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# WHEN THE RISK IS WORTH IT: THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN FREE RISKY PLAY

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## **Abstract**

Children show a universal propensity to perform thrilling and exciting play activities that involve some kind of risk: climbing or jumping at great heights, swinging, playing or engaging in rough and tumble play. Free risky play, which can be observed also in several mammalian species, has an evolutionary function, as it offers the opportunity to learn life skills, to master age-adequate challenges, to manage fears. Reasonable risk taking in play is a fundamental factor in gross motor, cognitive and emotional development (Sandseter, 2011). Adults' concerns about children safety as well as social and environmental factors may severely limit children's opportunities to engage in free risky play, compromising their overall health and wellbeing. For children with disabilities, free risky play is even more crucial than for their peers without disabilities, but they often face major barriers (e.g. lack of accessible playgrounds, overprotective attitude of caregivers) that can prevent them from fully benefiting from the opportunities afforded by this kind of play experience.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the state of the art as regards studies on children with disabilities' participation in free risky play, and to identify areas for further research.

**KEYWORDS:** CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, RISKY PLAY, OUTDOOR PLAY, FREE PLAY, RIGHT TO PLAY.

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## 1. The thrill of the risk

From a very early age children show an innate inclination to play adventurous and exciting games that involve some risk of physical injuries.

In international literature over the past decade interest has grown in this topic. These play activities are usually known as “risky play”, although some authors have criticised the use of this term, claiming it is potentially misleading. Other terms suggested have been “curious play” (Gurholt & Sanderud, 2016) or “adventurous play” (Tovey, 2010).

Sandseter (2007), the Norwegian scholar that has made the biggest contribution to the study of risky play, singled out six main categories of activities to which all children, notwithstanding individual differences (Morrongiello & Lasenby-Lessard, 2006), are attracted: speed (running as fast as possible, chasing, playing on swings, roundabouts, skateboards or any other instrument that gives the temporary sensation of a loss of control); heights (climbing up trees, balancing on walls); harmful tools (playing with scissors, knives, saws, or similar objects); dangerous elements, such as playing near fire or water; rough-and-tumble, hiding or getting lost (playing hide and seek, wandering around alone in unknown places).

In these games the child deliberately challenges himself, and gets to experience sensations of fear mixed with excitement.

In many ways “risky play” is similar to what French sociologist Caillois called *ilinx*, which he explained as being those games based «on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind» (Caillois, 2001: 23).

Risky play activities may be found in different types of play: in exercise play, construction play, symbolic play and play with rules. They may be performed in indoor and outdoor settings, although the latter, especially natural settings, are more conducive to free and risky play.

Children are encouraged to explore free and risky play by the vastness of outdoor spaces,

the complexity and unpredictability of natural elements and the richness of the resulting stimulation of the senses.

## 2. The importance of risky play in child development

Risky play may be observed not only in children of all cultures but also in many mammal species. According to some authors this fact demonstrates its adaptive function (Sandseter, & Kennair, 2011).

Ethologists explain that risky play plays a part in supporting the development of the offspring who, through play, gradually learn how to overcome fear, or, in the case of rough-and-tumble, anger, and pick up abilities in the social, cognitive, emotive and motor spheres. From a neurophysiological point of view, it has been observed that free play practised by young mammals has a prominent role in the maturation of the prefrontal cortex which, as is known, is involved in the executive functions, and consequently influences the ability to self-regulate one’s behaviour, checking impulsiveness and encouraging greater reflection (Brussoni et al., 2012; Panksepp et al., 2003).

Play deprivation, induced in trials on rats (Hol et al., 1999), proved to be a factor that can inhibit the development of the animal, which as an adult may present anomalous social activity patterns.

Research conducted on children have yielded similar results. In a longitudinal study conducted in the United States on a sample of children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds (Weikart, 1998), it was seen that the amount of time spent playing freely during early childhood had an impact on the social responsibility and educational performance of adolescents and young adults.

The positive effects of free outdoor play on the development of motor abilities are also well known (Fjørtoft, 2001). Children that do not get the chance to swing, climb, run are more likely to have poor motor skills (Greenland, 2010) as well as being more prone to medical conditions such as obesity.

### 3.1. Forbidden games

While the positive role of free and adventurous play is universally recognised, the time set aside for these playful activities has gradually dwindled. This trend has been observed ever since the end of World War Two, due to factors of an environmental and social nature (Tovey, 2010).

Urbanisation processes, changed parenting styles, increasingly centring on the protection of the child, and, in general, the spread of a risk-averse culture, have meant that few children get the chance to play outdoors without an adult's supervision (Brussoni et al, 2012). The majority of children spend most of the time outside school hours performing highly structured activities or sedentary games.

In recent decades the prevailing approach has been that of guaranteeing the safety at all costs of children and youngsters, and eliminating any potential source of risk. This includes the design of play areas, for which legal requirements have become ever more stringent.

This has led to the spread in towns and cities of "standardised" playgrounds, which in literature (Brussoni et al., 2015) have been given the acronym KFC (kit, fence and carpet), spaces that significantly reduce the quality of the play experience in aesthetic, emotional and motor terms. They have been chosen by schools and by local councils partly due to the rising fear of legal actions brought by parents in the event of accidents.

The basic assumption is that by removing those elements perceived as being potentially dangerous, children will be safer. But this is not true: as we have seen, play deprivation can have harmful effects on child development.

It is a fact that the mental health of children has been deteriorating in all Western countries: according to figures from the National Institute for Mental Health, in the United States 20% of the child population present mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

The causes of this phenomenon can be attributed to many different factors, however scientific literature has ascertained that there is a clear correlation between free play deprivation and the growing emergence of mental

health problems among children and adolescents (Gray, 2011).

To quote Bundy (2009), from an article analysing the potential of free play in the school setting, "the biggest risk is that there is no risk at all".

### 3.2. A new play culture

Recently, awareness of the value of free and adventurous play for the development of the child has led to a new approach for designing play areas and activities, and to the partial spread, among teachers and parents, of more positive attitudes towards risky play (Little et al., 2011).

Public authorities, foundations and private associations in northern Europe (especially in Norway and Scandinavia as a whole), the United States, Canada and Australia have drawn up strategies to promote free and adventurous play outdoors, enabling the design and creation of spaces that prioritise the use of natural elements (trees, hedges, tree trunks, small hills, sand, grass, soil or bark chipping surfaces) and loose parts (rubber tyres, milk crates, cable spools, planks).

In this new model, risk is deemed to be essential for the healthy development of the child: «children need to take risks to learn how to manage risks. This is an essential part of growing up, and play is one of the most important ways in which they develop this vital skill. Riding a bicycle, climbing a scramble net, or pushing a friend on a swing all involve risk. It is essential that we do not try and remove all the risk from play or wrap children in cotton wool» (DCSF & DCMS, 2008).

Changes in policies and in the quality of the public debate on this issue can be seen by some official publications, such as the guide *Managing risk in play provision* from the UK National Children's Bureau. The conclusions of this document are significant: «Safety in play provision is not absolute and cannot be addressed in isolation. Play provision is first and foremost for children, and if it is not exciting and attractive to them, then it will fail, no matter how 'safe' it is».

### 3.3. Children with disabilities

Children with disabilities in particular may

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benefit from free and risky play experiences. However, mainly when the impairment is severe, play opportunities may be few and far between, and limited to enclosed, tightly controlled settings (Route, 2012).

A number of factors are involved in hindering the full participation of these children in risky play.

Motor and sensory limitations, for instance, may hamper free movement and exploration of the environment, and the ability to play in the same way as one's peers; intellectual limitations may make it more difficult for the child to assess and deal with risks.

In many cases children with disabilities may depend much more on the presence of an adult; e.g. children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders who are prone to run away need an higher level of supervision in outdoor settings (Von Benzon, 2010).

At the same time, the child may be limited by the possible tendency of adults to underestimate the child's abilities or to hyper-protect him or her (Sanders, 2006) and by the shortage of suitably trained personnel.

John and Wheway (2004) stress that over-caution may prevent many children from using play facilities, or from using some play facilities due to the lack of reasoned judgments on the actual degree of danger of these activities, and to ungrounded fears and a lack of confidence in the potential of the child with disabilities. Such attitudes may result in forms of discrimination.

Denying a child with disabilities the chance to take risks may in general be viewed as the result of a non-recognition of his/her dignity and his/her right to be treated in the same way as others (Lenehan et al. 2004).

Other obstacles (lack of transport or of adequate mobility aids, architectural or natural barriers) that prevent or render more difficult access to playgrounds or the use of play facilities (Dunn & Moore, 2005), as well as the adoption of over-rigid health and safety regulations, may also restrict full inclusion in risky play (Casey, 2010).

The fear of bullying or discrimination, to which these children are particularly subject (Carter & Spencer, 2006; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2013), may constitute a serious

deterrent to participation in play.

Another problem relates to austerity measures adopted in recent years in Europe. In many cases these measures have had an adverse effect on the amount of funding allocated to favour the inclusion of persons with disabilities (Hauben et al., 2012), and consequently on plans for the creation and running of inclusive play areas.

Generally speaking, it has been seen that the presence of an impairment has a negative influence on the time devoted to non-sedentary recreational activities (Law, 2002).

### **3.4. Promoting inclusion in risky play**

To promote greater participation, we should be working on a number of factors, taking as a starting point the involvement of children with disabilities and of their families (Route, 2012; Tisdall, 2012).

In actions designed to guarantee equal opportunities for access to risky play, we should first consider the fact that many children may not be very familiar with this type of play activity, and may shy away from the risk. In such cases the adult must support the emergence of more mature play capabilities, carefully gauging the degree of difficulty of proposed activities, encouraging and, if necessary, helping the child, and involving other children (Wilkinson, 2015).

The degree of risk that is acceptable for play activities performed by a child with disabilities must be assessed according to the child's individual traits. In some cases, certain activities must be avoided. Children suffering from epilepsy, for example, should not be climbing up trees or playing on tall structures. In the presence of a physical disability, it is often necessary to remember that the child can get tired much more quickly than his fellow playmates, and consequently may need to rest more (Wellhausen, 2002).

It is very important to have trained personnel present, who can provide parents, teachers and other caregivers with specific support regarding the acquisition of risk management skills, helping them to develop attitudes that can make children with disabilities more responsible and self-sufficient.

It is essential to ensure the accessibility of

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play areas and facilities. It should be remembered however that accessibility is not in itself sufficient to ensure the quality of the play experience. Many playgrounds designed with accessibility criteria do not offer sufficient stimuli to children, and thus do not encourage creativity.

The use of loose parts can enrich play settings and also allow children with disabilities to experience more active, creative and exciting ways of playing. Peer cooperation may also find a way around accessibility problems regarding these materials: a child moving around on a wheelchair, for instance, may use a basket attached to his chair to help with the conveyance of materials collected by a playmate (Wellhousen, 2002).

When designing inclusive play areas that can encourage risky play, it would always be a good idea to prioritise the use of natural elements. To facilitate movement in areas having uneven or bumpy surfaces (e.g. soil, grass or sandy pathways), it may be possible to use specific mobility aids. Some natural parks in the United States, for instance, give visitors the chance to rent out all-terrain wheelchairs.<sup>1</sup> Even more traditional surfaces, such as concrete, may be designed in such a way as to provide the right amount of adrenalin for children moving on a wheelchair. In some schools in Berlin small artificial humps have been created to make crossings more fun and adventurous (Grounds for Learning, 2011). In some parks of the same city, tracks with banked corners have been built with the same objective (Architecture and Design Scotland, 2012).

#### 4. Conclusions

Free and risky play, especially outdoors, is innate in humans as well as other mammals. It is a type of behaviour that can have a positive influence on child development.

In recent decades a number of social and cultural factors have led to a decline in available opportunities for experiencing the dimensions of risk and challenge through play. This is a phenomenon that is likely to adversely af-

fect to a greater extent children with disabilities, who generally have fewer opportunities to participate in recreational activities.

Thanks in part to the example of some Scandinavian experiences, a new play culture has recently been emerging, centring more on the needs of children and more oriented towards the management rather than elimination of risks.

There is a dearth of literature on the inclusion of children with disabilities in risky play. Future research in this sphere should investigate more closely the individual, personal, socio-cultural and environmental factors that might hinder or facilitate the involvement of all children in these play activities.

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<sup>1</sup> See on this point the site [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org).

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