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Is it time for the risky classroom? Dealing with risk and uncertainty is a natural part of adult life. Yet modern children are shielded from risk at every opportunity. A pedagogical shift is required

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# IS IT TIME FOR THE RISKY CLASSROOM? DEALING WITH RISK AND UNCERTAINTY IS A NATURAL PART OF ADULT LIFE. YET MODERN CHILDREN ARE SHIELDED FROM RISK AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY. A PEDAGOGICAL SHIFT IS REQUIRED

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## Abstract

Risk within learning environments is a much debated topic within early childhood education. The sector sees and understands the benefits of risk but often remain risk adverse. No –one wishes for children to experience injury and as such safety measures are essential. However, risk has also been shown to be essential for holistic development and learning in the early years (Lights, 2014). It is very important in the formation of many important skills and contributes greatly to children's holistic health (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet, 2012). Contemporary research and the most up-to-date wisdom requires educators to embrace risk and risky play in order to maximise children's learning opportunities (Brussoni et al, 2015). It is a type of play that supports the child to encounter and overcome challenge. It includes the development of self-belief in the face of adversity, resilience building and problem solving confidence as well as physical competence and survival skills. Taking risks also transfers into skills such as judgement and risk measurement as well as tenacity and the ability to try again after failure. But is risk endangered in modern childhood? This paper presents data from the Irish Neighbourhood Play Study. This study incorporated 1688 families across 240 communities. One of the things under investigation was the engagement with risk within neighbourhood play. The results indicate that the children were engaging in very low levels of risk. If the benefits of risk are to be experienced by this generation of children, educators may need to overcome their fears and reservations and learn to embrace and incorporate risk provision into Early Childhood pedagogies.

Keywords: Risky play, Deep play, Early Childhood Education, The Irish Neighbourhood Play Study, Play, Children's play, Learning through play. Early Childhood Pedagogy.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Irish Neighbourhood Play Project is a research study that focused on children's play within contemporary Ireland. The research study was supported, shaped and resourced by IT Sligo and Early Childhood Ireland to investigate the play choices made by children aged 0-15 years of age. The researchers all held an Early Childhood Education and Care focus, approaching the research with a desire to document how children are playing in order to analyse this through child development and learning lenses. The study incorporated parental surveys and naturalistic observation to secure data on how children in modern Ireland aged 0-15 are spending their free time. An all-island approach was taken incorporating cities, towns and rural areas across a variety of socio-economic groupings.

The project was a large scale research study which included 1688 participant families and 240 communities throughout 18 geographical regions of Ireland. The regions encompassed 6 major cities, 6 medium sized towns and 6 rural communities. Qualitative and quantitative data from 1688 families was collated. 240 observations on children's play were also collated. There was a wide spread of respondents from the 18 geographic areas. There was also an even representation from the three socio economic (SE) indicators; affluent (30.5%), middle (35.4%) and disadvantaged (33.9%). 60% of respondents were from suburban houses surrounding large cities, medium sized towns and villages, 21% were from rural houses, 18% were from urban houses and 1% were from urban apartments.

Responses gathered were based on 906 boys and 782 girls between the years of 0 and 15.

Despite the socio-economic spread of communities incorporated, the majority of respondents (61%) identified themselves as middle income earners, while 13% of respondents were unemployed. Just under half of all respondents (49%) had achieved a third level qualification above level 7 (Bachelor's Degree).

Over two thirds of parents who took part in this study were aged between 35 and 49, a further quarter were aged between 25 and 34.

This paper focuses on the section of data that relates to children's risk-taking within play. The authors have chosen to highlight these findings as the weight of evidence demonstrates that Risky Play has real benefits. Educators are concerned with providing children with the best opportunities to engage with experiences which extend them. Experience and overcoming challenge is particularly important in the early years when brain development is at its most potent. Moss and Petrie's extensive 2002 study shows that children who are encouraged and supported to take risks will be better able to assess risk and deal with risk as an adult, be better equipped to deal with unpredictable life situations when they occur, will have better social skills, be more pro-active people, have higher and more diverse creative abilities, have better problem-solving skills, have more positive dispositions and be more resilient. They are also less likely to engage in inappropriate high risk activities at an older age and less likely to experience mental health difficulties. These findings have been further evidenced in the years since this study (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet, 2012, Brussoni et al, 2015; Little 2006; Stephenson 2003; and O'Connor 2014).

## **2 THE STUDY**

### **2.1 Background to The Irish Neighbourhood Play Project**

The motivation for this research project arose from an ongoing narrative on the decline of free play opportunities in the modern Irish childhood. This much discussed but undocumented and unconfirmed decline was potentially happening across childhood spaces—on the street, in the community, within homes, families, pre-school settings and primary schools. The concern is that, as a society, we are now so focused on structured activities that free play is on a serious trajectory of decline.

Play, whereby children are free to self-initiate and develop within their own structures and rules, is a crucial context for learning. Literature articulates that play, in its true sense, is a freely chosen, process rather than product orientated and is controlled by the players (Kearns, 2013). Whilst this may be achievable within structured learning environments such as crèches and schools, neighbourhood play embodies both freedom and choice, and is thus a potentially powerful educational tool in a totally child managed space. Free play is both an important learning medium throughout childhood and a vehicle for building high calibre life skills that can contribute greatly to both the well-being of future society and economic productivity. Play is the principle vehicle for all childhood learning—it provides for all domains of the human person: the emotional, social, moral, spiritual, cognitive, physical and the creative (Kearns, 2013). The more uninhibited the play, the greater the engagement of the will of the child. Its decline has serious implications for the development of individual children and ultimately for the future society they will form as adults. Key skills developed through free play include creativity, inventiveness, decisiveness, social competence and natural leadership abilities. Neighbourhood play is imperative in the development of this skillset.

Within crèches and schools, children are under adult observation and operate within formal learning structures. Whilst opportunities to engage in play are provided, these experiences are directed by the educator and remove key elements of the play experience, such as freedom, choice and intrinsic motivation (Fleer, 2013). At weekends, many children are enrolled in scheduled activities such as sports, Arts sessions and so on. In today's society, birthday parties now often consist of structured activities rather than free play events, with various entertainers such as magicians and clowns being provided or, alternatively, with locations chosen for their action specific equipment such as children's indoor play centres. If this is a true representation of Irish childhood then when and where does free childhood play occur?

Together, the researchers, then based at IT Sligo and Early Childhood Ireland decided that data was needed to establish both parental attitudes to play and children's level of opportunity for play in all its forms. They were supported by their organisations to develop a research project that included participation from 1688 families across 240 communities on the island of Ireland. Ethical clearance for the project was processed through IT Sligo. The project was resourced by IT Sligo and Early

Childhood Ireland. The resulting data sets baseline knowledge of how children in modern Ireland are really playing.

## 2.2 Methodology

The aim of the research was centred on the research question: What is happening in children's neighbourhood play in Ireland today?

Focusing on the best methods with which to answer this question, an approach was adopted that incorporated detailed parental questionnaires allowing for quantitative and qualitative data on family's perspectives (phase one) and the construction of a tailored observational tool (phase two). Naturalistic observation (Geller, Russ & Altomari, 1986; Loucopoulos & Karakostas, 1995) was chosen as the most effective approach of capturing a snapshot view of neighbourhood play. The project's sequential design allowed for the collection of data from multiple sources to facilitate triangulation which enriched the project, as there are often differences between what people report and actual behaviour (Punch, 2001).

The unique benefits of personal survey research such as high response rates and control over the sample (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p. 262) ensured that data was collected in a comprehensive and methodical manner. Data was captured in the respondent's home through the use of a structured questionnaire. It was felt that collecting data in this location would help the respondent feel at ease and facilitate a longer questionnaire instrument (Robson, 2011, p. 245). The questionnaire comprised 22 questions in total, the majority of which were closed ended finishing with a small number of open-ended questions. The questionnaire instrument was refined and tested for validity and reliability during the pre-test and questions that were somewhat duplicated and/ or ambiguous were revised (Robson, 2011, p. 265). The final questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The population of interest were all parents of children aged between 0 and 15 who resided on the island of Ireland in June- July 2012. The sampling technique utilised was non-probability sampling, which is appropriate when access to a comprehensive sampling frame does not exist. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling (Robson, 2011, p. 75); 18 regions across the island of Ireland were selected to maximise representation across geographical regions and socio economic regions. For Southern Ireland, the Haase-Pratschke Index of Relative Affluence and Deprivation (revised from Central Statistics Office, 2012) was employed, alongside the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2010) to inform selection of target locations. The final sample size achieved was 1688. The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) Data was used to analyse data. Analysis was uni-variate and bi-variate in nature, counting patterns and frequencies, and exploring relationships between variables (see Pallant, 2010).

The second quantitative data collection methods employed was naturalistic observation (Geller, Russ and Altomari, 1986; Loucopoulos and Karakostas, 1995), which is commonly used to capture data on the behaviours of children. Observation was overt and non-participant in nature, and occurred in playgrounds and communal play spaces. While participant observation has its merits when researching children, children may feel uncomfortable communicating with unfamiliar adults (Punch, 2002), therefore it was decided to employ non-participant observation, as adults are unable to truly participate in children's social worlds (Hill, 1997; Fine and Sandstrom, 1988). Data collection was guided by 'The Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children' policy (Department of Social Protection, 2011), The Convention on Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2010) and the Data Protection Act (Government of Ireland, 2003). Observations were short term in nature, approximately three minutes, which facilitated a focused data collection of children's play in the context of behaviours and the surrounding environment.

Data was collected utilising a simple coding system (Robson, 2012, pp. 337) which captured data on variables including age, gender, extent of peer interaction, type of play environment, play objects used, instances of interaction with nature and/or electronics and the type of play children were engaged in. The population of interest was all children aged between 0 and 15 who resided on the island of Ireland in June- July 2012. Corresponding with the survey research, the sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, external play areas within the previously determined geographical and socio economic locations were observed. The final sample size achieved was 240. Data was analysed quantitatively; frequencies and cross tabulations were performed.

### **3 FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 What type of play are children playing?**

The four most common forms of play were motor play (51%), social play (27%), fantasy or imaginary based play (15%) and construction play (9%). Some play activities were recorded as two play types. An example of this is imaginary play where the children are playing at being builders and proceed to build a house.

Within motor play, the assessment and engagement with play equipment (such as swings and bikes) was the most commonly observed activity. With social play, the most common activity was the negotiation and discussion of the rules and boundaries of the play. Within the imaginary/fantasy domain, pretend play was the most commonly viewed, particularly in relation to action 'pretend you are doing'. Within construction play, the most common activity was the manipulation of objects for the purpose of creating a construction.

#### **3.2 How much risk-taking are children engaging in within their play choices?**

Risk-taking was rarely observed. No risk was observed within either the social or construction play. No physical risk was observed within the fantasy/imaginary domains. However, 15% of the imaginary play, did explore challenging themes including destruction, war and gangs. As such, this could be viewed as an exploration of risky social concepts and therefore a cognitive and emotional experimentation with risk. However, these numbers were small. With 15% of play being imaginary based and 15% of that play involving cognitive explorations of social risk concepts, only 2.25% of play falls into this category.

Within the motor domain, 5% of motor play involved physical risk, 5% of 51% is 2.55% of all play. With 2.55% of play incorporating physical risk and 2.25% of play incorporating the concept of social risk. Less than 5% of all play observed could be said to involve risk taking. Within free and unstructured play in neighbourhoods, this is a low figure. Low enough for concern considering the benefits of risk taking in play (Brussoni et al. 2012,2015; Moss & Petrie 2002).

#### **3.3 The absence of play**

While low levels of risk-taking in play is concerning. There is one finding within this study which is of greater concern. This finding relates to the absence of play of any kind within unexplained circumstances. 65 planned observations in peak play hours over both week days and weekends resulted in no observation as there was no play occurring. These 65 observations are recorded as the absence of play and make up 27% of the observational study. Weather conditions were recorded for 62 of the 65 observations but proved negligible as a potential cause. Almost two thirds of these 'no play' observations were recorded in dry weather and just under one third in wet weather.

Instances of 'no play' did not differ between weekdays and weekends. They occurred in family based communities where play equipment was available and play spaces existed. Differences did appear in the analysis however in relation to geographical location and socio-economic status of the neighbourhood. A significantly higher number of play absences occurred within medium sized towns than in urban city or rural locations. In addition, a significantly higher proportion were also within affluent family neighbourhoods. For more information on this, please see our paper on *The influences of opportunity; Differences in children's play choices across diverse communities in Ireland* (O'Connor, O'Rourke, Robinson & McCormack, 2017)

#### **3.4 Negative impacts of weather and seasonal light changes on children's outdoor play opportunities.**

Much risk-taking in play occurs within outdoor play (Tovey 2007). Outdoor play within Ireland was found to be adversely affected by the challenging weather and seasonal lights conditions. The results of the parental survey are stark on this topic. Darkness and rain are both considered threats by parents and the data shows that they are having a massive impact on Irish children's opportunities to play. 88% of children play outside less in winter, 74% of children do not play outside in the rain and 85% of children do not play outside on dark evenings in winter. Given the Irish climate of year-round rainfall and darkness descending by 4pm during the winter season, this is a grave cause for concern. After-school hours should ideally be peak neighbourhood play hours.

Within the Early Childhood Education and Care sectors, many strategies are put in place to support outdoor play within challenging weather. This is supported by national framework documents and organisations (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017). Within neighbourhood play however, this becomes a partnership between community planners and parents. Safety levels, street lighting, shelters and walkways all play a role in the accessibility of the outdoor environment. Parental attitudes also play a key role. Attitudes are formed by knowledge which indicates the need for greater levels of information on the benefits of outdoor play, especially for physical activity and risk-taking within play.

#### **4 DISCUSSION; IS IT TIME FOR THE RISKY CLASSROOM?**

Several research projects have highlighted a concerning decline in risky play (Hughes, 1990; Gill, 2007; O'Connor 2014). The Irish Neighbourhood Play Study has found alarming low levels of engagement with risk during play in Irish neighbourhood across varied communities. Risky play is an important feature of childhood and has been shown to contribute very positively to children's development (Plant & Plant, 1992; Smith, 1998; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Stephenson, 2003; Little, 2006; O'Connor, 2014). Risky play contributes to children's personal and social development and is one of the most effective ways through which children develop resilience, motivation and confidence (Ball, 2002; O'Connor, 2014). In addition, it build physical confidence and strength as well as judgement and self belief (O'Connor, 2014) When children engage with physical types of risky play, existing studies suggest that there are benefits for the child with life-long positive impacts, with risk influencing the child's emotional, social, creative and cognitive domains in positive ways (Stephenson, 2003; O'Connor, 2014).

The significance of brain development in the early years of life is well documented (Cameron, 2009; Lindon, 2012). When children are in the early stages of development, they are primed for learning life-long skills. An investigation undertaken in 2002 by Moss and Petrie found that children who were afforded opportunities to take risks in childhood, and were supported within this were better able to assess risk in adulthood. This seminal study also outlines numerous benefits which can be accrued in adulthood through childhood risk-taking within play. These include: a more positive disposition, resilience, enhanced creativity, improved social skills, more effective problem solving skills and the ability to be flexible and positive during unpredictable life changes (Moss & Petrie; 2002). In addition, this research found that adults who have experienced risky play as children, make better judgements in adulthood, have better levels of self-esteem and are less likely to experience mental health difficulties. Several more recent studies support these findings that risky play has major benefits (Brussoni et al., 2012, 2015; Little, 2006; Stephenson, 2003; O'Connor, 2014).

A concern for parents and educators alike is striking the balance between affording children the opportunity to engage in risky play and maintaining the safety of the child. This concern is further amplified for educators who are faced with externally imposed safety requirements within their *duty of care*. If educators embrace the concept of risk within their indoor and outdoor learning environments, safety and the duty of care become key components of this discussion. Whilst these two concepts, risk and safety, appear to be incompatible, it is important that educators find a way to strike the correct balance. Children need to experience risk. What they do not need are hazards. An educator who is supportive of risk should carry out a risk and hazard audit to identify that which is offering the children growth through risk and that which is simply putting them in danger.

As children's development and learning is ever changing, so too is the pedagogy of the quality educator. It is the role of the educator to ensure that children's experiences are meaningful, and this is inclusive of risk. The outdoor classroom is a key consideration for educators wishing to embrace the need for greater levels of risk-taking. The outdoor environment therefore requires careful consideration by the educator as it provides many physical risk-taking opportunities for the child that involve movement, balance, speed and height, all of which contribute to positive outcomes with the social, emotional and cognitive domains of development (Brussoni et al., 2012, 2015; Little, 2006; Stephenson, 2003)

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