Risky Play
Introduction

Risk management is an inherent part of life. Engaging in risky play supports young children to learn from their experiences and develop this important life skill.



Benefits of Risky Play

The benefits of children engaging in risky play cannot be underestimated. Opportunities vary, but play experiences that involve a degree of risk and therefore risk management, support good social, emotional, mental and physical health amongst young children. Through these experiences children learn to become risk literate, a vital life skill! They problem-solve, engage in higher-order thinking, persevere, and build resilience whilst having fun and achieving a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Children learn to make confident decisions as they are engaged and motivated in the play activity they have chosen, not doing it simply because an adult has told them to. There is a degree of risk in any outdoor nursery space, and some children will seek out opportunities to challenge themselves more than others.

A fundamental factor for supporting healthy risk management is a balanced approach.

Additional Ways Being Outdoors Supports Risky Play

- Supports the development of the vestibular system and proprioception – important for coordination and movement, balance and stability.
- Ability to adapt the space to support risky play, e.g. with loose materials.
- Effect of seasonal change on resources, e.g. learning to negotiate slippery wooden surfaces.
- Awareness of risks in the natural world, for example recognising a nettle.

A Balanced Approach

Supporting children with experiencing risky play requires a balanced approach, focusing on the benefits of an experience as well as the risk. It is important that the staff team are consistent in their approach and that children understand the difference between a hazard and a risk. Considering the benefits of an activity in relation to child development highlights the fact that good risk management, when it comes to play, does not always mean that risks should be removed altogether. Staff should review existing outdoor risk assessments through this lens.

National Guidance and Promoting Good Practice

"The goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and the benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool." – Health and Safety Executive. Ofsted in England encourage a balanced approach with regards to risky play, as does the Care Inspectorate in Scotland. The Early Years curriculum in Wales, and the national play policy published by the Welsh Government, also reference the importance of a balanced approach.





Considering Both Space and Practice

To provide truly meaningful, child-centered, risky play opportunities, it is not only important to consider what the outdoor space offers, but also how current practice supports this. What is your approach to risk management, how is a consistent approach achieved, and how are the children involved?

Risky Play
Setting the Foundation

Although there are variations between nurseries regarding practice and outdoor space, there are some key themes that help support risky play opportunities.



Eight Categories of Risky Play

Professor in Early Childhood Education, Ellen Sandseter, has identified eight types of risk that children instinctively seek:

Great heights (e.g. climbing),
Rapid speeds (e.g. running, sliding, cycling),
Dangerous tools (e.g. mastering real life items such as hammers),
Dangerous elements (e.g. water), rough and tumble play (e.g. play wrestling),
Disappearing (e.g. hide and seek),
Play with impact (e.g. jumping)
Vicariousplay (observing others engage in risk helping to build a child's confidence).

Of course, what risky play looks like for one child can be very different to another, highlighting the importance of creating varied outdoor opportunities and the need for vicarious play.

Although there will naturally be a range of staff perspectives, the adult role in facilitating and enabling risky play is vital, so a consistent and agreed approach is key.

Scale of Risk

Recognising a nettle. Natural elements such as mud, sand and water. Balancing on a log. Opportunities to lift, move, build and construct with loose materials. Involvement in firelighting and outdoor woodwork. Opportunities to experience risky play comes in many forms, some arguably riskier than others but all are important in terms of meeting different children's needs and creating opportunities to build confidence and skills.

The Adult Role

As a staff team, it is important to be clear on your methodology and to know your why! What are the principles that underpin your approach and how is this communicated to the children? Different staff will have different opinions, so it is important to agree consistent messaging from the outset. Promote a 'can do' attitude and encourage adults to step back and observe before intervening (if required). Use scaffolding language. Instead of using a term like 'be careful', focus on opened-ended questions that encourage a child to think; for example 'Do you feel safe?' and 'What is your next move?'

Facilitating Risky Play

Opportunities for problem solving and perseverance are an intrinsic part of the risky play experience. Giving children a helping hand up something they can't climb themselves is less about support and more about doing it for them. Adult perception of risk can nega-tively impact play. It is important not to underestimate a child's ability and allow them to learn from their mistakes.





Communicating the message

To provide truly meaningful, child-centered, risky play opportunities, it is not only impor-tant to consider what the outdoor space offers, but also how current practice supports this. What is your approach to risk management, how is a consistent approach achieved, and how are the children involved?

Risky Play
Reflecting on Experiences

Once the staff and children have enjoyed the example outdoor activities, use your experiences to reflect on the outcome in terms of success and areas for development.



Activities

The example activities offer a range of opportunities for staff and children to experience, and learn from, risky play.

Whether the play involves an introduction to real tools or building confidence with using loose materials, these types of activities offer practitioners a chance to chat to children about risk and risk management in a live context; helping children make the links between the activity they are enjoying and the way they can manage the potential risks involved. Play is, of course, a vital way children learn to test their abilities and develop skills for life. Use the impact of the activities on the children, and the way they made staff feel, to inform your group reflection as you move forward. Evaluate the genuine risks as a team and weigh these up against the benefits of the activity for the children.

Risky play for one child is, of course, different to another. How can everyone reap the benefits?

Reference Examples

"I need spaces that encourage me to test my sense of risk. I need you to notice when I need you to step in to support my risky play and when you should step back."

(Realising the Ambition. National Practice Guidance in Early Years from Education Scotland. Page 29.)

Space – Loose Materials

When reflecting on the example activities, it is also important to review how the outside space supports access to risky play. Are there opportunities for children to self-select loose materials and is there a consistent approach to tidying away at the end of the session? Depending on the size of the space, a dedicated zone for use might be worth considering. Is there a variety of loose materials available (both natural and man made), incorporating different sizes, shapes and weights for children to build confidence in handing resources? What happens to broken items and who checks this?

Space – Tool Use

The example activities with real tools (a vegetable peeler and a rubber mallet) provide a way to introduce basic tool use to younger children. Agree the staff:child ratio and allocate a peripheral space for these activities (a destination space, rather than a run through). Tools will be kept safely indoors when not in use, but children can be engaged in developing the space over time to include related role play resources and materials.





Moving Forward

Risks in life are unavoidable. Through the support of knowledgeable practitioners, a consistent approach and a variety of opportunities in the outdoor space, children can be supported to develop their understanding, their ability, and their confidence in embracing this vital life skill.

Risky Play
Further Thinking & Reading

Engagement with research, pedagogical practice, and relevant organisations will support practitioners who wish to further develop their understanding.



Further Exploration

The concept of risky play, and the associated value for young children, is nothing new. However, risk and challenge can be an emotive subject amongst staff and parents.
Well-informed and knowledgeable practitioners, confident in their approach, can help mitigate these concerns.
There are a variety of opportunities for staff who wish to expand their knowledge base and associated pedagogical practice, including access to research papers and professional organisations and networks, both in the UK and internationally.

Building on the solid foundation of why risk is important and how it can be achieved, informed by current research and practice that links to the outdoors, can only have a positive impact on the outdoor space and the children that play there, as well as supporting understanding amongst others through professional dialogue.

Example support

- Early Years Scotland www.earlyyearsscotland.org
- Early Years Alliance (England) www.eyalliance.org.uk
- Learning through Landscapes www.ltl.org.uk
- The Froebel Trust www.Froebel.org.uk
- British Assoc. for Early Childhood Education www.early-education.org.uk
- International School Grounds Alliance www.internationalschoolgrounds.org

Children's Dynamic Risk Management – A comprehensive approach to children's risk willingness, risk assessment, and risk handling

This peer-reviewed research article explores the emotional, cognitive, and physical processes at work in children's approach to risk management and the component parts involved with this; namely risk willingness, risk assessment, and risk handling. Published 2024

www.tandfonline.com

Type in the search bar 'Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter and Rasmus Kleppe'

Ellen Sandseter is a Professor in Early Childhood Education.

Play Scotland

www.playscotland.org

Click the 'Schools and Childcare' tab, then the 'Managing Risk' tab for a comprehensive list of useful resources and information from both a Scottish perspective, but also from the Health and Safety Executive, The Play Safety Forum, and an extensive literature review on risk and play in a national context.





Relevant Publication

No Fear – Growing up in a risk averse society. Published 2007.

This book written by Tim Gill, one of the UK's leading authors on childhood, argues that childhood is being undermined by the growth of risk aversion in all aspects of children's lives. Free download www.rethinkingchildhood.com

Risky Play
Next Steps

In order to achieve sustainable change, continue to focus on both space and practice. Involve staff, children, and parents in developing and implementing ideas.



Positive Promotion

The importance of a consistent approach amongst the staff, and how this is communicated with all children, cannot be underestimated.

Help embed the approach to risky play at nursery through a range of dissemination techniques to support understanding. Examples include involving children in contributing to the creation of associated risk benefit assessments and the creation of an outdoor play policy that references the value of children learning to manage risk, examples of the ways nursery achieves this, reference to national policy, and a direct message to parents about their support (for example, providing suitable clothing).

Other positive promotion techniques include ensuring the photos used through nursery social media and the website include lots of images of children playing outside, including related quotes and feedback from all involved.

Sharing the Value

- Outdoor stay and play events for family members.
- Sending out a request to parents for donations of loose materials for play, including examples of materials and why. Follow this up with images of children making use of the materials.
- Identify relevant CPD for staff and, if possible, arrange a visit to another nursery to learn from their approach.

Day to Day Management

Providing opportunities for risky play should be year-round. As well as a focus on risk benefit assessment and the use of scaffolding language to help facilitate risky play, a daily, dynamic risk assessment approach should be agreed by all staff. This continuous, real-time process of identifying hazards and managing risks might relate to inclement weather, a reduction of staff on any given day or the individual needs of a child when engaging in risky play outdoors. This approach also supports positive adult interaction, encouraging stepping back and observing before intervening.

Supporting Practice

An example of the dynamic risk assessment approach can be downloaded from the LtL website. Click ‘Resources’ then ‘Risk Management Outdoors’ to access. Provide sim-ple handwashing facilities outdoors to support positive messaging and children moving between activities. Involve the children in an occasional audit of the space, helping them identify things that have changed and how this can be managed (e.g. rotting wooden logs).





The Outdoor Space

Through observation and discussion, work together to identify gaps in provision with regards to risky play. Remember, this is not a focus on big budget changes, more about creating daily experiences to help support children’s confidence and development.