

# Beyond our comfort zones: Children and educators developing risk competence through play.

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## Abstract

Conversations in the media, personal lives, and research literature reveal that 'risky-play' for young children is contentious. Talk of climbing high, using sharp tools, or lighting fires exposes a range of opinions ranging from the risk-averse to advocacy of engagement in the outdoors in all weathers. Detractors talk about the potential dangers, the phenomenon of so-called 'helicopter parenting'— usually in a negative way, or supporters point out the short-term and potential long-term benefits for children. Research around risky-play is relatively new and highlights children's innate drive to test their bodies and extend the range of their risky experiences; positive benefits for children; early childhood programs focused on extending the range of offerings in the outdoor environment; the fears of some adults; and demonstrates that many parents want their children to enjoy the positive experiences they had climbing trees and exploring environments. There is also evidence that the current market-based early childhood sector is leading centres to promote more robustly in competition for child numbers. There are both appeals for families with 'play anxiety' by advertising risk-averse play-spaces, or alternatively promotion of the benefits of risky play to seek out those parents to whom this appeals. Where the research is less clear is how educators can support children's risk awareness and competence through intentional teaching.

Our paper emerges from research in a children's centre as part of a larger practitioner action research project. The focus was the views, experiences, and actions of toddlers, pre-schoolers and early childhood educators. The centre-based research team, in collaboration with university mentors, discovered that some educators had previously unexplored risk-averse views, were providing more challenges to boys, and that limited intentional teaching about risk was evident. Following initial investigation the team collaboratively reconceptualised their approach to become more **competent and skilled** with risky-play. They learnt more about risky-play, added many challenges and opportunities to the environment, and greatly expanded their repertoire of intentional teaching strategies. Children were then found to have increased language to describe their own risk competence, and successfully engaged more often in risky activities. Educators were found to be much more positive about risky-play, were more likely to challenge girls and demonstrated improved intentional teaching. When these more **competent and skilled** educators were around, and intentionally talking to the children about planning for and taking risks, the children were more likely to attempt risky play. Following the changes there were no serious injuries, and those that did occur were minor scapes, mainly from softfall.

We argue that when educators undertake systematic research about their own practice, and decide on their own need to change, their competence, skill level and general professional capacity are enhanced in a sustainable way.

## Provocations

- How can educators design and implement their own professional learning programs in ways that lead to sustainable change, while at the same time address regulatory and professional requirements?
- How can the safety of children be balanced with the goal of recognising them as competent and capable?
- How can early childhood educators gain the credibility in general society to be seen as part the pool of experts around young children's development and learning?