

What barriers do educators face when implementing risky-play in preschool environments?

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Abstract

Despite a paradigm shift, in the education world, from risk averse, to risk benefit, many educators face barriers when implementing risk rich learning environments. Much research sees risk perceptions as the major hurdle as educators, parents and management still exercise the old paradigm. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, and an interpretative data analysis, this article looks at how risk is viewed, how risk play is implemented, what barriers are faced and how they're overcome. The discussions highlighted the need for educating the risk averse, whether informal one on one discussions, or formal programs in groups to help reframe peoples risk perception.

Introduction

Once there was a culture in Australia where children played outside un-supervised, discovering their world firsthand. Children's playgrounds were creeks, forest, building sites and junkyards. Children learnt how to avoid hazards, not from adults standing above them, but from knowledge constructed through experience. Over the last four decades the culture shifted to one of risk aversion. Studies warn of new generations of adults who lack the ability to self-risk assess due to growing up in sanitised risk-free environments (Gill 2007; Louv 2010). Furthermore obesity has increased at an alarming rate (Nathan et al. 2015) and has been connected to sedentary lifestyles deficient in outdoor play (Chivers et al. 2012; Garvis & Pendergast 2011). The need for active risky play environments has been identified by researchers, and governments as a significant objective needed to develop a nation's health and wellbeing. While some sites are embracing this change, others face significant barriers in implementing risky play. This research sets out to:

- identify barriers Australian educators face
- Identify strategies implemented to overcome these barriers.

By enabling educators to overcome risky play barriers vibrant and meaningful learning environments can be created, benefitting educators, families and children.

Risk aversion to risk benefit: A paradigm shift.

Currently there's a paradigm shift away from the risk adverse philosophy, to an understanding of risk benefit, brought about by international researchers such as Tim Gill (2007, 2014) and Hansen Sandseter (2010; 2009; 2013), and research specific to Australia by Helen Little (2015; 2008, 2010). The overwhelming supposition finds benefits of risky play outweigh the negative consequences in all domains of development (Brussoni et al. 2012; Chivers et al. 2012; Dowdell, Gray & Malone 2011; Little & Eager 2010; Spiegall et al. 2014). Even though the benefits are well documented barriers to risky play are still evident.

Re-calibration of risk perceptions.

The paradigm shift to a risk-benefit culture is only possible when risk perceptions are examined and challenged (Apter 2001; Cevher-Kalburan 2014; Little 2015; Lupton & Tulloch 2002; Niehues et al. 2013; Pachur et al. 2012; Sandseter, EBH 2013; Spiegel et al. 2014). The Niehues et al (2013) study examined education as a means of reframing risk perception, while Pachur et al (2012) looked at how people form perceptions based on heuristics and how these systems of understanding can be used to change views. In regards to barriers faced when implementing risky play environments, perception of danger is the most prominent (Cevher-Kalburan 2014; Little & Wyver 2008; Spiegel et al. 2014). Some studies illustrated the effect culture has on risk perception (New, Mardell & Robinson 2005; Sandseter, EBH 2013) and it's this research which illustrates the need to look deeper into the specific barriers and perceptions Australian educators face. Although many studies from around the world examine the cultural construct of risk, research specifically related to Australian values is lacking.

Method

Six participants were chosen to be interviewed regarding the barriers faced when implementing risky play. The samples were chosen to reflect a diverse cross-section of preschool educators. The sample consisted of;

- two directors, (male and female)
- three teachers (one male graduate teacher)
- an early childhood worker, with a diploma in children's services

The sample was also chosen due to the diverse environments they work in;

- Two preschools, with embedded risky-play natural environments
- A long day care / preschool site transitioning from risk averse to risk benefit
- A long day care site where most staff are risk averse

Instrument

Through the literature review, key concepts emerged. The weight risk perception has on risky play implementation, and how risk perceptions were formed. This informed six questions used to prompt discussion during the 30 minute semi-structured interviews, (see appendix 1). To build an understanding of the participant's perceptions of risks the following questions were asked:

- What is your definition of risk?
- Do you consider yourself a risk taker?
- What benefits, if any, do you see from risk taking?

The next set of questions set out to establish the level of risky play in the learning environment and the strategies enabling or hindering it:

- Does your site engage in risky play?
- What barriers have you faced, if any, in implementing risky play?
- How have you overcome these barriers?

Audio recordings were made, and from those files extensive notes taken.

Ethical considerations.

The participants signed consent forms, and were given information sheets outlining the context and ethical considerations. All participants were notified at the start of the interview they were being recorded, to aid note taking. All questions were optional and at any stage they could withdraw from the interview and refuse consent.

Data analysis

The data from each audio recording was coded according to how it answered the six interview questions and who gave the statement. Interpretations of statements were based on the context they were issued in. Commonalities and inconsistencies appeared throughout the interviews and these were categorised accordingly, e.g. training educators, the role trauma plays, and benefits observed in children.

Limitations of study

Lambert (2012, pp.137-138) discuss the concept of triangulation as a means of strengthening a research paper. A quantitative study looking at incident reports from various DECD sites, and an analysis of the ratio of incidents related to risky play, versus incidents related to conventional would have been incorporated to strengthen the qualitative interviews. Due to DECD ethical policies, this line of inquiry couldn't be followed.

Results

Definition of risk

Three participants viewed risk as a negative, believing it may lead to injury, loss, or danger. Loss of money, social standing, and professional reputation were some points mentioned. The other three participants defined risk as 'moving outside of your comfort zone', and even though they identified this as 'scary, frightening, and challenging', positive connotations were connected to it. Definition of risk was also described as dynamic, and evolving, as two participants noted their definition has changed over the years.

View of self, as a risk-taker.

All participant's perceived themselves as risk-takers, although two didn't think they were until they examined the risks they take, financially, socially and professionally. A commonality surfaced as three participants described implementing risky play as a professional risk, citing repercussions of a serious injury affecting their employment or reputation. Four participants took physical risks, for instance, driving fast cars, walking in 'risky' environments, rock climbing and firefighting. Two participants identified what shapes their risk-taking, stating positive or negative childhood experiences, mood of the day, and the environment.

Benefits of risk-taking.

This question looked at the benefits, if any, seen in children, as well as the benefits they see in themselves when risk-taking. Measurable benefits for children included:

- the transitional long day care sight reporting less absentees due to colds and flu when engaged in 'risky' outside play during winter
- Social development increased as children's risky play shaped their self-identities seeing themselves as competent active members of social groups
- Risk-taking environments offer more learning opportunities than similar environments devoid of risk-taking.
- Meta-cognitive development results as children use the language of risk, risk benefit, actions and consequences
- Fun and thrills

All participants believed there were more benefits, yet were not confident enough to link them exclusively to risky-play. In regards to the benefits educators see when they engage in risk, many of the same themes mentioned above emerged, for instance, fun, personal growth, and social gains, with additional 'adult' benefits like, better employment opportunities, financial gains, and better housing. One participant made a link between implementing risky-play and how it further developed his pedagogical base.

Risky play

Only one participant, at the long day care service, said they don't yet actively engage in any risky play though there are plans in the near future. The other long day care service said they are slowly implementing risky play, such as outside play no matter what the weather, excursions to the school and some mud play. The other two preschool sites between them engage in tree climbing, stick construction, adult tools, wrestling as well as enabling children to take emotional and social risks.

Barriers to risky play.

The overwhelming response to the question of barriers faced when implementing risky play, was educator perceptions of hazard vs risk. All participants felt frustrated stating although other educators were aware of studies supporting risky play, they still refused to implement it, giving reasons such as fears of litigation, serious injury, and an incident affecting their employment. Parents were the next major barrier. All participants experienced parent's concerns and request to refrain from letting children engage in risky play. Other barriers were mentioned, yet not seen as significant, such as, regulations, resources and aesthetics.

Strategies to overcome barriers.

By far the most common strategy employed to overcome barriers is education. The two preschool sites which engage in risky-play said knowledge of the current literature informs the risk-benefit pedagogy. In order to achieve risk rich environments, the preschool educators had to work through barriers faced. The Early Years Learning Framework (Australia. Department of Education et al. 2009) was viewed as a mandate for encouraging risk rich environments, and risk averse educators were reminded of its principles and practices which support it. Staff shared pedagogical discussions, reflecting on their bias, and how it may impede rich learning environments. Distinctions between hazards and risks were made, and all hazards were removed. All sites that engage in risky play said the reduction in injuries is one of the main tools used to educate staff and parents of the benefits of risky play. Documentation of learning

within risky play was also used to educate parents and staff of the benefits. Two participants also noted tabloid papers, publishing positive stories about risk benefits, have also helped reframe perception. All four preschool educators noted, the more experience they gained in the risk environments, the easier it became to validate the approach to the rest of the staff and to the parents. All participants commented change requires little steps. While the four preschool educators believe small steps helped them achieve their risk rich environment, the two long day care educators see this pathway as a must, when trying to address the fears of their risk averse settings. Building reciprocal and respectful relationships with parents was likewise noted as being a successful way of overcoming barriers. The participant's found teacher/parent conversations were effective only once reciprocal relationships had been built. Some successful strategies used when communication to parents were, acknowledging the parent's concerns regarding perceived negative consequences of risk-taking, and looking at the negative impact of not taking risk in regards to their child's development. Making the learning visible, was a salient tool in the reframing of parents and staff's risk perceptions.

Discussion.

Many participants were aware how the current literature affected the manner in which they view their environments so closer scrutiny was conducted to identify if their answers were based on experiences witnessed, or solely on beliefs constructed through readings. This was achieved by asking for examples witnessed to support their beliefs. With all participants, most statements could be validated through observations on-site. While this study highlights a small sample's perception of barriers faced, it is at odds with international studies (Brussoni et al. 2012; Spiegel et al. 2014), and quantitative studies with large sample sizes (Dowdell, Gray & Malone 2011; Sandseter, EBH 2013). Foremost in the published studies are barriers such as litigation, legislation, and parents, while this study highlights educator's fears, bias, and parent attitudes as major barriers. This may be because the participants brush over barriers that seem insurmountable, such as legislation and focus on those they can change, such as people's perceptions. The participants who work in risk rich environments described strategies used to change risk perception, yet overcoming legislative barriers was never mentioned.

Due to the small sample size, the percentage of males represented (30%) is above the nation's average of 4% (Rowell 2007). Overseas studies have shown (Sandseter, EBH 2013), gender does play a role in risk perception, and this study did show some correlations. The two males in the sample work at the same risk rich preschool site. In fact, there are males at both risk rich preschool sites covered in this study. Gender is a cultural construct (Nobelius 2004) and even though the males had positive views on risk play, two other female participants had stronger views and cited home culture as the impetus. A factor leading to this variation of gender values may be because in Australia, working with children is seen as 'women's work', and males in the industry may be less gender stereotypical.

The study also identified a broad gulf between the two preschools with their risk rich environments, and the two long day care centres, with their risk averse culture. While gender may have a bearing, another factor contributing to the gap may be the level of the staff's education. In the Pachur et al study (2012) it was stated, professionals will analyse facts and figures to reach conclusions, whereas laypeople will rely upon heuristics. This may explain why the long day care centres, with many staff holding basic

qualifications, look to heuristics, fed by the media, to form opinions, while tertiary educated preschool educators refer to academic papers. To support this assumption, the long day care participant in the director's role, told her staff 'when was the last time you ever heard of a childcare worker getting sued?' while addressing their fear of litigation. The Pachur et al (2012) study recommended addressing laypeople's availability heuristics, as opposed to their emotion driven affective heuristics. This strategy has been employed by all of the participants, especially when communicating with parents.

An Australian study into mothers perceptions of risky play showed most understand the benefits it offers, and want their children to engage in the best learning environments possible (Little 2015). The report noted however, even though this was their beliefs, their actions didn't always follow. The study supported this outcome. While all participants acknowledged parent's views are barriers, overcoming these barriers is possible. Participants mention various degrees of success, yet even the most risk rich site said parent education is ongoing.

Conclusion

This study found the main barrier Australian educators faced when implementing risky play was perception of risk. Even though the sample group came from diverse backgrounds, job descriptions, and education sites, the findings were consistent throughout. The risk averse sites talk of frustrations regarding failed attempts at changing people's perception of risk, from a negative construct, to be avoided, to a positive learning tool, equipping children with skills to successfully engage in the real world. Sites which practice risky play, have identified education as the key to changing perception. Through reflection, these sites have identified the actual barrier as perception of risk, rather than educators, parents and management. Education programs for staff and parents, highlighting the benefits of risky play, while addressing concerns of injury, should be instigated, just as education programs supporting literacy have. Successful programs have already been employed throughout the world and this study shows, through individual anecdotes, this approach would work here.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview questions.

1. How do you define risk?
2. Do you consider yourself a risk taker? E.g. do you participate in physical risks such as rock climbing motorbikes, or social risks such as walking into a crowded room by yourself to meet new people. Or swap jobs for new challenges. and can you give a few examples?
3. Does your site engage in risky play, and can you give some examples?
4. What benefits, if any, do you see in risky play?
5. What barriers have you faced, if any, when implementing risky play?
6. Have you overcome barriers, if so, how?