



# Risk and play

A literature review

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# 1. Introduction

This literature review accompanies the research carried out for Playday 2008. The theme this year is *Give us a go!*, which aims to give children the opportunity to experience more adventurous and challenging forms of play, and to counteract the apparent 'cotton wool culture'. The literature review looks at risk-taking in play, and aims to provide a balanced account of the empirical research and expert opinion. The objectives of the research were to assess whether or not children wish to take risks and what effects this may or may not have on their well-being; to look at risk management in play; and to assess possible trends in children's opportunities to take risks in play.

The literature was selected through a library search undertaken in March 2008, using the terms 'play', 'risk', 'challenge' and 'children'. The identified texts were assessed for their relevance and eligibility, based on our criteria. These criteria included: the benefits of risk in play; the kinds of behaviour that are perceived as risky; the types of risks described in the literature; accidents and the prevalence of harm; constraints to allowing risk in play; risk management; and risk aversion and the implications of this. It was decided to exclude conference proceedings and comment pieces in practice magazines. Relevant references in reviewed texts were also checked and included where eligible. Eligible texts were then summarised in a template. The Play Safety Forum was asked to comment on a draft and to provide further references, which were reviewed and included where eligible.

The review begins by drawing together texts on the benefits of risk-taking in play. We then look at public and parental attitudes towards risk in play. Following this, the review looks at risk-taking behaviour and perceptions of risk. There is then an examination of accidents and injuries, including an analysis of whether the safety measures that have been implemented are effective. The review then looks at risk management, including theories about risk assessment. After that, it examines how authors believe risk should be managed. Finally, the review looks at recent political policies on the issue of risk-taking in play.

## 2. Benefits of risk in play

A recurrent theme in the literature is that children benefit developmentally from risk in play, and that over-protection from risk can inhibit development. Ball notes that, because the benefits of play are not easily measured using accepted western scientific methods, they tend not to be appropriately considered in discussions about risk in play. He states: 'If the purpose of an activity is not directly considered, then a balance between risk and benefit cannot be struck and one is in danger of considering only one side of the equation.' (Ball, 2002)

It is argued that 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).

The National Playing Fields Association (now Fields in Trust) claims that play has various benefits to children, particularly play involving an element of risk. It argues that depriving children of this can result in a lack of experience to carry out tasks effectively, decreased opportunities for physical activity, an inability to cope in stressful situations, problems managing other forms of risk, and poor social skills (cited in Ball 2002).

Risk-taking is considered to have further benefits, which contribute to the development of desirable personality traits, including creativity (Susa and Benedict in Ball, 2002). Hughes has suggested that children's engagement in 'deep play', which is play that brings children into contact with risk or risk assessment, is an important device for coming to terms with human mortality, and to prevent children from having this experience is 'deliberately disabling and ethically unacceptable' (Hughes, 2001: 53).

Dweck suggests that risk can have positive implications for children's developmental needs. She has concluded that risk permits children to push themselves to the limits of their capacities and encourages them to progress. Drawing on her own and other people's research, she suggests that rising to challenges, embracing risks and taking an 'I can do it' attitude, are important characteristics of effective learners. Dweck argues that such personality traits are not biologically determined, but result from the attitudes of people around them. Encouraging children to

enjoy challenges rather than to shy away from them could, she argues, increase their persistence and learning abilities (Dweck, 2000). The UK Mental Health Foundation has argued that a lack of risk in play is damaging for children's well-being and resilience, and has been linked to health problems requiring professional assistance (Mental Health Foundation, 1999).

Christensen and Mikkelsen collected information about risk-taking with Danish children aged 10 to 12. Their ethnographic study, involving 35 children and 14 families, led the researchers to conclude that, when children engage in risky play, they are building their understanding and capacities for health. They noted how children individually assessed risks in relation to their perception of their bodily skills, embodying understanding of their health and past experiences. The children in this study were able to link their abilities to the social and physical risks around them. The researchers argue that this process of negotiating risks and relating them to their individual capacities is an important process through which children can learn from their mistakes and become aware of their personal health and safety (Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2008).

### 3. Public and parental attitudes

Gill is a strong advocate of the benefits risk can have in children's play, but suggests that children are often denied these opportunities. He describes the development of 'risk aversion' and argues that, as a society, we are now incapable of dealing with risks and have implemented unnecessary safety measures to avoid them, often at the expense of freedom and enjoyment. Despite these precautions, the public's fear surrounding the issue of risk has increased, rather than decreased (Gill, 2007).

In this sense, Tovey has argued, risk is a social construction, a reflection of current social values rather than based on facts or truths. Ironically, Tovey claims, what is perceived as risky has little to do with probability. She also argues that current perception of risk-taking has shifted, to centre on more commercial forms of risk, such as theme park rides and roller coasters. These activities are different from the kinds of risks children take in play, as they require no degree of control or skills (Tovey, 2007).

Lindon notes the apparent role of the media in this disjunction between children's actual safety and society's concerns about children's participation in risk-taking. Media coverage, it is contended, tends to focus on what could go wrong, with little regard to how likely or unlikely this outcome may be. In doing so, the media takes an active role in manipulating the public's perception of risks. Lindon claims statistics show that the risk of a car accident is significantly higher than the risk of a serious playground injury, but says that, because traffic accidents are such a frequent occurrence, they are often not publicised in the way playground accidents can be (Lindon, 1999). Landry claims that the media has created an atmosphere of social panic, so the positive characteristics and outcomes of risk-taking are forgotten (Landry in CAFE Space, 2005). Parental anxieties over children taking risks, Lindon suggests, seem logical if we are to consider the media's tendency to sensationalise risks and the focus on the dangers of the world (Lindon, 1999).

Gill argues that these concerns have led to sanctions for what he sees as appropriate forms of play. Play involving physical contact is often regarded as aggressive and anti-social. However, he maintains that such behaviour is vital to children's development, and depriving them of this is to damage an important opportunity for them to learn about the world and their ability to deal with real life situations. Penny Holland has argued that mock aggression, which is viewed with a 'zero tolerance' attitude, is a complex development activity and should not be deterred by adult interference (Holland, 2003). Gill highlights the need to distinguish between children playing and acts that cause actual distress, so they can learn from the social and physical risks in play (Gill, 2007).

Valentine's two-year study, documenting the perceptions of parents who have children between the ages of eight and 11, found evidence that risk, or perceptions of risk, are socially constructed. Her research entailed 1000 questionnaires sent out to parents, 400 of which were completed; from these, 70 parents were selected for interviewing. The method also included ethnographic work. Valentine notes various 'distortions' in parental fears. For example, the majority of parents believed that children are at more risk than they have been in the past; they also believed their children to be at greater risk in public spaces than within the home. This, she insists, contradicts 2004 statistics from NSPCC, which show that children are in more danger in private spaces (Valentine, 2004).

Whether the fears are justified or not, there is evidence to suggest that they impact upon children's experiences of risk in play. A study in 2006 by Future Foundations discovered that parents are spending more time looking after their children than in the past. The study shows that the time adults spend in the childcare role has quadrupled from 1975 to 2001. The authors argue that parents' fear of leaving their children unsupervised is one of the reasons for this trend (Future Foundations, 2006). In 1996, Wheway and Millward conducted 3,500 observations with children under the age of 18 across 12 housing estates. The researchers followed this with 236 interviews with children between the ages of five and 18, and with 82 parents. In relation to child supervision, the findings show that 46 per cent of parents frequently stated that their children have to stay within eyeshot of their home; a further 9 per cent stated that children must be within hearing or shouting distance; and 29 per cent said they could go round the block or within the next few roads. The authors argued that streets which are designed to give cars priority over pedestrians have been the cause of parents' increased supervision (Wheway and Millward, 1997).

Examining the role of wild adventure space for play, Thompson et al conducted a series of five focus groups across England with young people aged 11 to 18. The young people stated that parental and schoolteachers' fears stood as a major barrier to allowing children to undertake adventurous outdoor activity (Thompson et al, 2006). An event at the Moors Valley Country Park (described below) reported that parental attitudes prevented children from taking part in the kind of risk-taking play that they enjoyed. Age was also an issue, as the 12-13-year-olds said that there were few opportunities for people of their age group, and the pressure of school and homework meant that many children of this age found it more convenient to stay indoors (Gill, 2006).

Some authors have argued that parents' over-protective attitudes reflect a narrow understanding of children's play needs, and a lack of understanding of what practitioners call 'play value' (Armstrong et al, 2006). Cooper also provides evidence that play value is not always noted by parents. In 2000, he researched children's and carers' attitudes towards play surfaces across London. The study, which consisted of

questionnaires in public play areas, found that, for carers, safety was the highest priority in play provision, even compared with enjoyment (Cooper, 2000). He found that parents' desire to minimise risks in the playgrounds was at least partially for their own convenience. The adults wished to relax and take their attention away from supervising the children, and so favoured playground design that presented high levels of safety (Cooper, 2000).

However, Rob Wheway, adviser to the Child Accident Prevention Trust, has found evidence to suggest that parents do not, in fact, want safe playground equipment for children. Instead, he points to detailed interviews which, on closer examination show that parents wish for a socially safe environment for their children to play in, where they can see and be seen by a responsible adult, but they also want their children to have access to more exciting local playgrounds (Wheway, date unknown).

## 4. Risk-taking behaviour and perceptions of risk

There is evidence which suggests that children seek out risk-taking opportunities and enjoy risk-taking. A 2002 study carried out by The Child Accident Prevention Trust found that, in their free time, 40 per cent of young people aged 11 to 14 chose to visit locations they perceive to be dangerous, and around 50 per cent participated in risks or dares when out with their friends. The 'dangerous' locations mentioned included wasteland, abandoned buildings, building sites, subways and quarries. The young people claimed that they enjoyed spending time there for various reasons, including escaping adult supervision, enjoying being chased by security guards, the challenge of entering and exploring (CAPT, 2002).

A *Growing Adventure* project, organised by the Forestry Commission, produced similar findings. In 2005, 60 local children between the ages of seven and 14 gave their perspective on what constituted fun activities in the woodland setting of Moor Valley Country Park (mentioned above). The respondents seemed to enjoy activities that involved a degree of risk, such as climbing trees or cycling (Gill, 2006). The research indicates that children actively seek opportunities to take risks. Therefore, as is argued, providing challenges in spaces specifically designed for children can be an effective means of managing risks in a more secure environment.

A small exploratory study conducted in South Wales observed children in two different settings: a Forest School environment (a school session spent in wild woodlands) and a school outdoor play area. The researchers asked the teacher to identify one four-year-old child who often exhibits risk-taking behaviour, and one who does not. Observing these children, the researchers found that they were likely to exhibit more risk-taking behaviour in the Forest School setting. The study suggests that environment influences encourage the positive type of risk-taking behaviour children need for development (Waters and Begley, 2007).

Evidence from a study in New Zealand also suggests that children seek out risk-taking activities. Stephenson used an open-ended ethnographic approach to gather information on risk-taking play. She visited an early childhood centre 38 times over a four-month period, researching behaviours through observations, videos, photos and interviews with staff. The study was then extended through further observations in a sessional centre run by a parent co-operative. Stephenson observed four-year old children and discovered that they frequently chose to take physical risks, often referring to this physical challenge as 'scary'. Stephenson observed that risky behaviour tended to involve trying something they had never done before, feelings of being close to 'out of control' (often related to speed or height), and overcoming a fear of some sort. The author notes that the desire of the children to participate in physical challenges was fulfilled more by teachers' attitudes towards

risk-taking than by the equipment. Teachers encouraged outdoor play and took an approach to play that allowed children to experience their own challenges (Stephenson, 2003). This may contradict earlier evidence that adults' perceptions stand as a barrier against risk-taking behaviour, since here the teachers assisted risk-taking behaviour.

Stephenson also researched children aged under two. She observed that the outdoor environment presented many challenges for younger children, even through the most basic tasks, such as putting on boots or stepping outside. The writer states that such challenges were met with determination. Her observations of the younger children voluntarily taking part in challenging activity drew Stephenson to believe that 'undertaking "risky" activities was an integral part of their drive to extend their physical prowess and so their independence' (Stephenson, 2003).

Morrongiello and Lasenby-Lessard drew on empirical findings from literature to develop a model, which identified the psychological factors which cause elementary school children to participate in risky play that leads to injury. Although the writers believe that some degree of risk taking is beneficial, they looked specifically at risks based on poor decision-making that led to injury. They argue that such risk-taking is a combination of individual characteristics, such as age, sex and behavioural attributes, family or parental factors, such as socialisation practices and parental style, and social situation factors, such as oral influences from peers (Morrongiello and Lasenby-Lessard, 2007).

In 2005, Gladwin researched perceptions of risk in play during middle childhood in the Old Quarry Adventure Playground, through observational and interview methods. The study was conducted for a master's dissertation and was very small scale, with only 11 child participants. He found evidence of what he terms 'good scary play', which refers to deliberate risk-taking of some kind. Physical risks, such as climbing trees, were mentioned by some children. The research found that children were motivated to take physical risks to impress their peers, although they also mentioned developing skills.

'Rah play', whereby children purposefully startled their peers was another form of risk-taking Gladwin observed. He noted that children generally participated in 'rah play' in order to develop their skills or knowledge of what would happen. It seems that physical and social risk-taking could be at least partly motivated by a desire to improve on current abilities or a need to enquire about the world. Gladwin also links 'good scary play' to maintaining group solidarity or acquiring social status (Gladwin, 2005). According to his findings, a distinction could be made between 'reluctant risk-takers', that is, those who take risks because of social pressures, and 'enthusiastic risk-takers', that is, those who gain satisfaction from taking the risk itself (Gladwin, 2005).

A study conducted by Franklin examined perceptions of children's activities that provide scope for risk-taking in adventure playgrounds

across the London boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham. The data involved collecting information from the adventure playground accident books, and interviews with senior playworkers, young people and parents (Franklin, 2002).

According to data collected from children, 48 per cent of them stated that it was true that the playground offered them a chance to take a few risks, 29 per cent claimed this to be true some of the time, and 23 per cent stated that this was untrue. Most of the children believed that the activities they were involved in were safe but included a degree of danger, and this was seen as exciting rather than being viewed negatively. The most popular playground activity was playing on the swings, and children often referred to the height and speed of the equipment as reasons for choosing to play on it. The author suggests that risk is important for play value and that adventure playgrounds can offer children an opportunity for risk-taking behaviour (Franklin, 2002).

The parents interviewed, however, emphasised the importance of safety in adventure playgrounds, expressing concerns over the open access nature of the provision and that the gate was also left open, and the need for soft play surfaces. Despite this apparent conflict of interests, adults' perceptions seemed to hold some importance for children, with nearly half of the 107 young people interviewed believing that activities should be decided upon by adults, and appreciating the adults' input into issues concerning disciplinary action and safety. Other children believed that decisions on such matters should be agreed between parents and children. The research found that the perception amongst parents, children and playworkers was that the playground effectively balanced the need for safety with opportunities to take risks, but that more challenging facilities would improve the play value for children (Franklin, 2002).

Investigating attitudes surrounding playground facilities, McKendrick found that, overall, parents expressed positive attitudes towards the provision. The research found that children are safety conscious and confident in their judgement about taking risks. It also suggested that children enjoyed the provision available, but would gain more from the experience if more challenges were offered to them (McKendrick, 2000).

There is evidence to suggest that gender plays an important role in terms of parents' perceptions of risk-taking. Cooper's research found that male carers tend to have a more relaxed attitude towards children participating in risky behaviour than female carers (Cooper, 2000). An investigation by Morrongiello and Dawber found that mothers vary their intervention in children's risk-taking behaviour according to the child's gender. The researchers showed video footage of eight-year-old children taking part in 'injury-risk' behaviour. The mothers were then asked to stop the tape when they felt they would intervene in that child's behaviour in a real life. They found that mothers had a tendency to be more protective to female children, as they intervened more frequently

and quickly than with male children. Interestingly, the study also notes that mothers whose children have previously been injured or often engage in risk-taking activities tend to be more tolerant of risk-taking behaviour (Morrongiello and Dawber, 1998). Lindon urges adults to consider whether any judgements they make about risks in play are based on gender stereotypes, rather than on rational concerns (Lindon, 1999).

## 5. Accidents and injuries

Concerns about playground safety have tended to focus on equipment and surfaces. Ball has conducted extensive research into playground accidents and injuries. In 2002, he evaluated the level of playground injuries in the years 1988 and 2002, using data provided by the Leisure Accident Surveillance System database (LASS). He collected a representative sample of data from UK hospital Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments and compared this with figures from Home Accident Surveillance System (HASS). He found the overall number of injuries to be very low, estimating around one playground related fatality every three to four years. This figure suggests that playgrounds are comparatively safe when taking into account that there is a total of 500 to 600 child fatalities that occur each year. Furthermore, he calculated that 40 per cent of the injuries reported had nothing to do with the playground equipment. Injuries that were equipment related, he discovered, involved a behavioural aspect, such as getting in the way of the slide. He estimates that only two per cent of accidents that result in children being hospitalised are related to playground equipment (Ball, 2002).

From the LASS data, Ball also concluded that there is no evidence to suggest that softer surfaces in playgrounds are more effective at lowering risks than harder surfaces. He argues that, despite the money channelled into creating 'safer' playgrounds, there is no sign that injuries had declined as a result. He claims that the low probability of an accident occurring makes playgrounds among the safest places to be, and for this reason it is unjustified to claim that there is any strong link between playgrounds and risk (Ball, 2002).

In 2004, Ball examined impact-absorbing surfaces more extensively, as this is an intervention that is commonly believed to be an effective way of reducing the risk of playground injury. Ball drew much of his evidence from his earlier analysis in 2002. He reviewed playground injuries between 1988 and 1999 from information drawn from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and LASS, which was compared with international research. From this, 'crude estimates' of the effectiveness of impact-absorbing surfaces in reducing potential injuries were made (Ball, 2004).

This analysis, again, does not support the application of impact-absorbing surfaces as a safety measure. The HSE reasons, as a general rule, that if the risk of an injury is less than one in a million per year, then intervention is not required, since the measures taken will be highly disproportionate to the risk reduction. Ball estimates that the risk of a serious playground injury falls far short of this figure, with the individual risk of a fatal injury being one in 30 million.

Norton et al conducted a review of literature into playground injuries using 37 different reports on playground related injuries and fatalities. They argue that much of the literature has studied overall injuries rather than focussing on injuries that require the most attention, namely, head injuries and fractures. They note that modernisation and safety surfaces were introduced because of serious injuries occurring, and conclude that as serious head injuries rarely occur in modern playground, 'safety surfacing is likely to be effective in head injuries and should be continued' (Norton et al, 2004).

In 2006, Khambalia et al examined the risk factors for unintentional injuries to children aged between birth and 6 years-old, due to falls. Their review of literature comprised of searching electronic databases from the years 1966 to 2005 to identify research that evaluated risk factors for unintentional injuries. They note the importance of the age of the child, gender, height of the fall, surface type, mechanism, setting and socio-economic status in relation to the severity of falls. Four of the studies looked specifically at playground injuries and suggest that the height of the equipment and the nature of the surface were associated with injuries. (Khambalia et al, 2006).

Franklin's research across the London boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham found that 77 per cent of children claimed to have hurt themselves in adventure playgrounds, although the injuries consisted mostly of cuts or bruises. Her findings show that the most common accidents were a result of tripping at ground level, rather than using equipment. Supporting Ball's findings, the study also recorded that over half of the children who injured themselves (58 per cent) stated that the injury was a result of their own actions, and claimed that changes to the physical environment could not have prevented this (Franklin, 2002).

Cooper's investigation into playground surfaces, which involved consulting with carers in a playground environment, found that 52 per cent of declared accidents took place on either concrete or tarmac surfaces. Although the accidents described were not severe, the author notes that these surfaces are now rare, and that accidents might increase if this surface were more widely used. On the other hand, 58 per cent of carers witnessed 'compensatory play', whereby the sense of security created by the soft surfacing entices children to take greater risks and therefore possibly incur more accidents (Cooper, 2000). Moorcock criticises the use of rubberised surfacing, stating: 'Impact absorbing surfaces are put down to prevent injuries that occur. It is likely that the only positive effect they have is to provide an interesting bouncy sensation when walking or running on them.' (Moorcock, 1998: 29)

## 6. Risk management in play provision

According to Ball, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a huge shift in beliefs about risks and how they should be dealt with. In the 1950s, people acknowledged risks as a natural part of life, and accidents were seen as random spells of bad luck. These values were replaced by a view that risk of any kind is unacceptable, and accidents were no longer seen as misfortunes, but as predictable and avoidable events. Today's ethos, he claims, seems to follow a 'precautionary principle': the idea of avoiding an action if the outcome has any degree of uncertainty (in Thom et al, 2007). As Landry states, 'risk is a prism through which everything is judged' (CABE Space, 2005).

Risk assessment is a requirement under UK Health and Safety legislation, and is part of standard practice in play provision. Looking specifically at playgrounds, Ball contends that the most common approach is to evaluate play facilities based on advice from the British and European Safety Standard or other published advice standards. The European Standard is not a legal requirement, rather a recommendation for good practice. However, insurance claims often request that these rules are followed in order for play providers to be covered, regardless of their relevance to the setting. Ball argues that this method uses the same principles as risk assessments in a workplace, and that this approach is inappropriate to play settings, where retaining an aspect of excitement is necessary (Ball in Thom et al, 2007).

Ball examines eight perspectives on safety. All, he claims, are present in today's society, each with their own positive elements and drawbacks. The different perspectives, Ball claims, often tend to follow their own rules, despite their common aims. He argues that conflicts can arise between people holding these different perspectives on safety, since they are all based partially on evidence and partially on values or opinions. Ball suggests that having a variety of views and opinions is not negative in itself, but rather that problems tend to arise when one group presents its opinions as scientific facts.

There tends to be a problem in litigation that result from injuries, as an individual case will tend to be compared with whatever standard can be found. These standards or guidelines are often sourced from industries, with vested interests. Safety measures must be critically examined in order to avoid more damaging effects. Ball argues that there is a lack of vision of both the underlying philosophical issues and of the extent to which we apply safety measures (Ball, 2000).

Gill claims that vigorous risk assessments and concerns over safety have arisen, in part, because of concerns of a growing compensation culture in Britain. The emergence of 'no-win-no-fee' claims has meant that suing has become a more accessible option. However, he argues that the idea of a growing compensation culture in the UK is a myth and

that accident claims have remained at roughly the same level in recent years (Better Regulation Task Force cited in Gill, 2007). Gill argues that, despite this, a fear of legal action has caused play providers, schools and communities to avoid more adventurous or risky play opportunities (Gill, 2007).

It is argued that concerns about safety and litigation have led to the 'dumbing down' of playgrounds (Ball in Thom et al, 2007). This is not a new perspective, as Heseltine, the former head of playground safety at the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, said in 1995: 'We have made playgrounds so monumentally boring that any self respecting child will go somewhere else to play, somewhere more interesting and usually more dangerous... The play value in them is so limited that it barely scores on any register of play value.' (Heseltine, 1995: 72 quoted in Thom et al, 2007)

More exciting play facilities, it is claimed, have been removed through fear of litigation, and playgrounds have become standardised, with very few facilities for challenging and creative play (Ball in Thom et al, 2007). Moorcock argues that larger adventure playgrounds aimed at older children and young people have also been closed because of litigation concerns (Moorcock, 1998).

However, in the information from the Child Accident Prevention Trust, Whewey claims that it is a myth that children do not use play facilities because they are 'boring'. He argues that manufacturers are now offering a greater range of play equipment than in the past. Reflecting on various pieces of his research, he suggests that playgrounds are under-used due to travel issues, rather than because playground facilities themselves do not provide enough challenge. Whewey contends that motor vehicles are given priority over pedestrians, making it difficult for children to gain access to playgrounds and other public spaces (Whewey, date unknown).

As previously mentioned, Gill uses the term 'risk averse' to describe the current social climate. It indicates an environment in which people are no longer capable of dealing with everyday risks, and extreme and often unnecessary forms of intervention mean that children are losing any sense of freedom. Whewey is more sceptical. In his paper, *Not a Risk Averse Society*, published on the Fair Play for Children website, he argues that this term implies a degree of blame of the general public. Instead, he argues, the real danger is that those responsible for the health and safety of the public are imposing this culture upon them (Whewey, 2008).

Whewey suggests that simple alterations in procedures and practices related to health and safety could loosen the grip of a risk averse culture. For example, he says that legislation, standards and good practice each have a different status: some are compulsory, while others simply offer advice. He suggests that these are often misinterpreted because officials

have failed to provide clear guidance about the status and limitations of the advice. Whewey also notes the failure of health and safety guidance to indicate the importance of its various recommendations. Because of this, children's playgrounds are being closed unnecessarily over minor health and safety failures that could easily be resolved. This could be avoided by simply stating the relative importance of different recommendations (Whewey, 2008).

John and Whewey are also critical of the impact that health and safety regulations can have on disabled children. According to the authors, disabled children are often excluded from attending play facilities or using particular play equipment because of 'over-cautious fears about their safety'. They insist that this is not the result of balanced judgements but of discrimination based on unreasonable fears and lack of consideration. The writers call for a new approach which takes a 'can do' attitude to play. They maintain that although health and safety must be carefully considered, this must be accompanied with rational logic about disabled children rather than discriminatory practices. John and Whewey believe that minor injuries and getting dirty are important in positive childhood experiences, that attempts to prevent this will restrict children's play, and that this is true for disabled and non-disabled children. They note that a positive play environment will have opportunities for disabled children to take risks and engage in challenging play alongside non-disabled children (John and Whewey, 2004).

Despite the overall recognition that risk is beneficial to play, most of the playworkers in Franklin's research agreed that safety was still prioritised, and that safety measures must be considered before any risky behaviour is carried out. One playworker stated that the overriding interest of safety had affected the children's enjoyment and made the provision more 'boring'.

Of the children interviewed by Franklin, only 9 per cent believed that the structures in the playground were interesting enough, with 67 per cent stating that they should be more interesting. Faster and higher structures that appear to offer some excitement or challenge tended to be favoured (Franklin, 2002). This may be evidence that safety concerns in playgrounds have impinged on play value.

Cooper's investigation found that children were in favour of soft surfaces, and most commonly identified sand as their favourite material, whereas carers stated rubber to be the most desirable, due to the association it has with safety. Carers also believed that supervision was an important factor contributing to the safety of a playground (Cooper, 2000).

Moorcock argues that financial barriers have resulted in a prevalence of equipment aimed primarily at the under five-age group, which provides little challenge or entertainment for older children. She argues that the closure of adventure playgrounds because of a lack of money to employ

playworkers has meant that there are even fewer opportunities for older children to participate in challenging play (Moorcock, 1998). More recently, Stephenson claims that playgrounds do not provide children with a wide enough range of physical challenge (Stephenson, 2003). Sutcliffe estimates that 40 per cent of the money put into playgrounds is spent on surfacing (cited in Cooper, 2000), and Moorcock suggests that, in order to improve play quality, money may be better spent on skilled workers rather than soft surfacing (Moorcock, 1998).

Some commentators also note that concerns over safety have led to changes in the natural surroundings of play facilities. In her design guide, Hendricks argues that the natural surroundings have been altered, with the intention of protecting children from prospective harm. Poisonous plants near play areas have been removed. Hendricks argues that this is unjustified and has resulted in damage to the natural landscape and to children's play experience. Natural elements such as fire and water are almost completely absent from play settings. This is despite the evidence that suggests that natural elements are rated highly in terms of play value. Hendricks argues that these approaches are based on the assumption that exposing children to the natural world is too dangerous for them to cope with (Hendricks, 2001).

## 7. How risk should be managed

A number of commentators have advised on how risk should be managed, both in terms of play provision and in terms of parental interaction with children.

In terms of playgrounds, Cooper believes that there may, in fact, be no such thing as 'safe' surfacing, and rather than attempting to find a single optimal surface for all playgrounds, the solution is for different playgrounds to have different surfaces. Each type of playground surface may have merits over other types, whether it is cost efficiency, play value or perceived safety, individual preference or appropriateness to a particular location. Cooper argues that providing a range of surfaces means that the majority of needs are met, and offers choice and variety, which are vital for play value (Cooper, 2000).

Ball argues that it is the responsibility of playground providers to ensure that risks and safety are equally weighted. Regardless of how safe playgrounds can be, accidents will happen, and this should be dealt with rationally. Accidents, he states, do not constitute failure if principles have been carefully thought out, unexpected hazards have been controlled and the views of the public have been taken into consideration.

Gill argues that woodlands offer children the combination of nature, adventure, challenge and a small degree of danger that they need for a positive play experience. He claims that natural settings are ideal locations for children to learn about managing risks, and the unpredictable nature of woodlands adds to the attraction. He documents a year-long project, *Growing Adventure*, intended to develop the Forestry Commission's role in children and young people's play and leisure. The Forestry Commission acknowledges that removing all risks is neither desirable nor possible, and it aims to incorporate exciting risks in the activities and provision while avoiding unacceptable levels of danger (Gill, 2006).

In line with these values, the *Growing Adventure* project has drafted a risk management guide on den building, rope swings and fires. These guidelines, specifically written for Forestry Commission land and not intended for use in dedicated play areas, show how more exciting features can be incorporated into outdoor play in forests, by outlining possible risks and steps that can be taken to control them without removing the fun. For example, a Forestry Commission employee may find that a rope swing is in an unsafe location; if so, the guide would suggest alternatives to removing the swing completely, such as moving it to another area. The guide suggests that removing equipment is always a last resort, rather than the only possibility (Harrop, 2006).

Hendricks argues that exposure to natural risks is important if children are going to learn about the world. Protection against poisonous plants

should not be dealt with by eliminating them from all areas where children play, but by giving children the knowledge to deal with them. Similarly, elements such as water or fire should feature in supervised play provision so children can learn about the joys and dangers of the natural world. A sole emphasis on playground structures has resulted in them all looking similar. Designers should work with the ground itself and with vertical elements, rather than simply installing play equipment (Hendricks, 2001).

Ball suggests that, only through an overriding philosophy that acknowledges the play value of risk and avoids one set of interests dominating, can playgrounds represent the needs of the children and incorporate risk (Ball in Thom et al, 2007). He calls for a more holistic approach towards safety, taking into account the potential benefits of risk in play in terms of play value (Ball, 2004). This is not just relevant to outdoor play settings. In their book about managing risk indoors, Balmforth and Hubbucks argue that facilities for indoor play should be designed to encourage physically demanding, exciting play, and risk assessments must take account of this (Balmforth and Hubbucks, 2005).

Lindon suggests that risk assessment should take a variety of factors into account. It must be sensitive to the environment, the setting's purpose, the individuality of the children in terms of their age, ability and maturity, and how children use the opportunities available to them. After all this has been considered, risks that are believed to be unacceptable should be removed. She argues that such factors can be a rough guideline and that educated judgement still plays an important role in risk assessment (Lindon, 1999).

In terms of how parents should interact with children to support appropriate risk-taking, Lindon notes the tendency for adults to be extra cautious of disabled children's participation in risky play. In line with John and Whewey (2004), she highlights the dangers of this, as children of all abilities have the motivation to learn and the desire for challenges. Lenehan et al offer service providers and families advice about risk and disabled children. Talking about risk more generally, they argue that there is still a great taboo about disabled children's right to be treated with dignity and respect, and to be included in every aspect of the lives of children and young people (Lenehan et al, 2004).

Lindon provides advice to parents about how to react to risk-taking without preventing it. In order to balance safety with risks, Lindon advises parents to reflect upon their own actions, and only to restrain children if the risk posed is unacceptable. Parents, she argues, tend to prevent children from taking risks, even if the action presents very little danger. Instead, they should reflect on whether they have a genuine reason to intervene or whether they are stopping children's play out of habit. By exaggerating the dangers of risk-taking, parents can lose credibility when the child realises that the adults' warnings are false.

Instead, parents should calmly and rationally explain the real risks, and offer safer alternatives where necessary (Lindon, 1999).

Lindon recommends that parents should acknowledge that children's judgement might not be as advanced as theirs, and so this must be dealt with gently, comforting the child rather than blaming them. To help children learn to manage their own risks, parents are advised to support children's decisions to take risks, unless there is a genuine cause for concern. Taking an active role in children's learning can empower them to judge their own abilities. The use of language is important, and parents must be careful not to take control of children's behaviour, but to talk to them about safety rationally, giving them positive encouragement in adventurous behaviour (Lindon, 1999).

Instructions from a guide for play rangers emphasise that, if a child is stopped from taking part in an activity that is too dangerous, the child must understand why they have been stopped, in order to learn about risks and manage their own safety in the future (Wansdyke Play Association, 2007).

Similarly, Smith, writing about the role of adults in assisting children in taking risks, believes parents can educate children within the playground environment. Adults can bring a degree of maturity to playground activity, an input Smith refers to as a 'pedagogical relation to children'. He talks about how adults can use their knowledge of risk-taking to help children negotiate their own risks. In doing so, adults must be critical of their own beliefs. According to Smith, risk-taking should be based on common sense judgements. In order to support children taking up challenges in play, adults must become actively involved in children's play; words of encouragement are not enough (Smith, 1998).

However, Moorcock insists that some level of outdoor play must take place away from adult supervision, and that children should manage risks alone. She argues that the presence of adults is important, but constant supervision will interrupt children's social development and ability to negotiate risks (Moorcock, 1998). Armstrong's findings support the notion that children want more opportunities to play away from adult supervision (Armstrong et al, 2006).

The study by Christensen and Mikkelsen suggests that children have a greater ability to manage risks than adults often anticipate, and to increase adults' confidence in children's ability they should engage with them in a way that is meaningful to the children. Adults must be conscious and wary of children's risk-taking, but also appreciate their ability to handle their own risks through careful assessment (Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2008).

Gill argues that we should take a lead from other countries, such as the Netherlands and Scandinavia, which offer environments that meet children's needs through challenging play opportunities and more

relaxed attitudes towards risk. Gill argues that we should be aware of the media's tendency to bend the truth about risks and resist this by thinking rationally about the issue (Gill, 2007).

## 8. Recent changes and policies

In recent years, there has been increasing concern about over-cautious attitudes towards risk, which prevent children from enjoying the challenges that play can present (Gill, 2007). The issue was addressed in 2001 by Play Wales, when they published *The First Claim*. Play Wales argued that all forms of play present a degree of risk to children, whether it is physical or psychological. Incorporating risk into controlled environments is beneficial and desirable, as this is part of a natural developmental process in which children learn the skills to manage their own risks. The writers argue that it is the responsibility of all involved in play to encourage controlled risks and to help change the attitudes of others through understanding the value of risk in play.

Play Wales introduced a framework for self-assessment, which provides guidance at three different levels (basic, intermediate and advanced) to help playworkers provide risk-taking activities for the children they work with. The grading system allows the playworkers to assess their knowledge, understanding and skills, and to monitor their performance through a points system. The self-assessment encourages specific risk-taking activities, such as incorporating fire or water into play, or providing a challenging environment that has various heights, slopes or gorges. *The First Claim* contends that supervised play allows children to experiment with adult experience, and although some minor injuries may occur, this is a normal part of learning in childhood (Play Wales, 2001).

In 2002, the Welsh Assembly Government announced the introduction of a play policy which aimed to place children's needs at the centre of government agendas through a broad statement of principles. It states: 'The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to ensuring that all children have access to rich stimulating environments, free from inappropriate risk, and full of challenge, thereby offering them the opportunity to explore through freely chosen play both themselves and the world.' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002)

The Welsh Assembly Government's *Play Policy Implementation Plan* of February 2006 says that children have become too protected from the environment in which they live. The document states its aim to address the issue of 'insurance premiums', and the effect these have on children's play and risk-taking. The Welsh Assembly Government calls for a reassessment of 'no-win-no-fee' claims and the effect these have on children's activities. The document also advocates controlled risk-taking in play.

The Play Safety Forum, a group of national agencies involved in play safety, published a position statement in 2002, *Managing Risk in Play Provision* (Play Safety Forum, 2002). This called for a balance to be struck between safety and the need for children to experience risks. A distinction is made between acceptable risks, from which children would

benefit, and unacceptable risks, which may pose a genuine threat to their safety without a justifiable cause. Differentiating between them rests on three factors. These are the likelihood of the child coming to harm, the severity of the possible harm and the benefits, rewards and outcomes of the activity. They propose this to be a far more effective means of risk assessment, than the 'zero risk' approach, because it takes play value into account.

The *Managing Risk in Play Provision* statement acknowledges that risk assessment should be flexible, since acceptable levels may vary in relation to the context. Hazards in a play space can be justified, but only if appropriate measures have been carried out to make sure they are managed sufficiently. The Play Safety Forum suggests that all those who take responsibility for children should assess risks and manage the level to which children are being exposed. This way, children will be given the chance to test their boundaries and improve on their current skills without being placed in serious danger. Children, the writers claim, need protection from disabling injuries or death, but need to witness risk-taking in order to learn the consequences of their decisions – and this may well involve small injuries. Injuries can be acceptable but only if, firstly, the likelihood of injury is low, secondly, any hazards have been clearly brought to people's attention, thirdly, the activity has benefits which would be lost if the risk were removed and, lastly, the risk cannot be managed in a practical way. The statement also argued that disabled children must also be offered opportunities for risk-taking behaviour, claiming that they need even more opportunities to take risks, since they may not have the same degree of choice as non-disabled children (Play Safety Forum, 2002). An implementation guide to managing risk in play provision, advocating a risk-benefit assessment approach to risk management, is soon to be published by Play England.

In 2007, the government launched *The Children's Plan*, which specifically states the government's commitment to helping parents and carers balance children's safety whilst allowing them to explore new situations. This includes dispelling the myths about risk and promoting positive attitudes towards challenge in play. It states: 'We will promote better understanding of management of risks to children's safety by launching a new communications campaign to provide parents with information about risk and harm faced by children, with a focus on high risk households, and to encourage the general public to play a role in keeping children safe.' (DCSF, 2007: 43). In addition, the *Staying Safe Action Plan* published by the Department of Children, Schools and Families in 2008 stated that 'childhood is a time for learning and exploring', and warned against wrapping children in cotton wool (DCSF, 2008).

A consultation on the play strategy, entitled *Fair Play*, was then published by the Department for Children Schools and Families, setting out the government's proposals in which they have allocated £235 million to the development of local play opportunities. This includes

money for adventure playgrounds, which are intended to offer more exciting activities for children (DCSF, 2008). The government is also consulting with the Health and Safety Executive and the Play Safety Forum to improve play providers' understanding of the importance of opportunities to take risks whilst maintaining an acceptable level of safety (DCSF, 2008).

The Conservative Party has also published a policy statement that highlights the issue. The statement recognises the benefits of risk in play and tackles fear of the compensation culture that prevents children from playing normal childhood games. The report points to actions that other countries, such as the USA and Australia, have taken to avoid this. It suggests that the UK should follow this example through laws which state that an accident must be defined as 'reckless disregard' on behalf of the play providers, and also by abandoning the idea that providers are obliged to warn individuals of an obvious risk. The report introduces the concept of 'past form', in which adult supervision is adapted according to an individual's behaviour record of 'obedience'. The statement suggests that natural materials should be incorporated into playground designs, giving exciting opportunities for children to learn about risks (The Conservative Party, 2008).

However, there have been concerns that there may be too much emphasis placed on the benefits of play, rather than simply as play for play's sake. Lester and Russell's recent review of literature found that information in policy and practices tends to acknowledge the benefits of play only in terms of its developmental role. The authors highlight Sutton-Smith's 2005 argument that there is a dominant paradigm which views play, of any nature, as a means of development, rather than something that has intrinsic value. As play has been linked to a means of improving cognitive or social skills, this implies that play must have a certain direction or purpose, instead of being a means of expressing freedom in children's behaviour. Rather than justifying play, or risk in play, as an 'instrument' for progression, authors have argued that play should be seen as beneficial for the here and now (cited in Lester and Russell, 2007).

## 9. Conclusion

Risk is an important debate within the play arena, yet it remains a relatively under-researched area. The research that has been conducted seems to conclude that play is both beneficial and desirable to children, and there is some evidence that children have a greater understanding of and ability to manage risk than they are given credit for. It also suggests that opportunities for children to assess and experience risk in play are limited due to various structural constraints and attitudes.

Many authors refer to a 'risk averse society' because of the thoroughness of risk assessment in children's play provision, and the general attitude the adult world takes towards risk in play. There is evidence to suggest that many of the measures that have been taken to create 'safer' play for children are neither necessary nor effective. Writers call for recognition of the possible effects that vigorous safety standards have for children (Stephenson, 2007), and suggest adopting a new approach to risk assessment. Gill concludes that achieving a society which embraces the presence of risk in children's lives may require an extreme restructuring of the way we live. He argues that this will involve making the whole community operate on a more human scale, although smaller changes can also make a difference. Gill promotes a 'philosophy of resilience': a community where people acknowledge that there are risks, and deal with them (Gill, 2007).

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