

The importance of risky play in early childhood

Play is a fundamental aspect of learning and development in early years education. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to risky play due to its contribution to children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Risky play refers to exciting and challenging forms of play that involve uncertainty and the possibility of physical injury (Sandseter, 2021). Examples of risky play include, jumping, climbing, balancing and rough and tumble play.

This literature review critically explores the importance of risky play in the early years education by exploring developmental benefits, barriers to implementation, and the role of educators. The review also considers the theoretical perspectives of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky in understanding how children learn through challenging play experiences.

Risky play is commonly defined as exciting play experiences that involve uncertainty and challenge (Sandseter, 2021). Sandseter believed in several categories of risky play, these include climbing from heights, rough and tumble play, fast movement and exploration away from adults. Even though risky play can be seen as dangerous, research suggests it provides children with valuable opportunities to develop resilience, confidence and risk-assessment skills. Research has also identified more developmental benefits that are associated with risky play, including problem-solving abilities, emotional regulation, social competence and improved motor skills. Also, studies show that outdoor environments play an important role in supporting children's engagement in risky play experiences (Little and Stapleton, 2021). This shows that by allowing children to experience outdoor play it encourages them to take part in risky play which further improves their holistic development. Within early years practice, there is debates regarding the balance between safeguarding children and allowing them opportunities to experience manageable risk. The environments in ECEC institutions provide an important setting for children's engagement in all forms of play including risky play.

Sandseter, Kleppe and Sando (2021) argued that reduced exposure to risky play may negatively affect children's physical competence, confidence and ability to assess danger independently. This shows the importance for children to experience risky play in their early years as it highly benefits them not only physically but also socially, emotionally and intellectually. Play allows children to be themselves, express themselves while also allowing them the opportunity to form friendships and seek developmental benefits regarding their holistic needs. The Early Years Foundation Stage framework emphasises the importance of play-based learning, enabling environments and supporting children's independence. The EYFS of physical development encourages children to develop movement, coordination and spatial

awareness. Risky outdoor play provides valuable opportunities for climbing, balancing and navigating complex environments. “Playing and Exploring” encourages children to investigate and experience things independently, while “Active Learning” emphasises persistence and resilience when facing challenges. Risky play supports these characteristics because children must engage actively with uncertainty and problem-solving.

However, within the EYFS, tensions exist between promoting risky play and meeting safeguarding requirements. Practitioners are required to ensure children’s safety while also supporting and encouraging independence and exploration. This can be seen as an issue as it can create uncertainty regarding how much risk is acceptable within early years settings. To ensure children’s needs are being met, current approaches increasingly focus on risk-benefit assessments rather than risk elimination. This approach is important as it recognises that while some risk is present, the developmental benefits may outweigh the potential for minor injury.

Additionally, practitioners are encouraged to provide carefully supervised opportunities for challenge rather than removing all form of risk from children’s environment.

Benefits of Risky Play

Research continuously suggests that risky play contributes positively to children’s physical development. Outdoor risky play encourages children to develop balance, strength, coordination, running, jumping, gross motor skills through climbing and navigating uneven environments. Sandseter, Sando and Kleppe (2021) believed that children who engaged regularly in risky play displayed higher levels of physical activity and greater physical competence compared to children who had a more restricted environment. Risky play environments often offer open-ended opportunities for movement. spencer et al (2021) studied educators perceptions of risky play of within outdoor loose parts interventions and found that children demonstrated increased physical confidence and creativity when provided with less structured play opportunities. Also, risky play may contribute to long-term health benefits by encouraging active lifestyles and reducing lazy behaviour. Due to more children spending time indoors engaging with digital technology rather than outdoor physical activities, children may experience negative effects on their health and well-being.

The biggest advantage of risky play would be the positive effects it has on children’s social and emotional development. By children engaging in challenging and uncertain situations, they learn resilience, confidence and emotional regulation. Little (2022) found that children participating in risky outdoor play become more confident

to managing fear and uncertainty independently. This is an important benefit for children in early years education as they will be developing skills that they will not only need in the education system but also for their future careers. Also, risky play supports the development of self-esteem and independence, and this is seen when children successfully complete challenging tasks, such as climbing or balancing. They develop a sense of achievement and competence.

To conclude, literature suggests that risky play provides significant benefits for children's physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. Research shows that when children take part in risky play, it helps them develop confidence, resilience and problem-solving skills. Also, outdoor environments and open-ended play materials appear particularly important in supporting risky play opportunities. Even though risky play is seen as an advantage for children of early years, some barriers continue to limit risky play, such as parental anxieties, safeguarding concerns and practitioner uncertainty. In addition, risky play can be recognised as an essential activity within the education system and at home. By providing opportunities for challenge within safe and supportive environments, practitioners can promote children's holistic development while enabling them to become confident and capable individuals.

Reference List

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Methodological consideration

This section outlines the methodological considerations for the research project exploring risky play within early years education. It will discuss the chosen research sample, methods of data collection and the rationale for selecting these approaches. This section will evaluate the use of triangulation within the study and consider the strengths and limitations of the chosen methodology.

The chosen sample

The chosen sample for this research project would be 4-7 early years practitioners who work in a nursery setting in Wales working under the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework. Practitioners will include nursery practitioners, room leaders and early years educators who work closely with children between the years of 2 and 5. The reason for the chosen sample being early years practitioners, as they have direct experience supporting children's play and outdoor learning opportunities within the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework. This sample was chosen to gain detailed insights into practitioner perspectives on risky play and how it is implemented within early years practice.

Choosing a smaller sample size is appropriate for qualitative research because the aim is to gain rich and detailed data. Mikuska and Lyndon (2021) argue that qualitative research in early years education benefits from smaller participant groups because it allows researchers to explore experiences and meanings in greater depth. Some may argue that a limitation of using a small purposive sample is that findings may not be generalisable to all early years settings. However, despite this limitation, the sample can be seen as suitable because the study aims to gain detailed understanding rather than produce broad conclusions.

Research Methods

Semi-structured interviews

The primary method chosen for this research project would be semi-structured interviews with early years practitioners. Semi-structured interviews involve asking open-ended questions while also allowing the time for participants to expand on their experiences and opinions. According to Lambert (2019), semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to adapt questioning during the interview process, allowing for deeper exploration of participant responses and their collection of rich qualitative data. This method can be considered appropriate because it ensures participants to discuss their attitudes towards risky play in detail and allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions. Qualitative interviews are particularly valuable within early years

research as they allow practitioners to reflect on their practice and professional decision-making (Manni and Lofgren, 2022). Interview questions will include, what does risky play mean to you? What benefits do you believe risky play provides for children? What challenges do practitioners face when supporting risky play? How does the EYFS influence opportunities for risky play within your setting?

An advantage of interviews is that they provide detailed and personal that may not emerge through quantitative methods such as questionnaires. Unlike structured interviews, semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to ask follow-up questions and clarify responses where necessary (Brown and Danaher, 2019). Interviews allow clarification of Responses, improving the depth and quality of data collected and this is why it is a chosen sample for the research project.

Observations

Observation would also be used as secondary research method. Observations would consist of watching how practitioners support and respond to risky play opportunities within the outdoor environment. This will include observing children climbing, balancing, using loose parts and engaging in adventurous play while practitioners supervise and interact with them. Gowers (2022) highlights the importance of observing children and practitioners within authentic early years environments to gain meaningful understandings of educational experiences. When using observation as a research method, it ensures that the researcher is getting first-hand information.

The observation method would be non-participant. Non-participant means that the researcher will solely be observing the activity rather than observing by taking part in the activity. The researcher will be taking observational notes to record the themes relating to practitioner support, supervision and attitudes towards risk.

An advantage of observation is that it allows the researcher to compare what practitioners say during interviews with what happens in practice. However, sometimes observations can be restricted by the Hawthorne effect. The Hawthorne effect is when research participants act in a way that is consistent with their perception of the researcher's expectations during a study, which then biases the outcomes of that research study Franz (2018). To overcome this, researchers could spend some time in the setting before conducting the research study, this will ensure that the children will feel comfortable around the researcher.

Research methods that will not be used.

Research Methods that will not be used in this research study would be, questionnaires and surveys. They will not be used due to several limitations. Even

though questionnaires can collect data from a larger number of participants, they often produce less detailed responses compared to qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews. Limitations to questionnaires may be that participants may provide short, limited answers, reducing the depth of information. Newbury (2014) argues that questionnaires can restrict opportunities for probing deeper into participant viewpoints, limiting the richness of qualitative data.

Surveys will not be used in this project because they may result in low response rates, which can reduce the validity of findings. Also, in educational settings, practitioners may have limited time to complete lengthy questionnaires and surveys which may then affect the quantity and quality of the responses received.

Triangulation

Triangulation can be seen as the use of more than one research method or data source to improve the credibility, validity and reliability of research methods. Craig et al (2021) explains that triangulation enhances qualitative research by providing multiple perspectives and richer understanding of participant experiences. This shows triangulation is useful within this study because attitudes towards risky play may differ between what practitioners report and what occurs within the learning environment. Practitioners may express positive attitudes towards risky play during interviews but demonstrate cautious or restrictive behaviour during observations. By triangulation being used, it allows the researcher to compare findings more critically

Some may say that combining multiple methods can increase the complexity of data collection and analysis. However, despite this, triangulation was seen as beneficial for this study because it increases the validity, credibility and reliability of this study, and it provides more understanding of risky play within early years practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research project will use qualitative methodology to explore practitioners' perspectives on risky play within early years education. A purposive sample of early years practitioners was selected because practitioners can input relevant professional experience regarding risky play and the EYFS framework. Semi-structured interviews and observations were chosen as methods for collecting detailed and meaningful data within natural educational environments. By using triangulation, it will strengthen my research by combining multiple methods and enabling comparisons between practitioner perspectives and observed practice.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations can be seen as a set of principles that guide a research project. It can be seen as what is right and wrong. They are essential within educational research to ensure participants are treated fairly, respectfully and safely throughout the research project. By doing research within the early years education, it requires ethical sensitivity and this is due to the professional environment and the potential involvement of young children. This section will involve how consent will be obtained, how openness and transparency will be maintained, how confidentiality and anonymity will be protected and how risks to participants and the researcher will be minimised.

Informed consent is a key ethical principle when dealing with research and it ensures that participants fully understand the purpose, methods and potential risk of the study before they agree to take part. For this research project, early years practitioners would receive an information sheet that will be collected. This information sheet will include:

- ❖ How data will be collected
- ❖ How confidentiality will be respected
- ❖ The purpose of the study
- ❖ Their right to withdraw at anytime
- ❖ What participation involves
- ❖ What the findings will be used for.

Participants will then be asked to sign a consent form before conducting the research. Within this project, consent will be ongoing and not just a one-time event. Therefore, participants will feel more supported and can ask questions or withdraw from the project if they no longer want to take part. Due to observations possibly taking place in an educational setting where children attend, assent from the children will have to be arranged. Many children and perhaps all who are under the age of 10 are not considered to be sufficiently competent to make their own decisions regarding their participation in clinical research (Sibely *et al*, 2016). If a child appeared distressed, avoided the researcher or they verbally mentioned their discomfort, observations involving that child would stop immediately. Alderson and Morrow (2020) also argue that children should be recognised as active participants within research and their wishes should be respected throughout the research process.

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