Editorial

The concept of *risky play* may sound at odds with our desire for young children to be nurtured in a safe environment, however as the many contributors to this issue of *Childlinks* contend, risky or adventurous play is an inherent part of children's play and needs to be incorporated in the early years setting.

Key themes which recur throughout the articles include

- The theory of risky play
- The benefits of risky play for children
- The balance between risk and safety
- Challenges for staff practice
- The importance of partnership with parents

I am delighted that Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter from Norway, one of the leading theorists and researchers in this field, has contributed an article which explores the benefits of risky play for children as well as the challenging issues of regulation, legislation and staff practice in early years settings.

Marie Willoughby from Barnardos provides guidance on managing risk and planning opportunites for risky play that are developmentally appropriate and yet challenging.

Marc Armitage shares some of the learning from the UK and elsewhere. Armitage advocates four risky activities which early years settings should incorporate, including the experience of fire, which on first reading which might sound very challenging for some people.

Sara Knight writes about the philosophy and practice of the Forest Schools in the UK. Sally O'Donnell from the Glen Outdoor School in Co. Donegal gives an account of the development of this early years service and the practical benefits-risk analysis approach they use. Liz O Rourke from the Cairdeas Childcare Centre focuses on the use of their outdoor space and the importance of risk assessments, policies and procedures in ensuring compliance with the pre-school regulations.

Finally, Antoinette Gibbs considers risky play in the broader context/ concept of psychological, social and emotional risks in the context of the HighScope approach.

Thank you to all our contributors for sharing their insights and contributing to the debate and greater understanding of risky play.

ANNE CONROY Editor

CHILDREN'S RISKY PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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INTRODUCTION

A natural part of children's physical play involves engaging in play that is challenging, a bit scary and somewhat risky. Children actively seek this thrilling kind of play, and nearly all children love the quivering feeling of butterflies in their belly when they encounter something they do not know if they can manage or what the consequences of their actions will be. In other words, children seek challenging and risky forms of play even though, and often because, it is closely connected with the feeling of fear and thrill, and the possibility of being harmed (Adams, 2001; Aldis, 1975; Smith, 1998; Stephenson, 2003).

During the last decades, modern Western societies have experienced a growing focus on children's safety in general, and particularly on safety in children's play and their play environments. To what extent one should regulate risk in children's play is an ongoing debate around the world between politicians, parents and people working within childcare (Furedi, 2001; Gill, 2007; Guldberg, 2009; Hughes & Sturrock, 2006). Recently, new voices have argued that an exaggerated focus on safety is problematic because we, in our eagerness to protect our children and to avoid serious injuries, restrict the children from experiences and stimuli that is important for their normal, overall development (Ball, 2002; Boyesen, 1997; Sandseter and Kennair, 2011). This article looks further into the phenomenon of risky play by answering the following three questions: What is risky play? Why do children seek risk in their play? What factors influence risky play in early years settings?

WHAT IS RISKY PLAY?

John (5 years old) and Stefan (4 years old) have walked up to the top of the longest and steepest sledding hill in the forest. They have placed themselves together on the sledding mattress; Stefan is facing the right way, down the hill, while John sits backwards on the mattress. Both Stefan and John use their hands in the snow to increase speed on top of the hill, and soon they race down the hill at an incredibly high speed. They race down, whirling around with no control of the movement of the mattress or the environment or nearby children into which they could potentially crash. They fall off the mattress at the bottom of the hill and tumble into the snow under some trees on the side of the hill. They shriek and laugh, and get up and start brushing off the snow, laughing even more. They soon grab the sledding mattress and start walking to the top of the hill – ready for a new thrilling ride. (Sandseter, 2006)

Risky play is defined as thrilling and challenging forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury (Sandseter, 2007). This kind of play most often takes place outdoors and in children's free play. More specifically, risky play is categorised into the following six categories aiming to describe how children engage in this kind of play: a) play in great heights; b) play with high speed; c) play with dangerous tools; d) play near dangerous elements; e) rough-and-tumble play; and f) play where children can disappear/get lost (Sandseter, 2007).

TABLE 1 Categories and Subcategories of Risky Play (revised from Sandseter, 2007a, 2007b)

Categories	Risk	Sub-categories
A. Great heights	Danger of injury from falling	Climbing, Jumping from still or flexible surfaces, Balancing on high objects Hanging/swinging at great heights
B. High speed	Uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something (or someone)	Swinging at high speed, Sliding and sledging at high speed, Running uncontrollably at high speed, Bicycling at high speed Skating and skiing at high speed
C. Dangerous tools	Can lead to injuries and wounds	Cutting tools: knives, saws, axes Strangling tools: ropes etc.
D. Dangerous elements	Where children can fall into or from something	Cliffs Deep water or icy water Fire pits
E. Rough-and-tumble	Where children can harm each other	Wrestling Fencing with sticks, etc Play fighting
F. Disappear/ get lost	Where children can disappear from the supervision of adults, get lost alone	Go exploring alone Playing alone in unfamiliar environments

Thrilling and risky play is, in this view, activity where children feel on the borderline of out of control, often because of height or speed, and overcoming fear and the unknown that in the first place make the activity thrilling (Coster & Gleeve, 2008; Stephenson, 2003; Sandseter, 2010a).

WHY DO CHILDREN SEEK THRILLS AND RISKS IN THEIR PLAY?

It's very fun and very scary and all sorts of things… and then I feel both excited and really scared at the same time!

(Martin, 5 years; Sandseter, 2006)

Interviews with children have shown that children engage in risky play to experience positive emotions such as fun, enjoyment, thrill, pride and self-confidence (Coster & Gleeve, 2008). In risky play the outcome of the play is not necessarily positive; *it depends if the child can manage the risk.* If the child does not succeed in managing the risk it could result in unpleasant and negative experiences such as fear, anxiety, and sometimes injury. On the other hand, the level of thrill needs to be high to be able to experience the intense positive exhilaration; the more scary and thrilling the risk that is mastered is, then the more intense the positive feeling of mastery is. Children express through interviews that the goal of risky play is balancing on the edge between intense exhilaration and pure fear – they experience that this is both scary and fun at the same time (Coster & Gleeve, 2008; Sandseter, 2010a).

Playing with the long sticks we make out of straws is very much fun, but it is also scary… but it's actually more fun than scary, and it tickles in my tummy!

(Maria, 5 years; Sandseter, 2006)

Children are different, and not all children seek a similar amount of risks in their play. Children differ individually in the level of risk and thrill they like and feel comfortable with. Still, most children are continuously testing themselves and their environment on their own level of competence and acceptable risk. This is children's way of getting to know their world and to find out what is safe and not safe (Aldis, 1975; Smith, 1998). Children's risky play actually has important developmental benefits such as psychological, physical/motor, perceptual, and social development (see for example, Sandseter, 2010b).

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE RISKY PLAY IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS?

Physical environment

The characteristics of the physical environment in which children play influence what children actually do there. Features in the play environment invite and inspire children to certain types of play. Children perceive and interpret their environment based on its functions (Heft, 1988). This means that children interpret their surroundings in the light of what they can do there and how they can use the environmental features to create play. In this way the environment with its qualities affords certain types of play. This interpretation of the play environment is unique to each individual, and depends on the child's individual body size, strength, skill, courage, fear, etc. (Heft, 1988). A downfallen tree can afford climbing for a five-year-old, and crawling under for a three-year-old. An open lawn can afford play fighting among four-year-olds, and fast-paced running for two-year-olds. The affordance and inspiration of play is both dependent on the characteristics of the play environment and the characteristics of the individual who interprets it. The opportunities for risky play are therefore dependent on the play environments we offer the children. Research indicates that natural play environments such as forests and seashores afford more intense risky play than standardised playgrounds do (Sandseter, 2009a). Interviews with practitioners in early childhood education and care (ECEC) also show that the institution's physical environment is mentioned as one of the most important factors for children to get adequate opportunities to take risks in play (Little, Sandseter, & Wyver, submitted).

In many Western countries, there is a growing notion of surplus safety where everything is dangerous.

Safety legislation

Safety legislation for children's play environments is also influencing what play environments we offer the children. In recent years, the focus on child safety has increased significantly, both generally and also concerning play environments such as playgrounds, schools and kindergartens. In many Western countries, there is a growing notion of surplus safety where everything is dangerous (Bundy, et al., 2009, Little, et al., submitted).

In 1996, Norway introduced 'Regulations for the safety of playground equipment' (DSB, 1996). The aim of the regulations was to ensure that all public playground equipment worked as intended and did not pose any unreasonable risk to children. Other countries also have similar or even more strict

regulations including Australia (Little, 2006), New Zealand (Chalmers, 2003; Greenfield, 2003), Britain (Ball, 2002, 2004), and the USA (Caesar, 2001; Sawyers, 1994; Swartz, 1992; Wardle, 1997; Zeece & Graul, 1993). Have these regulations been effective? Statistics of playground accidents from several countries show that despite recent safety legislation to govern playground equipment in order to make play safer, playground accidents have not decreased (Ball, 2002; Briss, Sacks, Adiss, Kresnow, & O'Neil, 1995; Chalmers, 1999, 2003; Phelan, Khoury, Kalkwarf, & Lamphear, 2001). Still, the most serious playground injuries that result in death or severe invalidity are rare (Ball, 2002; Bienefeld, Pickett, & Carr, 1996; Chalmers, 2003; Chalmers, et al., 1996; Phelan, et al., 2001). In the UK, one fatal injury occurs every three or four years (Ball, 2002). Most playground injuries are bruises, contusions, concussions and fractures resulting from falls from or collisions with swings, slides, climbing frames, or other equipment (Ball, 2002; Bienefeld, et al., 1996; Illingworth, Brennan, Jay, Al-Ravi, & Collick, 1975; Mack, Hudson, & Thompson, 1997; Phelan, et al., 2001; Sawyers, 1994; Swartz, 1992), bicycling (Chalmers, et al., 1996; Peterson, Gillies, Cook, Schick, & Little, 1994), and a few due to rough-and-tumble play (Humphreys & Smith, 1987).

Research on the nature of childhood injuries actually shows that the most common risk factors for injury on playgrounds are not features of the equipment, but rather children's actions, normal rashness, and improper usage of the equipment (Ball, 2002; Coppens & Gentry, 1991; Illingworth, et al., 1975; Ordoñana, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2008; Rosen & Peterson, 1990). It seems that no matter how safe the equipment is designed to be, children's need for excitement makes them use it dangerously: 'they will take risks which even the best of playground designers could not anticipate' (Smith, 1998, p. 55). In light of the ongoing debate about the strict security focus indirectly having a negative impact on children's development and health (Little, et al., submitted), one could wonder if the safety legislation restricts children from the opportunity to develop their own risk management through the experience of risky play (Boyesen, 1997).

Staff practice

For children in ECEC services, not only their own risk perception but also the risk perceived by the practitioners will influence children's opportunity for risky play. The practitioners' attitudes and tolerance to risk, and how they manage risky play, is therefore of importance. The restrictions practitioners put on children's play is often based on the adult's perception of what is dangerous. According to Rasmussen (1996), practitioners in ECEC are restrictive in allowing play that involves risk. Rasmussen argues that for several years both teachers and researchers have regarded chaotic, noisy and risky play as low status play, despite the fact that studies have shown that children between two and six years of age prefer play that puts their sense of balance and spatial awareness to the test, rough-and-tumble play where physical strength is tested, and deep play where the aim is to overcome risks and fears.

Risky play...is an important kind of play where children acquire better motor control and learn what is dangerous and what isn't.

Still, Norwegian ECEC practitioners have a more positive attitude towards risky play than practitioners in most other countries (Little, et al., submitted; Sandseter, 2009b). A survey among practitioners in Norwegian ECEC settings show that they are generally positive to thrilling and risky kinds of play and that they rarely interfere in or restrict this type of play (Sandseter, 2011). The practitioners justify their positive attitude to risky play arguing that this is an important kind of play where children acquire better motor control and learn what is dangerous and what isn't. The results also show that men who work in ECEC have a more positive attitude towards thrilling and risky play than women, and they also allow more of this type of play among children (Sandseter, 2011). This is in line with several international studies that show that men are more sensation seeking than women (Zuckerman, 1994). In ECEC where the majority of the employees are women, there is reason to be aware of this. All practitioners in ECEC should ask themselves whether it is their own or the children's needs and boundaries that determine how far children can go in its exploratory and risky activity, and strive to assess each child's needs for thrills and level of competence and adjust rules and freedom of risky play for each child.

CONCLUSION

Finding the balance between allowing children to explore and take risks in their play while also avoiding serious injuries is not an easy exercise. The increasing focus on children's safety on one hand is important, but on the other hand it must not lead to children being restricted from the opportunity for challenge and excitement. ECEC staff must allow children to experience risk, on an individual level and within a relatively safe environment. In children's risky play, one must always consider the risks against the developmental benefits this play has (Ball, 2002), although it sometimes could result in some minor injuries. Children being able to engage in play in

diverse and challenging environments will promote their risk management, which is in itself accident prevention and an important contribution to safety work. Paradoxically, an overemphasis on safety will put children at greater risk because they miss out on important experiences that enhance risk management. Thus, a sensible approach to safety and injury prevention in ECEC means facilitating and securing frames and environments that prevent disabling injuries and even death, but also to avoid an over-focusing on physical security that deprives children the opportunity for natural risk management. In that way, children will be better equipped to manage challenging and risky situations that they will meet both in childhood and later in life.

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THE VALUE OF PROVIDING FOR RISKY PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

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Both Síolta – The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Aistear – The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework acknowledge the need for young children to experience challenge.

Everyday life always involves a degree of risk and children need to learn how to cope with this from an early age. They need to learn how to take calculated risks and, for this learning to happen, they need opportunities for challenging and adventurous play and to move and act freely. Their actions are very often constrained by adults:

> ***'You'll fall.'***
> ***'You'll cut yourself with that.'***
> ***'Don't get dirty.'***

Adults who don't fully appreciate children's need to experience challenge constantly express doubts about children's competence. In addition to undermining children's efforts, simply being told about possible dangers is inadequate – children need to see or experience the consequences of not being careful. By engaging in exploration, adventure, taking risks and meeting challenges they can learn what they are able to do as well as the limits of their physical capabilities.

Providing opportunities to experience challenge is particularly important in the early years when young children's brains are still developing.

> ***'Early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior and (both physical and mental) health.'***
>
> Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

Jennie Lindon warns that 'adults who analyse every situation in terms of what could go wrong, risk creating anxiety in some children and recklessness in others' (Lindon, 1999).

Many adults, who are afraid that children might hurt themselves, simply remove objects, furniture and equipment rather than allow children time and opportunities to learn how to use them safely. I have been in settings where sofas where young children might rest comfortably, listen to stories or read books were removed because the children were bouncing on them!

Children are competent, confident and capable learners, able to make choices and decisions

If adults don't allow or don't provide children with opportunities for worthwhile risks they also prevent children from developing the decision-making skills necessary to make accurate risk judgements (Little and Wyver, 2008). Children's skill levels and competencies are changing constantly as they grow and develop so it is difficult for them to know just what they are capable of.

> ***'When they have the opportunities to explore, risk, and try and try again in an environment that is both safe and challenging, babies can engage in motor practice play that leads to advanced physical abilities, mobility, agility, dexterity, and as a result, confidence, independence and learning.'*** Kernan, 2007

Children are competent, confident and capable learners, able to make choices and decisions. Early years providers can and should offer children the opportunities and experiences to learn about risk in an environment that is designed for that purpose and in so doing help children to become capable of dealing with the hazards they will encounter in the wider world including when they start school.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RISK?

It is important to distinguish between a 'risk' and a 'hazard':

> ***The easiest way to think of it is that a risk is something you can judge, how high can you go and still safely jump off the swing and fly through the air. This is good. Children learn 'physical literacy' this way by starting small and then becoming more adventurous.***
>
> ***A hazard is something you cannot judge, is the swing pivot almost worn right through and about to give way unexpectedly? This cannot be judged by a child, so this is bad and must be avoided by good management practices.***
>
> London Play Briefing, November 2007 (updated October 2010) Risk in Play

Ellen Sandseter, associate professor of psychology at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education in Trondheim has identified six categories of risky play: great heights; high speed; dangerous tools; dangerous elements (e.g. fire and water); rough-and-tumble; and getting lost.

BALANCING THE NEED FOR SAFETY WITH THE BENEFITS OF ALLOWING FOR RISK

The 'Managing Risk in Play Provision' position statement issued by the UK's Play Safety Forum[1] in 2002 challenged the tendency to focus on safety at the expense of other concerns including health and well-being. (The statement has equal relevance to children from 0 to 6 as for older children and young people – it uses the term 'children' to cover the whole age range from 0 –18).

Not focusing entirely or solely on safety does not mean ignoring safety, but rather carrying out a risk-benefit assessment which considers the benefits to children as well as the risks. The Play Safety Forum outlined the objectives that are fundamental in any play provision: to offer children challenging, exciting, engaging play opportunities while ensuring they are not exposed to unacceptable risk of harm.

When carrying out any risk assessment it is essential then to balance the benefits of an activity with the likelihood of coming to harm and the severity of that harm.

APPROACHES TO MANAGING RISK

Tom Mullarkey, chief executive of the UK's Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (in Guldberg, 2007) very simply summed up the balancing of risk, challenge and safety, by stating that things should be 'as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible'.

Bearing in mind the distinction between a risk and a hazard, one approach to risk management outlined by the Play Safety Forum is to make the risks as apparent as possible to young children. This means designing spaces where the risk of injury arises from hazards that children can readily appreciate (such as heights), and where hazards that children may not appreciate (such as equipment that can trap heads or for children under three small sharp stones that they could swallow) are eliminated.

Regular inspection and maintenance of equipment is essential. When equipment or tools which could be dangerous are introduced, children need to be shown how to use them safely and how this is to be done needs to be considered as part of activity planning. It is also essential for services to have clear policies and procedures which outline the service's position on risk assessment and safety. These must be shared and discussed with parents.

Another important aspect of any approach to safety and risk is teaching children about risk and encouraging them to make their own risk assessments and to think about the possible consequences of their actions – asking questions like 'What do you think might happen if you hold the knife like this?'

[1] The Play Safety Forum brings together the main national organisations in England with an interest in safety and children's play. Members include representatives from providers, regulatory bodies and expert agencies.

Clear and evidence-informed policies and procedures on approaches to children's behaviour are not only legally required but also essential to ensure all of the adults have a consistent approach in allowing children to experience appropriate risk-taking and being appropriately supported.

WHAT YOUNG CHILDREN NEED IN THEIR PLAY SPACES

'An environment free from hazard is necessary to ensure that children can satisfy their natural curiosity and desire for novelty and challenge and take risks without compromising their safety. This does not mean removing all the risks, but rather finding the balance between those that foster learning and those that can result in serious injury, and ensuring appropriate supervision.'

Little and Wyver, 2008

Children need movement

'…movement is considered to be the bedrock of all intellectual development… often it is merely limited opportunities for movement that create many so-called behavioural and learning difficulties.' Olds, 2001

Over-protecting young children from experiences out of a concern for their safety (especially outdoors) has become a serious issue in crèches, pre-school and schools, with some not allowing children to run. I recently heard of one setting banning children from touching as a means of preventing bullying!

As well as being free to run, jump, climb, swing and touch, children need to experience nature in the environments where they spend so much of their young lives. Many schools where children as young as four spend many hours have no access to nature or to opportunities to explore, to experience adventure, to use their imaginations. Such environments, in my view, present a far greater risk to children than the risk of falling – the risk of not developing to their fullest potential.

In his groundbreaking work 'Last Child in the Woods' child advocacy expert Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's wired generation (he calls it nature deficit) to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as rises in obesity, behaviour difficulties and depression. Not allowing children to play freely and explore their environment carries multiple risks including compromised development, decreased physical exercise, increased obesity and limited spontaneous play opportunities.

PLANNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN TO EXPERIENCE APPROPRIATE CHALLENGES

Inclusive practice means providing for all children what are risky play opportunities for them. What may be physically challenging, interesting and risky for a two-year-old may not provide four-year-olds with sufficiently satisfying or physically challenging experiences[2]. It is important to observe the children closely and identify those who need either greater challenge or specific support.

As well as children's age, their individual dispositions are an important consideration when planning appropriate activities. Having a key worker system facilitates an individualised approach to assessing the risks and benefits of a particular piece of equipment or a planned activity. Part of the role of a key worker is to observe changes in each of the children to whom they are assigned and how their interests and abilities are developing. They can then ensure that experiences are matched to their key child's abilities, interests, disposition and developmental needs and are appropriately challenging for them.

When planning play opportunities we need to consider what it is that we want individual children to gain from the experience? We know from the research that early childhood is an important time for developing children's ability to:

- Persevere
- Take risks
- Solve problems
- Develop confidence and independence
- Nurture their curiosity
- Develop an identity as a learner

Aistear: Key Messages from the Research Papers

We want children to have these and the many other benefits of challenging experiences and engaging in risky play identified in the literature, which include:

- Fun
- Cognitive, social, emotional and physical development
- Direct experience of the consequences of actions
- Development of autonomy
- Awareness of the capabilities and the limits of their bodies
- Emotional resilience
- The ability to assess risk situations
- Overall health benefits
- Learning how to use tools and equipment safely and purposefully
- Developing control and coordination of their bodies
- Learning to be resourceful, creative and inventive

It is important to plan children's play environments and the experiences they facilitate with these outcomes as the goals.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCES IN NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

We know that play is critical to children's healthy development and that over-protection from risk in play is likely to curtail imagination and inhibit development. As Scottish educator

[2] Play as a context for Early Learning and Development *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

and founder of Nature Kindergartens, Claire Warden (2011) puts it, it is important to 'be hazard-aware, not risk-averse and to employ a sense of perspective when assessing play-based situations. The adult role is to remove hazards that the children do not see, not the risk within the play'. In the Nature Kindergartens, Claire and her colleagues offer and encourage 'risky play' with the adults scaffolding the activity while the children gain confidence and become more competent both in self-risk assessing and in mastering the activity. For all the activities children undertake they do a risk-benefit analysis. It is their belief that such an assessment is not simply a technical matter but needs to be 'a value-based exercise which is dependent on the practitioner's knowledge about children's capacities, their resilience and their ability to make judgements'.

In countries such as Norway, many early childhood settings provide children with experiences such as using sharp knives to whittle sticks, hiking, travelling at speed on sleds, climbing trees and water activities in natural outdoor environments.

Regular positive interactions in nature allow children to feel comfortable in it and grow to love it. Love of nature, along with positive environmental behaviours and attitudes, grow out of children's regular contact with and play in the natural world and the risks that that entails.

Many environmental education programmes try to impart knowledge and responsibility before children have been allowed to develop a loving relationship with the natural world. Children's emotional and affective values of nature develop earlier than their abstract, logical and rational perspectives. We need to allow young children to develop their love of nature before we ask them to academically learn about it. Such experiences provide children with a much deeper understanding of their environment and of reality, as well as promoting development in all areas, particularly motor fitness and motor ability (Fjortoft, 2001).

CONSTRAINTS FOR PROVIDERS TO OVERCOME

In Tim Gill's view it is often the risks to adults – blame, loss of reputation, liability – that too often cloud providers' judgements when it comes to allowing children to take risks (Gill, 2007).

According to the Play Safety Forum, 'The risk-benefit assessment process should provide a sound and reasonable defence against liability claims and prosecutions.'

New et al. talk about practices in Reggio Emilia, Italy, where teachers believe in children's right to engage in activities that test their developing motor and critical thinking skills. They say that 'children generally know when they've gone far enough; they are careful because they don't want to get hurt'. The belief in the benefits to be gained from participation in a wide range of physically challenging (and perhaps risky) activities greatly outweighs any concerns about potential litigation (New et al., 2005).

Risk benefit assessment means that the provider weighs the duty to protect children from avoidable serious harm against the duty to provide them with stimulating, adventurous play opportunities – allowing children to take risks while protecting them from serious harm.

The goal for early years educators should be to help children learn how to cope with the everyday challenges that they will inevitably be presented with as they grow older. The best way to keep children safe is to be willing, as adults, to take more risks on their behalf.

'The real risk is… there is 'no risk'.' Bundy, 2009

Recommendations:

- Develop a clear policy that balances the benefits of stimulating, challenging and exciting play with a rigorous risk assessment.
- Ensure that children are adequately supervised.
- Ensure that hazards are eliminated that playground apparatus complies with safety standards and is properly maintained.

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RISKY PLAY IS NOT A CATEGORY – IT'S WHAT CHILDREN DO

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We often throw around the term 'risky play' as though it was a category of play like social play or gross-motor play. But it is not. Taking risks is simply one of the things children do when they are playing and, because a significant amount of playing is about pushing boundaries and extending ourselves, it turns out that most play is risky in one way or another.

The problem is that over a number of years we have gradually become a risk averse society. We have simply become very wary of anything labelled risky and have been encouraged to avoid it in any form. The newspapers for example are full of stories of this being banned and that being stopped on anti-risk health and safety grounds.

The issue seems to be largely confusion over our use of the word 'risk' and we can see this when reading documents such as the National Quality Framework (Siolta) where for example Component 2.4 *'The environment promotes the safety, both indoors and outdoors, of all children and adults'* asks the question: "In what way is the indoor environment/equipment designed to reduced *risk* of injury to children?". The wider component goes on to give numerous examples of these 'risks' to be avoided such as not having sharp corners on furniture, electrical sockets being out of reach and non-slip flooring for example – all of which are *hazards* in this context, not risks. There is further confusion when the Health Service Executive (HSE) uses the unhelpful phrase 'safe risk' in its guidelines. So, it is no wonder people are confused when it comes to the question of risk and what is risky and what is not, and what we can do and what we can't.

In the United Kingdom this is something that has been tackled very effectively by the play sector, which has taken back control over defining risk in play and childcare settings. The document *'Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide'* produced by the UK Play Safety Forum has been endorsed by the equivalent HSE body in that country and gives

...being able to make mistakes at a young age is vitally important in terms of learning and development.

lots of practical guidance and common sense advice on risk in a play context. This document has, quite simply, revolutionised the idea behind risky play.

For 'taking risks' we should read 'making mistakes' and being able to make mistakes at a young age is vitally important in terms of learning and development. Rather than shying away from being risky in our childcare settings we should actually embrace it!

Below are four 'risky' things that we could all provide access to, as do many play and childcare settings around the world.

1. EXPERIENCE HEIGHT AND DEPTH

We often associate risky play with big pieces of fixed play equipment and the first piece of equipment that comes to mind is usually some kind of climbing frame. And that's good, but there is more to experiencing height than just climbing. The desire to get off the ground is a powerful one from a very young age and children in a setting will climb on things even where nothing is provided for them to do so. Fences, gates, tables, window ledges, each other will all be pressed into use as they try to gain height. But a 'climbing frame' is limited in the experience it can provide because once you're 'up' then what?

Watching the world go by from a height attracts children (as does being able to see outside of the setting) so a climbing feature that has some kind of viewing platform works well. Being able to physically 'look down' on things is an experience children rarely have an opportunity to do unless they live on the side of a mountain and such a platform can keep their attention for a significant length of time as they see the world (literally) from another angle. But there is more: it is not a coincidence that the climbing features that are the most popular in public playgrounds with children of all ages are also those with multiple platforms and levels and with multiple ways of getting onto and off it. Children often play chasing games on these types of features and complex pretend games as well as just climb up and then down again. Multiple levels allow children to experience different levels of height and that provides multiple opportunities for challenge.

In safety terms, the real concern here is likely to be how high such a feature should be but 'height' is not the issue – it is 'fall height' that is important. In other words, is it possible to fall out of or off the feature and if so onto what surface do we fall? The European Playground Safety Guidelines (see below) recommend critical fall heights of no more than 3m high for any piece of play equipment. That is not to say that such a height will be appropriate to all, but a feature which is very low and with only a single level is not going to provide the degree of experience that will give a sense of challenge and that does not represent good value for money. If we are going to use our limited resources on something big we should make sure we go for something that works.

Talking of money, if a setting that has limited space can buy or have a fixed play feature that has platforms, levels and viewing points bespoke built, and build that feature on sand as the main surfacing material (rather than on rubber which has no play value in itself) with maybe a play house built underneath on the ground level, we will have provided four or five different opportunities for play combined within a limited ground area and usually lower cost than if everything was provided separately. Such a feature properly constructed, in the right place with the correct surfacing and policy and procedures around its use, satisfies both the need of our children to experience height and depth and also our legal responsibilities under the European Playground Safety Guidelines.

2. EXPERIENCE MOVEMENT AND SPEED

Being able to run around is by far the simplest, cheapest and among the most popular ways of experiencing movement and speed. And it's clearly important as children will often spend up to a quarter of all their time at play running around. But running around can interfere with other forms of play that does not involve movement. There is no point in the world, however, in simply telling children NOT to run around. Just like the need to experience height, children must move around and they simply cannot stop themselves from trying to do so. And there are good health and safety reasons for making sure they can.

Our children must experience movement and speed as preventing them from doing so for health and safety reasons at a young age is hazardous to their longer tem well-being.

During the 1980s many British playworkers visited and worked in orphanages and schools in a number of the failed European communist states setting up play and childcare facilities for children of a broad age. Many of them began to report that they found teenage children with very poor levels of balance and coordination while moving (they would, for example, stumble when playing chasing games). This was the effect of being brought up in confined, mainly indoor, spaces with little opportunity to run around. As movement is how we develop and maintain our sense of balance these children had missed out on a valuable, never to be repeated experience.

Our children must experience movement and speed as preventing them from doing so for health and safety reasons at a young age is hazardous to their longer tem well-being. In other words, there are strong health and safety reasons for ensuring that children can run around.

Running around does not satisfy the need for free movement through the air though and nothing provides for this sensation better than a swing. These are play features rarely seen in childcare settings, often because of concerns of children falling off them. But falling off a swing is not the real hazard – it is being hit by a moving swing that is the problem and that is easy to deal with by enclosing the swings in a coral fence with limited access. Then there is the question of what type of swing. We might feel that very young children need a swing with a bucket seat to keep them firmly in place but a swing with a cradle or large platform instead provides a feature that can be used by all ages and abilities AND by multiple people at the same time – another example of making best use of limited space and limited budgets.

A well-sited swing can provide lots of challenging movement. However, it can also be expensive and take up lots space. A tree swing, on the other hand, can be both cheaper, temporary (moveable in other words) and an exciting alternative. We are often guilty of ignoring the trees that some of us are lucky enough to have on site or at times actively keep children away from them over safety fears. In fact, the idea of a rope in a tree for swinging may seem very hazardous – but not when it's done properly. The organisations *London Play* and *Monkey Do* have produced a technical guidance document that shows how to do this in a practical, cheap and exciting way (see below). This document goes into detail about what type of trees are suitable for swings, what type of rope and knots to use, how to fit them and how to maintain them in a way that satisfies health and safety requirements.

3. EXPERIENCE DEN BUILDING AND USING TOOLS

The adventure playground movement (which is very strong in the UK, Germany and Japan in particular) has its origins in a Danish form of play called the 'Junk Playground'. The concept is very simple – it is that children should have a degree of control of their physical environment and have the ability to change it and add to it.

Den building is one obvious way of being able to do this and many childcare settings already provide access to this form of play by providing loose parts for building (improvised materials such as old sheets, netting, rope and poles etc.). But a 'den' is not just a structure – it also becomes a centre of very complex pretend play involving narrative and cooperation. Before it gets to that point though it needs building and building is very satisfying in itself and very popular with children. In fact, it is not uncommon to see children spend a great deal of time building a den only to then abandon it and move onto something else as soon as it is finished.

Building other things is also very popular – making ramps for wheeled toys, gullies to run toy cars and balls down, making carts and trolleys that can be used to transport yet more materials and people around the setting. Making small playthings such as cars, airplanes, boats and spaceships is also popular, and often these are made by combining other things. The experience of building dens and these smaller things can be limited, however, by both a lack of access of available materials to combine in the first place (this is true where bought toys dominate our play boxes for example) and more so by limited ways of being able to fix things together. To develop this we need tools.

We get an extra dimension to building things by providing access to tools. Adventure playgrounds typically provide supervised access to tools which allow children to saw, screw and hammer things, which increases the complexity of building and creating. This can result in more substantial dens such as those typically found in Norwegian childcare settings which are built to last for weeks. Access to 'real' tools, as opposed to plastic hammers and saws, also adds a sense of realism to building play which enhances the experience hugely. Being able to play with 'things' is important but playing with things you yourself have made is much more satisfying. In addition, using a toy hammer and pretending to nail two pieces of wood together is nothing compared to the experience and the sounds of using a real hammer to bang a real nail into a real piece of wood.

4. EXPERIENCE FIRE

We are very keen on promoting the importance of the natural world and access to the elements in our childcare settings, as can be seen in the increasing mentions of playing outside in good practice documents and guidelines. But while we don't seem to have a problem with earth, air and water we do seem to have a problem with fire. In fact, of all the forms of potentially 'risky' play this is probably the one that raises the most concerns and is almost always absent in Irish settings. But this is not the case in other cultures around the world.

In the Scandinavian and Nordic countries in particular it is common to see fire pits in the outside spaces of childcare settings. Fire is a particularly important cultural element in these countries which celebrate just about anything you can think of by lighting candles and setting fire to things. Where we have a very negative attitude to fire, seeing it as destructive and harmful, the Scandinavians see it as a vital, life-giving element that should be respected but not feared. It is interesting to note that instances of deliberate fire damage by teenagers in Sweden, for example, are virtually nil whereas in Ireland and the UK fire damage is common. At least part of the reason for that is that Scandinavian children know not only how to light a fire but how to control it and how to put it out. A significant number of arson attacks by teenagers here are actually fires that have simply got out of control.

Access to fire is another common element of the adventure playground movement and there are numerous courses available in the UK on fire play. Easier to access though are a number of useful guidance notes on how do this including one produced by Martin King-Sheard of Play Wales the national organisation for play in Wales (see below).

Fire is unique – there is nothing like it for the noise it makes or how it looks or the obvious power it has – and that fascinates children who want to experience it. A properly constructed and located fire pit can allow them to experience this in a controlled way and at the same time enhance the outdoor experience in a great variety of ways, especially during the darker and colder winter months.

Cooking around a fire pit is very different to making biscuits indoors and cooking them in the oven – in this case children can actually see things cooking in front of our eyes and changing from one thing into another. Story telling is also a completely different experience when huddled around a warm, crackling fire adding to a unique story telling atmosphere. In fact, the most important element of all in a communal fire pit is the sense of gathering and the light and heat it produces, all of which makes for a welcoming atmosphere. After all, when we visit friends homes at winter time we don't gather around the fridge, do we?

So there you have it – four risky play experiences that will enhance our children's experiences during play. All we have to do now is overcome the greatest barrier to risky play ... and that is the unwillingness of us adults to take risks ourselves.

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  Produced jointly with the Play Inspection Company 'An Essential Guide to BS EN1176 and BS EN1177' (revised 2008) www.playinspections.co.uk

WHY ADVENTURE AND WHY RISK IN THE EARLY YEARS?

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INTRODUCTION

As well as working at Anglia Ruskin University in the UK, lecturing and researching about wilder outdoor play, I am also a Forest School practitioner, and take great pleasure from introducing very young children to wilder outdoor places. My preferred client group are aged between three and six years old, my strap-line at conferences being that 'I light fires with three year olds'. The Forest School approach with this age group encompasses a play-based introduction to wilder and riskier play, where that play is, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led. A child-led approach is where play should, as far as possible, be 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' (Conway, 2008), a definition I find inspiring, as it leads to such interesting explorations of the environment and its possibilities.

However, I have become aware while working with early years practitioners that not all of them are ready to embrace the contemporary push towards more outdoor play, and the encouragement from advisors and others to provide more opportunities for children to take risks and have adventures. This may be because they are anticipating opposition from managers and colleagues, or because they feel that they lack the necessary expertise. In *Risk and Adventure in the Early Years*, my aim is to help the nervous to move closer to wilder, riskier play, by describing the steps by which children of all ages can take the risks appropriate to their ages and stages. Some may feel that they lack the skills necessary to support children in riskier and wilder play, but this really is unlikely with very young children. While I cannot provide training in additional skills in a book, I have pointed out what can be done with only basic knowledge of the outdoor environment, and identified possible sources of training for interested practitioners.

In this article I will cover some key messages, and endeavour to link them to Siolta (2006) to help practitioners link to the curriculum principles and practice.

What are Forest Schools

A Forest School is an innovative educational approach to outdoor play and learning. The philosophy of Forest Schools is to encourage and inspire individuals of any age through positive outdoor experiences.

By participating in engaging, motivating and achievable tasks and activities in a woodland environment, children have the opportunity to learn about the natural environment, how to handle risks and most importantly to use their own initiative to solve problems and co-operate with others. They use full sized tools, play, learn boundaries of behaviour; both physical and social, establish and grow in confidence, self-esteem and become self motivated.

RISKY PLAY

Why are opportunities for risk and adventure essential for normal development in the early years? I will explain below why I believe this to be important, but I can start by assuring you that it is not just me saying this. Let me offer you a random set of statements from Siolta (2006) and others:

- 'The child's experiences … are positively enhanced by interactions with a broad range of environments. These include the … outdoor…The environment should … extend and enrich the child's development and learning… stimulate curiosity, foster independence … The development of respect for the environment will also result' (Siolta, Infant Class manual, p.8)
- Component 2.5: 'Think about… encouraging the use of the outdoor environment all year round … variety of outdoor experiences provided … opportunities for challenge and "safe risk"' (Siolta, Infant Class manual, p. 22)
- The Principles of the Curriculum state that: 'the child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity is a primary motivating factor in learning … learning is most effective when it is integrated' (NCCA, 1999: 8)
- Key Issues include 'the role of the curriculum in establishing patterns of lifelong learning' (NCCA, 1999: 9)

I am not exhorting unsafe practice. Through my own Continuing Professional Development (including my Forest School training) I have learned to risk assess all aspects of my own practice, and would always advise that practitioners do likewise. Local agencies and the Health Service Executive (HSE) can recommend ways to do this, and every setting will have their own policies and forms to support you. Remember that without opportunities to challenge themselves, children's understanding of safety will not move forward. So instead of saying 'No' to risk, trying saying 'Ok, how can I do this happily?'

Young children are pre-programmed to keep stretching themselves, … until they reach maturity and the peak of their own particular set of abilities.

It is important that you help the children in your care to develop their understanding of their own safety, which is a many-layered thing. In part, it is about self-awareness. 'Where do I start and finish?' 'What can my body do?' 'How well can I control my actions?' are questions that we see the tiniest babies wrestling with as they grasp at toys and develop their mobility. This is an ongoing process. Young children are pre-programmed to keep stretching themselves, in the same way that all young animals do, until they reach maturity and the peak of their own particular set of abilities. The role of the adult, animal or human, is to enable the stretching process to be manageable and safe enough, in other words to help them to take reasonable risks. The risks will vary according to the child's understanding and ability. For a new walker, an uneven surface will be a reasonable risk. For a new climber, a log on the ground will be sufficient to balance on. Competent walkers will appreciate dramatic differences in levels, competent climbers more adventurous trees or frames. This is what we are likely to be dealing with for the majority of young children.

Once the child's competence exceeds our own we may need to call on an expert to move them on further still. However, not to give them the early experiences may be to deny them the opportunity to reach their potential. It is shocking to think that many new walkers living in urban areas will only experience concrete or carpet beneath their feet, and will not learn to deal with uneven ground or sand until they are older. This will mean that when they go to the beach or run through snow or leaves, the sense of their own capacity, or lack of it, may pre-programme them towards undue risk-taking or undue caution. Either way, it may affect the rate at which they gain physical competence or intellectual understanding of risk and consequence.

WHY IS THIS LEARNING SO IMPORTANT?

Tim Gill (2007: 15) identifies four arguments in support of risk in childhood:

1. Helping children to learn how to manage risk (understanding safety)
2. Feeding children's innate need for risk with reasonable risks in order to prevent them finding greater unmanaged risks for themselves
3. Health and developmental benefits
4. The building of character and personality traits such as resilience and self-reliance

Another outcome from such opportunities could well be to engage children at a sensory and intellectual level with their environment, benefits observed by the Forestry Commission's research (O'Brien & Murray 2007). This is the start of Education for Sustainable Development. In a world where climate change will be a real issue within their lifetime, it is important for children to connect with their environment at every level, and as often as possible.

HOW CAN ALL CHILDREN ACCESS SUCH OPPORTUNITIES?

For animals it is a simple progression from incompetence to expertise in physical activities, as they do not appear to have such a complex psychology to wrestle with at the same time. The self-awareness of our species adds to this development the need to develop self-confidence and self-esteem at the same time, without which physical development can be inhibited. This is where early years practitioners are uniquely placed to mediate the pressures from family, culture and community, which may put cultural pressures on children to conform to unhelpful stereotypes, or to be unnecessarily fearful (or reckless). It is the early years setting that can give every child the opportunity to stretch themselves and maximise their potential. This is not to put yourself in conflict with parents, but to help them to realise, for example, that having the opportunity to go out in the rain helps children to understand more completely the world around them. Having your own understanding that getting wet will not of itself give you a cold will help. If you do not feel confident in this, find a speaker for a parent event who is. Local authority advisors, Wildlife Trust representatives, and British Conservation Trust co-ordinators, are all people I have used to convince reluctant parents that I have the best interests of their children at heart.

Another aspect of understanding safety is knowledge. Knowledge is power, in this case the child's power to keep themselves safe. Even very young children can enter into a discussion about a feature of their environment that could offer them a challenge. When I take three year olds into woods for Forest School sessions we spend a lot of time talking, before, during and after the sessions. For some of them a wood is in itself scary, being dark and unknown, and I want them to benefit emotionally, intellectually and physically. A child can't do that if s/he is scared or if s/he is unaware of danger. Bravery is not about rushing in blindly, it is about knowing the risks and doing the best you can. So we talk about nettles and brambles and holes in the ground, among other things that are a part of that environment that they will need to learn to manage. We do not remove them.

There is a thought that if children have exciting reasonable risks to undertake they will be less likely to find unreasonable ones for themselves.

In settings with outdoor spaces the challenge for practitioners may be to review the space and to think about ways to increase the opportunities for challenge, rather than minimise them. Bear in mind that a concrete square has few visible risks, and yet children fall or push each other over and accidents happen. It may even be that some of the 'accidents' are the result of the limitations of the space, a direct correlation with the sterile safety being offered to the children. Perhaps if they had the challenge of a pile of logs to scramble over, the risks would be focused, could be discussed and managed, and learning

could take place. There is a thought that if children have exciting reasonable risks to undertake they will be less likely to find unreasonable ones for themselves. This may be one reason for encouraging older children to undertake Duke of Edinburgh Awards (DofEA) in Northern Ireland or Gaisce – the President's Award. Consider a pile of logs as an appropriate mountain for younger children to climb, and free-flow play between the indoor and outdoor areas as appropriate changes in temperature and climate for this age group to learn to manage. Children who learn these lessons early may move on to successes with awards such as those mentioned above. Children who do not may get their thrills from balancing on the parapets of bridges once old enough to get out of the range of watchful adults.

Other settings may be fortunate enough to have a patch of grass. A flat piece of grass has few visible risks, but children run into each other, trip over balls, and accidents happen. Perhaps if a great big scoop were dug out of the middle of the grass patch to make a hollow to roll into, or fill with water and make mud pies in, the risks would be focused, could be discussed and managed, and learning could take place. Just think of the early steps in science, mathematics and physics that could take place in such a space. Risky activities can mean moving water around, perhaps in sections of guttering. It is not tidy, clean or micromanaged, but it is fertile ground for tomorrow's creative entrepreneurs. Getting dirty is a wonderful learning experience that we should all be allowed to have.

Some settings have no outdoor space at all, and have to rely on outings, but these, too, can offer opportunities for risk. They are just different risks. If children have to make their own sandwiches for their snack as soon as they can manoeuvre the tools, they are learning to take care of themselves. The risk is in the choice of fillings, and the likelihood that the sandwich will fall apart. If they then have the responsibility for carrying a rucksack in which their spare jumper or water bottle can be carried, they are becoming more independent. The risk is in losing or forgetting the rucksack. This is apart from all the other risks involved in going out, too numerous to explore here.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STARTING POINTS

Start planning for more adventurous play by undertaking an audit of what you do outside already. Write down all the outdoor opportunities that occur in a week for all the ages in your settings. What risky and adventurous activities do you offer to your children? Are there different levels? Are there different surfaces to explore? Can your children gets their hands dirty?

Then look at the developmental stages of the children in their care. Comparing the children's abilities with the activities, think about which of them allow the children to consolidate their fine and gross motor skills, and which allow for experimentation. Which (to use a Vygotskian term) are in their zone of proximal development (Holzman & Newman, 2008), and need an adult to scaffold success, which is where practitioners come in. Consider how you can enrich what you do already to make it more exciting, and more open to children's experimentation.

Think about whether you know the risk assessment policy in your settings, and how they are reviewed. Consider whether you can include opportunities for risk benefit analysis. And what are the attitudes of colleagues and parents to risky play? Can you use displays of photographs to show the benefits of more adventurous activities for the children.

This article is based on the introduction of 'Risk and Adventure in the Early Years', published by Sage in 2011.

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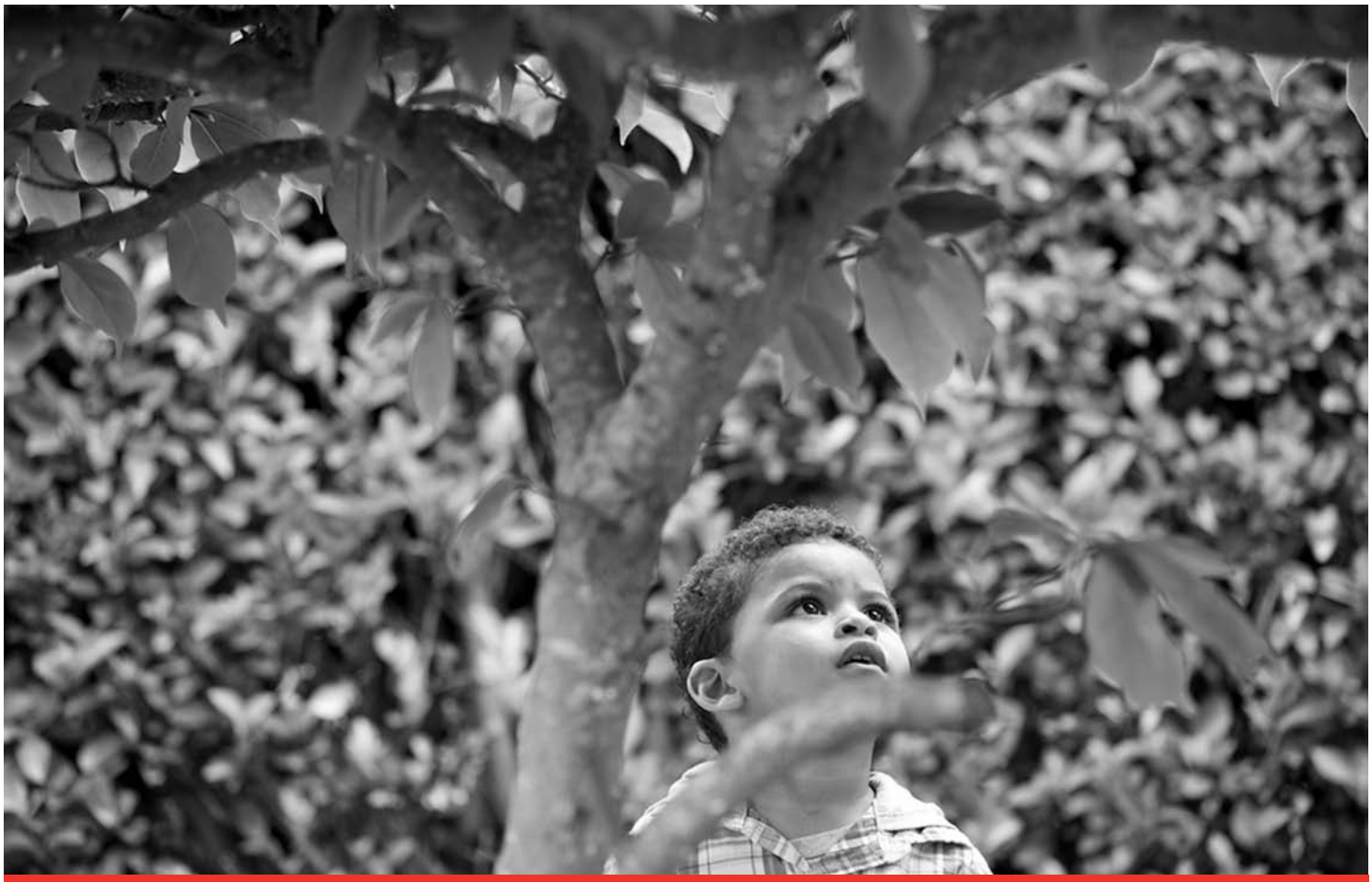


ANTOINETTE GIBBS HighScope Coordinator, Barnardos/*youngballymun*

SUPPORTING HEALTHY, UNCONSTRAINED PLAY IN HIGHSCOPE SETTING

'Activities requiring total body involvement are likely to encourage problem solving. During early childhood, what a child feels about themselves is largely dependent upon what she/he can or cannot do with their body.' (Carson, 1998)

As a child I loved nothing more than walking on the endless supply of city sandstone walls and country limestone walls. I knew every last detail of them as only a child can. There was no adult supervision, no one to talk me through the possible implications of my risky activity. Somehow I managed to survive unscathed. On a recent trip home I revisited my favourite childhood climbing spot that had taken so many months, if not years, to conquer. It was not nearly as high or even remotely as dangerous as I had committed to memory. The moment of triumph when I finally mastered that challenge is still fresh in my mind. The childhood disposition is to enthusiastically explore, persevere and problem solve. Though this activity could be termed risky play, it is arguable that my sense of accomplishment rewarded my persistence and boosted both confidence and self esteem.

'A no risk childhood is risky' (Mac Donald, 2006)

The term risky play is open to many interpretations. For some early year's practitioners it may refer largely to children's physical play which may pose a risk of injury and thus is often associated with outside time. Others may view risky play in a broader context and consider the psychological, social or emotional risks where, for example, a child takes a risk such as joining in a large group activity for the very first time. The HighScope approach acknowledges that children both need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, try new experiences and develop their capacities through their early play experiences.

HIGHSCOPE

In the HighScope curriculum children take on these challenges inspired by their access to climbers, swings, pedal toys, as well as natural features such as hills and trees. They approach experiences in their own time at their own pace. For example, on the climbing frame Amy may wish to dangle from the top, Sean may prefer to jump from the lower rung while Ellie may choose simply to observe from afar. By coming into contact with graduated risk in a supportive and supervised environment, children develop a capacity to identify, assess and manage other activities with risk content.

The HighScope approach acknowledges and supports children to take reasonable risks by providing a curriculum where the child is an active participant in constructing their own knowledge and in choosing activities which allow them to take risks and engage in healthy unconstrained play. It provides a physical learning environment, both indoors and outdoors, that is designed and equipped with a wide variety of materials and equipment. This promotes a range of opportunities and strikes a balance between providing a safe environment and encouraging the necessary risk taking required if children are to experience the full benefits of challenging play.

The HighScope curriculum supports children's necessity to physically explore, jump, dig, climb, hide, run and other such activities. The curriculum also recognises the important role of the adult in supporting children's psychological, social or emotional necessity to perhaps just wait and observe such activities until they feel safe enough or ready to join in themselves. Adults in active learning settings understand that children's social, physical and cognitive learning is not restricted to certain places or times.

The HighScope learning environment also provides real and open-ended materials and equipment that supports opportunities to acquire new skills, try out new behaviours, and encounter challenges and reasonable risks. Outside time can sometimes present more challenges for educators as children take on physical challenges in a more vigorous way such as balancing, dangling upside down, cycling at speed or playing rough and tumble games. This can often be a time that teachers may be tempted to remove any risky materials. For example, removing the developmentally inappropriate wheelbarrow only to discover that the child's struggle to make it work was the learning (Greenman, 1996). Adults in HighScope settings are encouraged to approach outside time with 'good-natured enthusiasm' (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002). Among other strategies they participate as partners in children's play, examine their own beliefs about how children learn at outside time and encourage children to problem solve.

Through exposure to carefully managed risks, children learn sound judgement in assessing risks themselves, hence building confidence, resilience and self-belief – qualities that are important for their eventual independence (Children's Play Council, 2004).

Stephenson (1998) noted that children who were confident physical risk-takers in the outdoor environment were more likely to take risks during indoor activities. This risk-taking disposition enables children to seek out and take on challenges in both environments. Though some risk-taking behaviours may be more observable than others, such as physical risk taking, each child's risk taking efforts are supported, encouraged and equally valued in the HighScope setting.

In this HighScope classroom, children have been supported through both conflicts and reflective decisions making processes. Equally they have been encouraged to generate solutions both independently and collectively. The teachers have been instrumental in laying the foundations for the children to feel competent and confident to take appropriate risks and make choices and judgements.

HighScope teaching strategies also recognise young children's necessity for explicit information and guidance from teachers to understand, establish and follow safety limits. The HighScope approach presents us with the interesting challenge of delicately balancing children's intrinsic motivation to take risks in order to learn, with our desire as teachers to support these emerging needs safely.

RISK TAKING – APPLYING SOUND JUDGEMENT, PROBLEM SOLVING AND RESILIENCE

During work time: one child splashes the other during a vigorous water play activity. The child silently left and selected a set of goggles. Returning to the water tray, she placed them over her eyes and continued with her activity.

GLEN OUTDOOR SCHOOL FOR EARLY LEARNING

SALLY O'DONNELL Manager and Owner, Glen Outdoor School for Early Learning

'I wanted to provide an environment that gave children the same opportunities I was fortunate to experience.'

Glen Outdoor School for Early Learning was set up in 2008 to provide a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children to explore, take risks, run free, have time and get in touch with natural materials such as trees, plants, sand, water, grass and willow tunnels.

Outdoors, children have freedom to express themselves noisily, engage in messy play, experience sights, sounds, smells and textures of the natural environment and enjoy greater space for freedom of movement. The environment was designed to offer challenges and opportunities for risky play, enabling children to experience situations that need calculated decision on how far they could go in an appealing atmosphere that contained a sense of wonder and mystery.

THE BEGINNING

Before setting up Glen Outdoor School for Early Learning I travelled to Norway and Scotland to see outdoor schools and learn about risk and risk assessments, and how to carry out and record risk benefits. I was very lucky to have two staff who were as excited as I was about the project and who had gone to Scotland with me to see it first-hand.

After securing suitable premises I contacted the HSE Pre-school Inspection Team and discussed my intentions to open an outdoor early learning centre. The HSE gave us guidelines on what was required and we took them on board and got started. As we already owned an established full day-care setting, we were very aware of the requirements to meet the Pre-school Regulations, including Regulation 5. We were also conscious that both Siolta – The National Quality Framework and Aistear – The National Curriculum Framework highlight the importance of access to high quality learning environments outside for young children's development and learning. We set about dividing the playground into interest areas like an indoor classroom with home corner, construction area, sand and water etc.

On the following page is an example of how we see our curriculum fitting into Aistear, the National Curriculum Framework, under the four areas.

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aim 1: Children will be strong psychologically and socially.

Aim 2: Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be.

Aim 3: Children will be creative and spiritual.

Aim 4: Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on lilfe.

Aim 1: Children will have strong self-identiites and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.

Aim 2: Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.

Aim 3: Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.

Aim 4: Children will see themselves as capable learners.

Well Being

- Respect themselves, others and the environment.
- Discover, explore and refine fine motor skills.
- Understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.
- Think positively, take learning risks and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong.

Identity & Belonging

- Build respectful relationships with others.
- See themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people.
- Demonstrate the skills of co-operation, conflict resolution, responsibitily and negotiation.
- Be motivated and begin to think about and recognise their own achievements.

Physical Development

Communicating

- Understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others.
- Interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation.
- Develop counting skills and a growing understanding of the meaning of the use of numbers and mathematical language in an enjoyable iand meaningful way.
- Show confidence in trying out new things and taking risks.

Exploring & Thinking

- Engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills.
- Use their experience and information to explore and develop working theories about how the world works and think about how and why they learn things.
- Build awareness of the variety of symbols used to communicate and use these in an enjoyable and meaningful way leading to early reading and writing.
- Develop higher order thinking skills.

Aim 1: Children will use non-verbal communication skills.

Aim 2: Children will use language.

Aim 3: Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language.

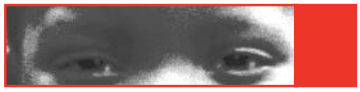
Aim 4: Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.

Aim 1: Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.

Aim 2: Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating and problem solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers.

Aim 3: Children will explore ways to represent ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects and actions through symbols.

Aim 4: Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness and risk-taking.



RISK ASSESSMENTS

Next the staff and I carried out risk benefits on all the areas, outlining the benefits, learning outcomes, how they fitted into Aistear the curriculum framework and the procedures we would follow to ensure that policies were implemented.

The following are the steps we followed when assessing and recording the risk benefits. We examined the playground taking one area at a time and recording our findings on the following:

- We recorded the benefits.
- We identified the hazards that would affect the children.
- We evaluated the risk and decided on the precautions.
- We recorded the findings and the necessary controls.
- We realised the necessity to continually review and update when necessary.

Below is a sample of our risk benefit for the tyre area at The Glen Outdoor School for Early Learning. These are pictures of the area.

Benefits	Hazards & risks High/Med/Low	Who could be harmed & how	Action needed	By who and by when	Done
Physical, large motor, balance, co-ordination early maths, communication.	Falling off, breaking a bone, hurting another child or banging head. *Medium risk.*	Children if not properly introduced to the area and boundaries clearly explained.	• Children are introduced until they are familiar with them. • Hazards are discussed and children given an opportunity to add their own. • Staff are never far away	By staff from the start of the year until they are happy that children are safe and confident on their own.	Children have been introduced to this area for the full month of September.

Below are pictures of other areas for which the same process of risk assessment was carried out.

THE COMPETENT CHILD

Another important element of Glen Outdoor School is our philosophy about the competent child. Our strongest belief is that each and every child is competent, even the youngest baby. Accepting and working within this belief will lead us as educators to a new level of understanding and to actual changes in the way we work with children. A consequence of seeing young children as competent is that we also see children as having rights rather than just needs. All children are naturally inquisitive and this characteristic, if nurtured, results in attaining further knowledge and competence.

In the table below, the first column gives Sandseter's description of elements of risky play while the second column shows where we at Glen Outdoor School for Early Learning can identify with Sandster's elements.

Great Heights	Trees, rocks, tyres, swings and slide
Great Speed	Embankments, swings, bikes and trampoline
Dangerous tools	Saws, hammers and nails, fire, spades
Dangerous Elements	Water, stream, fire, bridge and grass slopes
Rough & Tumble	Slopes, imaginative play and football pitch
Disappear/ Get Lost	Behind shed, playhouse, poly-tunnel, under climbing frame

These various outdoor activities afford children the opportunity to experience risky play and enable us to provide a curriculum that fits with Aistear and Síolta.

Although the evidence is anecdotal, after two years we can see several benefits that the outdoors has over indoors as follows:

- Children have much more time and are more relaxed.
- Children communicate clear messages of their likes and dislikes, choosing where they want to play, showing tolerance of and respect for each other which leads to much less conflict. We feel this is due to being outside with freedom to run, jump and shout, releasing any frustrations that may arise.
- We experience fewer accidents due to larger working areas with more space to move.
- The outdoors provides more risks, challenges and freedom of movement, with fewer restrictions, for children with special/ additional needs. It is more stimulating, encourages more questioning, thinking and predicting. Weather is more sensory stimulating as is the natural elements.
- Gives children an appetite, healthy lunch boxes rarely have food left over.

A TYPICAL DAY AT GLEN OUTDOOR

Opening hours are from 7.45am to 6pm, Monday to Friday. Staff start by carrying out a check in the outdoor classroom for trespassers (cats, dogs etc.) and children join in the process as they arrive. A risk assessment is also carried out by staff and children together. Questions asked: Are all areas outside safe? Are there things needing to be carried out in order to leave some areas safe? Are there just some areas out of bounds for today? Do we stay inside today as outside is dangerous? Children very soon become aware of potential hazards/dangers and assess the risk attached to each and arrive at an appropriate solution with staff.

Winter last year gave many opportunities for decision making as the snow was safe but there were icy parts which needed extra care and at times were out of bounds, but children were never kept indoors completely. When there is heavy rain and the stream is fast and high, children deem this area out of bounds and don't go there. High wind conditions are the one time that outside may be deemed unsafe for the full day.

The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky

(Margaret McMillan)

Our biggest challenge since opening The Glen Outdoor School has been to relieve parent's fears of children getting flu from being outside in the rain. We inform parents of the need for warm clothing, thermal underwear and woolen socks for underneath the wet gear which we provide. We hold regular meetings, listening to parents concerns/issues and we work together. We encourage parents to see their children as competent and allow them time to learn life skills such as dressing, undressing themselves, feeding themselves and making healthy choices with regard to the food they eat and take in their lunchbox.

There is no such thing as bad weather just inappropriate clothing.

(Margaret McMillan)

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RISKY PLAY IN THE EARLY YEARS SETTING

LIZ O'ROURKE Manager, Cairdeas Childcare Centre, Kinnegad

My name is Liz O'Rourke, I am the manager of Cairdeas childcare centre, Kinnegad. We are a community setting and have been operating from our purpose-built childcare centre since January 2005. We provide both full time and part time childcare for babies, junior toddlers, pre-schoolers and after schools. We have an attendance of up to 100 children per day.

When parents choose an early years setting for their children no doubt their prime consideration is that their child will, first and foremost, be safe. This is obviously of paramount importance to the early years practitioner also. Indeed, an early years practitioner's worst nightmare is that a child has a serious accident while in their care.

It then falls to the practitioner to balance the instinct to look after the child's safety and well-being, the necessity to comply with Pre-school and Health and Safety Regulations and the urge to nurture their natural development.

Parents are often cautious about allowing children the freedom to play outside in housing estates or built up areas due to the dangers of traffic or children wandering off and getting themselves into trouble. If parents are unavailable to accompany their children outside to supervise them they are more likely to put them in front of the television or computer thinking that this is the 'safe option'.

It is therefore imperative that we as early years practitioners encourage children to explore the outdoors as much as possible. The obvious benefit of outdoor play to a child is the benefits to their physical health, encouraging good habits and a love for exercise in later life.

Taking risks can have positive implications in terms of children's developmental, social and emotional needs, as well as their overall health. Play commentators tend to claim that eliminating risks deprives children of the opportunity to assess them efficiently, and so they are unequipped to deal with any situations they may encounter in later life. It is reasoned that, by providing the opportunities for children to manage their own risks in a controlled environment, they will learn vital life skills needed for adulthood, and gain the experience needed to face the unpredictable nature of the world (Gill, 2007). Gill argues that denying children this opportunity could result in a society of risk-averse citizens, unable to cope with everyday situations; or in children simply finding more dangerous locations to carry out their risk-taking behaviour (Gill, 2007).

We are very lucky that Cairdeas is built on a large site of almost an acre. We have several small outside play areas which are fenced for security and have a safety play surface. We also have a large back garden which is mostly in grass with a small section concreted over where children can play basketball and ride trikes and bikes. We also have a large commercial climbing frame which consists of several flights of steps, a bridge and a spiral slide.

I have no doubt that many early years centres will be envious of so much outdoor space with plenty of room for children to run around and 'let off steam'. Over the years we have learnt that in order to make the most beneficial use of our outdoor areas we need to give children lots more challenges and more opportunities for risk taking. It is possible to create a wonderland for children in your outdoor space without spending a fortune on purpose built play equipment. In order to make the most beneficial use of our outdoor areas we need to give children lots more challenges, for example, hills and steps to climb, areas to hide in and explore, different types of plants and vegetation to investigate, different textures to experience.

We have built a large outdoor sandbox which has a removable lid. We have filled this sandbox with earth. Children enjoy manipulating this material. They add water to make mud. They fill buckets and transport it around the garden. Obviously they might be going home dirty but parents accept this as a side effect of children learning and exploring in their play.

Our outdoor area is an on-going project which we are trying to develop into a fascinating area for our children to explore and learn while taking managed risks. Risk taking permits the children to push themselves to the limits of their capacities and encourages them to progress. Taking an 'I can do it' attitude is an important characteristic for effective learners. Encouraging children to enjoy challenges increases their persistence and learning ability.

Consider risky play in the indoor environment. When we tell our parents that our wobblers (6 to 18 month olds) were baking today, the parents reaction is usually 'Oh isn't that cute', never really thinking that their child was actively involved in the process. Only when they see the photograph of their child holding the mixer or cracking the eggs do they

realise that we meant what we said. There is no doubt that allowing a very young child to hold an electric mixer in their hand when it is switched on might sound reckless on the part of the practitioner but when the child is gently supervised the reward is an excitement and sense of achievement that the child gets which is obvious.

Risky play might be allowing our 2 to 3 year olds to play with large pebbles from the beach. Assessing the risks we might be afraid that the child would throw the stone and hurt another child or break a window. Our experience, though, is that once children are well supervised and are given clear instructions they will use the stones in many creative ways. They will build a pretend fire, they will make a path that they can then follow practising their balance and co-ordination; they will use the stones as all kinds of foods for picnics.

Early years practitioners are often guilty of stunting a child's ability to engage in risky play by intervening in or disturbing risky play. We need to train ourselves to supervise and encourage rather than interfere.

There is such a large emphasis in the early years care and education sector on health and safety and compliance with Pre-school Regulations that they are often seen as one of the obstacles to allowing children to engage in risky play whether indoors or outdoors. It is our experience in Cairdeas that as long as risk assessments have been carried out and there are strong policies and procedures in place in relation to how children are supervised, there is no reason why children should not be encouraged to take risks in their play. The benefits far outweigh the disadvantages and the child is always the winner.

REFERENCE

Gill, T. (2007) *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society.* London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

Useful Resources on Play

The following resources are available to borrow from Barnardos Training and Resource Service. You can search Barnardos' Training and Resource Service library catalogue on www.barnardos.ie/library

Too Safe for Their Own Good: Helping Children Learn About Risks and Lifeskills
National Children's Bureau Enterprises, 2011.

Risk & Adventure in Early Years Outdoor Play: Learning from Forest Schools
Sage Publications, 2011.

Lens on Outdoor Learning
Redleaf Press, 2010.

Reclaiming Childhood
Routledge 2009.

Foundations of Playwork
OUP, 2008.

The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children: Learning What Comes Naturally
Da Capo Lifelong, 2008.

Natural Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul
Exchange Press, 2008.

The Indoor and Outdoor Learning Environment
High/ Scope Press, 2008. (DVD)

No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society
London: Caloustie Gulbenkian Foundation, 2007.

Outdoors for Everyone: enjoying outdoor play in the early years
Learning through landscapes, 2007. (DVD)

Playing Outdoors; Spaces and Places Risk and Challenge.
Open University Press, 2007.

Nurture Through Nature: Promoting outdoor play for young children
Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association (IPPA), 2006.

50 exciting things to do outside
Lawrence Educational Publications, 2005.

Playing Outside: Activities, ideas and inspiration for the early years
David Fulton Publishers Ltd, 2004.

Power of play: A play curriculum in action
Irish Preschool and Playgroups Association (IPPA), 2004.

Exercising Muscles and Minds
National Early Years Network, 2003.

Outdoor Play in the Early Years: Management and Innovation
David Fulton, 2002.

Outdoors with Young People: A Leader's guide to Outdoor Activities, the Environment and Sustainability
Russell House Publishing, 1998.