



Give us a go!

Children and young people's views on play and risk-taking

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1. Introduction

This report was produced to inform the Playday 2008 campaign. Playday is coordinated by Play England, working in partnership with Play Wales, Play Scotland and PlayBoard Northern Ireland. Playday is a national campaign, now in its 21st year, which celebrates children's right to play with thousands of children and young people out to play at locally organised events. The focus of this year's Playday is risk in play.

This report presents findings from a qualitative study of children and young people's experiences and perceptions of risk in play. The body of research commissioned for the Playday 2008 campaign has four parts. First, this qualitative study. Second, a survey conducted by ICM of adults and children's perceptions of risk in play, which is shaped in part by the findings from this qualitative research. In addition, a qualitative study of play providers, investigating the benefits and challenges of providing adventurous play opportunities for children and young people. Finally, there is a literature review, which was produced by Play England's policy and research department.

This qualitative research has been conducted and produced by the National Children's Bureau research and evaluation department.

2. Methodology

The purpose of the study was to find out how children and young people experience risk in their play and what factors affect their risk taking activities.

The main objectives of the study were to explore the following topics:

- The types of risky play that children and young people engage in and what kinds of risks they encounter.
- How children and young people talk about risk, and whether they describe it in positive or negative terms.
- How children and young people assess risk, and what constrains them from taking risks.
- Finally, whether children and young people think they have enough opportunities to encounter risk in their play and whether they would like more opportunities to do so.

In order to explore the issue of risk in play in focus groups with children and young people, the researchers needed to think about how these two concepts could be introduced in discussions with children and young people.

In recent years, the term 'risk' has been increasingly used in discourses about children's play. Writers such as Gill (2007) have argued that we live in an increasingly risk averse society where children are denied the opportunities to take risks in play. The government has also recognised the issue of risk in play and, in the 2007 *Children's Plan*, states its commitment to helping parents and carers balance children's safety with the opportunity for them to explore new situations, dispel myths about risk and promote positive attitudes to challenge in play.

When engaging children and young people in dialogue about risk and play, the researchers needed to think carefully about how to introduce the concept of risk in the groups. It was considered that the concept may not have much meaning for young people in the context of play, or that it may have a negative connotation because of the chance of injury, damage or loss. The researchers wanted to ensure that the understanding of 'risk' included challenge as well as hazard.

To try and convey the complexity of the concept of risk in the focus groups, we talked about challenge, excitement, uncertainty and adventure in play.

Consideration was also given as to how to identify a shared understanding of the term 'play' in discussions with the children and

young people. The widely accepted definition of play, as outlined by the former Children's Play Council states that:

'Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour, that actively engages the child.'
(Children's Play Council et al, 2000)

While this definition is useful, researchers did not want to be too prescriptive about what was considered play. Our hope was to identify and work with what the children and young people considered as play, in the context of risk, rather than to impose a definition and so limit opportunities for their discussions.

While the activities some older children engaged in could be said to fall within the former Children's Play Council definition, they did not use the word 'play' to describe what they were doing. These older children no longer considered themselves as playing. In order to help children and young people to talk about play and to get away from the idea that only younger children play, researchers asked the focus group participants to talk about 'activities' that they liked to do in their free time.

This approach led to a discussion not just about traditional play activities or, for older children, self-directed activities, but to discussion about sports and outings, both with parents and youth groups. Although some of these activities are organised and managed, to some extent, by others, they have been included in the analysis as these are the examples which some children and young people gave when they were asked to talk about risk and challenge in their active recreational lives.

A range of children and young people were consulted for this study. Seven focus groups were held in three locations in England. Groups were held in inner city, rural and small town locations. The groups were held in a variety of types of setting: adventure playgrounds, and primary and secondary schools.

The focus groups had six to eight children in each group. Two focus groups were held with children from Year 4 (aged 8 to 9 years). Three groups were held with Year Six pupils (aged 10 to 11 years) and two groups were held with Year Eight pupils (aged 12 to 13 years). Five of the groups were held in schools and two in adventure playgrounds. The sessions lasted for, on average, 45 minutes each. In addition, the researchers visited another adventure playground, where less formal discussions were held with approximately eight children from a wide range of age groups. Sixty-two children and young people were consulted in total.

The focus groups covered the same key questions and the same activities were used with each group. Various methods of eliciting information were used in the focus groups.

For some questions, pair work was used: the children or young people were asked to consider a question; they then discussed this with a partner; and then they fed back to the group what their partners had said. This made it easier to obtain the opinions of all children, even those who may have been uncomfortable about speaking out in a group situation. For other discussion topics, full group work was used.

In order to ensure that the groups considered a wide range of play activities, some of the discussion in the focus groups featured picture cues – for example pictures of children swinging on ropes, climbing trees and skateboarding – to prompt them to think about times when they had been playing independently. The pictures were not meant to provide an exhaustive list of all challenging play that they could engage in, but a starting point for discussion. Children and young people were asked to discuss the images in groups and then return to the whole group setting to feedback their ideas and opinions.

Children and young people were also asked to think about play in particular contexts, in order to focus their discussion on how risks may occur in different play environments. Pictures of four environments were used: a living room, a street, a playground and some woods. In pairs, children discussed how they would play in these particular environments and whether they felt that they would be allowed by adults to engage in these activities.

Staff in the settings selected participants for the focus groups. Staff were asked to select a mixture of boys and girls for each group. Before the groups took place, information sheets were provided for both parents and children, and parental consent was obtained.

The focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using the Framework Analysis approach. Data from the groups were summarised in a thematic framework derived from both the study objectives and the issues raised in the focus groups.

3. Findings

3.1 What risks and challenges do children and young people encounter in their free time, and what activities give rise to risk and challenge?

Most children and young people were able to talk about when they had taken a risk or engaged in challenging, exciting play or activities. Their readiness to engage in talking about challenge and adventure suggests that this is something they have experienced and which they can relate to. They do seem to have opportunities to engage in challenging risky play or activities.

The kinds of activities that they spoke about can be considered under four separate headings:

- Traditional play
- Exploring new places or activities
- Organised sports
- Commercially provided play opportunities

‘Traditional play’ involved engaging in independent activities, sometimes using play equipment and sometimes making use of opportunities in the natural environment. The kinds of activities they talked about included, for example, swinging high on swings, using playground equipment like climbing frames, climbing trees, and riding bikes and scooters fast.

One girl described jumping on the trampoline as an example of when she has engaged in risky play:

‘Sometimes I try to go really high, but sometimes when I land, I go a bit too near the edge, and it gets quite scary then.’
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

Another girl talked about swinging high on the swings:

‘When I go on the swings I go really high... It’s fun to just be going through the air but I get a bit scared in case I fall.’
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

A number of children also talked about the risk or challenge involved in exploring new places, engaging in new activities and doing something for the first time. One girl talked about exploring new places:

‘When I play out sometimes we go, we find a new place and we just go exploring in there even though there might be something or someone there. We go just to have a look.’
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

Children and young people also talked about more organised risk taking activities. These activities were supervised by parents or other adults and were more prescribed. Activities mentioned included ‘extreme sports’ like rock climbing, paragliding and abseiling and organised sports like horse riding and rugby. These risky activities were supervised by parents or other adults and were not, therefore, consistent with some definitions of play. When young people were asked to describe risky challenging activities however, they often mentioned these kinds of activities.

One boy describes the risk he identifies as being inherent in playing rugby:

‘I like doing rugby because there’s a real chance of getting hurt and I like getting hurt. Well I don’t like getting hurt ... you get that sort of feeling that, sort of 50/50 chance whether you’re going to get hurt or not.’
(Secondary school-aged boy, rural)

Finally, children and young people talked about commercially provided risk-taking opportunities, for example going on roller coasters or visiting theme parks.

‘My nan and granddad live in Wales, and in Wales there’s this place called Folyflam, and in Folyflam there’s lots of rides ... and then there’s a big astronaut sort of aeroplane ride, and then there’s this big astronaut holding lots and lots of aeroplanes, and you can go in the aeroplanes, up and down and it’s great fun.’
(Primary school-aged girl, rural)

An interesting feature of the discussion about activities or play that children talked about when taking risks, was that nearly all risks seem to occur in outside places: woods, playgrounds, gardens and theme parks. Children and young people did not talk about risks occurring in indoor play.

3.2 The nature of the risks

Having clarified what children and young people consider to be risky or challenging in their activities, play and free time, the focus groups attempted to explore what is the nature of the risk in the activity. For example, bike riding is an activity that some children and young people identified as being risky, but how did they articulate what constituted

the risk inherent in bike riding? What exactly is it that makes bike riding risky for some people?

Broadly speaking, there are three different components to risk, as identified in the focus groups, which defined the nature of the risks children encountered in play. Play or activities can be physically, emotionally or imaginatively risky, or a combination of any of these.

Physically challenging risks occur in certain contexts, for example, walks over rough terrain, building tree houses, riding bikes fast, and climbing up high. The risk that is identified by the children and young people is the danger of physical injury. When they engage in an activity there is the danger that injury may occur.

Here, a girl talks about playing on a swing at the top of a hill:

‘Because if the swing’s on top of a hill, and if you fall off, you’ll roll down the hill and you might hurt yourselves.’
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

Sometimes activities are described as emotionally risky. Here, the risk is that the child will experience some negative emotion as a result of the activity they are undertaking. They may feel fear, either as the result of worry about a physical danger, or it may be the fear of getting lost, getting into trouble, or feeling isolated.

Other negative emotions mentioned by children were worry and anxiety:

‘When I was building the tree house, I did do it, but I felt really scared.’
(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

Children also here described being scared of heights – a label that they seemed to apply to themselves very definitely:

‘Climbing up a zip wire was scary because I’m scared of heights.’
(Secondary school-aged boy, town)

The third risk type identified is the idea of imaginative risk. A child may imagine some negative outcome to the activity that they are engaging in, which does not have an obvious basis in reality but the situation or activity that they are involved in may induce uncomfortable or ‘scary’ thoughts.

In such cases, children and young people may recognise that there is nothing directly physically challenging about what they are doing, but they can imagine a risk. One boy when looking at a picture of some

children paddling in a stream talks about how he wouldn't like to undertake the activity because there may be crocodiles in the water.

Another girl talks about going to an unfamiliar place and feeling scared:

'Going to the park and our lady's church, it's scary.'
(Secondary school-aged girl, town)

Her friend reports it's because she imagines she will get shot:

'Because she thinks she's going to get shot.'
(Secondary school-aged boy, town)

Some activities provide a combination of physical, emotional and imaginative challenges. Physically challenging risks can be emotionally or imaginatively risky. Swinging on a rope swing over water is physically challenging, but the uncertainty about what would happen if you fell into the water from the swing also provides a level of emotional risk. In addition, the child imagines what would be under the water, which adds a further level to the risk experienced.

Looking at a picture of children swinging over water on a rope, one boy commented:

'Well we liked this picture because it looks like fun and it's adventurous, and what we said was, oh, what we said was we would say it looks a bit like really fun, because if you dropped down there, there might be something down there, like really, really exciting things. Yeah, and if you fall off you would drown, because if you hit the ground you'd probably, like, break your neck.'
(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

The focus groups' discussions provide evidence that children and young people are engaging in what they consider to be risks, at various times, in their play. The focus groups do not attempt to address how often these risks are occurring but they allow a picture of the range of things that children and young people find challenging to develop as well as illustrating the ways in which they find these things challenging.

In the focus groups, not all children or young people agreed about what was risky yet acceptable, when something became physically, emotionally or imaginatively challenging. Children and young people, as individuals, judge and assess risks in the activities that they undertake or are considering undertaking, differently from each other. These issues are explored in the next section.

3.3 Assessing risk

Through the focus groups, the researchers were also interested in exploring how children make decisions about whether an activity is too risky to undertake.

Pictures of risky activities were used to explore how children and young people assess risk and what kinds of play or activity they felt were too risky. The focus group participants were also asked to think about a time in their lives when they had done something risky, or had stopped short of doing something risky. They were also asked about the factors that had helped them to reach a decision about the level of risk involved. From their responses, it was possible to build up a picture of how children assess risk and to explore what strategies and mechanisms they use.

Risk assessments usually involve a process whereby decisions are made about the likelihood of something bad happening, the severity of consequence if it does happen, and whether the benefits of taking on that risk might outweigh the possible negative consequences. From the focus groups, researchers could identify these elements of the risk assessment process from the way that children talk about risks engaged with and risks avoided. The children and young people drew on various sources of information to gauge the likelihood of something bad occurring, they considered the nature and severity of any consequences, and they compared the positive and negative impacts of an activity or play experience and decided which is greatest.

To assess the likelihood of bad outcomes resulting from risk taking, it can be seen that children and young people in the focus groups draw on information from a range of sources.

They may try something once and use this experience to decide whether they would want to undertake the activity again:

‘I think that when I was quite young, I was scared to go on a long water slide, and I really felt like doing it, so I tried doing it, and afterwards I felt, I, it was, afterwards I really enjoyed it because I like going underwater, and it, when we got to the end, and I felt like I wanted to do it again.’

(Primary school-aged girl, rural)

Sometimes the experience made children decide it was a risk they would not want to take again:

‘I was standing on a platform and I was shaking. I knew that I’d done it ... and would never do it again because I was that scared.’

(Secondary school-aged girl, rural)

They may watch friends take risks and use this experience to inform their judgement. One boy comments on watching his friend do a BMX stunt:

‘My friend did it and he fell off and he broke his ankle and his arm, and I didn’t want that to happen to me, so I didn’t do it.’
(Primary school-aged boy, city)

They may use anecdotal or written evidence of what had happened to other people that undertook the risky activity. Here, a girl talks both about what she has heard about the danger of an activity and about evidence of how the risk was too great for someone else:

‘When I was at this club and we went on a trip, there’s this like, it’s like a beach but there’s like a kind of a lake and there’s a light bit of water that you can see it, and you can dip your foot in it, and then I was going to do it, but then when my friend done it, she dipped her foot in the water, she slipped over and she nearly drowned into it, we called ‘help’ and then I didn’t want to do it again. And then there was this like, there’s this picture of a person who done it and they died as well, they drowned’.
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

The second aspect of risk assessment was consideration of the nature and severity of the possible consequences. The nature of the risks children encountered in their play have been described. In talking about how they assess risk, children and young people talked about the fear of getting hurt, or just feeling worried, scared or unsafe.

One boy commenting on a picture of children said he would not do it because:

‘If you fall the current could take you into the rocks or you could drown.’
(Primary school-aged boy, town)

They may also fear the unknown. In response to looking at the picture of children exploring in a stream, one girl talks about why she wouldn’t want to jump off some rocks:

‘Well I don’t think I have, but my dad, I think he has gone, we went to the seaside and he jumped off a rock. I was only small, I was with my mum, he jumped off a rock into the sea, he said you could jump in, because I had armbands on, but I wouldn’t because of the fish, and I thought there was something different in there.’
(Primary school-aged girl, rural)

In addition, in assessing risk, children sometimes entertain an imaginary picture of what could happen to them to assess whether something is risky or not:

'I, well we went into a place that there was a thing, the death train, but I wouldn't do it because I, because it'll get really deep, and what stopped me from doing it is that I'm just scared that, because I'll get so steep and it just goes flat, but then that, I'm scared that I might just fall and hit my head on the bottom of it.'
(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

However, when assessing risk, children and young people considered factors that might mitigate either the likelihood or the possible consequences of a risky activity. They described considering how their own skills and attributes will impact on their ability to take the risk without then incurring negative consequences. Children and young people often refer to their age, stating that they are 'too young':

'I went to this kind of group play thing at Weston Super Mare, and there was this kind of thing that went up and really quickly down, and I couldn't, well I went on it last year, but when I was a lot younger I didn't like it, I didn't go on it, it was a bit too scary.'
(Primary school-aged girl, rural)

They considered their experience, strength or skill, which could either deter them from taking the risk or encourage them to take it. One boy talks about doing stunts on a bike:

'Because like you've got to be good at it to be able to do it. I don't know. I can't do it. You've got to be very athletic to pull the bike and do ... and look down and see what jump you're doing, get yourself in the air.'
(Secondary school-aged boy, city)

They also recognised that having the right equipment or safety measures for the activity helped to minimise risk. One boy talks about his experiences of skateboarding:

'Well I felt a bit safe, because when you've got like, wear the helmet, it feels like your head is, like, safe, so when I fell it didn't hurt. I sometimes wear armbands, like, for your elbows and knees, just in case you fall or landed on anything, we might fall somehow, and so I wear, so we wear bands.'
(Primary school-aged boy, city)

Children and young people also described social context as a factor in considering whether to take a risk. Some young people said they were more likely to take a risk if their friends or adults are present, or had decided to take a risk because others were there, either because other

people encouraged them or because they did not want to back down in front of others:

‘Well, there was this really horrible slide at Cattle Country when I was little, about, I don't know, two years old, and I was just, and I wanted to really go down it but I was a bit afraid, and I really wanted to go down it but I didn't want to, so, and then my dad came up with me, and I went down it, as well, and then after a while I got used to it so I just went down on my own.’

(Secondary school age girl, rural)

Sometimes young people cannot articulate fully what it is that informs their assessment and contributes to their decision about whether to take a risk. Below, one girl talks about her fear of going on a slide at a theme park:

‘Once I went to Cattle Country and they have a massive, massive death slide, and I had to get my friend, I couldn't go down it, so I had to get my friend to sit by me to go down it with me, but in the end I couldn't do it because I was too frightened, I mean I'm not scared of heights, but I just didn't feel right doing it.’

(Primary school-aged girl, rural)

Young people and children in the focus groups used a range of strategies to reach a conclusion about whether an activity is too risky for them to undertake. They considered past experience, information from others, and observation. They were influenced by other people, adults and friends, both by their support and any pressure that others may exert to encourage them to take part.

Consideration was given to the impact of factors that will reduce the risk, such as safety equipment or their individual differences, their personalities, skills and attributes. This information allows them to decide what the outcome of the risk is likely to be. All of these factors inform the assessment of a particular risk.

The final element of risk assessment is the benefit young people see from engaging in a risky activity. Even in hazardous activities, the inherent dangers are accepted if the young person feels the benefits are sufficient and if their desire to enjoy these benefits overrides their fears about the activity. The next section explores the benefits that young people identified from the activities that they engaged in.

3.4 Benefits of risky play

In the focus groups, children and young people identified various positive feelings or outcomes arising from risky activities. These fell into five groups:

- physical and emotional sensations evoked by fear
- pride and self-esteem
- developing physical capabilities
- new experiences and perspectives
- feelings of independence and freedom.

Children and young people talked about feelings of fun and enjoyment. Other words used were 'excitement', 'adventure', 'amazement' and 'thrill'. Some young people spoke about taking risks as being 'cool':

'Because it's cool doing new stuff and when you hang upside down and stuff it's fun because you're a bit scared and then you sometimes fall off as well which is funny.'
(Primary school boy, city)

Children and young people also spoke about the positive physical sensations that they enjoyed when taking risks. Some of these benefits are pleasant feelings that adults would recognise. Children and young people talked about the feeling of the wind blowing on them. This boy cited the pleasant physical sensations of going fast on a bike:

'What felt good about it was the wind going in my face and accelerating.'
(Secondary school-aged boy, city)

Children and young people also spoke positively about physical sensations that are not usually regarded as being pleasant, for example, feeling sick or having 'butterflies' in the stomach. They spoke of feeling 'sick but excited' and their hearts beating 'really fast'. One girl spoke about swinging high:

'You get butterflies and your belly comes up, it feels like you're falling from the top.'
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

Another spoke about going on slides:

'I like to go to slides because they make my belly feel funny.'
(Primary school-aged boy, city)

Some of these children and young people saw the element of danger as positive in itself. They enjoyed being scared. A major factor in making risky activities worth undertaking, and providing some of the excitement and novelty of risks which children enjoyed, seems to be the element of danger. In these cases activities were described through contrasts, for example, fun but scary, cool but sick making:

'Doing scary things is fun or enjoyable'.
(Secondary school-aged girl, town)

Children and young people talk about feeling anxious and happy at the same time. Skateboarding made one young person feel this mixture of emotions:

'I did it once and I did OK and I felt happy and scared at the same time. I couldn't stop myself.'
(Secondary school-aged boy, rural)

This contrasting talk captures well the nature of the risks and how children feel about them. Risky activities are something out of the ordinary, a bit 'on the edge'. There is the potential for the activities to go one way or the other – towards disaster and injury or success and thrill:

'You feel excited because you're out of your comfort zone but enjoying yourself.'
(Secondary school-aged girl, rural)

The combination of feeling exposed or vulnerable to danger, and yet knowing that the risk was not as great as it seemed, could also be a pleasurable experience. Young people seemed to enjoy the thrill of feeling great danger but knowing the real danger was limited. One child, talking about climbing on rocks at the beach said:

'You feel like because you are standing on a rock you feel as though you are going to fall down 1000 ft but you are not because the sea is just beneath you.'
(Secondary school-aged boy, rural)

Children and young people also spoke about a sense of achievement and pride when they had done something they saw as risky, and particularly if they had had to overcome initial reluctance. When one young person had overcome their fear and climbed high up a tree, they said they felt:

'Like I'd won a gold medal.'
(Secondary school-aged boy, town)

The feeling of overcoming their fears increased their confidence and provided feelings of self worth:

'I felt quite proud. I'm not that good with heights either but I was proud that I'd done it, whereas if I hadn't have done it I would ... wouldn't be able to do it again.'
(Secondary school-aged girl, rural)

The feelings of self worth extended, with some young people, to a sense of credibility with their friends:

'If you do something scary it makes you feel big and you can tell you friends.'

(Primary school-aged boy, town)

'I went, in my primary school I went to a PGL camp, used to go there for a week. You had to climb up this tree, stand on a platform for a trapeze, and because I was scared of heights I was standing on the platform and I was shaking. All my friends cheering me on and I did it. I was really proud of myself when I grabbed hold of it because I knew that I'd done it and I would never do it again because I was that scared.'

(Primary school-aged girl, rural)

Risky activities, in some cases, also provided the young people with a physical challenge. People talked about how physical activities helped to improve their fitness, build up their muscles and provide exercise. They described how the setting of physical challenges to themselves also led to positive feelings.

One boy articulates how he challenges himself to overcome his fears through rock climbing:

'Well because I go with a youth club and every time I go I always go for higher ones so then I can get used to heights because I'm not that good with heights. And then I can conquer my fear and just get used to it really.'

(Secondary school-aged boy, rural)

Risky activities also provided novelty and opportunities to do things out of the ordinary that children and young people seemed to appreciate greatly. They enjoyed seeing the world from a different perspective. When they talked about climbing trees they talked about being able to see all around:

'Well it's exciting, because when you get to the top, then you see all these things around you. It's like being on top of the world.'

(Primary school-aged boy, city)

They also relished the chance to explore new places or opportunities. One boy talked about paragliding, which was something he had recently done for the first time. He described how he enjoyed undertaking the new activity and also articulated how doing something new gave him a new experience – being high and enjoying the quiet:

'Like you go up really high and everything, you can't hear anything, it's like really quiet.'

(Secondary school-aged boy, rural)

They also enjoyed the novelty of uncertainty that is part of the essence of risk. They simply liked the fact that they did not know what was going to happen next.

One boy talked about skateboarding as a new activity:

‘It gives you a rush, like say if you’re going along and then you don’t know if you’re going to fall off, but then you never know what’s going to come next.’

(Primary school-aged boy, city)

Abseiling was another good example of the idea that things are uncertain and unknown which some children seemed to enjoy:

‘Because you’re only being held up by a rope and you’ve got to lean back and you don’t know what’s going to happen. It’s like the fear of nothing behind you.’

(Secondary school-aged boy, rural)

Finally there is the feeling that taking risks brings independence and a feeling of freedom. One young person said that when they are climbing trees they feel liberated and confident. Others said they liked to climb trees because:

‘I feel free and confident, and on top of the world because I’m really high.’

(Primary school-aged boy, city)

Play fighting with sticks made them feel:

‘Like you are young and you can do what you want.’

(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

Children and young people articulated a range of benefits arising from engaging in risky activities, that ranged from the practical, such as improvements in fitness, to less tangible benefits, like heightened confidence and imaginative enjoyment. Risks that provided an emotional challenge led to feelings of self worth, pride, and confidence.

Whether these benefits led to increased competence or confidence in other areas of the young people’s lives is difficult to gauge from the focus groups. Certainly, children and young people said that doing a risky activity for the first time meant they were more confident about undertaking that activity again in the future.

A girl talks about her experience of going rock climbing with her youth group:

‘Well because I go with the youth club and every time I go I always go for higher ones so then I can get used to heights because I’m not that good with heights. And then I can conquer my fear and just get used to it really.’
(Secondary school-aged girl, town)

Children and young people, however, did not talk about increased confidence in one area leading to increased confidence in another.

Having identified in the focus groups that children and young people saw risk as a relevant part of their lives, researchers were also interested in exploring whether the children and young people felt that they had enough opportunities to take risks. The next section explores this issue.

3.5 Do children and young people have enough opportunities to undertake risky activities?

As evidenced, young people are able to talk about risk taking activities and go through a process to assess whether activities are too risky. The literature around risk and play increasingly suggests that, currently, children and young people do not have enough opportunities to take risks in their daily lives. Researchers sought therefore to explore with the children and young people whether they felt they had enough opportunities for risky play or activities. The results were mixed; some children and young people said that they were able to engage in enough risk taking. Others felt that this was not the case.

It is important to note that children and young people did not generally talk here about wanting to take more risks in their ‘traditional’ play. When asked to describe whether they felt they had enough opportunities for risky play or activities, their thoughts tended towards opportunities for more extreme activities, such as going on roller coasters, or novel opportunities which they had not experienced before.

One exception is a girl who spoke about her desire to climb more trees:

‘I wish we could do more, because I wish we could, like, climb a lot more things, like climb big trees and go higher on the tree.’
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

Usually, however, when they did say that they would like to engage in more risky activities, what was uppermost in their minds was commercial opportunities – either venues such as theme parks they had been to before or ones that they had seen advertised and which looked exciting:

'I would like to do more daring stuff because I never went on the roller coaster because I was scared and it was my first time, so I want to do more daring stuff.'
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

They did also talk about going to new or different places, for example the sea, and learning things like new sports. The element of novelty seemed important to them. As has been seen, novel experiences provide challenge and allow children to engage in unfamiliar activities. Activities that are unfamiliar also provide the element of risk: specifically, the uncertainty about how the new experience will work out.

'I think I get enough opportunities because I have quite a big garden, and I have a climbing frame and some football goals in it, that kind of stuff. But at times I feel I can't get enough because it's just boring eventually when it's there, and I wish that I could go and do something different compared to doing the same thing.'
(Primary school-aged boy, city)

Children and young people also talked about being able to participate in more activities and have access to more facilities and more playground equipment:

'Well I think that, well I would like to do more activities, like when you're in the playground, like more stuff to do, like say you want to play tennis but you don't have the equipment for it, like more equipment so you can play with, yeah.'
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

'I live round the corner to Leah and I think there should be a park that's closer, and there should be more of the stuff around the streets that you like to do. Like there should be more football pitches and basketball courts and more playing activities to do whilst you're going out.'
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

Finally, the desire to have more risky activities seemed also to be tied up with the desire simply to have more freedom, and to be able to play out more:

'Where I am it's not, where I live we don't get to do much. I'd like to be able to do more.'
(Primary school-aged girl, city)

‘Well I'd like to go out more, maybe, because a lot of the times if I do go out I just go shopping, really, and that's not much of a thrill.’

(Primary school-aged girl, rural)

‘I would really like to go to the park which is quite far away from us, where I live, and just be able to go out with my friends anywhere.’

(Primary school-aged boy, city)

Overall, then, children and young people talked about wanting more access to commercial adventure opportunities, more chances to do new things, and more opportunities to play generally. It seems that, for some children at least, there is a desire for a change in circumstances that could lead to more excitement in their lives and more opportunities to play freely. This is the case even when children and young people do not explicitly state that they would like to take more risks.

3.6 Constraints on risk

Given that children would like to engage, to some extent, in more risks, what is it that constrains them from participating in risky activities? There are the internal constraints that they impose on themselves, when they have gone through a process of assessment, or more generally when they choose whether or not to take a risk. Other external factors seemed also to impact on their opportunities to take risks.

Children and young people suggested that parents may not want them to do certain things because they were worried that they might injure themselves. Children and young people also expressed an opinion that parents might not want them to ‘make a mess’ or break rules. This was highlighted when they talked about opportunities to take risks in the home:

‘Well inside I don't think I would be allowed to like, bounce on the sofa, because like the springs might break or something like that, they were expensive.’

(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

Children and young people felt that their parents were correct in not permitting them to do certain things. They did not generally seem to challenge their parents’ assessment of what was right. This did not stop them from wanting to do have more exciting play opportunities. But it is too simplistic to say that children and young people are keen to undertake risky activities and are prevented from doing so only by their parents’ more cautious assessments of risk.

Sometimes children and young people did express a desire for more freedom:

'They are our parents but they don't own us.'
(Primary school-aged boy, city)

Children and young people also talked about doing more daring things when their parents were not present. So even though they were aware of, and in most cases concurred with, their parents' feelings about risk and danger, some did admit to engaging in risky behaviour beyond what they felt their parents would allow.

One boy talked about climbing trees and his parents not knowing about it, another boy talked about playing on his climbing frame in his back garden and doing daring things:

'Sometimes, I have a climbing frame in my back garden and it's held up by lots of wooden poles together, and the metal ... together, and I climb on the top of it, hang upside down, or do lots of stuff compared to I would normally, that I'm not supposed to. Because it's cool doing new stuff and when you hang upside down and stuff it's fun because you're a bit scared and then you sometimes fall off as well which is funny. My mum and dad ... well normally they don't see me but sometimes they do, and when I do it at home ... I jump down and they don't see me.'
(Primary school-aged boy, city)

'Because your parents aren't there and they don't know you're doing it and, so you know you can do it.'
(Secondary school-aged girl, town)

One pair of children, when looking at pictures of different environments, described the activities they would like to do in that environment and they debated whether they would be allowed to engage in these activities. They felt that they would be freer to do all the activities if an adult wasn't present and that some of the activities, for example tree climbing, might not be allowed by an adult:

'We put yes for all of them because, but we would be able to do them if there was no-one there because no-one would know that we were doing it. And we were allowed freedom because there are not many people. But if we asked then, and our parents said no then fair enough, it would stop then.'
(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

As well as parental restrictions, children and young people suggested that other rules and expectations constrained them, although again they did not generally seem to think this was inappropriate. When shown a picture of some playground equipment, they were very aware of the correct way of using the playground equipment. Various

children said they would not be allowed to climb on top of the house in the adventure playground 'because you're not meant to be up there'.

They also highlighted the danger of using the equipment 'inappropriately':

'Well if we get on there we might fall off or might not be able to get back down.'

(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

'We wouldn't be allowed to climb on the roof because it would be too dangerous.'

(Primary school-aged girl, city)

Children and young people seemed to recognise that particular behaviours are not appropriate in certain contexts. In the focus groups the children and young people presented themselves as observing rules and using apparatus appropriately.

As well as parental misgivings and the existence of set rules, children additionally saw opportunities for risk in play being constrained by not having the time, being too busy, doing organised school activities and not having enough freedom. In relation to organised risk taking activities, some children commented that their parents were too busy to take them to activities or did not have enough money to pay for them:

'I would like to do more exciting things because I like the sense of thrill you get from them, but the only thing that stops me is how much stuff that our family has to do, like different, like spending things, and we don't, I suppose that's fun, but I mean it's not a sense of, you don't get a sense of thrill.'

(Primary school-aged boy, rural)

Finally, children and young people talked about not having many places to go, or places to play out, where they could engage in activities or play which was risky:

'Because round here there's not many places you could go, and like your mum and dad's coming with you, and if, like, your mum can't trust you as much as you think she could, she wouldn't let you go, because if it was really busy you could get, like, knocked over, or if you get hurt and no one would know that you were there.'

(Primary school-aged boy, city)

'Yeah, because where I live I live in a side road from the main road so I can't really go that far, and on our ... side there's not much to do because you can't really play with a ball or anything because there's loads of cars around.'

(Primary school-aged boy, city)

4. Conclusion

The research has given an interesting insight into the ways that children and young people experience risk in play, and has identified several interesting themes:

- Children do engage in risky play or activities, and these risks are sometimes commercial or adult-led and managed risks.
- Children are aware of adults' fears about risk and, in general, agree with them.
- Nevertheless, children say they undertake more risks when adults are not present.
- Some children express a desire to take more risks.
- Children's opportunities for risk taking are also constrained by limited opportunities for play in general.
- Children are sophisticated assessors of risk.
- Children enjoy taking risks and gain benefits from doing so.

Children and young people take various risks in their play and activities. The majority of these risky activities occur outside and children and young people perceive risk both in traditional free play activities and also in more organised activities. New places and experiences also provide risk for children and young people. Many children and young people also mentioned commercially provided risks, such as roller coasters and theme parks.

Children and young people did talk about activities such as climbing trees and playing on playground equipment, especially when prompted, but they tended to focus on organised and managed activities. This focus on managed and commercially provided risks may have been influenced by the difficulties of articulating to children what exactly is meant by risk in play. Terms like 'challenge', 'adventure' and 'excitement' may have led them to consider more managed and commercial activities. The researchers tried to address this by providing visual images of children engaging in more traditional activities.

Nevertheless, this research suggests that children do now live in a culture where an important element of opportunities for fun which involves risk are opportunities that are managed, adult-led and commercial.

Other research on risk and play suggests that there is a shift in the way that children play and take risks. Gill (2007) states that children's lives are far more constrained than they were 30 years ago and children

have less unstructured free time. Children spend four times more time being looked after by their parents than they did in 1975 (Gill 2007).

This relative lack of freedom may explain the shift towards more managed activities. Children and young people have their independence constrained, by school, after school activities and a lack of freedom to play outside. Researchers saw from the focus groups that, in some cases, children and young people may be more likely to take risks when adults are not present. The fact that children today are looked after by an adult for longer periods may have a bearing upon the degree of risk to which children subject themselves.

Adults' fears about the physical dangers inherent in risky play may also impact on the amount, and types, of risks that children take. It would be simplistic to suggest that children are very keen to take risks which parental fears prevent. When children and young people are prevented from taking risks because of adult constraints, they are, in general, happy with the boundaries that are provided for them and accept rules as sensible. They present a picture of sharing their parents' risk assessment rather than being coerced into inactivity by anxious parents – and indeed the presence of others including parents could sometimes provide encouragement to take a risk especially for the first time.

Nevertheless, they do sometimes want to push beyond parents' judgements. Young people described specific occasions or contexts when they either had done, or would do, more risky activities when their parents are not around.

A more obvious constraint on risk taking than parental prohibitions was limited opportunities for play in general. Children and young people expressed a desire for more freedom, novelty and access to places where they could play.

Children and young people's willingness to discuss risk in play suggests that they may still be able to find scope for risk-taking, whatever environment they find themselves in. The focus groups suggested that the desire to take risks is clearly still there and that children and young people build in and respond positively to risk in their activities.

The desire to have exciting commercially provided risk-taking opportunities, such as roller coasters rides and theme park amusements, also emerges strongly in the research. This desire for more commercial opportunities for risk is perhaps understandable since the purpose of these activities is to thrill and provide intense engagement with excitement. However, such opportunities are reliant on parental or other adult input that may not always be available and they are expensive. They also do not provide the opportunities for physical challenge that other play opportunities provide.

It therefore seems important that children do not lose the element of risk from everyday play. Children do need to be given the opportunities to play independently so that more traditional and child-led ways of taking risks in play are available to them, as well as commercially provided risks.

To support this, it is important to provide challenging play spaces, where children and young people can independently challenge themselves and where parents feel happy for them to go. There was support for this from the focus groups, when children and young people talked about having more places to play in their local neighbourhood. Given the emphasis children place on commercial risk opportunities, parents and playworkers are likely to need to work hard to encourage children to create their own opportunities for excitement and to build them into more everyday play opportunities.

The picture that the focus groups have provided of children and young people as active agents in risk taking in their play and activities underlines the importance of giving them opportunities to engage in risk. They are sophisticated assessors of whether a risk is acceptable to them and take into account different factors when considering what risks they will engage in, weighing up the likelihood of harm, the nature and severity of possible consequences, how likelihood and severity can be mitigated, the social context, and the potential benefits of taking a risk.

Given that previous experiences contribute to children's risk assessments, having the opportunity to build up experience of risks is likely to facilitate improvement in children's ability to assess risk. It may also be worthwhile for play providers to help children to develop their ability to assess risk using the strategies that children and young people already use.

The discussion in the focus groups also suggests that play providers should be wary of allowing the assumptions and feelings of adults to override those of children. Children's perspectives on the benefits of risk taking, and what they enjoy about risk taking, may differ from adult perspectives. For instance, children talked about feeling sick and having butterflies in the stomach as a positive thing. They also sometimes enjoyed the feeling of being scared. Adults may not regard these feelings as beneficial, but for the children and young people in these focus groups they were some of the positively good things about risk taking.

One clear finding from the focus groups was that children and young people enjoy taking risks and describe many positive impacts from doing so. The focus groups identified risk taking as being a valuable and enjoyable activity for young people. Participants talked enthusiastically about opportunities they have had to stretch

themselves by undertaking risky play or activities. The long-term benefits of risk taking cannot be ascertained from the focus group data, but these children and young people certainly expressed positive feelings. Children and young people described ways in which risk taking activities contribute to their social, physical and emotional development and talked about improved fitness levels, confidence, pride and self-esteem.

5. Bibliography

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6. Appendices

Appendix 1

Breakdown of groups

There were equal numbers of boys and girls in each group.

Group name	Type of setting	Type of area	Year group
Group 1	Gloucestershire primary school	Rural	4
Group 2	Gloucestershire primary school	Rural	6
Group 3	Gloucestershire secondary school	Rural	8
Group 4	London primary school	City	4
Group 5	London primary school	City	6
Group 6	Manchester adventure playground	Town/suburb	6
Group 7	Manchester adventure playground	Town/suburb	8
Group 8	London adventure playground	City	Various

Appendix 2

Focus group topic schedule

1. Introduction

Explain focus group. Run through ground rules. Explain that today we're going to talk about activities that they enjoy doing in their free time, either by themselves or with friends.

2. Warm up activity

Partner work. Ask children and young people to tell the person next to them what is the thing that they most enjoy doing in their free time. Everyone feeds back to the group.

3. Experiences of risk in play

Use an example from their activities/play that is risky or use independent scenario to develop the idea of adventurous play.

Partner work. Ask children and young people to think about something that they enjoy doing in their free time that they find adventurous, challenging, exciting or that makes them feel like they are taking a risk? Ask them to tell their partner, then feedback.

Explore further in the group.

4. Views about risk in play

Split participants into two groups – look at pictures of adventurous activities. Ask the groups to discuss what the activity is, whether they have ever done it and how they would feel about doing it. Feedback to group.

5. How risk is assessed

Ask children and young people to close their eyes and think about a time when they have done something and found it too scary, or not done something because they thought it would be too scary. Discuss as a group.

6. What constrains risk?

Divide the focus group into groups. Give the children pictures of four different environments: the street, the woods, a playground, and a living room.

Ask them to write on what they would like to do that was exciting/challenging in each environment. Tell them to put a tick by the activities they think they'd be allowed to do and a cross by the ones they wouldn't be allowed to do.

Everyone feeds back to the group explaining why they feel that they wouldn't be allowed to do certain activities.

Follow up question:

Do they think adults let them do activities that are challenging/ exciting enough?

7. Would they like the opportunity to take more risks?

Group discussion.



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