

'It's just because it went really high and we go wheeee...!' Young children's views on risk-taking play in their early years setting

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that young children enjoy taking risks in their play and that risky play offers many benefits. To gain further insight into the child's perspective, the present study explored young children's views about risk-taking play, employing a sample of eight children aged four years old from four different early years settings in one local authority in England. Since research outside the UK has identified categories of risk-taking play, this was used as a starting point to inform for the current small-scale study. Semi-structured interviews with the children were undertaken with a series of photographs depicting different types of play used to engage the children in discussion. Data from each of these interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. Findings revealed that children had a variety of reasons for choosing to participate in risk-taking play, such as it being scary or exciting. Children's choices were mediated by their awareness of safety issues with each child articulating the boundaries around whether, where and how they might choose to engage in a risk-taking play activity.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that children learn through their play and that play is central to learning in early childhood (e.g. Bruce, 2001; Moyles, 2010). It has been argued that an important aspect of play is that it is fun (Brown, 2009), and this is the perspective that underpins this study. In the UK, successive governments over the last 10 years have stressed the importance of early years (EY) education – that is education for children aged birth to five. This has partly been for economic reasons, so that parents can return to work, and partly for educational reasons, increasing young children's access to the developmental benefits of having a structured learning environment. In England, all three- and four-year-olds are eligible for 570

hours of free education per year. This education is underpinned by play (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). This study focuses on one specific type of play in the early years: that which involves risk-taking.

Risky play

According to Stephenson (1999), children 'hunger' for physical challenge and by the age of four are aware that some activities include an element of risk that makes them more enjoyable than less risky activities. In a subsequent study, Stephenson (2003) noted that a playful activity may appear to be risky if it is novel and untried, if it causes the child to feel it is beyond their control, or if the child attempts the activity to overcome a fear. Support for this comes from Sandseter (2009b) who describes risky play activities as 'thrilling and exciting forms of play that involves a risk of physical injury' (p. 93). Sandseter (2007) describes six types of risky play:

- play with great heights
- play at high speed
- play with dangerous tools
- play near dangerous elements
- rough and tumble play
- play where children can 'disappear' or be out of sight of adults

Risk and safety

Risk often has negative associations with a focus on the dangers in the world from which children must be sheltered and kept safe (Furedi, 2001; Waters & Begley, 2007). This issue of health and safety has become increasingly important in workplaces in the UK, particularly those that involve the care of children. In a review of the UK literature surrounding early childhood and societal risk, Gill (2007) argued that 'childhood is becoming undermined by risk aversion'. If all health and safety regulations are followed, then any chance of providing positive risk-taking opportunities for children are eliminated. There is a need to balance health and safety with the developmental

needs of the child (Brock, Dodds, Jarvis & Olusoga, 2009). Indeed it has been argued that without opportunities to experience risk-taking in early childhood, children are more likely to behave in dangerous, inappropriate ways, particularly if they become bored with their play (Stephenson, 2003).

In recent years in the UK, there appears to have been the beginning of a shift in thinking away from the belief that children need to be protected from all risks, towards the view that children need to experience risks in order to be kept safe (White, 2008). For example, in the past few years the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has begun to post 'monthly myths' on their website in an attempt to redress misunderstanding of long-held beliefs about safety. The challenge therefore, is to provide children with suitably 'risky' experiences whilst meeting extensive safety requirements (Waters & Begley, 2007).

Risk-taking in children of school age

From an international perspective, research on risk-taking play has suggested that children's participation in risk-taking play has many benefits (Gladwin, 2008; Little, 2006). Morrongiello and Dawber (2004) carried out extensive research in Canada that aimed to identify factors that might relate to school-age children's risk-taking decisions. They argued that one of the greatest factors for injury in school-age children was the influence of other children. Their sample included 40 pairs of friends, with an equal number of boys and girls, all aged between 7 and 10 years of age. Each pair was recorded having a conversation, with the underlying intent being for one friend to persuade the other to change their view about a risk-taking decision. Findings indicated that friends were similar in their tolerance for risk-taking, and children were more prone to change their decision about risk-taking when persuaded by a friend. Also, the more experience the children had with an activity, the higher they rated it as fun and the lower they rated the danger.

Christensen and Mikkelsen (2008) specifically examined the way Danish school-age children engaged with everyday risks. Working from the premise that risk engagement is a necessary resource by which children learn from their mistakes, this research involved a sample of 35 children, aged between 10 and 12 years. Using observation, it was shown that children's assessment of risk was linked to assessment of their personal capabilities and skill at avoiding accidents. They found that children were aware of their own physical limitations and adjusted their behaviour accordingly, employing a range of 'risk

management strategies', such as negotiation with others and conflict-avoidance strategies such as crying.

Australian research by Bundy et al. (2009) has shown that when young children engage in risk-taking play they have an increased opportunity to develop their social play and creative problem-solving skills as well as enhance their emotional wellbeing and resilience. Their aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of providing a range of materials to a school playground to increase children's activity levels during break times. A key finding related to staff members' perceptions of risk. Although the injury rate did not increase during the intervention, staff reported feeling anxious as they feared what *could* happen to the children.

More recently, research with school-age children found that in organising and controlling play activities, teachers frequently managed children's risk-taking or removed opportunities for them to engage with it (Stan & Humberstone, 2011). Children who did not experience any decision-making related to risk had their learning and development opportunities reduced.

Risk-taking in younger children

Much of the research on risk-taking in children under five has compared outdoor pre-schools and 'ordinary' pre-schools, particularly in countries where the educative ethos or climate supports an outdoor curriculum, such as Norway or New Zealand (Sandseter 2007; Stephenson 2003). Research has suggested that there are more opportunities for pre-schoolers to engage in risk-taking activities in outdoor, natural settings (Waters & Begley, 2007) and that the physical environment offers opportunities for pre-schoolers to take greater risks (Sandseter, 2009a). One of the very few pieces of research in the UK that looks at young children and risk-taking play, is that of Waters and Begley (2007), which was undertaken in Wales. In a very small study they compared the risk-taking behaviours of two four-year-old children in an ordinary pre-school setting and a wild woodland environment – a Forest School. They observed more risk-taking behaviour in the Forest School and suggested two reasons why this should be so. Firstly, the difference in the rules governing each establishment (notably the more permissive approach employed at the Forest School); and secondly, the greater opportunities for risk-taking behaviour in the Forest School.

Research in New Zealand has shown that some types of risk-taking play enhance young children's physical skills and independence (Stephenson, 1999, 2003). She

identified that different opportunities are available for pre-school children in outdoor play areas and described eight categories of outdoor play (Stephenson, 1999). She found that in an outdoor environment children engaged in more physical play. She suggested that children's experiences in New Zealand were distinctively different from those in countries where outdoor play is limited to a brief recess or break time. Stephenson followed up this research with a reflective review in which she focused initially on children aged four (Stephenson, 2003). The research showed that an activity might be risky for a four-year-old if it involved trying something not previously attempted, feeling like they are out of control or overcoming a fear. Her findings indicated that the environment had an impact on risk levels in play, and she posited that children who learn to take physical risks will also begin to take risks in other areas of their learning. Ultimately, well-planned risk-taking play allows children to experience challenge in an appropriate way.

More recently, Sandseter's (2009b) research in Norway explored pre-school children's feelings when they experience risky play. From a sample of 29 children, she found that the children experienced enjoyment when there was a balance between mastery and injury, fun and scariness. She concluded that staff working with pre-schoolers should be providing opportunities for children to engage in play activities that involve risks that are adjusted to meet children's needs in relation to experiencing fear and exhilaration.

There is a growing body of international research into risk-taking play, however in England there is limited, if any, research that considers young children's risk-taking play in their EY education setting. In England, the ethos and climate do not support a culture of outdoor play despite its promotion by organisations such as Play England. There has been in recent years a shift in thinking towards recognising the importance of children taking some risks in order to keep safe. However, most of this thinking is around the management of risk in outdoor play spaces (Ball, Gill & Spiegall, 2012). At the moment, little is known about how young children in England view such risk-taking in their play. Therefore, the aim of this research was to explore the views of four-year-olds about risk-taking play in a small sample of EY settings in England.

Methodology

This research was qualitative in design. Several visits to different EY settings were carried out. These constituted a 'pilot' of the data collection. As previous research found

that children have increased opportunities to experience risk-taking play in outdoor environments (Sandseter, 2007; Stephenson, 2003), the researcher purposefully planned to observe the children during the summer months. This was intended to increase the likelihood of the children having access to outdoor play areas.

Four EY settings were used in the research. One was selected purposefully as the researcher was aware of their positive approach to risk-taking. The other three settings were situated in the same geographical area in the south of England and had indicated their willingness to take part in the research when initially approached by the researcher. All were indoor settings with an outdoor space available. A letter requesting consent was sent to all the parents in the selected settings whose children met the following criteria: aged four at the point of interview; had English as a first language; attended at least three half days a week; and had no identified special educational needs. From this sample, the researcher interviewed the first two children from each setting whose parents provided written consent. It is important to note that the pre-school staff did not select the children to be interviewed. The sample consisted of two boys from Setting 1, two girls from Setting 4 and a boy and girl from Settings 2 and 3.

Ethical permission to undertake the research was obtained from the University of East London, and the research adhered strictly to the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2006) for research with children. In addition to written parental consent, the children's informal permission to meet with the researcher was always sought. The researcher became a familiar figure in the EY settings, and each child was approached individually and was invited to talk and play. The researcher was very careful to ensure the children enjoyed the 'talk about play' (interviews) and could leave at any time they wished (which they did!). Once a child walked away, they were not pursued further. All the interviews took place in the child's EY setting. Children were interviewed individually.

Prior to the interviews, each child was observed for three 15-minute sessions during unstructured free play. Detailed field notes were kept using direct quotes from children and staff when possible. The field notes were typed up by the researcher immediately following the observations to ensure the recording of details and reflections. Following completion of the observations, the field notes were subjected to thematic analysis using the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis

offers a way of exploring the dataset both inductively and deductively. Guided by this approach, the researcher searched for the existence of *known* themes (categories of risky play) but also looked for new themes that might provide a context for the existing themes. The observations revealed that children engaged in five out of the six risk-taking play categories proposed by Sandseter (2007), with no alternative categories of risk-taking play observed. Consequently, the researcher decided to use these categories as the basis for the interview guide, which listed key topics to be explored. These topics included:

- types of play the children enjoyed
- whether certain play activities looked 'fun' and why
- whether certain play activities were 'allowed'.

Initially it was intended to use the interview guide as a basis for discussion with each child using a semi-structured format. In practice, however, the researcher was rarely able to refer to the interview guide, as the priority was maintaining the children's attention. Questions were omitted and added at the discretion of the researcher, based on each child's response. In an effort to hold the children's attention, the researcher used a series of 12 laminated photographs sourced from the internet to act as a visual stimulus during questioning. The same set of photographs were laid out in front of each child, and they were asked to choose one photo at a time to look at. Once each photograph was viewed and discussed, the researcher removed it from sight. As a result, children's selection of photographs was random; however, all photographs were included and discussed. The photographs illustrated examples of the six categories of risky play proposed by Sandseter (2007), as well as other common types of play, including pretend play and messy play.

All the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Following transcription, the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages of analysis as already described. The transcribed interviews were read repeatedly until the researcher was familiar with the content. Numeric codes were created to record individual categories and initial ideas. Following the initial coding of the data and the subsequent checking of codes, the researcher grouped the codes into initial themes or areas of similarity. Codes that did not relate to risk-taking play were discarded. Data extracts were then considered in relation to each theme and changes were made where necessary. A thematic

map was created to illustrate the themes and sub-themes. The researcher enlisted the help of a colleague to check that the codes fit within each of the themes. Discussion was held when discrepancies were found, and this resulted in the adjustment of several codes and themes, until a level of agreement was achieved.

I think they're play fighting. Does that look fun?

Ummm uh uh (negative response, shakes head)

No? Can you do that one here?

No.

Why not?

No.

What would Julie say if you did that one?

You can't.

You can't? Why not?

Because you can't.

(Brandon)

Whilst Brandon knew that play fighting was not allowed in his setting, he did not know why, or at least could not verbalise any reasons for it.

Findings

A thematic map of the core themes and sub-themes generated from the children's interviews was created (Figure 1). These will be described in turn, using verbatim quotes from the transcripts. The researcher's speech is shown in bold text. Each child's name is changed to ensure their anonymity.

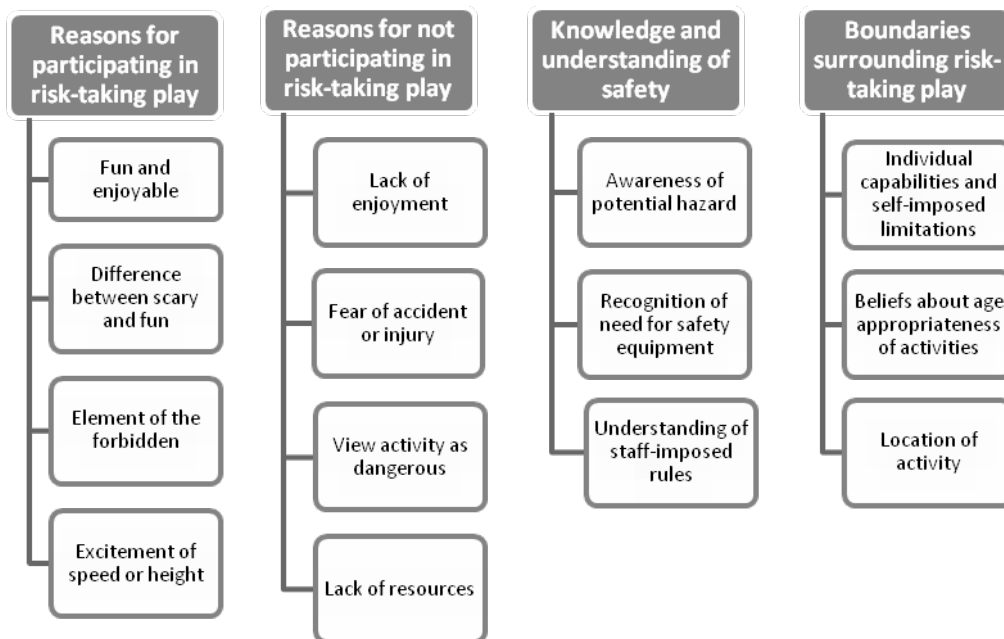


Figure 1. Thematic map of core themes and sub-themes

Theme 1: Reasons for participating in risk-taking play

The first core theme relates to the positive aspects of risk-taking play, specifically the reasons the children gave for liking risk-taking play activities. All the children interviewed gave at least one positive response when asked whether they enjoyed various examples of risk-taking play activities (based on those illustrated in the photographs). The reasons most commonly given for liking risk-taking play became the basis for the sub-themes, with the first sub-theme being that risk-taking play was viewed as fun and enjoyable. For example David found play fighting fun:

What's good about that?

Well, you have to follow a kid and you can jump on, jump on them too.

Yeah?

That's the most fun part.

(David)

Responses indicated that certain types of risk-taking activities were viewed as more fun than others. These variations in personal preference were expected, as previous research found that children have differing needs for risk or exhilaration when playing in risky ways (Sandseter, 2009b).

The second sub-theme was that the children indicated that they liked the fact that play could be scary as well as fun. For example:

And I like going on the big blue slide.

A big blue slide? That sounds fun.

I'm going to my nanny and granddad's and there's a really big one with back pieces in it... it's not scary... well it is... it's fun, that bit.

(Adam)

The word scary was specifically used alongside the word fun. An initial reluctance was evident in Adam's words as he quickly noted that the slide wasn't scary, before admitting that it was scary, but was also fun.

The third sub-theme encapsulated children's views that risk-taking play was exciting as it was sometimes forbidden. For instance:

What about this one? I think they're... what are they doing?

Fighting

Can you do that here?

Nooooo (shakes head)

No? Why not?

'Cos it's... 'cos someone might be hurt.

Oh ok.

But I do it (whispers)

Do you? (whispers)

Yep.

(Felix)

The emphasis given to the word *no* and the contrasting whisper when Felix confided that he did participate in play fighting, perhaps illustrated Felix's understanding that although play fighting was not allowed in his pre-school, he viewed it as fun.

In the final sub-theme, the extent of the speed or height involved in an activity sometimes resulted in feelings of excitement. For example:

What's fun about that one?

It's going really fast.

It's going really fast.

I mean it's... can you see my finger? (moves finger quickly to and fro)

(Hannah)

Theme 2: Reasons for not participating in risk-taking play

The second core theme contrasts with that of Theme 1, as it examines the reasons children gave for not participating in risk-taking play. All children provided at least one negative response when asked if they enjoyed or participated in various risk-taking play activities.

A key reason that emerged for not participating in a risk-taking play activity was lack of enjoyment, and this became the first sub-theme. The children found it hard to verbalise reasons, but their negative response was evident:

So you don't like going high?

(shakes head)

(Eve)

The second sub-theme identified a more specific reason for children not participating in risk-taking play and outlines the most prevalent response, which related to the children's fear of being hurt or injured:

Do you play that? (shown photo of child on scooter)

Er... sometimes. I did at Nursery once. But somebody, but somebody might hurt me.

Oh.

And one time, Finlay was running round and he falled over and he had blood... He had a nose bleed and a face bleed. And his lip.

Oh dear.

Not his mouth, just his lip.

(Adam)

This suggests that Adam was not only aware of the potential risk of injury from certain play activities, he knew from experience what could happen.

Thirdly, many of the children identified the potential danger in an activity as a reason for not participating in risk-taking play. When discussing play with dangerous elements, one child posed a sensible question:

Why's he playing with flames?

Well, I don't know.

Too dangerous.

It is dangerous, isn't it?

Why's he playing with it, then?

Hmmm... I don't know.

(David)

David clearly viewed flames as dangerous and could not understand why this would be something that a child plays with.

Finally, a more practical response given for why the children did not participate in certain risk-taking play activities referred to the lack of resources. Chrissie commented:

Do you do that here?

No.

No? Why not?

Because we've got no swings.

Oh, that's a good reason.

(Chrissie)

Theme 3: Knowledge and understanding of safety

The third core theme specifically highlights the children's awareness of safety issues surrounding risk-taking play. The first sub-theme emphasises the fact that the children were aware of danger. In the extract below, Grace identified a potential risk:

I can't, I can't even swing on monkey bars on my own...

You can't? No?

Just in case I let go.

Ohh what would happen if you let go?

I would hurt myself.

(Grace)

Grace appeared to be aware of her physical limitations and understood that she could fall.

The second sub-theme pertains to an awareness of the need for safety equipment. During her interview, Grace was quick to point out that the child in one of the photographs needed to wear safety goggles:

...Oh, what's he doing? (shown picture of child with hammer)

Umm...Work.

Doing work. What's he using?

Wood work.

He is doing wood work isn't he? He's playing with a hammer there.

He needs goggles on.

He needs goggles on? Why does he need goggles on?

So the pins don't hit him in the eyes.

(Grace)

The children's level of understanding seemed to vary with regard to how much they understood about the dangers of various risk-taking play activities; however, all children demonstrated a fundamental awareness.

The issue of respecting rules is further explored in the third sub-theme when considering the children's attitude

towards staff implementation of safety rules. Most children appeared to be aware of which activities were allowed in their settings, for instance:

Activities such as swinging or riding a scooter involve some level of speed or height; however, Sandseter maintains it is the extent of the speed and height that creates the element of risk. This suggests that exhilaration and fear are in balance in risky play (Sandseter, 2009b).

Theme 4: Boundaries surrounding risk-taking play

Theme 4 comprises three sub-themes. The first sub-theme introduces the issue of children's awareness of their own capabilities. Eve stated that her reason for not liking a particular swing was because of its size, which implies that Eve did not feel confident on the bigger swing:

Because, I... you have... I like going on that one (points to swing) that one is easier... that orange one is a bit too big for going on...

(Eve)

The children varied in their view of what they considered risky, and they appeared to have an internal belief about the riskiness of an activity.

The second sub-theme related to the children's views about the age appropriateness of certain activities. When a play activity was viewed as scary, the children frequently associated it with older children:

Ok. What about this one? She's playing all on her own, with nobody else there.

(mumbles) ...I think she's quite older than me.

Oh, she's older than you. So can you do that here? Can you play on your own here?

No.

No? Why not?

Because I'm younger than her.

'Cos you're younger. So, Ok.

There's teachers outside when we play.

(Hannah)

Hannah's initial response to seeing a picture of a girl playing alone was that the girl was older than her. It is possible that Hannah was making a distinction between older children being allowed to play alone and children her age needing to be supervised.

The final sub-theme centres on children's views about where risk-taking play activities could take place:

Right. Ok. What about this? (shows jumping from swings) Can you do that one here, at Nursery?

No. No. Somebody might hurt theirselves. I can at a park, with my best friend.

Oh, right.

I might play that one. If was grass, soft grass.

It has to be soft grass, does it?

Yes.

(Adam)

Adam was aware of the potential for injury, yet he noted that he would like to participate in the activity (jumping from a swing) if the conditions were amenable – in other words if the grass was soft enough! Adam's response possibly indicates that he had thought through the potential risks and had considered what adjustments may make the activity safer. Simply put, he appears to have made a risk assessment.

Discussion of key findings

Several interesting findings emerged from this research and these will be explored with reference to previous research.

Children's feelings and preferences

The children's views of participating in risk-taking play were complex and multifaceted. As might be expected, the children expressed their enjoyment for certain activities over others, based on personal preference. On the whole, they agreed that play that involves an element of risk is exciting. This has been found in previous research (e.g. Sandseter 2007; Stephenson 2003; Waters & Begley, 2007).

Children varied in their ability to express why they liked or did not like certain risk-taking play activities. The ambivalence of the children to risky play is captured by Adam's wonderful description of playing on a slide: 'it's not scary... well it is... it's fun, that bit'.

The researcher felt that this response epitomised the mixture of feelings that many of the children attempted to verbalise. Indeed, as noted already, Sandseter (2009b) argued that children endeavour to achieve a balance between exhilaration and fear, and the current research supports this. Furthermore, in the current research,

children frequently expressed their enjoyment of risk-taking play by using sounds and non-words to describe their feelings. For instance ‘wheeee...’ was how Hannah described the experience of swinging very high.

Age appropriateness

When interviewed, the children repeatedly referred to the age appropriateness of particular activities. The children’s comments about the photographs revealed that they felt some of the risk-taking play activities would (or should) only be undertaken by older children. This could indicate that for some children, their engagement with risk-taking play activities is related to their understanding of age appropriateness. This is very much in line with research by Little and Wyver (2010) who found that children aged four and five made risk judgements based on various factors, with age being one.

Safety awareness

The children’s comments during interviews provided evidence of their understanding of the need to be cautious and minimise risks when playing in a way they perceived to be ‘dangerous’ or risky. The way the four-year-olds in the current research actively assessed situations appeared to link to their understanding of their own capabilities. During the interviews, the children were generally able to identify potential risks, whilst still recognising fun aspects. The findings suggest that children are able to make informed decisions about the potential risks of an activity. This fits with previous research, that children use risk-management strategies when playing (e.g. Bundy et al., 2009; Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008).

Context

Additional findings related to the children’s perceptions of what activities they could or could not do in their EY setting. The children in one setting thought that they were allowed to participate in most of the risk-taking activities shown in the photographs. This was the setting that had been purposefully included in the sample based on its positive approach to risk-taking play. However, children from the other settings were less clear about what they could and couldn’t play. Sandseter (2009a) found that in Norway, children were not always aware of what they were allowed to play.

Confidence and risk taking

Throughout the interviews the children made numerous comments about their own capabilities. When considering

the role of children’s perception of their capabilities it can be argued that those children with a positive view might be more likely to attempt new tasks, therefore further increasing their skills. A helpful way to consider these findings is to view them in relation to Dweck’s (2006) theory of motivation. Dweck proposed that some children have a fixed mindset and continually seek to prove their worth (without taking new risks), whereas those with a growth mindset take on new risks and challenges. In relation to young children, risk and play, it can be said that if children see certain play activities as beyond their capabilities (due to age limitations or otherwise) they will be less likely to attempt the activity if they have a fixed mindset. Previously, Dweck (2000) had argued that children who have a positive attitude and an awareness of their capabilities will be more effective learners. This argument suggests that those children who are confident risk-takers will be more successful learners. Therefore, it can be argued that children must learn to take physical risks (possibly through risky play) before they will attempt to take risks with other aspects of their learning (Smith, 1998).

Implications for practice

The findings of this small-scale study have several implications for practice for those working in EY settings:

- EY practitioners need to recognise the ‘zone of risky development’ where children feel safe enough to take a risk. They need to provide opportunities for the child to extend this zone.
- EY practitioners therefore need to provide appropriate resources so children can experience risky play.
- EY practitioners need to talk to children about risk in order for children to be able think, plan and assess risks in their everyday play.
- EY practitioners need to listen to children’s views about risk, as the children are likely to be able to offer a new perspective.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore children’s views about risk-taking play in their EY settings. Four boys and four girls took part in this research. Gender differences were not considered explicitly, however the main findings seem to suggest that it was the EY setting and not gender that most influenced the children’s opinions about risk-taking play.

The findings from this small-scale research provide a unique insight into young children's understanding of risk-taking play, as well as revealing the complexity of their thinking. The children identified various reasons for whether they participated or not in risk-taking play. Most important, they appeared to be aware of the dangers and associated safety considerations linked to playing in risky ways. This research has shown that even very young children appear to have a basic understanding of how to keep themselves safe and have ideas about what types of play offer sufficient challenge without becoming too scary to attempt. This research should highlight the importance of the need for EY practitioners to carefully plan and facilitate play that is enjoyable, provides an element of risk, and yet still remains safe.

The findings from this small-scale research build on the existing body of knowledge in the area of young children, risk and play, whilst also offering a unique contribution to research in the UK. Having completed the research, it is evident that there are further gaps in knowledge that would be worth addressing. For example, exploring the views of EY practitioners and parents in relation to children engaging in risk-taking play. Finally, it is worth remembering the child's voice. This research found that the ultimate reason for participation in risk-taking play was enjoyment. Hannah encapsulates the voice of the child, reminding us why she likes risk-taking play:

'It's just because it went really high and we go wheeeee...!' (Hannah)

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