were clustered in the same order as the questions that were presented to the respondents.

3.3.1. Opinion on children's risky play

Almost all of the respondents positively value the opportunities that risky play delivers for children. Two elements that are deemed to be the most important are: they have to learn by *themselves* and they have to perform this activity through *experience*, herein understanding what children are capable of doing and the abilities that they are missing. The explanation for this appreciation is interlinked to children's healthy development and is pronounced in six distinct categories: discovering boundaries, daring and being able, estimating risks as risk is part of life, developing self-confidence and self-dependence, improvement of social interaction and development of creativity and solving capabilities.

In their positive evaluation of children's risky play, the respondents simultaneously identify some hindrances. These hindrances largely pertain to Health Authority safety regulations and the concerns of their pupils' parents. The respondents subsequently experience personal barriers in their approach to risky play practice. These barriers are related to feelings of tension, even fear and doubt on when to intervene.

The necessity to establish a balance between letting children take risks versus fulfilling the requirement for careful supervision also emerged in the respondents' answers. Age-appropriate risk-taking, tuning in on the individual child as well as assessing acceptable risks are elements that could support this finding.

3.3.2. Positive and negative aspects of children's risky play

Coding the positive aspects of risky play generates five distinguishable categories. First, children learn about their limitations by daring and doing. Second, children grow and develop self-esteem and self-confidence, which can cultivate their resilience. Third, they learn to take physical risks in their play by assessing these risks. Fourth, the value of learning by doing and discovering new experiences is mentioned. Finally, the positive influence of social interaction on children's personal development that comes with risky play reveals itself in the analysis as a positive connotation.

The negative facets of risk-taking in play can be distinguished in three different elements. The most prevalent is the possibility of an accident causing injuries that range from common and specific pain to serious harm. Fear for the dangers that can hurt children hereby arises. Another negative aspect is that children may be unable to oversee the risk or overestimate themselves while engaging in risky play. This negative factor goes along with the supervisor who experiences difficulty in guarding these boundaries for children, resulting in the possible approval of unacceptable risk. Finally, the consequences for others are mentioned: risky play can have undesirable effects on other children in their play and parents can address the organization, which can trigger the loss of clientele.

3.3.3. Dilemmas towards children's risky play

In articulating the dilemmas that the respondents encounter, they indicated mostly barriers in their working environment. Eleven respondents who state a distinct dilemma place their positive

attitude on risky play and what this attitude delivers to children against the various restrictions that they experience. Overall, five categories of barriers are differentiated from the data: (1) regulations, protocols and policy from the respondents' organizations and the Health Authority; (2) over-protective and anxious parents for injuries and dirty/damaged clothing; (3) colleagues with different opinions or characteristics, thus causing difficulty in reaching an agreement; (4) respondents' own concerns about their attitude towards risky play and how to bring this attitude in practice; and (5) the differentiation of groups and individual children who require a careful approach to supervision.

3.3.4. *Factors that help to develop a balanced attitude towards children's risky play*

The themes emerging from what the respondents need in their approach towards children's risk-taking in play are categorized from two viewpoints. The first perspective focuses on the factors that are important in supporting professionals, which are displayed in the rank of presence in the data. The second standpoint highlights the actions that professionals expect from stakeholders, which are present in their working environment.

The beneficial factors from the most frequently mentioned to the least frequently mentioned by the respondents are as follows:

- (1) Professionals need insight into and experience with the risky play of children.
- (2) Regulation authorities have to be less strict and more generous in offering additional opportunities for risky play in directives.
- (3) Parents can be provided with more insights into the value of risky play to reach agreement on this matter.
- (4) Children can be developed into more self-reliant individuals by offering them more opportunities to manage risk and uncertainty in their play.
- (5) Colleagues, with whom the subject of risky play has to be discussed, to gain their moral support.
- (6) The outdoor environment requires additional risky play opportunities.
- (7) The childcare organizations need to include risky play in their pedagogical guidelines.
- (8) Other factors should be considered, such as attention to risky play in education and research, availability of background information, attitude of society and financial support for outdoor risk-taking in play facilities.

The actions towards risky play that are useful for professionals are as follows:

- *making their own decisions* in daily risky play practice
- *making arrangements* with colleagues and parents
- *giving consent* for risky play activities by parents and health authority organizations
- *endorsing the importance* of risky play by colleagues and parents

The first element—professionals' need to be able to make their own decisions—emerged strongly in the data. The respondents primarily mentioned the necessity to gain experience in making their own judgements on risky play situations. Furthermore, they considered multiple possibilities for guiding children, ranging from 'nearby' to 'from a distance'. Finally, professionals preferred to encounter individual children in their competency while focusing on the needs of the group under their care. However, the respondents also concluded that they required instruments to be able to make their own decisions. These instruments include tools for assessing risks, supervising risky play and guiding individual children in a group, thus supporting children's risk-taking in play more autonomously.

4. Discussion

The primary aim of this study is to examine professionals' attitudes towards risky play in Dutch childcare settings. Professionals' ranking of influencing factors and open-ended responses were interpreted using Van Rooijen and Newstead's model (Van Rooijen & Newstead, 2016) of influencing factors. The results highlight the importance of different influencing factors to Dutch childcare professionals' perceptions of children's risky play. Results from the ranking of various influencing factors indicate that professionals, as a group, encounter difficulty in differentiating between potential barriers that they experience in facilitating risky play. The differences in responses between ranking and open-ended responses are noteworthy. One possible explanation is based on a methodological argument: The ranking procedure compels respondents to consider options that may not be readily apparent to them. In doing so, it may also contribute to their experience of being unable to realize changes by themselves. The discrepancy between ranking and open-ended questions can also be explained more theoretically, namely in the context of the model by Van Rooijen and Newstead (2016), which follows Bronfenbrenner's (1979) approach for examining influences that are close to an individual (proximal) or further away from an individual (distal). Professionals may perceive these influences as equal to their span of control, as they have more possibilities to change the nearby factors such as their own constructs of children compared with the distant aspects such as cultural beliefs. Based on the current findings, the open-ended questions apparently elicit a discussion of proximal factors that professionals can control more easily; yet as a group, professionals view the distal factors as highly influential.

4.1. Comparing the results in the Dutch childcare context to the model of influencing factors

The model of influencing factors on professional attitudes towards risk-taking in children's play (Van Rooijen & Newstead, 2016) was based on international research; thus, the current study examined its applicability in Dutch contexts. In the model, *cultural aspects* are depicted as the most distant context in which professionals are acting, influenced by the societal expectations of supervising risk in children's play. Interestingly, cultural factors rank as the least influencing factor for Dutch professionals. Moreover, in the qualitative part, cultural factors were scarcely mentioned as a barrier in professional practice. This finding could denote that childcare professionals do not experience a risk avoidance culture. It also suggests that Dutch culture towards risky play is less restrictive than the cultures of Anglo-Saxon countries where risk awareness is high and compensation claims are made easily in case an untoward incident occurs. The relative absence of the influence of cultural beliefs on professionals may indicate Dutch culture can be placed closer to the more stress-free attitude towards risky play situations of Scandinavian countries that Sandseter (2014) describes.

The *regulatory influences* included in the model refer to the external rules from health authorities as well as the internal policies of the organizations in which professionals are working. The ranking of influencing factors implies that professionals experience these two factors separately as external regulations may have a noticeably less impact than organizational protocols. However, this distinction is less clear in the analysis of the open-ended questions. Professionals indicate that health authority safety regulations affect them the most negatively in their possibilities to support risky play in practice; meanwhile, organizational protocols are less frequently mentioned as a barrier.

Parental relationship is positioned in the middle of the model, signifying that the opinion of parents can play an important, but less impactful, role in the development of professional attitudes towards risky play compared to the factors close to the professional. The mid-range ranking of parental influences supported this finding, but open-ended responses implied a higher level of importance. Professionals perceive that the parents are omnipresent in their thinking and acting in terms of decisions on children's risky play activities. Therefore, professionals recognize the

substantial importance of engaging parents in collective agreements on the value of risky play and the manner of bringing this approach in practice.

Personal attitudes constitute the next influencing factor from the model. This study finds that the professionals' individual characteristics do not determine their professional attitudes towards risky play. Gaining more insight into the value of risky play and making day-to-day decisions on guiding children helps to develop professional attitudes, including dealing with risk in play to increase the competencies of children.

The professional's *constructs of children* are located in the model closest to the professional. This factor as well as the playing child scored high in the rankings. Professionals acknowledge the significance of risk-taking in play for the children's healthy development. Professionals express the necessity to adjust their supervision on risky play to the needs of the individual children, which could indicate their awareness of the vulnerability and resilience of children.

The *outdoor play environment* and the *opinion of colleagues* were not included in the model and appeared to influence professional attitudes. Within the Dutch context, professionals acknowledge the opportunities for children under their care to experience *high speed* and *height*, which are the most common play types in child care outdoor play spaces. However, the five-point scale indicated that professionals perceive children's overall risky play opportunities to be inadequate. Further confirmation of this view arose from the qualitative outcomes in which professionals expressed a need for more risky play opportunities in outdoor environments. The pilot study suggested that colleagues in professional organizations could play an important role for two reasons. First, people have to collaborate in day-to-day practices. Second, the force of social pressure by peers is evident. However, based on the results, this factor seems to play no significant role.

4.2. Adjustment of the model based on the Dutch contextual study

As a result of a pilot study among Dutch practitioner respondents, the questionnaire included five additional factors. With reference to the outcomes, we suggest an adjustment of the model, which can be of value for international studies, including Dutch contextual studies (see Figure 2). The designated influences *constructs of children* and *the playing child* seem evenly important, and therefore can be recognized as confounding concepts. We recommend conceptualizing both in one factor, *view on the individual child*, revealing the significance of the professional understanding of children. A critical notion

Influencing factors on professional attitudes towards risk-taking in children's play: Adjustment based on Dutch childcare context findings

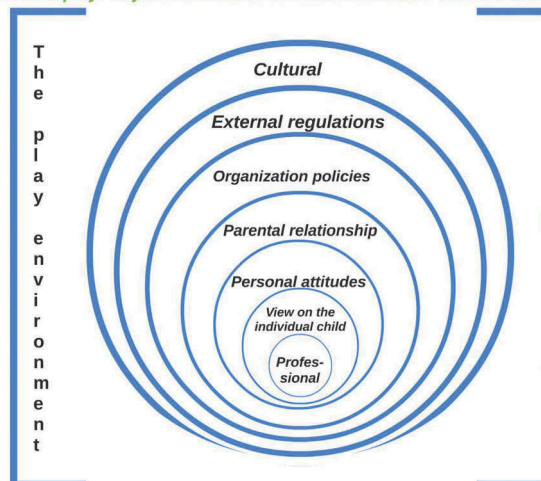


Figure 2. Adjusted model

is that the view on children is changeable, and the professionals' attitudes can become less important than their observations of the needs of individual children. The results suggest that Dutch professionals find a high degree of importance in the differentiation between the individual needs of children in their care; in doing so, they broaden their own perspective of the capabilities of children, thus adjusting their attitudes towards risky play. The *regulatory factors* from the original model are divided into external factors, from legal health and safety organization, and internal factors such as organizational protocols and pedagogical policies. Further research is necessary to articulate the manner by which these factors influence professionals separately and are inter-related to each other. Thus, we propose to distinguish between *external regulations* and *organizational policies*. The *play environment* is perceived as a conditional factor for the possibilities of experiencing risky play: no risky environment, no risky play. This concept connects to the limitations that a 'poor outdoor environment' offers, thus minimizing risk-taking in play (Little & Wyver, 2008, p. 38). Hence, we suggest the identification of the play environment as an elementary influence and the starting point for studying the other elements; therefore, in the model, we position the play environment next to the inter-related factors.

4.3. Limitations of the study

The results of this study should be considered within the context of its limitations. The number of respondents involved in this study was 101, and 59 completed the entire questionnaire. Generalization from these results should be regarded cautiously as some bias may have emerged among the respondents sampled. For example, the likelihood that respondents with an interest in risky play may have been greater and consequently are more open-minded towards the subject could have resulted in their over-representation. However, the objective of this study is not to generalize outcomes but to gain further insight into influencing factors. Use of open-ended questions allowed professionals to express views about the theme of risky play that may not be captured by the primary quantitative questionnaire. Because the open-ended questions provided comparable results and insights into the particular influences that can be discerned, this study can offer a clearer understanding of professional attitudes. Moreover, the working environment of the respondents varies across child-related settings. As the possibilities of risky play depend on this setting, an overall conclusion cannot be derived. However, in the analysis of the open-ended questions, only childcare professionals were included, thus providing a focused examination of this sector.

5. Conclusion

The intent of this paper was to explore the influencing factors on the professional attitudes towards risk-taking in children's play in Dutch childcare contexts. Interest in risky play in the Netherlands is growing, whereas knowledge about barriers and facilitators becomes more important. The use of the model of influencing factors in international contexts can provide advanced insight. Although our study has limitations, we present the inter-related factors in an adjustment of the Van Rooijen and Newstead model, which can be useful for further research in Dutch contexts. The adjusted model could be valuable for understanding the attitudes towards risky play for other countries as well.

The results of this study suggest that professionals themselves are aware of the multitude of factors that influence their attitude towards and practice of risky play activities of children in their care: individual aspects (personal and professional) include the organization, parents, children and stakeholders that represent society. Professionals define many barriers in their work on facilitating children's risky outdoor play, which they are unable to change by themselves. However, they also indicate the requirements for gaining the highly needed autonomy in their practice and the method through which children can benefit from additional risky play possibilities.

This study may be a valuable contribution to the research on risky play and the factors that influence the professionals' attitudes towards facilitating such play. It explores the influencing factors in the Dutch context and offers profound insight into professional barriers to children's risk-

taking in play. Therefore, this study can be used in professional development of Dutch childcare staff to enhance their attitudes and practice on challenging and risky play. However, in cases where childcare professionals may experience similar barriers at face value, these hurdles may vary between different childcare settings, according to the pedagogic framework of the organization, parental attitudes or trust in workers. Further research could ascertain the extent to which such factors are influencing professionals in various childcare contexts.

Similarly, further research could examine the manner by which professionals in childcare and other child sectors can be equipped to, on the one hand, provide children with opportunities for risky play and, on the other hand, supply them with tools for reframing hindrances in their working environment such as parents, organizational barriers and external regulations. Further international research will be useful to identify the predictive power of the model in a range of cultural contexts and determine whether the model can be applied to identify the key factors that may be functioning as barriers to children's risk-taking in play.

Note

1. [http://www.vsnu.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/The_Netherlands_Code%20of_Conduct_for_Academic_Practice_2004_\(version2014\).pdf](http://www.vsnu.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/The_Netherlands_Code%20of_Conduct_for_Academic_Practice_2004_(version2014).pdf).

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