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Towards a re-conceptualisation of risk in early childhood education

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ciec.sagepub.com**Mandy Cooke** 

Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

Sandie Wong

Macquarie University, North Ryde, Australia

Frances Press 

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, England

Abstract

Children's engagement in risk-taking has been on the agenda for early childhood education for the past 10–15 years. At a time when some say the minority world has become overly risk averse, early childhood education aims to support confident, competent and resilient children through the inclusion of beneficial risk in early childhood education. The concept of risk is a complex phenomenon. *Beneficial risk* is engaging in experiences that take a person outside of their comfort zone and include outcomes that may be beneficial to learning, development and life satisfaction. To date, research on beneficial risk in early childhood has focused on children's risk-taking in outdoor play. This focus has led to a predominant conceptualisation of beneficial risk in early childhood as an outdoor physical play activity for children. In this article, the authors problematise this conceptualisation. Drawing on both broad and early childhood education specific literature, the authors explore the current discourse on risk in both childhood and early childhood education. The authors identify the development of the current conceptualisation of risk as an experience for children within play, outdoors and as a physical activity, and highlight the limitations of this conceptualisation. The authors argue that for risk-taking to be in line with the predominantly holistic approach of early childhood education, a broad view of risk is needed. To achieve this broad view, the authors argue for a re-conceptualisation of risk that encompasses a wide range of risk experiences for both children and educators. The authors suggest further research is needed to expand our understanding of beneficial risk in early childhood education. They propose further research will offer a significant contribution to the early childhood sector.

Keywords

Early childhood, risk, risk-taking, early childhood educators

Corresponding author:

Mandy Cooke, Charles Sturt University, Panorama Avenue, Bathurst, NSW 2795, Australia.

Email: acooke@csu.edu.au

Introduction

Children's risk-taking is often seen as synonymous with outdoor play in early childhood education (ECE) research. Although at times researchers discuss risk-taking in broad terms, the dominant conceptualisation of risk-taking in ECE research is as *risky play*. Risky play is defined as 'thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury' (Sandseter, 2009b) and is principally aligned with children's outdoor activities. Within the conceptualisation of risk-taking as risky play, children's risk-taking is predominantly viewed as physical in nature, voluntary and enjoyable (Sandseter, 2009b). In this article, we argue that children's outdoor physical risk-taking in play is just one aspect of children's engagement with beneficial risk in ECE. Beneficial risk is defined as engaging in experiences that take a person outside of their comfort zone and include outcomes that may be beneficial to learning, development and life satisfaction. We also argue that engagement with beneficial risk in ECE does not fall only within children's experience. Given the potential positive outcomes, it is reasonable to assume that educators also can and should engage in beneficial risk-taking.¹

Our argument is based on the growing understanding that being brave and taking calculated risks is an important component of learning dispositions and contemporary society. We acknowledge that not all risks are beneficial. Opportunities to engage with beneficial risks can support the development of confident, competent and resilient children and educators, resulting in a community of learners who know how to assess and manage uncertainty, and see failure not as negative, but as a positive catalyst for growth and development (Brussoni et al., 2015; Dweck, 2012; Gill, 2007; Jones, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007; Simmons and Ren, 2009; Stephenson, 2003; Tovey, 2007).

This article argues that risk is a complex phenomenon. Risk experiences are not universal (Adams, 2016; Beck, 2006) and it is inappropriate to generalise or to assume any discussion on risk could apply to all countries, cultures or periods in time. This article takes a contemporary minority worldview of risk, informed by current minority world literature. Based on a review of relevant literature, it is argued that the current dominant view of risk in ECE as taking place in children's outdoor physical play does not fully acknowledge the complex nature of risk. When viewed from a broad perspective, we argue that risk-taking is not just about physical risks. Risk-taking can also include social, emotional and cognitive risk. Social, emotional and cognitive risk may align to the development of one's identity and sense of belonging, in addition to confidence, competence and resilience. An example of risk-taking associated with identity is a boy wearing a dress or fairy outfit in a conservative community or a child expressing an opinion that is different from that of adults or peers. Risk is also not just an outdoor play experience. Risk-taking can take place indoors and in activities other than play. If the ECE sector is to embrace beneficial risk as a valued aspect of children's learning and development, it is important to understand and encompass the full spectrum and complexity of risk in relation to both children's and educators' risk-taking.

It will be argued that in the provision of high-quality practices, and in turn high-quality experiences for children, the ECE sector needs to further develop its understanding of risk. This requires a re-conceptualisation of risk as more than children's outdoor physical play. Consequently, expanding our understanding of risk and associated practices (herein referred to as *risk practices*) should be the focus of the next phase in ECE risk research. Specifically, we propose that rather than focusing on children's risk-taking in outdoor physical play, research and practice should focus on a broad range of risk-taking for children and educators both indoors and outdoors, in both play and non-play experiences, and in a range of domains including emotional, social and cognitive. This broad view of risk-taking, as will be shown in this article, is in line with the guidelines expressed in curriculum documents from around the world, and a holistic approach to ECE.

This article begins by exploring some key concepts as a way of unpacking the complexity of risk. Risk-taking in ECE is then situated in the current discourse on risk in childhood, highlighting the additional complexity of risk when discussed in relation to children. The next section discusses a review of existing ECE research, identifying the alignment of risk-taking with children's outdoor physical play. Existing ECE research was reviewed in peer-reviewed journal articles, books and commissioned reports published in English-speaking countries such as Australia, England and New Zealand, as well as a small number of European countries, primarily Norway. Literature included empirical and theoretical research. Literature was accessed through electronic databases (EBSCOhost, Scopus, SAGE Journals Online, ProQuests and Taylor and Francis Online) using the following search terms: risk, children, early childhood, early childhood education, play, and risky play. The literature that has been reviewed points to a gap in ECE research. ECE research has not comprehensively explored a broad range of risk-taking including social, emotional and cognitive risk, risk-taking that takes place indoors and in activities other than play, and educators' risk-taking. This gap in the research, and the resulting limited conceptualisation of risk as children's outdoor physical play, may have led to limitations in educators' practices and children's learning and development. We point to a small number of research articles that conceptualise risk in broad terms and join with these authors in arguing for an expansion of ECE risk research. Further research should address the research gap by developing a broad conceptualisation of risk in ECE, exploring the full spectrum of beneficial risk experiences for children and educators and offer possible solutions for educators' practices.

Unpacking the complexity and definitions of risk

Risk invades many aspects of life. Crossing the road, buying a house, asking someone out on a date all involve risk. Although risk is an inherent part of everyday life, as a concept it is complex (Madge and Barker, 2007). A brief look at the etymology of risk begins to uncover both its complexity and its broad range of applications. In ancient Greece, the term *rhiza*, meaning root, was used in Homer's *Odyssey* to describe Odysseus' perilous journey at sea and the ensuing refuge he found clinging to the roots of a fig tree (Skjong, 2005). Stemming from this beginning, the term was used in maritime insurance, referring to the 'risks' involved in exploring unknown waters (Davis, 2009). Similarly, the Spanish word *riesgo* meant 'to sail into uncharted waters'. Alternatively, the German word *rysigo* stood for 'to dare, to undertake, enterprise [and] hope for economic success' (Skjong, 2005: 1), and the Arabic word *rizq* meant 'riches or good fortune' (Pinkus, 2011: 69). These historical examples identify risk as positive, negative or a mix of both; this dichotomy being a key element of the complexity of risk.

Another element of the complexity of risk is the fact that risk is not always a given reality, but a socially constructed phenomenon based on individual risk perception (Beck, 2006; Doron, 2016; Zinn, 2016). Risk perception, defined by Sjöberg et al. (2004) as 'the subjective assessment of the probability of a specified type of accident happening and how concerned we are with the consequences' (8), means that a single event can be viewed in multiple ways. Individual risk perception is influenced by a range of factors including experience, knowledge, culture, age and personality, and can change with varying contexts and over time (Zinn, 2016; Zuckerman and Kuhlman, 2000). In terms of cultural influence, for example, in Denmark the practice of infants sleeping outside in winter is common place, whereas in other countries this could be seen as too high of a risk to children's health (New et al., 2005). Additionally, risk perception can change over time. Walking alone to school was common practice for many Australians in the past, yet today this is mostly considered too high risk without adult supervision. Tolerance for risk has been attributed to the perceived

value the risk has for one's ideal vision of life and experience (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982). Within this view, communities might rally together against a perceived risk in the protection of moral civil society (Wilkinson, 2001). These variations in the way risk is perceived result in variation in both individual and collective responses to risk.

Risk itself has been defined as 'the probability of some specified adverse event occurring in a specified time interval' (HSE, 2001 as cited in Ball, 2007). This broad definition of risk encompasses both the idea of being *at risk* and the act of *risk-taking*. Being *at risk* refers to the vulnerable position of being at risk of harm, such as is often referred to regarding health risks. Whereas *risk-taking* suggests the voluntary action of engaging in an experience that may expose one to uncertainty and the possibility of either positive or negative consequences, such as sky diving, rock climbing or starting a new business. Exposure to risk through experiences, or the deliberate act of risk-taking, is primarily driven by the hope for positive consequences – and is the kind of risk discussed in this article. In light of this view of risk, we deem the following definition appropriate to this discussion:

Perceptions of dangers and uncertainties that may have negative outcomes but which may also be undertaken with positive consequences. (Madge and Barker, 2007: 10)

Although the terms 'risk' and 'risk-taking' are interchanged in this paper, we maintain reference to *risk-taking* as a voluntary action of engaging in an experience that may expose one to uncertainty and the possibility of either positive or negative consequences.

The current discourse on risk in childhood and early childhood education

While the discussion above illustrates that both the term and concept of risk have long been part of human life, seminal risk sociologists suggest that the contemporary minority world has developed an increasing focus on risk, leading to a rise in risk aversion (Beck, 2006; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Furedi, 2005, 2018). Some suggest that this rise in risk aversion has been caused by increased access to information and an increased ability to control both natural and social worlds (Beck, 2006; Giddens, 1991). Others suggest that increased risk aversion is fuelled by 'a narrative of fear' that encompasses a rise in 'safety as a moral value' and reduced tolerance towards uncertainty and harm (Furedi, 2018: 7). Whether due to one or a combination of these forces, increased risk aversion is evident in everyday life through an increase in regulation (Alemanno, 2016; Madge and Barker, 2007), public and consumer warnings (Furedi, 2018) and the depiction of fearful events in the media (Furedi, 2018; Gill, 2007).

This increase in risk aversion is often amplified in relation to children. According to Connolly and Haughton (2017), there has been an increased focus on the special place of childhood in relation to the human life span. Part of this focus has been on protecting children from threats and dangers that may hinder their health and development (United Nations, 1990). As adults, we have strong and often conflicting views on what this looks like. For some, total protection and maintenance of positive experience is the way forward, for others giving children the skills and knowledge to navigate life's risks and challenges is preferable (Baily, 2011). In the early childhood sector, government interventions in the form of national curriculum frameworks and quality reform are evidence of attempts to ensure positive outcomes for children (Sims et al., 2017). In practicality, for many parents, an understandable need to protect their children from harm dominates, and for many educators their duty of care is a powerful driver in keeping children safe (Bundy et al., 2009; Madge and Barker, 2007; McFarland and Laird, 2017).

The protectionist perspective, largely fuelled by concern about physical injury (Brussoni et al., 2015) and a view of children as innocent (Cunningham, 2006), has resulted in an ‘as safe as possible’ approach to children’s experiences (Brussoni et al., 2012). This approach, also referred to as ‘surplus safety’ (Little, et al., 2010; Tranter et al., 2012), may lead to the removal of experiences that are beneficial to children’s health and development in lieu of protecting them from negative experiences and possible harm (Brussoni et al., 2015; Brussoni et al., 2012; Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2008). In a systematic review of literature examining the relationship between children’s health and risky play, Brussoni et al. (2015) identified a range of experiences that have an element of risk and provide positive health and development benefits. Experiences include children playing out of sight of adults, climbing to great heights and rough and tumble play (close physical play). Results show that engagement in these experiences can lead to increased physical health, social competence, creativity and resilience. The protectionist perspective, where children are supervised and often restricted in their play choices, can lead to a primarily negative view of risk as something to be avoided (Gill, 2007; Little and Wyver, 2008). Commentators argue this protectionist view has led to what some refer to as ‘the cotton wool generation’ (Gill, 2007; Jones, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007; Sandseter, 2009b), where the lives of children today are vastly different from that of a generation ago (see for example, Ball, 2002; Brussoni et al., 2015; Gill, 2007). Many children are now no longer allowed to independently engage in activities their parents did without supervision (Brussoni et al., 2015; Niehues et al., 2016). For example, a seminal study on children’s independent mobility (freedom to roam without adult supervision) identified a 70% reduction in the number of children allowed to walk to school independently in England and Germany between 1971 and 1990 (Hillman, Adams, and Whitelegg, 1990). Similar results have been found in studies in Norway, Denmark, Finland (Fyhri, Hjorthol, Mackett, Fotel, and Kyttä, 2011) and Australia (Carver, Watson, Shaw, and Hillman, 2013). These restrictions on children’s freedom are often cultural, reminding us of variation in risk perception. For example, children in Australia and New Zealand have even less freedom than children in countries such as Germany (Tranter, 2006). Increased traffic, fear of judgement by others and media reporting are reported among the causes of amplified fears (Brussoni et al., 2015; Furedi, 2005; Gill, 2007; Little and Wyver, 2008; Madge and Barker, 2007; Tranter, 2006).

An alternative view sees risk as a natural and beneficial part of childhood. This view is not new. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762), in his revolutionary educational text *Emile*, recommended that we should let nature take its course by allowing children freedom of movement and, in turn, the experience of pain through minor scrapes and bruises:

Give them practice, then, in the trials they will one day have to endure. [...] We may therefore make a child robust [...] and even if there were some risk we still ought not to hesitate. Since there are risks inseparable from human life. (para. 25)

When viewed from a pro-experience perspective, the protectionist perspective might be regarded as limiting children’s freedom and therefore exposure to risk, which in turn limits positive adventurous, challenging and rich learning experiences (Gill, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007). The pro-experience perspective sees risk in a more positive light.

Advocates of a positive view of risk recognise ‘that understanding and managing risk lies at the heart of the challenges we face today in business, government and civil society’ (Madge and Barker, 2007: 8) and suggest that learning to take calculated risks is an important undertaking for children ‘to grow into competent and confident adults who have a measured view of society and its challenges’ (Madge and Barker, 2007: 45). Children’s engagement in beneficial risk-taking can support the development of physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills (Brussoni et al., 2015;

Farmer et al., 2017; Gill, 2007; Little and Wyver, 2008; Madge and Barker, 2007; Sandseter and Kennair, 2011), as well as increase children's inherent risk management skills and aid in the development of key life dispositions such as perseverance, resilience and creativity (Brussoni et al., 2015; Dweck, 2012; Gill, 2007; Jones, 2007; Krieger, 2016; Madge and Barker, 2007; Simmons and Ren, 2009; Stephenson, 2003; Tovey, 2007). Acknowledging the benefits, commentators now promote an 'as safe as necessary' approach that balances risk with potential benefits (Ball et al., 2012; Brussoni et al., 2012; Gill, 2007). Reflecting this balanced approach, children's risk-taking is now included in many ECE curriculum documents.

Explicit articulation of risk-taking in ECE curriculum documents began around 10 years ago. For the most part, contemporary ECE curriculum documents take a holistic approach to children's ECE experiences, viewing the whole child within the context of their learning environment (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (AG), 2009). This approach results in risk-taking being aligned to a range of developmental areas and learning dispositions. The Australian curriculum document *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) (AG, 2009) and the Welsh *Curriculum for Wales: Foundation Phase Framework* (Department for Education and Skills, 2015), first articulated in 2009 and 2010, respectively, encourage educators to allow, invite and challenge children to take appropriate and calculated risks. In the Australian EYLF, for example, these references to children's opportunities for risk-taking are included throughout the document, with reference to learning environments, autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience, agency, social and emotional well-being, problem solving, inquiry and experimentation. The EYLF states that both indoor and outdoor environments should be designed to allow for children's risk-taking, and that taking risks is part of children's learning (AG, 2009: 35). Similarly, Canadian provincial curriculum guides such as *Play, Participation, and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta* articulate that taking risks is inherent in the 'spirit of learning' (Makovichuk et al., 2014: 36).

Articulation of the importance of risk-taking in curriculum documents does not necessarily translate into educators knowing how to provide for or support children's risk-taking. A steady succession of research focusing on both risk in childhood and risk in ECE has been exploring both children's experiences and educators' practices since the early 2000s, with the bulk of key literature published between 2007 and 2015. A review of ECE and child-related risk literature reveals a number of dominant views about risk. Analysis of these views suggests there is a current conceptualisation of risk as an experience for children in *outdoor physical play*. We argue that this conceptualisation may have created a narrow understanding of risk in ECE, limiting both children's engagement with risk and educators' risk practices. This article will now explore the development of this conceptualisation, followed by limitations of this conceptualisation as justification for further research.

Development and limitations of the current conceptualisation of risk

There are a number of definitions of risk used in current ECE research literature. Leading researcher, Sandseter (2009a), whose work focuses specifically on risky play, defines risky play as a 'thrilling and exciting form of play that involves a risk of physical injury' (p. 439). Another leading researcher, Little (2010a) refers to risk-taking as 'situations in which we are required to make choices among alternative courses of action where the outcome is unknown' (2). Although Little's definition offers broader scope, Sandseter's definition has been widely referred to in international research (see, for example, Brussoni et al., 2015) and all of Little's research has focused on the outdoor environment.

With the support of current literature, this article will now reveal the development and limitations of the conceptualisation of risk as play, as an outdoor experience and as a physical activity.

Risk as play

Our review of the literature identifies a dominant view of risk as a play-based experience. Non-ECE specific documents such as Ball et al.'s (2012) *Managing Risk in Play Provision* and Coster and Gleeve's (2008) *Give Us a Go! Children and Young People's Views on Play and Risk-Taking* clearly link risk and play through use of both terms in their title. Other documents, such as Tim Gill's (2007) *No Fear; Growing up in a Risk Averse Society* and Madge and Barker's (2007) *Risk and Childhood*, refer to a range of everyday risks and challenges children encounter as part of childhood, but then go on to either largely focus on risks in play, or highlight the existence of this trend. When looking at ECE-specific research, the dominant view of risk as play becomes even more evident. Literature by prominent authors Sandseter, Little and Wyver consistently refer to children's risk-taking in play and regularly use the now commonly applied term *risky play*, thus clearly aligning risk-taking with play (see, for example, Little, 2015; Little and Wyver, 2008; Sandseter, 2007, 2009a).

This article argues that risk in ECE – either children's or educators' – may be experienced in events or activities that do not fit into the category of play. Play is a dominant discourse in ECE and as such it is possible that non-play experiences may have been overlooked in the discourse on children's risk-taking. Without entering a discussion on the play–work dichotomy, we suggest that defining children's risk-taking as play neglects the possibility that children may engage with risk in experiences that are more like work – such as cleaning, cooking or travelling to an excursion. Stephenson (2003) supports this proposition. During her observational study of children's risk-taking in outdoor play, Stephenson observed non-play experiences such as a child being dropped off on her first day at childcare and wondered about the possible risk involved. Stephenson noted that, for the child, attending childcare for the first time involved both uncertainty and the possibility of either positive or negative consequences – key elements of our working definition of risk. If risk-taking in non-play experiences is not part of the discourse on risk-taking in ECE, then educators may not be recognising the presence of risk in these experiences. If educators do not recognise potential opportunities for beneficial risk-taking, or experiences where beneficial risk is inherent, they may also overlook the support and/or encouragement needed to manage these experiences.

The conceptualisation of risk as a play activity also aligns risk predominantly within the child's domain (we are not suggesting that adults don't play, just that play is predominantly viewed as a children's activity). This alignment neglects the possibility that risk-taking may be something that educators can and should engage in. It is likely that early childhood educators, being entrusted with the care of other people's very young children, inherently take risks each and every day. Educators' engagement with risk may be particularly prevalent when allowing and/or encouraging children's risk-taking. Researchers in *The Sydney Playground Project* identify this link between children's risk-taking and educators' risk-taking. Educators in the study reported that they were often uncertain about how parents might respond to children's risk-taking. This uncertainty influenced educators' willingness to allow children to engage with risk. Some educators said that allowing children to engage in risk-taking was not worth the possible negative response from parents if the risk-taking resulted in negative consequences for the child (Bundy et al., 2009; Niehues et al., 2013). New et al. (2005) have approached educators' risk-taking from a different perspective. They suggest that educators can and should engage in risk-taking in curriculum planning. New et al. describe the 'risk-rich' curriculum where educators take risks in the planning and delivery of curriculum to encourage 'both adults and children [to] explore new topics and unfamiliar terrains' (1). Given the inherent

nature of risk in human life, it can be assumed that educators engage in risk-taking in a variety of ways within ECE practice. We propose that educators' risk-taking may be linked to the development of new and innovative practices – practices that address the needs of the children in their particular service or the needs of a changing and uncertain future. By not recognising educators' risk-taking in our conceptualisation of risk in ECE, the ECE sector may be overlooking the support, encouragement and professional development educators need to manage these experiences.

Risk as an outdoor experience

Literature also suggests that children's risk-taking is synonymous with outdoor environments. Similar to the documents discussed above by Ball et al. (2012) and Coster and Gleeve (2008), Helen Tovey's (2007) book *Playing Outdoors: Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge* aligns risk with outdoor play from the outset through use of all three terms in the title. This alignment is also evident in research projects such as *The Sydney Playground Project* (Bundy et al., 2011) where five- to seven-year-old children's risk-taking is explored within the context of children's school playground play, and in Brussoni et al's (2015) systematic review of children's health in relation to risky outdoor play. ECE-specific research also reveals a dominant view of children's risk-taking as taking place outdoors. In separate studies researchers Greenfield (2004) and Stephenson (2003) observed children's overwhelming interest and enthusiasm for taking risks in outdoor play. Waters and Begley's (2007) research compared the risk-taking of four-year-old children in an outdoor natural environment (Forest School) and a regular learning environment. Although this was a comparison between the two environments, the regular environment was purposefully selected. The selection was made because the programme included routine use of the outdoor space and the teacher had initiated enrolling the class in a Forest School programme. These two aspects provided the class with increased outdoor experiences. A paper by Maynard (2007) also discusses risk-taking within a UK outdoor Forest School environment and, like Waters and Begley, identifies a clear alignment between risk-taking and the outdoors, for both children and educators. An Australian study by McFarland and Laird (2017) exploring parents' and early childhood educators' attitudes and practices around risk, also focuses on risk-taking in outdoor risky play. This link between children's risk-taking and the outdoor environment has been solidified by key researchers Sandseter, Kleppe, Little and Wyver (see, for example, Kleppe, Melhuish, and Sandseter, 2017; Little, 2010b; Little and Eager, 2015; Little and Wyver, 2008, 2010; Sandseter, 2009a, 2009b). In numerous studies, these researchers have maintained focus on risky play as an outdoor experience. Sandseter initially began looking at children's risk-taking throughout the ECE environment, but concluded that most incidents of risk-taking occur outdoors (Sandseter, 2007), thus contributing to the dominant view of children's risk-taking as an outdoor activity. As a result of her research, Sandseter has provided six categories of children's engagement in risky play. The six categories are:

- Play with great height;
- Play with high speed;
- Play with dangerous tools;
- Play with dangerous elements;
- Rough and tumble play;
- Play where one might disappear or get lost.

The conceptualisation of risk as synonymous with outdoor play neglects the possibility that risk may be present indoors. When looking at Sandseter's categories of risky play it is easy to see that some of these categories could potentially take place indoors, such as rough and tumble play and

play with dangerous tools. Recognising this possibility, Saunders (2016) engaged in a single-site case study exploring the provision of risky play indoors. Using Sandseter's categories, Saunders identifies that around 40% of these activities also take place indoors. Identifying examples such as children building block towers above their heads and using scissors and clay knives, Saunders suggests adding an additional two indoor risky play categories: 'play with resources at great height' and 'play with small dangerous tools'. Saunders identifies the limitations of both the conceptualisation of children's risk-taking as outdoor play and Sandseter's categories. Saunders advocates further exploration of risk-taking both indoors and beyond these categories. Like Saunders, we believe that the indoor environment may offer opportunities for other types of risk-taking and that a focus on risk-taking indoors more generally could provide valuable information on a broader range of risk-taking in ECE settings. Alternative and/or additional categories of risk-taking may be necessary, or it may be possible that attempting to categorise engagements with risk may be an unending and futile process.

The suggestion that children engage in risk-taking in indoor environments is also supported by Stephenson (2003) and Tovey (2007). Stephenson observed indoor experiences such as a child doing a puzzle for the first time, children building a block tower above their heads and a child entering a play scenario for the first time – and wondered about their riskiness. Likewise, Tovey (2007) proposes that 'risk-taking is not just about taking physical risks' (107). Tovey suggests social and emotional risk-taking are key components of children's ECE experience. She uses the example of children teasing each other and making jokes, arguing that these activities are risky because the outcome is uncertain. Tovey refers to Little's (2010a) broad definition of risk as 'situations in which we are required to make choices among alternative courses of action where the outcome is unknown' (2) to argue that many ECE experiences involve risk-taking, including common activities such as imaginative play.

We argue that neglecting to include indoor risk-taking in the discourse on risk in ECE may result in educators overlooking opportunities and encouragement for children's indoor risk-taking. Expanding our view to include indoor risk-taking may draw attention to social, emotional and cognitive risk-taking as important aspects of children's holistic learning and development. Inclusion of indoor risk-taking in our conceptualisation of risk in ECE will provide a more comprehensive view of risk than the current conceptualisation as outdoor physical play.

Risk as a physical activity

In addition to identifying children's risk-taking as play that takes place outdoors, literature also indicates a dominant view of children's risk-taking as a physical activity. Stephenson's (2003) research had a specific focus not only on outdoor play, but also on physical activity, and in particular 'physically scary' experiences, such as sliding head first down a slide. Greenfield (2004), perhaps because her focus was on the outdoor environment, primarily uses examples of physical play to illustrate children's engagement with risk. These examples include children using slides, bikes and swings. Establishing a clear link between risky play and the physical domain is Sandseter's (2009a) widely referred to definition of risky play as a 'thrilling and exciting form of play that involves a risk of physical injury' (439). Sandseter's definition of risky play has received wide attention in international literature on children's risk-taking (Brussoni et al., 2015), thus reinforcing the dominant view of children's risk-taking as a physical activity.

The conceptualisation of risk as a physical activity neglects the possibility that risk may be present in non-physical domains such as social, emotional and cognitive. We do not wish to suggest that previous research does not acknowledge the holistic nature of children's experiences

– when a child takes a physical risk, such as learning to ride a bike, there may be additional social and emotional risks involved. However, we argue that the dominant focus on physical play has neglected specific attention towards possible social, emotional and cognitive risks such as asking a friend to play or contributing ideas to a conversation.

Nikiforidou (2017) supports the idea that risk-taking in ECE is not just physical. She uses the examples of ‘the risk of not recycling, the risk of eating sweets excessively, the risk of not sharing with peers’ (p. 620) to demonstrate that risk-taking can involve emotional, environmental and social risk. Nikiforidou, Pange and Chadjipadelis (2012) describe risk in terms of ‘risk literacy’, this being a child’s readiness ‘to accept failure, to achieve success, to take initiatives, to become self-competent, to develop probabilistic and statistical thinking, to confront uncertainty and in turn to face the challenges of modern risk society’ (4830). The concept of risk literacy positions risk-taking as a disposition or attitude and contributes to the notion that risk should be conceptualised as more than a physical activity. The concept of risk literacy suggests that risk-taking may take place in a broad range of experiences, aligning risk practices with the holistic approach of ECE curriculum documents, such as the Australian EYLF. Based on the view of risk as risk literacy, Nikiforidou et al. (2012) suggest risk-taking can take place within a range of contexts and experiences including individual and group activities, indoors and outdoors, a range of curriculum areas, and in both spontaneous and planned contexts. This view of risk aligns closely with New et al.’s (2005) ‘risk-rich curriculum’. Like Nikiforidou et al., New et al. suggest a risk-rich curriculum for ECE presents risk-taking as a practice that can occur indoors or outdoors, in multiple domains, and in both play and non-play experiences.

Again, we argue that developing a more comprehensive exploration of social, emotional and cognitive risk in ECE risk research may broaden educators’ practices. By clearly identifying social, emotional and cognitive risk-taking in our conceptualisation of risk, educators may be better equipped to plan for and support children’s risk experiences.

Justification for further research

By drawing on general risk and childhood literature, and ECE-specific research, this article has illustrated the argument that risk in ECE is predominantly conceptualised as an outdoor physical play activity for children, commonly known as risky play. Supported by a small number of ECE research articles, we have identified the limitations of this conceptualisation. We argue that the current view of risk as an outdoor physical play activity for children neglects the possibility that children may encounter risk indoors, in activities other than play and in non-physical domains such as social, emotional and cognitive. It likewise neglects the possibility that educators may also engage in risk-taking. This article has proposed that the view of risk as taking place predominantly in children’s outdoor physical play is inconsistent with the holistic approach of ECE curriculum documents, such as the Australian EYLF, which identify risk-taking as a feature of both indoor and outdoor environments and all learning areas. This current view is also at odds with broad (non-children specific) risk literature that indicates risk is entrenched in all aspects of life including physical, social, political, economic and interpersonal (Lupton, 2013).

The limitations of the current conceptualisation of risk have begun to be acknowledged by risky play researchers. In a recent paper, Kleppe et al. (2017) acknowledge the limitations of Sandseter’s definition of risky play by providing a new definition. The new definition describes risky play as ‘play that involves uncertainty and exploration – bodily, emotional, perceptual or environmental – that could lead to either positive or negative consequences’ (12). Despite the limitations of risky play research, this research has helped to create an increasingly positive attitude towards risk in ECE. This increase in positivity is evidenced by the expanding uptake of risky play experiences

such as tree-climbing, use of real tools, fire pits and beach, bush and kinder programmes (ACECQA, 2017) and the proliferation of risky play in educator professional development programmes (see, for example, Child Australia, 2017), early childhood magazines, online resources (see, for example, Brussoni, 2017) and mainstream news articles (see, for example, Carmody, 2018). This increase in positivity suggests the early childhood sector is well placed to enter the next phase in ECE risk research.

This article argues that a re-conceptualisation of risk in ECE is needed to support the development of educators' risk practices. We propose further research to explore a broad range of risk-taking experiences in ECE for both children and educators. By including a broad range of risk-taking experiences in the discourse on risk, the early childhood sector may be better equipped to plan for and support opportunities for risk-taking for both children and educators. Particularly, expanding the discourse on educators' risk-taking may increase educators' confidence in developing new and innovative practices for the benefit of children and society.

Exploring educators' understanding of risk, in light of the current discourse, is proposed as an appropriate way to begin the next stage of research. We also propose an exploration of educators' risk practices and what enables and constrains these practices. Exploration of children's understandings and experiences of a broad range of risk-taking would also make a valuable contribution to ECE risk research.

Conclusion

In contemporary minority world society, risk has become an increasing focus of attention, not least when it comes to children. A perceived increase in risk aversion has led to the promotion of beneficial risk-taking for children. A growing body of research has explored children's risk-taking in ECE settings. In this article, research has been identified as predominantly conceptualising risk as an outdoor physical play activity for children, commonly known as risk play. While risky play research has challenged the largely held negative connotation of children's engagement with risk, this conceptualisation may not be sufficient for educators to understand and engage with a broad range of beneficial risk-taking practices. Inspired by a small number of research articles that identify risk as more than outdoor physical play for children, the case has been argued for further exploration of risk in ECE. We have proposed that a more comprehensive understanding of risk-taking for children may encourage educators to plan for and support a broad range of beneficial risk experiences in line with a holistic approach to ECE. A more comprehensive understanding of risk-taking for educators may also expose the beneficial risks educators take in professional learning and the development of ECE practices. Further research may lead to an expanded conceptualisation of risk, offering a significant contribution to the ECE sector. As many educators appear to acknowledge the importance of engagement with risk in the development of confident, competent and resilient children, we feel it is an appropriate time to ignite a broader conversation – to talk about risk not only in children's outdoor physical play, but in all aspects of ECE.

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Note

1. In this article, the term 'educators' is used to refer to staff working directly with children aged from birth to five years in a prior-to-school education and care environment.

ORCID iDs

Mandy Cooke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4384-1662>

Frances Press  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8980-5096>

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Author biographies

Mandy Cooke has a Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) and a Masters of Education (Early Childhood). She has over 20 years' experience teaching and leading in primary and early childhood settings in Australia and internationally. Mandy is heavily influenced by her own schooling experiences where much of her learning took place outdoors and independence and individuality were promoted. These early learning experiences combined with participation in broad range of teaching environments have led her to explore and critique contemporary approaches to education. She is currently a PhD candidate at Charles Sturt University where her research focuses on risk-taking in early childhood education.

Sandie Wong is an Associate Professor at Macquarie University. Sandie is committed to working in collaborative, strengths-based ways, with academics from a range of disciplines, early childhood organisations and practitioners, and governments, to lead and support high quality research, evaluation and practitioner enquiry, that contributes to best practice in early childhood. Her current work investigates: early childhood practices; workforce issues; educator well-being; and the history of early childhood internationally.

Frances Press is Professor of Early Childhood and Education Policy at Manchester Metropolitan University and a Partner Investigator in the ARC Linkage Study Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work (ARCLP 160100532). Frances is interested in the ways in which policy frameworks and framings enable and constrain social justice in early childhood education and care.