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AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of Copilot on 16/05/2026

I used the prompt(s):

- Please could you help me to source scholar / academic sources on the research subject of Role of EY practitioner in outdoor and risky play specifically around the ethical considerations. Ensure these are published within the last 10 years unless they are theory based
- Analyse whether this article can help me to explain how adults have an impact on children's outdoor play and risk taking? - <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/15/4212>
- Please find me a source for GDPR
- Help me to put my Harvard reference list into alphabetical order and remove any duplicate references

I acknowledge the use of Google Editor on 16/05/2026 to check Spelling and Grammar

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work

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This literature review explores the question of - **How does the role of the practitioner support effective outdoor learning and risky play in early years settings.**

Despite increasing recognition of the value of outdoor learning and risky play, research indicates that children's access to these experiences remains inconsistent across early years (EY) settings. This inconsistency is frequently linked to practitioner attitudes, confidence, and their interpretations of risk and safeguarding obligations. This literature review aims to consider how the role of the practitioner influences effective implementation of outdoor learning and risky play, the influence of practitioner attitudes, training, and professional judgement on children's access to outdoor play experiences and examines how practitioners manage risk, safety, and learning to promote children's physical, emotional, and social development.

Definitions of outdoor learning vary across the literature, reflecting differing conceptual and pedagogical perspectives on its purpose and practice. Sandseter and Lysklett (2018) describe outdoor learning as a process that supports children's movement, play, design, and active exploration, enabling them to construct and express their own ideas. This aligns with sociocultural and experiential theories of learning, where understanding emerges through active participation, social interaction, and engagement with real world environments (Vygotsky, 1978; Waite, 2011), as well as through direct interaction with the natural environment (Maynard and Waters, 2007).

From a pedagogical perspective, risky play is understood as meaningful learning opportunities in which children engage with risk, challenge, and uncertainty, supporting the development of confidence, resilience, problem solving skills and the ability to assess and manage their own risk independently (Sandseter, 2007; Little and Wyver, 2008; Gray et al., 2025).

Across Welsh play policy documents such as Wales - A Play Friendly Country (2002) that underpin the Curriculum for non-maintained settings (CFNMS), outdoor and risky play are recognised as vital in supporting children's holistic development. Opportunities for adventurous and physical play help children develop decision making skills and self-regulation, particularly when supported through sensitive adult

supervision rather than overly directed adult involvement (Welsh Government, 2021, Welsh Government, 2025).

Within EY settings, this method of play is viewed as a child centred approach that recognises even the youngest children as capable learners who construct knowledge through physical action and movement, social interaction, and engagement with appropriate challenge (Tovey, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). However, despite extensive research evidencing the developmental value of outdoor learning and risky play, there is also literature that highlights ongoing tensions between these pedagogical approaches and practitioner concerns within the sector relating to safety, professional accountability, inspection culture and regulatory requirements, particularly within settings providing care for the youngest children (Gill, 2007; Ball, 2002; Brussoni et al., 2012).

The effectiveness of outdoor learning is strongly influenced by practitioner involvement. Practitioner perceptions of risk are widely recognised as central to the implementation of effective outdoor learning, as adult attitudes strongly influence the extent to which children are permitted to engage in challenge and exploration (Sandseter, 2007; Little and Wyver, 2008; Little, Wyver and Gibson, 2011).

While quality outdoor provision is often available in many EY settings, studies suggest that its potential is not always fully realised due to adult-led restrictions or limited understanding of outdoor pedagogy and its benefits (Kiviranta *et al*, 2024). This highlights the need for practitioners to adopt an enabling role rather than a purely supervisory one, positioning themselves as facilitators, empowering children to take ownership over their exploration, helping them to manage their own appropriate risk levels and develop a deeper confidence and competence in outdoor spaces (Ernst, 2014, Stephenson 2003).

The literature consistently positions practitioners as central enablers of children's access to risky play, suggesting that opportunities for play are influenced more by adult perceptions of risk than by children's demonstrated competence. Research suggests that negative attitudes towards children's ability to manage risk often stem from practitioners' own experiences, confidence, and levels of professional knowledge (Tovey, 2011). When practitioners recognise that risk does not equate to danger, they are better positioned to support children in assessing and managing

risk safely therefore reinforcing the importance of professional judgement and reflective practice rather than rigid rule following. This approach is central to effective EY pedagogy (Little and Wyver, 2008; Little, Wyver and Gibson, 2011).

A recurring theme within the literature is the balance practitioners must navigate between safeguarding obligations and enabling play. Regulatory frameworks such as the CFNMS impose a duty of care that requires practitioners to both protect children and uphold their rights to meaningful outdoor learning experiences, this can lead to overly cautious practice if not interpreted thoughtfully (Brussoni et al, 2012). This can create ambiguity for practitioners, who must interpret safeguarding expectations alongside pedagogical commitments to challenge and autonomy (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). However, robust safeguarding measures should be understood as an enabling practice that supports children to identify, assess, and manage their own risk, rather than a restrictive approach that removes risk and restricts learning opportunities (Ball, 2002, UNCRC, 2025).

The literature also highlights the role of training and continuous professional development in shaping practitioner confidence. Without appropriate training, practitioners may struggle to balance safeguarding responsibilities with the promotion of independence and appropriate challenge (Bilton, 2014). Similarly, professional development focused on outdoor pedagogy and risk benefit assessment has been shown to increase practitioners' confidence and willingness to support risky play (Gill, 2007). However, evidence suggests that training alone is often insufficient in producing sustained changes in practice. Although high quality professional development has the potential to challenge risk averse cultures within EY settings, increased confidence does not consistently translate into risk enabling practice. Wider institutional, cultural, and regulatory pressures can heighten practitioner anxiety and inhibit professional decision making, resulting in cautious or inconsistent implementation of risk enabling approaches (Button and Wilde, 2019; Szpunar *et al.*, 2023; McCrorie *et al.*, 2025; Hanrahan, 2023). Furthermore, practitioner attitudes towards risk are often shaped not only by formal training but also by personal beliefs, prior experiences, and organisational expectations, suggesting that confidence gained through training may be undermined in settings where compliance to risk averse policies is prioritised over professional judgement (Little and Wyver, 2008; Ball, 2002; Little, Wyver and Gibson, 2011).

Overall, the literature highlights the practitioner as central to enabling effective outdoor learning and risky play. Where practitioners demonstrate confidence, reflective judgement, and a child centred approach, children are more likely to engage in meaningful and challenging play. However, tensions between safeguarding, confidence, and organisational expectations suggest a need for further research into practitioners' perspectives and decision making.

A key gap also exists in relation to age and context. Much of the research focuses on children aged three and above, with limited attention to two-year-olds, particularly within Flying Start settings in South Wales. This highlights the need for research exploring how practitioners support outdoor learning and risky play specifically for this younger age group within this context.

Methodology

This methodology outlines the research design, participants, data collection methods, and analysis procedures used in the study exploring 'How the role of the practitioner support effective outdoor learning and risky play in EY settings.

The sample for this research study will consist of practitioners and childminders working within private and Flying Start EY settings in Blaenau Gwent. Participants will include EY practitioners who are directly involved in planning, supervising, and facilitating outdoor learning and play experiences for children aged 0 – 3 years.

These settings align with Welsh EY frameworks, including the Curriculum for Non-Maintained Settings (2021) and Flying Start programme guidance (2026), which are informed by established EY theories such as Froebel (2018) as well as elements of Forest School (n.d) and Reggio Emilia (1997) making them a valid and appropriate sample group.

A targeted sample of practitioners with direct experience of outdoor learning and risky play will be selected to provide rich and relevant insights into how practitioner attitudes, confidence, professional judgement, and organisational expectations influence children's access to such experiences. As participants are intentionally chosen for their relevance to the research focus rather than randomly selected, this constitutes a non-probability sampling approach (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013).

This sample was selected because early years practitioners play a pivotal role in shaping children's experiences of outdoor and risky play. Research highlights that practitioners' perceptions of risk, safeguarding responsibilities, and levels of professional confidence significantly influence children's opportunities to engage in challenging and adventurous outdoor play (Gill, 2007).

Focusing on practitioners working within Flying Start settings allows the researcher to explore these issues within a specific policy driven context where expectations around safeguarding, inspection, and child development are particularly prominent. (Welsh Government, 2026).

Furthermore, Flying Start settings provide an appropriate context for this study due to their emphasis on early intervention, child wellbeing, and holistic development (Welsh Government, 2026). Practitioners within these settings are required to balance policy expectations with responsive, child-centred pedagogy (Welsh Government, 2023) making them well placed to reflect on the tensions between enabling risk taking and maintaining safety. By selecting participants with direct responsibility for outdoor provision, the study aims to generate meaningful, practice-based insights that align closely with the research question.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how EY practitioners support outdoor learning and risky play in their EY's settings. A qualitative approach of Semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observations were selected as they allow for an in-depth understanding of practitioners' experiences, attitudes, and professional judgement within real life contexts. This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring complex social interactions and behaviours that cannot be easily quantified (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013). A quantitative approach would be less suitable for this study, as it focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, which would not capture the depth and complexity of practitioners' experiences and perspectives needed for this research topic (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

Additionally, other research methods were considered but were deemed less appropriate. For example, structured methods such as surveys or structured interviews would limit participants' responses to fixed answers, restricting

opportunities to explore their experiences and reasoning in detail (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013; Creswell, 2014). A mixed method approach was also considered however it would introduce unnecessary complexity for a small scale, exploratory study. Collecting and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data would be time consuming and difficult to integrate and may shift the focus away from gaining in-depth qualitative insights (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on understanding professional practice, the qualitative approach of using Semi-structured Interviews and Non participatory observations is more appropriate, giving rich, detailed insights into participants' views and experiences (Denscombe, 2014; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Method 1 – Interviews

Interviews were chosen as an appropriate method for this research study as they enable the researcher to gain in depth insights into practitioner's personal experiences, perspectives and professional practice-based decision making. The flexible nature of an interview allows for probing and clarification, resulting in rich, detailed data that supports a deeper understanding of the professional practice (Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

The format of interview chosen for this research project is a Semi-structured interview.

Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative data collection method that allows the researcher to explore practitioners' experiences and perspectives in depth through flexible, open-ended questions (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). Unlike structured interviews, which rely on fixed questions and limit participants' responses, semi-structured interviews allow for open ended questioning and greater flexibility in gathering data. They enable the researcher to extend and clarify responses, generating richer and more detailed responses (Mukherji, P. and Albon, D, 2018).

For example, when exploring how practitioners support outdoor and risky play, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ask an initial question and then use follow up prompts to explore responses in greater depth, such as how they support children to manage risk or how setting policies influence their practice. This

enables the collection of rich, detailed data that would not be achievable through structured questioning alone (Denscombe, 2014).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews offer a balance between consistency and flexibility, ensuring that key topics such as approaches to supporting outdoor and risky play, as well as the barriers and enablers influencing practice are addressed while still allowing participants the freedom to express their views in their own words (Punch, 2009). This can lead to the emergence of unanticipated themes and insights, providing a deeper understanding of complex aspects of professional practice (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). As a result, they are particularly effective for investigating how practitioners support outdoor and risky play, as this involves individual experiences, professional judgement, and the personal influence of setting policies and safeguarding requirements (Fielding and Thomas, 2008).

Despite their advantages, semi-structured interviews have several limitations. They can be time consuming to conduct and analyse, particularly where practitioners are working within staffing ratios, as participation may need to take place outside of working hours, which can impact availability and willingness to engage in the research having a potential impact on sample sizes (Mukherji, P. and Albon, D, 2018).

A further limitation is the potential for researcher bias. Due to the flexible nature of the interview process, the researcher may unintentionally influence participants' responses through the way questions are phrased, the tone of delivery, or the use of follow up prompts sizes (Mukherji, P. and Albon, D, 2018). Additionally, the researcher's own beliefs and expectations may impact how responses are interpreted during the analysis stage. This subjectivity can affect the reliability and validity of the data, as different researchers may interpret the same responses in different ways. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and reflect on potential bias when conducting and analysing qualitative data (Berger, R, 2015).

Recording data captured in interviews can be achieved by using audio recording devices with consent, allowing for accurate and complete documentation of participants' responses. This enables the researcher to accurately capture the interview and focus on the interaction with the participant rather than relying on note taking, which may result in the loss of important details. The recordings can then be

transcribed verbatim, meaning that all spoken responses are captured in detail to support a thorough and systematic analysis of the data. However, transcription can be time-consuming, and careful attention must be paid to maintaining accuracy and minimising researcher bias throughout both the transcription and analysis stages (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013).

Method 2 – Observations

The second qualitative method chosen for this research project was naturalistic non-participation observation. This method takes place at the participants setting in their day-to-day practice and allows the researcher to observe practitioners supporting outdoor and risky play without direct involvement from the observer. This approach minimises disruption to practice and enables the collection of authentic data on how practitioners respond to children's engagement with risk (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013).

For example, when exploring how practitioners support outdoor and risky play, non-participant observation allows the researcher to directly observe behaviours and interactions within the natural setting. This may include how practitioners support the children to manage risk, when they intervened, and how individual setting policies influence practice in day-to-day situations. This enables the collection of authentic data based on actual practice, rather than relying on self-reported responses (Denscombe, 2014).

Furthermore, these observations offer a structured yet flexible approach, allowing the researcher to focus on key aspects such as approaches to supporting risk taking, as well as the barriers and enablers influencing their practice, while remaining open to capturing unexpected behaviours or interactions. Participants can also take part during normal session times, which may reduce the need for additional time commitments outside of working hours and support greater accessibility and participation barriers (Punch, 2009).

However, while observation provides valuable insight into what practitioners do, it does not capture their perspectives, reasoning, or professional judgement, which are central to understanding how and why they support outdoor and risky play (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). As observation focuses on visible behaviours and interactions, it cannot reveal the intentions behind practitioners' actions or the factors influencing

their decisions, such as training, personal beliefs, or setting policies. In the context of outdoor and risky play, these underlying factors are particularly important, as practitioners must constantly balance children's freedom to explore with safeguarding responsibilities and risk management. Without access to participants' explanations, the researcher may misinterpret behaviours or make assumptions about practice. Consequently, although observation can illustrate what is happening in practice, it provides a limited understanding of the complexity of decision-making processes, reducing its ability to fully address the aims of this study (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013).

Another notable limitation of observational research is the Hawthorne effect. This is where individuals may modify their behaviour when they are aware they are being observed (Franz T, 2018). In the context of this study, practitioners may adopt more cautious approach to outdoor and risky play, closely adhering to safeguarding procedures or demonstrating what they perceive to be 'best practice' rather than reflecting their usual day-to-day behaviour. This may result in an artificial representation of practice, reducing the authenticity of the data collected. Furthermore, as risky play involves elements of uncertainty and professional judgement, practitioners may be less willing to allow children to engage in higher levels of risk when being observed, potentially limiting the range of behaviours recorded. Consequently, the data gathered may not fully reflect typical interactions, which could impact the validity and reliability of the findings (Oswald, Sherratt and Smith, 2016).

Recording data during observations can be achieved through detailed field notes or structured observation recordings, enabling the researcher to systematically document behaviours and interactions as they occur in real time (Mukherji, P. and Albon, D, 2018). This supports the collection of authentic data on how practitioners facilitate outdoor and risky play within the natural environment. However, this process can be challenging, as the researcher must balance observing and recording simultaneously, which may result in missed or selectively recorded information time (Mukherji, P. and Albon, D, 2018). Furthermore, observational data relies on the researcher's interpretation, increasing the potential for bias. Therefore, careful planning, consistency, and reflexivity are essential to maintain accuracy and

reliability throughout the process of data collection and analysis (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013).

This research would benefit from the use of triangulation, which involves combining multiple methods to enhance the credibility and validity of the research findings and whether both methods corroborate one another (Bolshaw and Josephidou, 2009).

In this context, while the interviews allow practitioners to explain their perspectives, reasoning, and professional judgement, observations would enable the researcher to examine how these approaches are demonstrated in practice.

For example, practitioners may describe how they support children to engage in outdoor and risky play during interviews, while observations could be used to explore whether these practices are reflected in real-life interactions within the setting. This combination allows the researcher to compare, and contrast reported practices with observed behaviour, helping to identify consistencies or discrepancies between what practitioners say and what they do (Denscombe, 2014).

As a result, triangulation can strengthen the reliability and validity of the findings by providing a more comprehensive understanding of how practitioners support outdoor and risky play. However, it may also increase the complexity and time required for data collection and analysis, particularly in small scale research studies (Denscombe, 2014; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Bolshaw and Josephidou, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

This study explores how practitioners support outdoor learning and risky play in early years settings, using semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observations. Given the focus on professional practice within EY settings, it is essential that the research is conducted in an ethical, transparent, and respectful way, ensuring that no harm whether physical, emotional, or professional is caused to those involved (Palaiologou, 2016). The study will be guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2018), which underpin the research process through their emphasis on respect, responsibility, and integrity. It also draws on the principle of researching 'with' rather than 'on' participants (James, 2004), recognising practitioners as active contributors to the research rather than subjects of it, and

valuing their experiences and perspectives throughout. These ethical principles, particularly informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, are central to protecting participants and ensuring that research is conducted in a way that respects both individual rights and professional integrity (BERA, 2018).

Before the research begins, participants will be provided with clear and accessible information about the study, this should be available in a language of their choice where possible to ensure accessibility (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013). The Information provided will outline the names of the researchers, The aims and purpose of the research, The methods being used, What participation will involve, How the findings will be recorded, Proposed timescales, The right to withdraw at any time and how the data will be stored and used (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Providing this information in advance supports transparency and enables participants to make fully informed decisions about their involvement (Spagnolli *et al.*, 2018).

While providing this information supports transparency and informed decision making, it is recognised that understanding of this information cannot be assumed, and consent should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event (BERA, 2018; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Participants may still feel pressure to take part or may not fully anticipate the nature of their involvement; therefore, opportunities will be provided throughout the research for participants to ask questions and reaffirm their consent (Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

This is equally important for the parents of the children. Although parents are not part of the primary sample group, their children's presence within the observational element means that parental awareness and informed consent are still required (Palaologou, 2016). This ensures that parents are informed about the purpose of the research and can raise concerns or withdraw their child if they wish, in line with ethical guidance around safeguarding and consent. In accordance with BERA (2018), participants will be reminded that involvement is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any point without consequence.

Ethical approval for this study will be obtained from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection. This ensures that the research is conducted in line with institutional ethical

values, standards and guidance, safeguarding the interests of participants, the researcher, and the university (UWTSD, n.d.).

Protecting confidentiality and anonymity is a key priority. All Interview and observation data should be anonymised using pseudonyms, and identifying details about individuals or settings should be removed. Observational notes will focus on general practice rather than individuals. This ensures participants feel able to share honest reflections without concern about professional judgement or repercussions (Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2013).

There are several potential risks associated with this research that require consideration. For participants, discussing practice around risky play and safeguarding may cause discomfort or anxiety, particularly if they feel their practice is being judged. To minimise this, interview questions will be open, non-judgemental, and focused on experiences rather than evaluation, and participants will not be required to answer anything they are uncomfortable with (Decker et al., 2011).

There is also a risk of professional sensitivity, where practitioners may worry about how their responses could reflect on themselves or their setting. This should be addressed through strict anonymity and reassurance that no identifiable information will be included in the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

When collecting data during interviews, participants will be made aware that responses are being recorded and will have opportunities to ask questions throughout. During observations, practitioners will be informed about what is being observed and why. This level of openness is particularly important when exploring sensitive areas such as risk, safeguarding, and professional decision making, as it helps to build trust, minimise anxiety, and support informed participation (Spagnolli et al., 2018). However, it is recognised that this does not remove all risk, as participants may still feel judged, alter their responses or behaviour, or remain cautious due to perceived professional expectations (Spagnolli et al., 2018).

It is also important to consider the support available to the researcher. As someone working within an EY context, there is potential for emotional and professional pressure when discussing sensitive areas of practice or observing colleagues. To manage this, ongoing reflection will be maintained throughout the research process, supported by academic supervision and adherence to institutional and ethical

frameworks (UWTSD, 2025). This helps to ensure that the research is conducted appropriately and that any challenges are addressed in a reflective and professional manner (Finlay, 2002).

Working within EY settings also presents additional considerations, including the need to maintain professional boundaries and adhere to safeguarding requirements. These will be addressed by following all setting policies alongside university guidance, always ensuring safe and appropriate conduct. Furthermore, it is important that the research is conducted in a way that maintains professional integrity and does not bring the university into disrepute. Adhering to ethical frameworks such as BERA (2018), alongside the Universities Research Code of Practice (2025) ensures the researcher is maintaining confidentiality and appropriate conduct, minimising risk.

Once data has been collected, all materials arising from interviews and observations, including audio recordings, transcripts and field notes, will be securely stored in line with GDPR (2016) and BERA ethical guidelines. Digital files will be kept on a password protected device, and any hard copy materials will be stored in a locked cabinet, with access restricted to the researcher. Only authorised individuals will have access to the data for the sole purposes outlined within this research study, in accordance with ethical guidelines and data protection requirements. Data will be retained only for the period specified by the university and will then be securely deleted or destroyed in line with GDPR (2016) guidance and institutional requirements.

While these measures aim to ensure data is stored securely, it is recognised that risks remain, including the potential for data breaches, human error, and limitations in maintaining full anonymity, particularly within small EY settings. There is also a risk associated with digital storage systems and extended data retention periods (UK Statistics Authority, 2025). These risks will be minimised through careful handling of data, restricted access, and adherence to GDPR and institutional guidance throughout the research process.

Overall, these ethical considerations ensure that both the semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observations are conducted responsibly, protecting participants

while enabling a valid and meaningful exploration of how practitioners support outdoor learning and risky play within early years settings.

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