



Risk Management in children's play

The National Quality Standard calls on educators to plan learning environments with appropriate levels of challenge, where children are encouraged to explore, experiment and take appropriate risks in their learning. (Guide to the National Quality Standard, p. 41)

This summary exists to share with nominated supervisors, educators, coordinators and other interested people, some recent research regarding risk management in ECEC services. By learning more about perspectives of risk, from both within and outside the sector, we as educators and educational leaders can model reflective practice and the value of ongoing learning, as well as exploring ways in which we as professionals understand and participate in risk management.

Recent perspectives

Recent perspectives about leadership in the context of the National Quality Framework include:

- Risk is...defined as situations in which we are required to make choices among alternative courses of action where the outcome is unknown. Such situations often require us to weigh up the benefits against possible undesirable consequences as well as the likelihood of success or failure. When considered from this perspective risk is not necessarily a danger that needs to be avoided, but rather something that needs to be managed (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2008; Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008)
- Recognising and responding appropriately to risk situations is an important aspect of this process as children learn to function safely in a range of environments. (Little, 2013)
- Franken et al. (1992) suggested that a person's perception of risk is altered by their prior engagement in risk situations; hence those who engage in risky situations without adverse outcomes are likely to perceive such situations as less risky in the future.
- Fear of risk, of injury or disaster has increased in the last decade to the point that fear itself is the greater risk to our health than the issues we are fearing (Furedi 2007).
- Restrictions put on children's play are often based on the adult's perception of what is dangerous or risky (Sandseter, 2011, pg. 5), rather than individual abilities or giving the children the freedom to judge situations for themselves.

So what do these perspectives around risk management mean for nominated supervisors, educators, and coordinators?

Services are being called on, both through the National Quality Standards, and through contemporary research findings, to embrace an element of risk provision in children's play and play environments. Cultivating the skill of not only tolerating, but also embracing, risk in both children and educators is a pivotal aspect of supporting children's emerging resilience, and supporting our image of the child as one who is a competent and capable learner.

Sandseter's 6 categories of risky play, listed below, provide scope for educators and others designing and provisioning children's play spaces, to reflect on the types of experiences being offered to children:

- **Great heights:** Climbing trees and other structures to change perspective and receive a sense of accomplishment.
- **Rapid speeds:** Children swinging, sliding, riding and otherwise experiencing life at a pace fast enough to produce the thrill of almost but not quite losing control.
- **Dangerous tools:** Children playing with knives, saws, machinery, and other tools known to have potential danger associated. Children gain a sense of satisfaction from being trusted with tools, and also thrill in controlling them, knowing that a mistake could hurt.
- **Dangerous elements:** Playing with fire, or in and around deep bodies of water, either of which poses some danger.
- **Rough and tumble play:** Children chasing and engaging physically in a playful way.
- **Disappearing/getting lost:** Playing hide and seek and experiencing the thrill of temporary separation from their companions.

Reflecting on the opportunities provided in the environment for children to explore, engage with and experience spaces and objects which contain an element of risk is not only supportive of children's emerging skills in assessing and managing risk, but also in providing opportunities for children to experience a sense of engagement and agency over their environment. ■

Further Resources

To access more resources around providing an environment for risky play can be found in the IPSP online library (www.ipsplibrary.net.au), search for terms such as "environments", "risk" or "play".

Read more about risk in children's play from:

Outdoor learning in the early years:

<https://earlyyearsoutdooreducation.wordpress.com/outdoor-risky-play-for-all/>

Tasmanian Catholic Education Commission:

<http://catholic.tas.edu.au/our-schools/curriculum/managing-risk-in-outdoor-learning-spaces>

Risky play prepares kids for life:

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/aug/06/children.play>

If you would like further support, please email the project officer, at enquiries@gowriesa.org.au

References

Little, H, 'Finding the balance: Early Childhood practitioners' views on risk, challenge and safety in outdoor play settings' AARE Conference Melbourne 2010

Little, H, 'Relationship between parents' beliefs and their responses to children's risk-taking behaviour during outdoor play' *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, Issue 8, pp. 315 – 330