What is Missing When Children are Too Safe?

Considerations for Risky Play in Early Childhood

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to identify young children’s risky play in the outdoor play areas of three Early Childhood Education Centers in Northern California. Risky play is defined as “thrilling or exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury” (Sandseter, 2010, p. 22).

Employing the use of Sandseter’s (2007) six categories for risky play, the researcher recorded ninety-five incidences of risk-taking over a fifteen day period. The most prevalent forms of risky play observed were rough-and-tumble play, play at great heights, and play at high speeds. The highest number of risky play incidences occurred in the center that had the most natural features in the outdoor environment. In this study, adult care providers were supportive of the majority of children’s risk-taking activities.
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Chapter One
Introduction to the Study

Formative Experiences

Growing up in the early 1980’s, I had ample opportunities for unstructured play without constant adult supervision. During this period, I spent considerable time playing on park playgrounds, exploring the local creek, and participating in improvised sports competitions with peers. As a child I was unaware of the possible hazards that were present due to the lack of adult supervision, as I was compelled by my own volition to challenge my current capabilities both socially and physically. Interactions with older children were oftentimes frightening as they taunted or teased my friends and me for being little kids, yet upon reflection, these were some of the most stimulating and thrilling moments of my early childhood. Learning to assess a social or physical risk was a principal factor in my development, as it created a foundation for my emerging problem solving skills, as well as my confidence to persevere through demanding circumstances. Presently, I continue to cherish those moments of freedom and remain grateful that I grew up in an era when children were allowed to go outside and play without the accompaniment of an adult. These events significantly contributed to my interest in working with young children, as I currently strive to provide them with a semblance of the enjoyment that I experienced in my early childhood.
Background for the Project

My career working with children began in the early 1990’s when I was a day camp leader at the YMCA for several summers. Typically, the camp would visit local parks and sights where the children were able to explore the environment within the boundaries that were established upon arrival. One afternoon, several children were climbing trees when one boy fell off a branch and broke his arm. Following this incident, children at all YMCA camps in the county were banned from climbing trees or other objects that were considered too high or too dangerous. Reflecting upon this event, I contemplated the fact that children have climbed trees for centuries if not millennia, and a single accident had changed what types of activities were offered for the hundreds of children attending these camps each summer. Restrictive policies toward overtly challenging or risky activities for children soon became a common theme in my professional career.

For the past fifteen years I have worked with preschool-aged children in a variety of Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC) within the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Throughout the progression of my career, I observed how increasing concerns about safety significantly influenced the types of activities and environments that were offered at ECEC. Common examples of these new limitations included children restricted from jumping off a play structure or climbing up a slide due to the risk of injuring themselves or others. Consequently, a less challenging environment developed at these sites and the children had fewer opportunities to engage in cognitive and socially stimulating experiences. A crucial
aspect of working with young children is to redirect their less appropriate behavior to activities that are safe, challenging, and enjoyable. When common activities such as picking up sticks, games of chase, bike riding at high speeds, and physical rough and tumble play are prohibited, options for redirection become limited. Helen Little (2008) comments that,

> there is mounting concern that as many Western societies are becoming increasingly risk-averse, children’s freedom to play outdoors is restricted and many everyday activities that previous generations took for granted are now being seen as dangerous and something to be avoided or regulated with over-protective safety measures (p. 1).

ECE practitioners now had the arduous task of sustaining a challenging environment in their programs in an age where many materials and features were being removed from play spaces due to safety concerns.

Preventative policies to limit the number of accidents that occurred within ECEC paralleled my development as an early childhood educator. While ensuring that a child remains safe is an essential facet of caring for young children, I began to observe that parents and directors of ECEC rarely tolerated a single accidental scrape or bruise that a child sustained through physical play. Outdoor features were made to prevent injury rather than to challenge a child to exceed their current capabilities, and childcare practitioners almost exclusively forbade physical exchanges between children for fear that one child might suffer an injury.

Subsequently, I witnessed the punishment of many children for simply engaging in any form of physical play, even when both children were clearly enjoying this type of activity. Suddenly I found myself in a position to enforce these standards of safety that I believed were developmentally inappropriate for young children, and I
observed how practitioners often intervened in these types of exchanges while seldom allowing the children the opportunity to solve their own problems. As a result of this, I began to question what these children were missing in their play when the physical challenges and opportunities for any sort of risk were removed from their environment.

Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to work at ECEC that were outdoor-based and frequently allowed children to partake in risky play. Risky play is defined as “thrilling or exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury” (Sandseter, 2010, p. 22). Observing children climbing trees, riding bicycles down steep hills, or fencing with sticks, I began to comprehend benefits associated with this type of play. When children were able to engage in physically challenging activities and take risks, I noticed the sense of pride children attained when they completed these tasks without adult intervention. Additionally, the children seemed to be better equipped to solve their own problems both cognitively and socially. While discussing the topic of risk-taking with my colleagues, I noticed how many individuals reacted in a very positive manner and often provided their own childhood anecdotes regarding risky play. Many of these discussions were based on the freedom that was accessible in our youth to explore the boundaries of risk. Excitement toward the subject developed in my mind as I began to consider the absence of risky play in ECEC as a hindrance to young children’s developmental potential.
Purpose of the Project

By pursuing a further interest in risky play and reading research dedicated to this topic, I discovered that many of the studies conducted thus far took place in the United Kingdom (UK), Norway, and Australia. While theory-based articles have been published in the United States regarding the developmental benefits children achieve through risk-taking (Carlsen, 2011; Grambling, 2010; Jones, 2012; Warden, 2010) very little research has been conducted to determine the accessibility of this type of play for young children attending ECEC in the United States.

The primary question of this study will address what types of risky play, if any, are present in outdoor play areas in three ECEC located in Northern California. Considering that the features of the outdoor space are vital to the provision of play activities (Little & Eager, 2010; Sandseter, 2009b), my secondary question is: “How do the physical features of the outdoor environment affect the affordances for young children to engage in risky play?” Being that care provider beliefs and attitudes towards risk-taking are instrumental in supporting or restraining children’s risky play (Little, 2008; Sandseter, 2012; Little, Sandseter, & Wyver, 2012), an additional question, “What actions do ECEC care providers exhibit to support or restrain children from engaging in risky play?”

My professional experience in ECEC has provided an opportunity to work in a wide variety of settings including university campuses, non-profit agencies, and small private sites. Each program differed in their approach to outdoor physical play and balancing safety with challenging and developmentally appropriate activities that should be the primary focus for quality ECEC (Little, 2008). As a
result of this experience, I decided to examine a sample of three different types of ECEC in Northern California: one preschool on a university campus, one receiving state funds run by a nonprofit agency, and one run by a church.

Significance of the Project

Recently, the subject of children engaging in risky play has surfaced in Early Childhood Education (ECE) publications in the United States. In particular, studies focus on developmental benefits young children achieve while assessing risk or participating in rough and tumble play. However, there is little research in the field that discusses the variation of ECEC, and their incorporation of multiple types of risky play for young children. Benefits from this type of study may inform care providers about methods in which to ensure children’s safety while simultaneously maintaining a physically and cognitively challenging environment. Additionally, administrators, care providers, and parents will gain knowledge about the developmental advantages children obtain through risky play, as well as insight into how ECEC in other countries manage to balance safety with risk-taking. Research of this nature will illuminate the increasingly restrictive policies for physical play that occur in many American ECEC (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998) and subsequently, the potential developmental advantages that emerge when children are permitted to participate in risky play (Little & Wyver, 2008; Waters & Begley, 2007).

Support for the Study

Studies conducted by Stephenson (2003) and Gill (2007) examined the diminishing opportunities for children to take risks in an increasingly risk-averse
Western culture. However, it is Norway's Ellen Beate Sandseter (2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, & 2012) who is currently one of the leading researchers regarding the subject of risky play in early childhood. Sandseter’s studies focus on two preschools in Norway, one of which she refers to as “ordinary”, while the other is an outdoor-based program. Since 2007, Sandseter has been examining the opportunities for risk-taking in each preschool and comparing the results between these different programs. As a result of her studies, Sandseter (2009b) determined that young children attending the outdoor-based preschool have more opportunities to engage in risky play, primarily due to the features of the outdoor environment. Sandseter’s largest contribution to this field is the aforementioned definition for risky play. Furthermore, she developed the foundation for this type of research with her creation of the six categories for risky play. These categories consist of: play from great heights; play with great speeds; rough and tumble play; play near dangerous elements; play with dangerous tools; and play where children may get lost or disappear (Sandseter, 2007). Utilizing Sandseter’s six categories will provide a framework for my research, as I intend to tally the number of times children participate in risky play from each category in three ECEC. In addition, Sandseter (2012) analyzed Norwegian care providers’ perceptions of children’s physical risk-taking and how they managed the responsibility of keeping children safe while still preserving a challenging environment.

Meanwhile in Australia, Helen Little (2006, 2008) has conducted research highlighting adult attitudes concerning children’s risk-taking and how these attitudes affect the opportunities for children to partake in risky play (Little, Wyver,
& Gibson 2011). Little’s work takes place in the greater Sydney area and although her work is centered in ECEC, she also examines what risk-taking opportunities are available at local park playgrounds. Another aspect of Little’s research is the investigation of playground equipment (Little & Eager, 2010), and determining whether these features invite risk-taking or contain potential hazards for young children. Studying the role of safety regulations as they relate to children’s risk-taking as well as the developmental benefits that children attain through risky play are vital facets of Little’s work (Little and Wyver, 2008).

**Limitations to the Study**

Clearly, three ECEC in Northern California do not represent the values, curriculum, or affordances for risk-taking in ECE programs for the entirety of the United States. Therefore, this study has severe limitations due to the fact that it represents a small faction of a very large and diverse country. Even within my sample, missing are a great variety of ECE programs such as Waldorf, Montessori, family childcares, and co-ops. However, this study does serve as a pilot study within ECE and may benefit the field by increasing recognition of the value of physical risk-taking and how often it is neglected and unavailable for young children in ECEC.

Another limitation to the study will be that I am the only one analyzing the data. Consequently, the analysis of the data will be somewhat subjective, based upon my interpretation of risky play, outdoor environmental features, and adult reactions to risk-taking episodes. Moreover, it may be appropriate to mention that I am a male in a female dominated field. As a result of this, my perceptions of risk-taking may be skewed, as males tend to view physical play, particularly that of a
rough nature, in a more positive manner than female practitioners (Pellegrini, 2011).
Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

Play is an essential component of young children’s learning and development, as it has been shown to promote optimal learning and growth throughout the domains of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Little & Wyver, 2008). Play gives children an opportunity to display and develop their knowledge, skills and concepts. Through interactions with their environment, children acquire tools to gain knowledge of the world and learn skills that are necessary for adult life. Physical risk-taking, also referred to as risky play, appears to be a natural part of play in early childhood, as children are naturally exploratory and seek out new experiences in their environments (Sandseter, 2007; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Ellen Sandseter (2010) defines risky play as “thrilling or exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury” (p. 22). This review of related literature is structured to examine young children’s risky play in conjunction with its developmental benefits, outdoor play environments, adult attitudes towards risk-taking, children’s safety, and the cultural implications associated with this type of play.

Brief History of Risky Play

Presumably, children have been engaging in physical risk-taking for many centuries, yet the earliest research on children and risky play is quite modern. The majority of children’s risky play takes place outdoors and is dependent upon the
features of the outdoor environment (Fjortoft, 2000; Little & Wyver, 2008; Sandseter, 2009b). Whereas much of the thinking that affected children’s risk-taking in the late twentieth century focused on the potential hazards in an outdoor play space (Gill, 2007; Little, 2006), David Ball (2002) considered the benefits as well as the dangers associated with risky play. Ball’s decade-long study assessed playgrounds in the United Kingdom and their connections with injuries and overall child safety. His research balanced the threat of injury with the developmental advantages afforded to children who chose to engage in risk-taking activities. Ball (2002) created a chart termed “The Play Balance”, which weighs the benefits of risk-taking against the disadvantages. For example, he evaluated how to cope with real risks, accidents, costs, and bad publicity. He concluded that the potential harm associated with children’s risk-taking was quantifiable and therefore “too real”, while the benefits for risky play were more difficult to prove and consequently undervalued.

Meanwhile, a study conducted by Stephenson (2003) advanced the current debate in Early Childhood Education regarding risk-taking opportunities. Stephenson observed twenty-five children ages 0-5 in a New Zealand early childcare center. She visited the center thirty-eight times to document the children’s physical risk-taking experiences and adult reactions to these behaviors. Stephenson (2003) concluded “young children naturally seek out and enjoy physical challenges in play, yet safety regulations make it very difficult for teachers to provide children with experiences that are satisfyingly ‘risky’” (p. 35). As a result of this study, Stephenson initiated the foundational questions that presently guide this research:
What are adequate physical challenges for young children? How do care providers balance the need for a challenging environment while maintaining safety regulations? What are the repercussions for restricting children’s accessibility to physically challenging and risky play? Stephenson’s questions provided a new outlook on children’s risk-taking as a form of play that is currently being neglected in many ECEC. In addition, Stephenson introduced the question of how her inquiries would affect practices in ECEC in the United States and elsewhere.

**Categories for Risky Play**

Currently, Norway’s Ellen Sandseter is one of the leading researchers on the topic of risky play in early childhood. Before Sandseter’s (2007) research there was no empirical study that categorized risky play. Stephenson (2003) had suggested criteria for what determines a risk factor in play, for example “attempting something never done before; feeling on the borderline of being out of control often because of height or speed; and overcoming fear” (as found in Sandseter, 2007, p. 238). Stephenson (2003) observed examples of risky play connected to swinging, sliding, climbing, and bike riding. Sandseter (2007) focused all of her studies on two Norwegian preschools consisting of one termed “ordinary” (p. 239) with traditional play features, while the other was an outdoor-based nature school. Additionally, she mentions that each outdoor play area contained fixed playgrounds with fences and both preschools regularly took hikes into nature areas such as forests, ocean fronts, and caves. Sandseter observed both schools for five weeks and conducted qualitative interviews with eight children and seven preschool staff in relation to what types of play they deemed ‘risky’. Results of this study were analyzed to find
codes that qualified the six categories for risky play. These codes consisted of: play with great heights; play with high speed; play with dangerous tools; play near dangerous elements; rough and tumble play; and play where children can get lost or disappear. These six categories would influence all of the remaining research Sandseter would conduct and set a precedent for other studies regarding risky play.

**Developmental Outcomes Associated with Risky Play**

Several developmental benefits young children may attain during risky play are practicing and improving motor skills for developing strength and endurance, testing their physical limits, and enhanced spatial-orientation and problem-solving skills (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Risky play may also augment social skills between children such as peer group bargaining, social signaling, peer management, and dominance skills within the peer group. Another likely benefit of this play is easing children’s anxiety toward dangerous elements and objects by recognizing situational restraints and possibilities, as well providing them with more direct experiences for learning. Play where children have the possibility to disappear or get lost may also alleviate separation anxiety that exists when children are first separated from a parent or care provider, thus promoting a sense of independence. Conversely, dangers involved with these activities include children hurting themselves or others in the process of falling, moving at high speeds, or using dangerous tools (Sandseter, 2007). Rough-and-tumble play carries with it the serious risk of play fighting or wrestling becoming a legitimate fight, which may result in extreme aggression or injury (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Many of these categories of risky play may be unlikely to occur in the
United States. For example, getting lost or disappearing is prohibited due to regulations that children must be supervised at all times in a childcare setting.

An additional asset to young children’s engagement in risky play is the development of risk assessment and eventual mastery of risky situations (Little, Sandseter & Wyver, 2012; Smith, 2005). When children have the opportunity to participate in self-guided risk-taking activities, they become “competent, resourceful, and active agents who are usually very capable of judging physical and social risks around them” (Eichsteller & Hothoff, 2009, p. 9). This form of risk assessment and mastery increases the potential for a child to develop risk competence. When a child has achieved risk competence, the likelihood of experiencing serious accidents or injuries during the course of risky play declines as that child attains further awareness of their own bodily limitations. Furthermore, through risk-taking activities, children must manage the negative outcomes of their decisions and actions, therefore allowing them to “build resilience and self-reliance by having acquired coping strategies to deal with such situations” (Little et al., 2012, p. 301). Although there are numerous developmental benefits associated with risky play, there remain many negative connotations related to young children’s risk-taking.

Wellisch (2004) connects risky play with the likelihood that children will underestimate the uncertainty of risky situations while at the same time, overestimate the probability of successful outcomes in these play scenarios. Additionally, she links learning difficulties, low IQ, and fearlessness with children who engage in risk-taking activities. Conversely, Baillie (2005) argues that
encouraging children to participate in risky play is not only developmentally beneficial; it might actually save their lives. Baillie suggests that many fatal accidents involving young children in the United Kingdom result from their lack of opportunities to look after themselves rather than taking unnecessary risks. Although these viewpoints are rather extreme, they aid in illustrating the controversy and debate that currently surrounds children’s risky play. Throughout this paper, topics such as these will be investigated further, but for now it is important when considering children’s development to include other factors that affect risky play, such as a child’s age, gender, temperament, and emotional response relating to risky play.

**Children’s Individual Characteristics and Risky Play**

Boys of all ages are more likely than girls to engage in rough or risky play, particularly when there is physical contact involved during play (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). One possible explanation for this occurrence may be due to hormonal differences, as boys have higher levels of testosterone during the growth of the fetus (Pellegrini, 2006). In addition, socialization is a factor, as parents tend to encourage and participate in this type of play with boys, while girls are often discouraged from rough physical play (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Hiller and Morrongiello (1998) investigated age and gender in regard to children’s appraisal of risk-taking opportunities. They examined whether children’s beliefs about the likelihood of experiencing an injury affected their appraisal of risky situations. They determined that younger children were less capable of judging risks in their play, and consequently possessed a greater threat of suffering an injury. Another result of
this study was the finding that boys believed the possibility of injury during risk-taking was less than risk assessed by girls.

A child’s temperament is relative to “individual differences in responses to external stimuli and internal self-regulation”(Little, 2006, p. 148). Temperament affects a child’s risk-taking behavior, as certain individuals are more prone to engage or withdraw from potentially dangerous situations. Little (2006) has referred to children who normally engage in risky play as sensation seekers. She argues that particular children act as sensation seekers because they have an optimistic bias towards their actions. An optimistic bias results in a child believing that they are less likely than others to experience negative outcomes of their actions. A child’s temperament often relates to their emotional response to certain stimuli as well.

Sandseter (2009a) explored the notion of children’s emotional responses pertaining to risky play. She contends that fear and exhilaration are the dominant emotions when children are engaged in risky play. Sandseter concluded that children demonstrated an innate urge to pursue the conflicting feelings of fear and exhilaration through their acts of risky play. A child who is a sensation seeker (Little, 2006) is more likely to show signs of exhilaration during risky play due to their temperament. Sandseter (2009a) relegates fear as an “unpleasant outcome” (p. 101) of risky play and determines that children are constantly straddling the border between fear and exhilaration while engaged in risk-taking activities. The degree to which children have these experiences, depends upon the environmental setting where children have the opportunity to play.
Play Contexts for Children’s Risk Taking

Outdoor spaces offer children more opportunities to explore their environment and engage in active physical play than do indoor spaces (Fjortoft, 2000; Little & Wyver, 2008; Sandseter, 2009b). Outdoor play allows children to participate in a variety of gross motor activities such as running, walking, jumping, climbing, hopping, skipping and riding bikes. Through this type of physical play, children are enabled to refine their current abilities and attempt to develop mastery over new skills. An ideal outdoor space provides children with elements that enhance their physical, social, and cognitive play, while allowing them a chance to engage with the natural world as well (Brussoni, et al., 2012; Little & Eager, 2010). Children require the space needed in an outdoor environment to move feely and engage in open-ended experiences such as construction and pretend play, not to mention peer interactions (Little & Wyver, 2008). Kieff and Casbergue (2000) add that in a “risk-taking environment, children feel free to invent, experiment, pretend, and explore ideas, symbols, and objects” (p.158). Being that there is a greater variety of challenging stimuli in an outdoor context, the opportunities for risk-taking activities are also elevated (Sandseter, 2009b). While there is diversity in types of outdoor play contexts ranging from Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC) to local park playgrounds and the natural environment offered at outdoor-based schools, maintaining children’s safety during play is imperative regardless of the setting.
**Playground Design and Safety Issues**

An idyllic playground is one that offers children a variety of challenging, risk-taking opportunities while minimizing the hazards and potential dangers involved with such play (Little & Eager, 2010). While risks offer young children the ability to challenge their current skills, hazards, on the other hand, pose a threat of real danger or serious injury. Little and Eager (2010) state that “an example of an inappropriate risk or hazard would be one that is not clearly apparent to a child at play such as head and neck or chest entrapment, or potential finger crush point” (p. 511). They argue that the removal of hazards from playgrounds will still allow the children to participate in challenging and positive risk-taking opportunities. They contend that a “hazard filter” (p. 510) would enable playground designers to promote physically and intellectually stimulating play features without compromising the children’s safety. This is a critical point, as a lack of sufficient challenges on a playground invites unnecessary risk-taking from young children, thus increasing the likelihood of accidental injury (Gill, 2007; Grambling, 2010; Little, 2008). Curtis (2010) suggests that adding challenging and engaging features to a play environment is more beneficial than eliminating materials for safety reasons. Curtis contends that children have a tendency to use caution and problem solving abilities to meet the challenges of a complex environment.

Little (2008) cited that when Australian childcare practitioners were unable to provide challenging play opportunities involving some level of risk-taking for young children, the result was more frequent behavior problems in the ECEC. One practitioner commented that,
some children who are greater risk takers and always will be but in the
general scheme of things I think that it is boring in the playground for some
of these children so therefore some of them come to have behavior
difficulties as a result of boredom (Little, 2008, p. 8).

One solution to this dilemma occurring in ECEC is to adopt the concept of adventure
playgrounds that began in Europe (Brusonni et al., 2012). These playgrounds offer
children raw materials for construction and challenging play features, as well as
providing trained play workers and playground volunteers who facilitate and
supervise children’s play while removing hazards from the environment. Being that
adults play varying roles regarding children’s opportunities to take risks, it is
essential to discuss the role of adults when examining risky play and concerns for
children’s safety.

**Childcare Practitioners’ Beliefs Regarding Risky Play**

Presently, children are increasingly attending ECEC and Little, Wyver, and
Gibson (2011) state, “these services have a vital role in providing facilitative
environments where children can safely take the types of risks that enable them to
extend their current capabilities” (p. 116). Accordingly, it is early care and
education practitioners who must provide a safe and challenging play environment
comprised of positive risk-taking opportunities. Stephenson (2003) found in the
New Zealand preschools she studied the amount of risky play permitted was
dependent upon the care provider’s attitudes regarding such play. Care providers
who enjoyed being outdoors had more of an interest in physical play, and generally
were more tolerant and supportive of children’s risk-taking behavior. Sandseter’s
(2007) research conducted in Norwegian preschools provided similar results. Staff
in this study recognized that they had a lower tolerance for risk than the children, yet they rarely prevented risk-taking behavior solely because a child may suffer a minor injury. These care providers believed that risk was a natural and inevitable aspect of children’s learning.

Conversely, not all early care and education practitioners have positive feelings towards children’s risky play. Maynard (2007) examined the relationship between two Welsh early care providers from a traditional preschool and two workers from the Forest School, a nature-based enrichment center in Wales. Young children who visit the Forest School interact with nature and experience unstructured play in a natural environment. Maynard observed that the preschool staff and the Forest School Workers frequently disagreed about how to respond to children’s risk-taking behavior. The care providers viewed risk as negative and sought to regulate the children’s actions to maintain the safety required for their school curriculum. On the other hand, the Forest School Workers stressed the positive developmental benefits gained from risky play, which they believed nurtured the children’s confidence, independence, and self-esteem. These differences in opinion created a tension between the care providers and the Forest School workers.

**Safety Regulations and Adult Supervision in ECEC**

Safety regulations have a tendency to impede early care and education practitioner’s abilities to offer challenging experiences for children (Little, 2008). Little, Wyver, and Gibson (2011) conducted qualitative interviews with sixteen (15 female, 1 male) Australian care providers to measure what they considered the
benefits and limitations of risk-taking behaviors in their ECEC. Results were varied, as eleven of sixteen claimed that safety regulations both supported and constrained their practice. While twelve (71%) of the care providers declared that the regulations were necessary to guarantee at least minimal standards for safety, the same number (n=12, 71%) believed the regulations to be “inflexible” (p.125) and restricted the types of equipment and experiences they were able to provide for the children. Many care providers (n=10, 59%) asserted that regardless of rules or regulations, children would still find ways to take risks, for example, climbing trees and fences. In addition to childcare workers’ required adherence to safety regulations, fear of litigation or lawsuits is another factor that contributes to the reduction of risk-taking opportunities in ECEC (Little, 2008). The threat of a lawsuit has potential to bankrupt or close down many ECEC with legal fees and licensing requirements. Although, Little (2008) adds:

Whilst restrictive safety measures may appear to ensure children’s safety in the short term, the resultant impact on the quantity and quality of children’s outdoor physical play is likely to contribute to other short and long term negative outcomes (p.4).

In Little’s 2008 study, childcare practitioners determined that a lack of risk-taking opportunities in their ECEC had a detrimental effect on young children’s confidence, self-esteem, and problem solving skills. While this study focused on the limitations childcare practitioners encountered in their profession, another factor to examine is how adults support children’s opportunities for risk-taking.

Adequate levels of adult supervision ensure young children have opportunities to take risks in a safe and supportive environment (Little, 2008). The
levels of supervision adults provide in ECEC dictates how children are able to participate in risk-taking. ECEC with a high ratio of adults to children are able to support children’s individual risky play, whereas an insufficient number of adults determine low-level amounts of risks in which the children are able to partake. Maynard and Waters (2007) asserted that care providers often did not take children outdoors unless there was good weather, and rarely changed their supervision tactics in the outdoor space that they employed indoors. They commented that many care providers had limited opportunities to take children outdoors because the buildings were not designed to allow the children “a free-flow between the inside and the outside”, (Maynard & Waters, 2007, p.262). Supervision is essential to maintaining safety in an environment with children. Sandseter (2009a) comments that when children express physical or emotional fear during episodes of risky play, the mere presence of a supportive adult enables that child to solve their problems and move forward with their play.

Generally speaking, standard adult/child ratios in the United States are quite high for preschool aged children. California licensing (California Child Day Care Act, 2012) permits twelve preschool children in a class with one certified care provider and fifteen children with the inclusion of an aid. These ratios make it extremely demanding for care providers to ensure children’s safety while offering a challenging environment for risky play. Therefore, in my experience, early care and education provider’s beliefs regarding risky play, safety regulations, and adult/child ratios have the potential to severely limit opportunities for children to engage in positive and challenging forms of play. In contrast, Helen Little (personal
communication, November 18, 2012) explained that in Australia, pre-service care providers are being trained to incorporate the ideas of risk and challenge into their own practice. Little also conveyed that she is developing a research project that focuses on teaching care providers to be more flexible and tolerant of children’s risk-taking, along with recognizing the benefits associated with risky play. Little commented that there are several lecture series, presumably in Australia, that address this subject matter. While early care and education providers are key players who influence children’s opportunities for risky play in ECEC, parental beliefs and concerns for safety also affect children’s risk-taking behavior.

**Parental Beliefs and Attitudes Towards Risky Play**

Little (2010) addresses the role of parents by stating, “parental beliefs and socialization practices not only impact children’s developmental outcomes but also expectations for behaviors and participation in particular activities” (p. 325). Preschool aged children are developing their appraisal and self-management skills, as well as gaining a sense of independence from their parents. Little (2010) administered an Attitudes Toward Risk Questionnaire to twenty-seven Australian parents of preschool children. The questionnaire was used to determine the parents’ personal beliefs and attitudes towards risk-taking. Results showed that the majority (n=21, 87%) of the parents believed there were positive developmental benefits associated with risk-taking. Conversely, eight parents (33%) recognized the negative outcomes to risk-taking, while five parents (19%) spoke of risk-taking in exclusively negative terms. Little adds that many parents (n=19, 70%) believed risk-taking to be essential in order to enhance skill development and build
confidence. Little (2010) concludes, “parents beliefs about risk and safety are likely to influence the extent to which children’s healthy positive risk-taking is encouraged” (p. 328). In another study Little, Wyver, and Gibson (2011) specified that males generally participate in more risk-taking, thus fathers have greater tolerance for their children’s risky play. Considering these factors, the lack of male perspective in Little’s (2010) study leaves many questions unanswered in regard to parental beliefs and attitudes towards risky play.

Furthering Little’s 2010 research, Little, Wyver, and Gibson (2011) conducted interviews with twenty-four Australian parents (23 mothers and 1 father) regarding their feelings for safety regulations in their child’s ECEC. Results of those interviews determined the majority of the parents felt the current safety regulations to be appropriate, or they simply made no comment about them. However, four parents (17%) believed that the safety regulations were too stringent and were bothered by the fact that their child’s ECEC had to complete an accident report for each minor injury. Little notes that there is often tension over differing beliefs between care providers and parents regarding children’s physical risk-taking in an outdoor space. This study represents a foundation for this type of research, yet the views of these Australian care providers and parents most likely do not necessarily reflect those of care providers and parents from other countries and consequently it is essential to view the cultural ramifications that affect risky play.

**Cultural Implications of Risky Play**

As stated previously, Norwegian and Australian care providers often have conflicting reactions to children’s risky play due to such factors as safety
regulations, attitudes towards risk, and fear of litigation. For instance, Norwegian care providers have a more liberal attitude towards risky play, as this culture generally has a great love for the outdoors and does not fear litigation or child molestation to the extent that occurs in other Western countries such as Australia, Britain, or the United States (New, Mardell, & Robinson, 2005; Sandseter, 2012). Gill (2007) notes these countries are growing more risk-averse over time and argues that this aversion to risk-taking infiltrates every facet of a child’s life, particularly their opportunities for unstructured play.

Gill (2007) maintains that one of the foremost causes for this phenomenon in the UK is attributable to the fact that presently children are under adult supervision four times more than in 1975. Furthermore, children are frequently restricted from traveling to school alone and do not have the same accessibility to embark on unaccompanied trips with friends as generations did before. Therefore, these children are missing opportunities for risky play and the developmental benefits associated with this type of play. However, Gill is presently the director for Play England (Voce, 2011), an advocacy group for young children’s healthy play development, which has lobbied the British government’s Health and Safety Executive to place “risk-benefit, not just risk assessments in the hands of the provider rather than Health and Safety ‘experts’” (p.2). As risk-taking is no longer entirely constrained by safety regulations, children’s outdoor play in England is managed in a common-sense fashion “where exciting and adventurous play provision was no longer routinely sacrificed on the alter of rigid (mis)interpretations of health and safety rules” (p. 2). As England makes strides
toward incorporating challenging play that involves elements of risk on UK
playgrounds, risky play remains a contentious topic in the United States.

A recent study conducted by Logue and Harvey (2010) found that forty-six
percent of preschools examined in the United States had a no-tolerance policy
regarding rough-and-tumble play. Grambling (2010) contends that children are
often taught about pedestrian safety rules like crossing the street, yet are not
commonly trusted to move out of the way of a swing on a playground or play
wrestle with one another. He notes that this lack of trust creates a culture of fear
rather than the feeling of safety with children. Founder of The National Institute for
Play, Stuart Brown comments:

Part of the problem with mainstream society is that the gradual learning of
appropriate risk beginning with walking and even crawling and proceeding
to chasing, wrestling, jumping, punching, and other mayhem is taken over by
adult over organization or suppressed completely, leaving a skill deficient kid
then unwise about sensible risk...and more. (personal communication, October 2, 2013)

Brown (2009) began his career studying murderers in a Texas prison and found that
they were all play deficient in their childhood, especially in regard to rough-and-
tumble play. As Brown furthered his studies, he discovered that when children and
adults were deprived of play we “lose our sense of optimism and we become
anhedonic, or incapable of feeling sustained pleasure” (p.43). These findings led
Brown to create an organization that is dedicated to play and promotes the value of
play for people of all ages. While research may support the benefits of children’s
risk-taking, it is paramount to consider how safety regulations affect risky play in
the United States.
The National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education (2012), while searching for physical risk-taking in an outdoor setting, identified risks such as suffocation with blankets, sun and weather exposure, and injury, dehydration, and disease prevention, all of which have negative implications. Additionally, it is imperative to recognize how media in the United States influences parents and care providers alike. A recent article on Yahoo News entitled “Danger on the Playground: Riding the Slide with Your Toddler in your Lap Could Break Her Leg” (2012) is an example of the American media’s outlook toward risky play on playgrounds. Rather than highlighting a doctor’s recommendation for children to play independently on age-appropriate equipment, the article emphasizes the dangers present on the playground. However, there is a new voice advocating against the surplus safety (Little, 2008) that exists in many of this country's ECEC and local playgrounds.

Ellen Sandseter’s work has been featured in a Yahoo News article entitled, “Have Playgrounds Become Too Safe For Kids?” (2011). While the article informs readers that many schools have banned games of tag and touch football for recess activities, it quotes Sandseter on the virtue of risk-taking. She comments:

> Children need to encounter risks and overcome fears on the playground. Children approach thrills and risks in a progressive manner, and very few children would try to climb to the highest point the first time they climb. The best thing to do is to let children encounter these challenges from an early age, and they will then progressively learn to master them through their play over the years. (as found in Alphonse, 2011, p.1)

Furthermore, the article states that most schools are eliminating any risks in the schoolyard no matter how minor the risk. Sandseter is again quoted, “paradoxically, we posit that our fear of children being harmed by mostly harmless injuries may
result in more fearful children and increased levels of psychopathology” (as found in Alphonse 2011 p. 1). Sandseter seeks to inform the United States public of the benefits of risk-taking in early childhood, yet whether her message is being received still remains unclear.

**Conclusion**

Play is an essential manner in which children learn and develop new skills and concepts. Koplow (2007) adds that through play, “children activate synapses in their brains that allow them to think in increasingly sophisticated ways, thus improving their potential as learners” (p. 97). Children naturally seek out forms of challenging risk-taking during their play (Sandseter, 2007). Through risky play children gain the ability to assess risk, establish independence, socially negotiate, solve problems, and advance their current capabilities (Brussoni et al, 2012; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011; Ward, 2010). In order for young children to attain these developmental benefits, they must be provided with a challenging environment and supportive care providers to ensure their safety and learning opportunities are not compromised. Conversely, children sustaining a major injury, adherence to safety regulations, and the cost of play equipment are among many of the constraints to the provision of risk-taking in an outdoor play space.

While the majority of research conducted on risky play has taken place outside of the United States, there are individuals in this country who advocate for opportunities for risk-taking in early childhood. Bev Bos (2010) is the founder of Roseville Community Preschool and while she maintains that safety regulations may limit her practice, she has created “an illusion of risk” at her center. In essence, the
children feel as though they are taking physical risks while there is no actual danger present. Perhaps this is a method for early care and education providers in the United States to find the balance between providing a challenging environment for young children without violating any safety regulations. However, without research conducted in the United States that examines incidences and affordances for risky play in the outdoor play area, in addition to adults’ responses to this type of play, there remains insufficient evidence as to how children’s risky play transpires in this country.
Chapter Three

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

Being that the majority of research focused on risky play has been conducted outside of the United States, this project will act as a pilot investigation for risky play in the United States. Three questions are the focus of this study. First, is risky play available or does it even exist in Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC) in the United States? Second, how do the features of the outdoor environment affect children’s affordances for risk-taking activities? Lastly, given that children in ECEC are constantly supervised by adult care providers and their actions impact children’s play (Little, 2008), how do adult reactions influence children’s engagement in risky play?

Setting

This study was conducted at three ECEC located in a county in Northern California. One center is located on a university campus, one is a center run by a non-profit agency that supports low-income families, and one is a small private preschool.

Situated on a university campus, University Play School consists of a preschool class with twenty-seven children ages three to five years old. Families from this program include college students, faculty and staff of the university, and the occasional child from the community. Children mainly come from Latino and Caucasian families. Approximately half of the families receive subsidized care;
money from state services pays for their child’s tuition. The other half of the families pay full tuition. The second ECEC, Orchard View Child Development Center, is a non-profit program and is one of twelve ECEC that are offered throughout the county. This program serves low-income families and the majority of children attending this center receive subsidized care from the state of California to pay for their tuition. Children from this program are three to five years old, and many of the families attending are of Spanish-speaking and of Latino decent while the other portion of the families are mainly Caucasian. The third ECEC, Fellowship Preschool, is a small private program that shares a building with a local Presbyterian church, and has twenty-six children with ages ranging from three to four years old. Unlike the other two centers that are full-time programs, this site offers only a half-day program for the children and families. This ECEC has no children receiving subsidized care and its families are primarily Caucasian from the local community. These sites are representative of the main types of center-based early childhood programs available to young children and their families in the county.

Data Collection

This study acted as a case study, in which a small sample was used to comprehend the context, population, and theoretical issues that are being studied (Cassell & Syman, 2004). Observations were conducted over a two-month period commencing in January and concluding at the end of February 2014. Observations were conducted during five days in the outdoor setting of each ECEC. Observations lasted for one hour or the total amount of time allocated for outdoor free play, either in the morning or afternoon hours. These time frames were selected as most ECEC
have extended periods of free play and generally take the children outdoors before and after lunch and nap. Both children and adult care providers were aware of my presence while observations were being conducted, as I was in plain view sitting or standing taking notes in a journal. Although no interaction between the children and me was required for this study, I interacted with the children who approached and inquired about my presence. Frequently, children would ask what I was writing in my notebook or my name, and afterward they would often share personal information or ask me to watch them engage in a physical activity.

Upon my first entrance to Orchard View, multiple children approached me and asked my name and what I was doing at their school. Before I was able to take out my journal, I had given six males high-fives as a group of children followed me to the seat where I began to observe. Numerous children inquired about my journal and either asked me to write their names or why I was working on a project for school. Children at this center continually introduced themselves to me and told me anecdotes about their families, friends, and pets. I was a familiar presence at University Play School being that I was employed in another classroom at this center. Previously, I had worked with a number of the children present and initially they were curious as to why I was in “their yard”, but their interactions with me decreased with each observation. Children in this program were accustomed to college students documenting their play and there appeared to be little novelty to an adult taking notes in the outdoor play area. While my presence created a considerable amount of curiosity amongst the children at University Play School and Orchard View, not a single child spoke with me during the five-day observational
period at Fellowship Preschool. One child waved to me at Fellowship Preschool, which was the only interaction I had with any child at this center.

Since, the primary objective of this study was to examine young children’s risk-taking during outdoor free play, play events were categorized according to Sandseter’s (2007) six categories for risky play, and the number of instances of each type of risky play were recorded. While observing children ages three to five years, I also recorded notes in a journal with codes indicating where the play occurred, how the play was enacted, and the age and gender of each child in the play scenario.

In order to determine if an activity was risky play, I used Sandseter’s (2010) definition, which labels an action as risk-taking if there is the possibility of physical injury and if children cope with a degree of uncertainty. In order for an act to be documented as risky play, it was also imperative that each activity be child-directed. Consequently, when an adult pushed a tire swing particularly high, there was no risk-taking involved, as the children were not assessing the risk of the activity.

Furthermore, risky play is a voluntary act for all children involved, particularly in the case of rough-and-tumble play (Pellegrini, 2006). If one child did not willingly participate in this act, it was not considered a form of play for this study.

In addition to coding children’s play, I also recorded observations of adult reactions to children’s risky play. Adults in this study were aware that their actions with children were being recorded. It should be noted that each adult care provider in this study was female. University Play School employs two male care providers in their preschool-age program, but none were present during the observation period.
Several adults were eager to ascertain the results of each day’s observations by asking, “How did I do?” following the observations. One area of concern for the care providers was the number of times females participated in risky play. When the care providers were informed of the evidence of female risky play, the response in each center was a mix of elation and relief, with certain individuals clapping and cheering upon hearing this information.

**Data Analysis**

After the data was collected, an analysis determined how many occurrences of risky play transpired in each ECEC, which types were predominant, and the age and gender of each participating child. Codes were created to categorize the activities and environmental features where risky play incidences occurred. A chart was created to show the number of risk-taking scenarios that were documented at each site and to compare and contrast the opportunities for risky play in accordance with the types of features that each site provided.

Documentation of adult early care and education practitioners’ reactions to risk-taking situations were recorded in order to illustrate the variations of adult responses to risk-taking in each program and for each category of risky play. When an adult was physically close to a child or inquired about that child’s safety during a risk-taking activity, this action was documented as supporting risky play. When an adult witnessed an incidence of risk-taking and had no response, the behavior was recorded as, “no reaction.” An episode of risk-taking that was not observed by an adult was recorded as “not witnessed”, whereas a risk-taking activity that was stopped by an adult was documented as “restraining risky play”. Conversely,
“redirection” was noted when an adult informed the child’s of other approaches to play but did not completely restrain the action.

At the conclusion of the study, one care provider from each ECEC was asked to participate in a short interview with the researcher. The following interview questions were used,

- How often do you observe the children in your center engaging in risky play?
- How does your program instruct its care providers to manage children’s participation in risky play?
- Personally, what is your reaction when you see children partaking in risky play in your center?

These questions were designed to demonstrate how care provider’s personal feelings towards children’s engagement in risky play align with the rules and regulations of the ECEC where they are employed. Moreover, the interviews provided further insight into the frequency of risky play and how early care and education practitioners react to these actions in ECEC studied.

Throughout the observation period, the adult care providers who inquired about the research were informed of each day’s results. Following a report of the findings, the care providers frequently shared anecdotes of similar risk-taking events they had recently witnessed at their center. For instance, there were numerous recorded instances of male rough-and-tumble play at Orchard View; the care provider communicated that it was a challenge maintaining a safe environment for these males to participate in this activity. At University Play
School, where the highest number of risky play incidences occurred, one care provider was anxious to share accounts of risk-taking that took place when I was not present. Conversely, there were few recorded examples of risky play at Fellowship Preschool, and multiple care providers spoke to me about the limitations of the outdoor play area and the need for more challenging equipment.
Chapter Four

Results

Cumulative Totals

During the course of the fifteen days documenting children's outdoor play in three Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC), ninety-five incidences of risky play were recorded. The total time of the observational period was thirteen hours and one minute while three hundred and twenty-six children (172 males (M) and 147 females (F)), ages ranging from three to five, were observed in the three outdoor play areas. (Most individual children were counted multiple times during this study.) Rough-and-tumble play was documented on forty occasions, which resulted in the most frequent category of risky play recorded for this study. Additionally, there were twenty-eight cases of play at high speeds, and play at great heights was recorded twenty-six times. There was one occurrence of play with dangerous tools, whereas, play near dangerous elements and play where children can get lost or disappear were the two categories of risky play that were never observed at the three ECEC.
University Play School

Observations at University Play School commenced on January 27, 2014 and concluded on February 7, 2014 with a total of five days. Each session lasted one hour. Data was collected four times during the morning hours and once in the afternoon. In the course of each observational period, the children had the option to play indoors or in the outdoor play area. Throughout the data collection, ninety-one children (fifty-one males and thirty females) were documented in the outdoor play area over the five-day observational period. The fewest number of children, thirteen, were observed in the afternoon session, as certain children had departed for the day while other children remained sleeping indoors. It was raining on the final day of observations and many children stayed indoors or under the covered patio, thus not utilizing all of the features in the outdoor play area. Only two
incidences of risky play were recorded during that rainy hour—the lowest number recorded at University Play School. Overall, there are seventeen males and eleven females enrolled in this program, ages three to five years. Forty-three acts of risky play were recorded at University Play School, the highest number of the three ECEC.

**Play at high speed.** Nineteen instances of play at high speeds were recorded, with thirty-six males and five females participating in this type of play. For this category of risky play, twenty males and five females swung on the tire swing at high speeds, and on several occasions the child pushing the swing asked, “Wanna go fast?” and the other children replied, ”Yeah!” in unison. Children sat, stood, or lay with their heads or feet dangling in the middle or off the sides of the feature as it moved. While swinging on the tire swing, children exclaimed, “Yahoo”, “I’m Batman”, and “A tidal wave” as they spun rapidly. On seven occasions, there was no adult to this activity. Twice the act was supported as an adult moved closer to the children on the tire swing and in one case, an adult asked the children “Do you feel safe?” to which each child replied affirmatively.

In addition to swinging, many other forms of play at high speed were recorded. For example, one day the double slide that rested on hay bales was turned upside down, allowing for five occurrences of nine males running, skating, or sledding on cushions down the feature. Each time, an adult was near this play supporting the activity. On another occasion, five male children rode a bike backwards downhill; two males rode together while the other rider was alone, and no adults reacted to this play. Additionally, two males rolled a large plastic tube down a hill and ran in front of it yelling joyfully, “Oh no, oh no!” and “Whoa!”, as it
rapidly approached them. In one case, there was no adult reaction to this activity, but during the other incident, the adult restrained this play by telling the child, “This is not safe”.

**Figure 2: Gender= M-F; Adult Reaction= NR= No reaction, Su= Support, R= Restrain**

**Play at great heights.** On eight occasions, children were observed climbing trees and four males and four females participated in this act. Two fig trees that were designated for climbing, and for safety purposes, hay and dirt was placed beneath the trees. Adults had no reaction four times during tree climbing, supported the act by moving closer on three occasions, and on one occasion, this act was not witnessed by an adult. There were two examples of two males jumping off the slide, once this was supported while the other occurrence had no reaction. In this category of risky play, two examples of adults restraining this act ensued when one male jumped off a table and another male stacked milk crates against the fence in an attempt to climb out of the play area.
**Rough and tumble play and dangerous tools.** Throughout the observation period in each ECEC, there was one case of play with dangerous tools and this transpired at University Play School. Three males were observed swinging large garden shovels on top of hay bales, subsequently; this play was quickly redirected when an adult introduced foam noodles for the children to safely swing. This act transformed the children’s play, as fourteen males and three females participated in rough-and-tumble play by swinging the foam noodles and play fighting with one another in this fashion. An adult supported each incident of this form of play fighting, while an adult redirected the only instance of two males play wrestling without the use of objects. In this situation, the adult encouraged the two males to push a punching bag or tire swing rather than one another. On two occasions, six
males chased and grabbed one another playing, “rescue heroes”, and in both examples, adults had no reaction to this form of play.

Figure 4: Gender= M - F; Adult Reaction= NR= No Reaction, Su= Support, RD= Redirection

**Orchard View Child Development Center**

Data collection from Orchard View lasted for five days beginning on February 12 2014, and culminating on February 24, 2014, with observations conducted for a total of four hours and forty-five minutes. Observations occurred during three afternoons and two mornings in the outdoor play area with one hundred and twelve children (sixty-eight males and forty-four females) recorded playing outdoors over a five day period. A total of forty-one children attend this program daily, with twenty-six males and fifteen females, ages three to five years old. During the course of data collection, an option to play indoors or outdoors was available for the
children. However, there was one exception on the first day of observations, as a parent meeting took place in the indoor environment, which resulted in each child mandated to play outside. Additionally, one afternoon session was limited, as all children went indoors for structured activities and returned to play for half an hour before all the children proceeded indoors due to staffing issues. On this day, there was one occurrence of risk-taking and eight children present, the lowest number recorded at this site for both categories. Thirty-nine incidents of risky play were documented at Orchard View, with sixty males and twelve females participating in risk-taking activities. Of the total number of risky play incidences recorded, twenty-seven were rough-and-tumble play while twelve resulted in play at great heights. Four of Sandseter’s (2007) six categories for risky play were not represented at Orchard View: play at high speeds; play with dangerous tools; play near dangerous elements; and play where children can get lost or disappear.

**Rough-and-tumble play.** Twenty-seven examples of rough-and-tumble play were documented and fifty-four males and six females participated in this play. Play fighting and wrestling represented the majority of rough-and-tumble play, as it was recorded twenty-two times with fifty-five males and no females playing in this manner. This type of play varied from children piling on top of one another, to other occasions where two males were simulating martial arts moves, barely making physical contact. During this example of rough-and-tumble play, one male informed a passing adult, “It’s pretend. We’re playing.” Media images were frequently evoked in the course of this play, as one male told another while wrestling, “I’m the good Batman, he’s the bad Batman. Get to jail” at which point the male hauled off the
other child as if he was handcuffed and placed him in the area behind the sand box. Another example of this play occurred when two males captured an additional male in a hula hoop and shook him with force. The captured male repeatedly said “I am an alien from the future” in a robotic voice as he was being shaken and captured.

Play fighting was recorded in all areas of the outdoor play environment and the adult reactions contrasted depending on the action and the particular adult present. Adults had no reaction to play fighting twelve times and the same adult restrained two incidences of this play by saying, “No pushing” and on another occasion, she had the children talk with one another rather than have a physical exchange. There were four examples of play fighting that were not witnessed, as the males involved wrestled and laughed applying headlocks or joining hands to push one another. In one case of play fighting, four males rolled over one another repeatedly. The adult in this situation supported the play by consulting with the males to determine if they felt safe, and as the play escalated, the same adult told the children to “Be careful”. When this play fighting became more rowdy and the children began jumping on one another’s backs, the adult restrained the play and redirected this activity by telling the four males, “I don’t want you to land on each other’s backs. You need to find a different way to play this game. Maybe you can play hide-and-seek, I know you’re good at it”. One male propositioned the others by announcing, “Let’s play hide-and-seek”, hence initiating a new game.

Another facet of rough-and-tumble play that was present at Orchard View, involved children chasing and capturing one another. Five occasions of this play were recorded and eight males and six females participated in this activity. On
several occasions, children called out” Na, na, na, na”, and stuck out their tongues or waved their hands to instigate this style or risky play. Once, when two males were capturing one another, they exclaimed, “Gotcha” and “I got you” enthusiastically as they played. There were two examples of females instigating this type of play, as one female growled and chased a male, shouting “I’m gonna catch you”. At one point, three females chased two males around the yard growling and capturing the males. Adults in the outdoor environment had no reaction to four of these incidences and only restrained this play once by instructing two males to “Keep your hands to yourself”.

Figure 5: Gender= M - F; Adult Reaction= NR= No Reaction, Su= Support, R= Restrain, RD = Redirection

Play at great heights. The monkey bars were the only feature in Orchard View’s outdoor environment where play at great heights took place. Throughout
the observational period, the monkey bars were opened sporadically and frequently a cone was placed on the platform to denote that the feature was closed. Twelve children, six females and six males, were recorded engaged in risk-taking on the monkey bars. For many of the older children there was no risk involved with this feature, as they made their way across the rings effortlessly. However, there were was one occasion where a three year-old male struggling to get from one ring to the next, as the adult encouraged, “You can grab the next one” to which the male responded, “I can’t” and promptly dropped to the ground. A three-year-old female navigated her way across the monkey bars for the first time. The adult supervising clapped and picked up the child excitedly announcing, “Yea, you made it across for the first time”, and the child responded by saying, “I’m gonna do it again”. The children who were observing this act cheered and chanted the females name after she accomplished this feat. Older children did increase the challenge of this feature, as one female negotiated the monkey bars one-handed while another boy closed his eyes when he crossed the feature. As it was required for an adult to supervise this feature at all times, each example of play at great heights was supported.
Figure 6: Gender = M - F; Adult Reaction = Su = Support

**Fellowship Preschool**

Observations were conducted for five days at Fellowship Preschool beginning on February 4, 2014 and concluded on February 25, 2014, for a total of three hours and sixteen minutes of data collection. There were seventy-three females and fifty males recorded throughout the five-day observational period. The program enrolls twenty-six three to four year-olds (fifteen females and eleven males) who attend the center each day. Forty-five minutes was allotted for outdoor play each day with no option to enter the indoor environment during this time period. Typically, the children played for approximately thirty minutes in the outdoor play area during the observational period. Thirteen incidences of risky play occurred at Fellowship Preschool and twenty females and seven males participated in risk-taking activities. There were no recorded examples of play near dangerous
elements, play with dangerous tools, or play where children can get lost or disappear.

**Play at high speed.** Nine examples of play at high speed were recorded and fifteen females and six males partook of this form of risky play. Five of these incidences occurred on the teeter-totter where children would stand and bounce on the feature, and in one case, a child declared, “Let’s go fast”. Five females and four males participated in this act. Twice, adults had no reaction, and on three occasions, this act was supported when an adult moved closer, once warning the children, “Whoa, careful there”, as they bounced. Two episodes of high-speed play were recorded on bikes, as the adult supported one female as she raced around a scooter by saying “Wow, speed racer”. On another occasion, an adult restrained one female who rapidly pushed two other females on a bike by telling her, “Not too fast”. Once four females pushed the tire swing quickly, as all the children laughed and screamed, while another time, two males and two females lay prone and spun in circles. Both of these incidents had no reaction from the adults, however, at this site, the adults regularly pushed the tire swing, at the children’s request.
Figure 7: Gender= M - F; Adult Reaction= Su= Support, NR= No Reaction, R= Restrain

**Rough-and-tumble and play at great heights.** Additional forms of risky play documented at Fellowship Preschool were rough-and tumble play and play at great heights. An example of rough-and-tumble play occurred when two females crashed into one another when they went down the slide. The adult present restrained this activity immediately and told the two children “You have to go down the slide”. One male and female were fencing with sticks when an adult cautioned both children, “Hey careful with the sticks, watch out for the eyes”, demonstrating support for this activity. Two cases of play at great heights ensued when a younger female balanced on the teeter-totter, while another female dangled from her feet on the pull-up bar screaming enthusiastically. Each of these examples of risky play had
no reaction from adults.

**Figure 8**: Gender = M - F; Adult Reaction = Su = Support, R = Restrain

**Figure 9**: Gender = M - F; Adult Reaction = NR = No Reaction
**Figure 10: Summary of risky play at each ECEC; M- F = Gender**

**Adult Interviews**

At the conclusion of the observational period, an adult care provider from each ECEC agreed to participate in a short interview regarding their attitudes and experiences relating to risky play. Marilyn from Fellowship Preschool and Carol, who works for Orchard Valley, acted as both directors and care providers for their centers. Gaia, who is employed at University Play School, is the lead provider in her classroom. When the adults were questioned about the frequency with which they observed risky play in their programs, each care provider responded that they witness this type of play on a daily basis. Gaia explained that depending on the child, risky play may occur every fifteen to twenty minutes. She acknowledged “certain children engage in this type of play more than others” and that “some days
the teacher needs to move closer to these children every five minutes.”

Furthermore, Marilyn replied, “For some children what is risky play is not for others” and risk-taking activities are either encouraged or prohibited “depending on the day”. Conversely, Carol commented on the challenging aspects of having males “jumping and hurdling concrete barrels” at Orchard View. She added that monkey bars “help build children’s upper bodies and help to push their own limits of strength and coordination.” Carol mentioned that recently two broken arms occurred on the monkey bars and that it is essential that adults provide supervision at this feature to ensure the children’s safety. Additionally, Carol spoke about the need for Orchard View to continually provide challenges for the older children in the program.

Secondly, the adults were asked how they instruct the care providers under their leadership to manage risky play. Gaia replied that children should initiate risky play and the role of adults at University Play School is to “point out solutions, safety, clear hazards, and use proper language to narrate the events and get closer to the child during risky play”. Marilyn commented that the adults at Fellowship Preschool often think of ways to encourage this play by creating an “ongoing dialogue” at forums where the staff talks about certain details of risky play. She also mentioned that it is easier to manage the three year-old children, as they “don’t push it” in the same manner as older children. Conversely, Carol remarked that she encourages her staff at Orchard View to “expand on the ideas of what a child is doing and risky play falls into that”. She added that when adults encourage and scaffold
with the children during gross motor activities, it helps to increase the children’s ability to think critically.

Lastly, the three adult care providers were questioned about their personal feelings regarding risky play. Gaia stated, “When it is a high risk-taker my first reaction sometimes is to cringe”. During an incidence of risk-taking, Gaia asks her staff to take three seconds before moving closer to the children, because she does not want the adults to pass their fears on to the children. In the event that a child sustains an injury, the adults at University Play School are “encouraged not to swoop right in and to let the child have the experience” or rather, to inform the child that, “I feel a little worried. I’m moving closer”. Gaia concluded the interview by stating, “I feel risk-taking is a great opportunity for learning”. Carol remarked that children “are different on the developmental spectrum with different temperaments and abilities” and that “some children do not risk-take enough” and “play it too safe”. Carol observed that some children at Orchard View are “a hazard to themselves and others” and that adults need to stay close to these children in order for them to think before they act. Carol ended the interview by mentioning the importance of children completing tasks on their own without adult assistance. Moreover, Marilyn replied that she has a “myriad of emotions” when witnessing risky play, and that “it is exciting to see a child empowering themselves, yet with others, you don’t know what is coming, as they are unaware of the consequences”. Marilyn commented that adults must act quickly during risk-taking activities and how previously at Fellowship Preschool; parents have voiced their concerns for their children’s safety while observing risky play from the indoor environment.
Each adult interviewed valued risky play as a significant aspect of children's outdoor physical play. In their interviews, the adult care providers expressed the need for children to be challenged physically in the outdoor play area and how through risk-taking, children learn about their own limitations and those of others. However, the common concerns for the care providers regarding risky play, centered upon maintaining the children’s safety and having a suitable outdoor environment for the children to engage in this type of play. Unlike Carol and Marilyn, who felt their centers lacked space and features to consistently provide challenging play opportunities, Gaia’s main concern was that the outdoor play area at University Play School was too large and at times, had an excess of challenging features. Marilyn’s main concern was about the worries the parents in her program shared about safety, while Carol had trepidations regarding licensing and injuries that took place on the monkey bars. Gaia, on the other hand, was apprehensive about the overall safety of the children in the program. A common idea that was shared by each adult was the challenges that came with certain children, primarily males, needing extra supervision due to their continuing pursuit to engage in risk-taking activities.
Chapter Five

Discussion

Variations Between the Three Centers

For this study, observations of outdoor play in three Northern Californian Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC) were recorded to determine how frequently young children participated in risky play. University Play School had the highest number of risk-taking occurrences (43) with four of the Sandseter’s (2007) six categories of risky play represented at this site; the most of any ECEC in this study. In addition, the fewest number of children (91) were observed at University Play School, over the longest observational period, which totaled five hours. Conversely, Fellowship Preschool had the highest number of children observed (123) and the lowest number of risky play incidences (13), as well as the least amount of time (3 hours, 16 minutes) recorded in any of the three ECEC. Orchard View produced the second highest quantity of risky play occurrences (39), children observed (112), and the number of recorded hours (4 hours, 45 minutes).

Numerous factors contributed to these results, including the features of the outdoor environment, children’s individual characteristics, the adult reactions to risky play, and the amount of time children attended each ECEC.

The Outdoor Environment

Sandseter’s (2009b) study compared two Norwegian ECEC, one was labeled an outdoor nature school due to it’s wooded location, while the other was described as an ordinary program with conventional outdoor features. Sandseter’s study
focused on the affordances for risky play in both outdoor environments, and concluded that the nature program had more incidences of risky play due to it’s natural features and large outdoor space, which provided for more challenging and complex play. University Play School was the only ECEC outdoor play area that contained a hill for climbing and biking, trees to climb, a movable slide, and hay bales for jumping. These features figured prominently in the recorded cases of risky play for this center. Moreover, the outdoor environment’s design incorporated natural elements, as the surface consisted mainly of dirt, while plants and trees grew sporadically around the yard. Grass and hay were commonly used for safety purposes under the climbing areas.

In contrast, concrete made up much of the surface of the outdoor environment at Fellowship Preschool and Orchard View, both of which were smaller in space as compared with University Play School. Furthermore, the main features at these two ECEC were fixed, and therefore could not be moved or modified to enhance the children’s play.

Orchard View possessed the fewest features of all the programs and this may have contributed to why rough-and-tumble play was the predominate form of risky play observed at this center. Fewer playground features and more open space promote the large body physical play connected with rough-and-tumble play (Carlsen, 2011). In all probability, the features of the outdoor play area had an impact on the number of risky play incidences in each ECEC; nevertheless the amount time children played in the outdoor environment appeared to affect their opportunities for risk-taking.
Throughout this study, University Play School had the most examples of risk-taking with the greatest variety of risky play occurrences among the three ECEC. In addition, the children in this program played outside without interruption regardless of the weather and went indoors only to eat, nap, or for a short group gathering. For the majority of the morning and afternoon hours, children at University Play School had the option to play outside, unlike at Fellowship Preschool where there was only one short period of time in the morning to play in the outdoor environment. It should be noted that Fellowship Preschool is a half-day program where children depart before lunch. Therefore, children attending Fellowship Preschool interacted less with the outdoor play area as compared with the other centers that provide full day programs. Rather than participate in large body physical activities, the children from this program often engaged in more quiet or teacher-directed play. For example, on various occasions, up to fourteen of the twenty-six children outdoors were observed digging or playing in the sandbox; the largest number of children at any ECEC recorded engaging in this activity. Perhaps these children simply had less desire for overtly challenging physical play. Additionally, Orchard View had designated times in the morning and afternoon hours for structured, adult-guided activities, which affected the allotted time for children’s free play in the outdoor environment. Another factor that influenced risky play at Orchard View was the fact that the monkey bars were closed for portions of the outdoor play due to limited adult supervision. When this feature opened, children lined up to swing across the monkey bars, and at times, there were up to ten children waiting in line to use this feature. Although children’s exposure
to the outdoor environment affects their opportunities to engage in risky play (Little & Wyver, 2008; Sandseter, 2009), each child's age, temperament, and gender may also influence their participation in certain types of physical activities.

**Children’s Individual Characteristics and Risky Play**

**Age.** Younger children are less capable of judging risks in their play and therefore have a greater threat of injury during risk-taking activities (Hiller and Morrongiello, 1998). Subsequently, more complex play opportunities pose an additional challenge for younger children (Little, 2006). For instance, in this study there were multiple recorded cases of younger children having difficulty attempting an activity that an older child completed with relative ease. One example occurred at Orchard View where a three-year-old female and male struggled on separate occasions to cross the monkey bars. Older children consistently used this feature with certainty and no real risk of injury, and for this reason, risky play was not recorded. There were two cases of one male crossing the monkey bars backwards, and another male, who twice crossed with his eyes closed. On these occasions, risky play was documented, as these two older males established a method to further challenge their current abilities on this feature.

A common theme during the interviews with the adult care providers was the challenge to supply the older males in the program with sufficient physical stimulus in the outdoor environment. This was achieved at University Play School when the plastic double slide was turned upside down while being supported by hay bales, which allowed the children to jump, skate, run, or sled on a cushion down the feature. Older males (four-five years old) dominated this play; perhaps due to its
complex nature or merely the level of physical activity associated with this play
intimidated the females and younger children. Moreover, it was older males who
typically participated in rough-and-tumble play at Orchard View. Potentially, age
was one factor as to why Fellowship Preschool had the fewest recorded incidences
of risky play; the majority of the children attending this program were three as
compared with the four and five year olds in the other two centers. While age may
influence children's participation in risky play, a child's temperament also affects
the type of play they select.

**Temperament.** Little (2006) recognized that children who are sensation
seekers take part in the majority of risky play in ECEC. Furthermore, Sandseter
(2009a) determined that sensation seekers were more likely to feel exhilaration as
opposed to fear during a risk-taking activity. Throughout, this study it was apparent
that certain children seemed to seek out risky play while others were content with
other activities such as; sand play; reading; nonphysical forms of dramatic and
sensory play; games with rules; relaxed forms of physical play; or quiet indoor
interests. One male from Orchard View was involved in many examples of rough-
and-tumble play, often instigating the play by running up and gently striking or
applying wrestling holds to other males. This particular male frequently displayed a
rather bold temperament accompanied by social confidence and a very active style
of play, which may explain his recurrent involvement in rough-and-tumble play.
This type of temperament was observed at University Play School as well, as large
groups of loud, expressive males were often observed running, jumping, and play
fighting with one another.
Overall, fewer examples of physical play were observed at Fellowship Preschool. During the observational period, I spoke with the care providers at Fellowship Preschool regarding the calm dispositions that the children demonstrated during outdoor play and the adults attributed this to chance and explained that in other years their program had “a lot of wild boys.” The temperament of these children, particularly the males, may have contributed to the low number of risky play incidences recorded at this center. Although female participation in risky play was somewhat limited throughout this study, the females who did engage in risk-taking often displayed extroverted and physically active dispositions.

**Risky play and gender differences.** Pellegrini and Smith (1998) acknowledged that males are more likely than females to engage in physical forms of play such as risk-taking activities. Throughout this study, out of the ninety-five total incidences of risky play, one hundred and thirty-seven males were recorded participating in this type of play as opposed to forty-four females. In addition, males in this study were frequently observed risk-taking in larger groups than females. For example, four to five males at Orchard View repeatedly participated in several occurrences of rough-and-tumble play throughout the hour-long observational period, hence increasing the number of males recorded in the entire study. University Play School and Orchard View had more males attending their programs than females, which also accounted for the high number of male risky play incidences. In contrast, the majority of children attending Fellowship Preschool were females, and this program accounted for the only instance where females (20)
participated in risky play more than males (7). However, Fellowship Preschool had far fewer incidences of risky play (13) compared to University Play School (43) and Orchard View (39).

Tree climbing and the monkey bars were the only two risk-taking activities where gender equity was documented. Four females and four males participated in tree climbing at University Play School, while six females and six males engaged in risk-taking on the monkey bars at Orchard View. Rough-and-tumble play, on the other hand, was dominated by male participation, as seventy-seven males as opposed to twelve females engaged in this form of risky play. Incidences of rough-and-tumble play were less common at Fellowship Preschool (2) than at Orchard View (27) and University Play School (11) possibly due to the fact that more males attend the first two programs. A potential explanation for these gender differences in rough-and-tumble play is hormonal differences, as males have higher levels of testosterone during the growth of the fetus (Pellegrini, 2006). Another factor constituting the rough-and-tumble play differences between males and females revolves around socialization. Parents tend to encourage and participate in this type of play with males, while females are often discouraged from rough physical play (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). However, Stuart Brown (2009) explains that females frequently partake in a more psychological form of rough-and-tumble play that might encompass “more role playing, gossip, teasing, or exclusionary clique-formation” (p.190). While children’s individual characteristics influenced the results of this study, the adult reaction to risky play was an additional factor to these outcomes.
Adult Reactions to Risky Play

Children’s opportunities to engage in risky play are dependent upon the attitudes and beliefs of the adults who educate and care for them (Stephenson, 2003). Being that many young children are spending increasingly more time in ECEC, adult care providers support and maintain much of the children's play throughout the day (Little, Wyver, and Gibson, 2011). Adult reactions to risky play were recorded for this study in order to gain an understanding of how adult care providers respond to risky play in the centers in this study. In general, the adults in this study allowed for risk-taking activities, as seventy-eight of the ninety-five recorded incidences of risky play had an adult supporting or not reacting to the act. Eight cases of risky play were restrained completely and half of those were in response to rough-and-tumble play. On one occasion at Fellowship Preschool, three children were riding together on a bike when the adult informed them that it was “not safe” and encouraged the children to slow down due to the space constrictions of the environment. At University Play School, a child was restrained from jumping off a table, while another male was prevented from climbing the fence after he had stacked milk cartons in order to scale this element. (This instance represented the sole occasion in which I interfered with the children’s play, as I informed the adult care provider that the child had practically scaled the fence that had a parking lot on the other side.) There were two cases of redirected play fighting, as once a group of males was encouraged to play hide-and-seek while in another instance two males were asked to hit a punching bag instead of one another. Adults in this study did not
witness six acts of risky play, and none of these occurred at Fellowship Preschool where the adults regularly interacted with the children during outdoor play.

University Play School differed from the other two ECEC in this study, as this program employs college students without formal Early Childhood Education (ECE) to work with children at this site. Therefore, the two lead care providers supervised these student’s reactions to children’s play, including acts of risk-taking. Subsequently, in one instance, a student restrained a child’s play by telling him that swinging shovels was “not safe” and proceeded to take the shovel from the male. After observing this interaction, the lead provider informed the student and the child that “we can bring out foam noodles that are safe for swinging”. Fellowship Preschool and Orchard View employed individuals with at least twelve college units of ECE to educate and care for the children in their centers. Consequently, each adult responded in their own manner to acts of risky play. One adult from Orchard View restrained play fighting on three occasions while another adult at the center did not react to the same activities. Adults at Fellowship Preschool frequently consulted one another regarding the appropriateness of a child’s activity, as the children often referred to the care providers for guidance and attention.

Play was child-directed at each ECEC in this study, yet the children from University Play School and Orchard View regularly played more independently than the children from Fellowship Preschool. While adults at Fellowship Preschool frequently pushed the tire swing for the children, this was not permitted at University Play School, as the children were encouraged to utilize the features according to their own abilities. As a result of this, fewer risky play incidences were
recorded at Fellowship Preschool, being that an act must be child-directed to be determined risk-taking for this study. Therefore, adults played a key role in children’s opportunities for risk-taking, being that children were constantly under adult supervision at each ECEC throughout this study.

Stevenson (2003) established that adult care providers in New Zealand who enjoyed the outdoors and physical activities were more supportive and tolerant of children’s risky play in their centers. In Norway, Sandseter (2007) determined that care providers seldom restrained risky play due to the fear of a child suffering an injury, as they recognized this was an important facet of children’s learning. Each adult interviewed for this study expressed their belief that risky play was a significant tool for young children’s learning and development. However, when the adults were questioned about their personal feelings regarding risky play, they stated that their reactions were based on the individual child and the act itself. Additionally, the care providers expressed concerns for the children’s overall safety in the environment, regulating play within the safety standards established by licensing, and the worries parents have for their children’s welfare. While these concerns may affect the play opportunities for children attending ECEC, the results from this study revealed that adults were primarily supportive of risky play, as they generally allowed children to challenge their current capabilities through risk-taking.
Active physical play is often overlooked as a component of young children’s learning and development, as is indicated through the lack of research and funding dedicated to children’s physical activity in general (Carlsen, 2011; Pellegrini, and Smith, 1998). In addition, adults frequently exhibit apprehension towards children’s play that involves a high level of physical activity. Carlsen (2011) adds that Western society “seems to be shifting away from an appreciation for such male characteristics as physical prowess, dominance and quick decision making and toward an emphasis on female traits of self-control and strong communication skills” (p.11). Moreover, according to Carlsen (2011), non-physical attributes for children such as social intelligence, the ability to remain still and focus, and open communication currently have more value in Western culture, and this perspective has entered the standards for early education. Nevertheless, most adults who work with young children acknowledge that children have a natural inclination to engage in uninhibited physical play that involves risk-taking in some form.

A recent article in The Atlantic (Rosin, 2014), explored the effect that adult overprotection has on children presently growing up in the United States. The author visited an adventure playground in Wales with her five-year-old son, where features such as stacks of tires, a muddy slope that led to a creek, a frayed rope swing, wood pallets, and a fire pit dominated the play environment. This area, referred to as “The Land” incorporated adult play instructors who rarely interfered
with the children’s play and was noted for the absence of bright colors or any structures that may be found on a more typical modern playground. Rosin managed her anxious feelings, as she observed her son engage in risky play without adult supervision for the first time in his life. Rosin reflected on her own childhood memories where she and her peers played freely without adult supervision and realized that her daughter had spent less than ten minutes of her ten-year life without being watched over by an adult. Lady Majory Allen of Hurtwood, a child advocate and landscape artist from the United Kingdom, developed the concept of an adventure playground in the 1940’s for children to take “really dangerous risks” and overcome them without adult supervision to “build self-confidence and courage” (Rosin, 2014, p. 77). Recently, playgrounds like “The Land”, that allow children to independently explore an outdoor environment as well as the properties of fire, have become more popular in the United Kingdom with the purpose of providing children with challenging and engaging play areas that incorporate risk-taking (Ball, 2002).

An interview with Norway’s Ellen Sandseter is featured in Rosin’s (2014) article, in which, she claimed that children need not engage in activities that consist of real danger to experience the feeling and sensation of risk-taking. Additionally, Sandseter declared that of the six categories of risky play, getting lost or disappearing is the most important, being that “when children are left alone and can take full responsibilities for their actions and the consequences of their decisions, it’s a thrilling experience” (as quoted in Rosin, 2014, p. 80). As stated earlier, play where children can disappear or get lost was not observed for this study and is
inaccessible for American children who attend Early Childhood Education Centers (ECEC), due to the regulations that exist where every child must be supervised by an adult at all times. Furthermore, play near dangerous elements was also not found in this study, as a typical ECEC outdoor play area is designed to maintain safety rather than provide children with the opportunity to interact with any element that could be deemed dangerous. When Rosin witnessed a child lighting a fire at “The Land”, she commented that a similar act by a child in the United States would involve a call to the police.

Young children’s safety has become paramount in Western culture and this is exemplified in many ECEC where children have few opportunities to achieve the developmental benefits associated with risky play (Little, 2006). Joe Frost, who campaigned for playground safety in the United States throughout the 1980’s, has recently updated his stance on children’s safety, as he considers that adults are presently misguided “that children must somehow be sheltered from all risks of injury” and that “in the real world, life is filled with risks - financial, physical, emotional, social - and reasonable risks are essential for children’s healthy development” (as found in Rosin, 2014, p. 79). Consequently, what is missing in children’s play that takes place in an over-protected environment where maintaining safety is imperative?

This study was designed to explore risky play in the United States through the examination of three ECEC located in Northern California. In this study, children frequently engaged in risk-taking activities, yet certain aspects of risky play were absent in the three ECEC. Opportunities to participate in rough-and-tumble play
and play at great heights were available for children at each ECEC. Essentially three forms of risk-taking were absent: play near dangerous elements, in which children can get lost or disappear, and play with dangerous tools. Because these types of play were not present, children in this study did not have the opportunity to experience the developmental advantages associated with this type of play.

University Play School’s natural landscape provided the most features of any of the outdoor play areas in this study, and as a result, the highest number and greatest variety of risky play incidences occurred at this center. Additionally, adult care providers in this study were generally supportive of risk-taking in their programs, therefore allowing for a high number of recorded cases of risky play.

More research dedicated to young children’s outdoor physical play should increase awareness of the value of providing a challenging play environment, including benefits such as increased problem-solving skills, increased self-esteem, and physical dexterity (Brussoni, et al., 2012; Little, Sandseter, and Wyver, 2012; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). This increased awareness should help adults put more trust in children’s abilities to assess and master risks, while allowing them the independence to challenge their current capabilities through risky play in a safe environment (Little, 2010, Sandseter, 2011). Both factors will hopefully result in more opportunities for children to engage in challenging, yet safe play.
References


