Outdoor and Risky Play in Early Childhood: Challenging the Emerging Culture of Risk Aversion

Abstract

In recent years, research (Tandon et al, 2012; Woolley and Lowe, 2013) has documented change in the nature of children’s play. A rapid decline in outdoor play has been largely reported (Colley et al, 2012; Brussoni et al, 2012). Subsequently, children’s opportunity to engage in risky play has diminished (Brussoni and Olsen, 2013). However, research (Kernan and Devine, 2010) indicates a proliferation of indoor play technologies. There is evidence to suggest that this shift from outdoor play environments to a predominantly screen-based lifestyle may have resulted in profound consequences on children’s health, including increasing mental illness (Gray, 2011) and rising obesity levels (Cleland et al, 2008). Consequently, it is pertinent that early years educators, researchers and policy makers re-evaluate approaches to outdoor and risky play.

The following article will explore the rationale for the provision of outdoor and risky play with reference to benefits in terms of physical well-being, mental health, educational attainment, reducing challenging behaviour and risk mastery. Furthermore, it will examine salient issues which are currently impinging on optimal access to outdoor and risky play. This will include critical analysis of the regulatory framework, professionalism and pedagogy, parental attitudes and expectations, and children’s rights. To conclude, recommendations for future policy development, research and practice will be established.

Key words: outdoor play, risky play, risk aversion, risk-taking

Defining outdoor and risky play

The literature (Gray, 2009; Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2008) demonstrates ongoing and wide-ranging debate regarding the conceptualisation and definition of play, and distinctions between the various types of play. Thus, a unified conclusion regarding a definition of play has not yet been achieved. The lack of a universal definition of play somewhat hinders any attempt to identify outdoor and risky play within the broader concept of play in general. However, for the purposes of this article, outdoor play may be defined as any spontaneous and enjoyable activity which is self-motivated and process-orientated that occurs in the outdoor environment (O’Brien, 2009). Staempfli (2009) identifies natural environments such as forests, fields and woodlands, and constructed environments such as
purpose-built playgrounds as two distinct types of outdoor areas that children may utilise for outdoor play. Louv (2009) argues that natural environments inherently offer diversity in sensory experience, which is not available to the same extent in constructed environments. Louv (2009) further suggests that children’s decreasing interaction with natural environments is negatively impacting well-being, a phenomenon he refers to as “nature deficit disorder.” However, Parsons (2011) argues that there is a lack of research examining the developmental impact of outdoor play in natural versus constructed environments. Therefore, additional research may be required in order to determine the specific contributions to child development of both natural and constructed environments.

Research (Kennair, 2007; Sandseter, 2011) suggests that risky play comprises of a set of motivated behaviours which provide the child with a sense of thrill and challenge, and facilitate exposure to stimuli the child may have previously feared. It generally presents a risk of physical injury. According to Little and Eager (2010), risky play commonly occurs in outdoor environments as the outdoors provides children with a sense of freedom to explore and experiment. Thus, outdoor and risky play may be considered to be largely intertwined.

**Rationale for the provision of outdoor and risky play**

Research (Brussoni et al, 2012; Ward et al, 2010) suggests outdoor and risky play experiences are fundamental to physical well-being, including perceptual-motor capacity, and fine and gross motor development. This is significant given the dramatic increase in the prevalence of childhood obesity. The World Health Organisation (2012) estimates that, globally, there are forty-two million children under five who are overweight or obese. Recent data from the Growing Up in Ireland Study (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2013a) indicates that one fifth of five-year-olds are overweight. Given the health implications of obesity including the development of cardiovascular conditions, pulmonary disorders and onset of type II diabetes (Karnik and Kanekar, 2012; Masters et al, 2013), and the resulting economic pressures on the healthcare system which amounts to approximately €1.1 billion per annum (Perry et al, 2012), it would be prudent for the government to prioritise access to outdoor environments. This is supported by research conducted by Department of Health (2009) in England which concluded that if the population were afforded frequent access to a natural outdoor environment, it would yield an estimated saving of £2.1 billion per annum.
Studies (Gray, 2011; Sandseter, 2011) further indicate that outdoor and risky play are linked to positive mental health and emotional resilience. Henderson and Bialeschki (2010) argue that the current lack of outdoor play has resulted in a decreased capacity to deal with everyday stressors of life, and rampant increases in emotional and psychological disorders. This is significant given the current state of children’s mental health services in Ireland. As outlined by Children’s Rights Alliance (2013), due to chronic underfunding and lack of a comprehensive legal framework, the mental health needs of children are not being addressed. Therefore, it may be determined that the provision of outdoor environments is a key area which must be prioritised in the early years in terms of the promotion of positive mental health and emotional resilience.

Research (Blair, 2009; Trudeau and Shephard, 2008) further suggests that frequent exposure to natural outdoor environments results in higher educational achievement. Significantly, Moss (2012) found increased engagement with reading, writing and mathematics. This finding is particularly relevant in the Irish context currently given the recent findings of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2011) which found that one in six young people in Ireland have significant literacy difficulties, while Ireland was found to be significantly below the OECD average for mathematics, achieving a score of 487 compared with the international average of 496.

A study (Barros et al, 2009) conducted with children with frequent access to natural outdoor environments noted reduced instances of challenging behaviour when compared to predominantly indoor counterparts. Significantly, numerous studies (Taylor and Kuo, 2009; Taylor and Kuo, 2011) have established symptomatic improvements in children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), with Taylor and Kuo (2009) demonstrating a similar effect size to that of Ritalin. In light of the increasing prevalence of ADHD in Ireland (Buckley et al, 2008), and the expanding government cost of medication which amounted to €2.5 million in 2013 (Baker, 2013), it may be argued that the provision of natural outdoor environments would provide a cost-effective method of managing ADHD symptoms.

Risk-taking enables the development of risk management strategies. Observational studies (Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2008; Sandseter, 2009) found that while children deliberately exposed themselves to risk, they displayed clear strategies for mitigating harm, and engaged in behaviours which were within their current capabilities. It is argued by Christensen and Mikkelsen (2008) that this process of negotiating risk and relating risk to their individual capacities enables children to become aware of their personal health and safety. Therefore, it may be argued that if risk-taking is prevented, it will have a detrimental impact on learning and development as children will not learn
to assess risk. This is supported by Waters and Begley (2007) who state that the emerging culture of risk aversion is impinging on children’s preparation for later life.

**Regulatory Framework**

Regulations may impact the ability of early years educators to provide sufficiently challenging play experiences (Little *et al.*, 2011). According to Bundy *et al.* (2009), concerns regarding litigation results in the reduction of the challenge of outdoor play. In light of recent incidences of litigation such as a case in which a young boy was awarded €20,000 compensation for being hit with a toy block (Maguire, 2014), this appears to be an understandable anxiety. The Preschool Regulations (DCYA, 2006) provide the primary source of regulation for the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector. However, Start Strong (2012) argues that the Regulations focus predominantly on health and safety, rather than holistic developmental needs. This is particularly evident in relation to risky play. Due to the safety-focused nature of the Regulations, Little and Eager (2010) contend that playground design is increasingly driven by safety, rather than developmental benefits. According to Sandseter (2012), such stringent regulation is problematic as children require challenging and stimulating play opportunities for optimal development. In the absence of such opportunities, implications such as difficulty interacting with peers, decreased academic achievement and lack of independence may emerge (Piotrowski *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it is pertinent that stakeholders engage in revision of the regulation framework in order to conform to international standards of provision, such as in Norway in which regulations are primarily concerned with capacity to provide for holistic developmental needs (OECD, 2012).

In terms of outdoor play, while the Regulations outline the requirement of an outdoor play area in full and part-time day care, there is no such requirement for sessional services (DCYA, 2006). Given the contribution of outdoor play to holistic development, this omission may have serious detrimental implications. Significantly, Pobal (2008), in a nationwide survey of ECCE settings, found that 7% did not have an outdoor area. Therefore, immediate reconsideration of this omission is required. Furthermore, the Regulations state that access to outdoor environments is “weather permitting” (DCYA, 2006). This is significant given that Kernan and Devine (2010) identify negative attitudes of early years educators towards Irish weather as a key mechanism which results in reduced outdoor play. Therefore, it may be suggested that this provision is amended, and the Regulations should instead put forth the requirement of appropriate outdoor clothing for children and early years educators.
The inspection process of the Regulations has also been largely criticised. Early Childhood Ireland (2012) argue that as Health Service Executive inspectors are not required to have specific training in the field of ECCE, this may impinge on their ability to assess the capacity of ECCE settings to provide for the complex learning and developmental needs of young children. Implications of this may be that inspectors do not have an awareness of the need for challenging outdoor play opportunities.

**Professionalism and Pedagogy**

Trost (2010) suggests that a professional ECCE workforce is instrumental to establishing effective outdoor and risky play experiences. Convergence is established with the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al, 2011) which found that stimulating environments and high quality pedagogy are more readily fostered by highly trained staff. The introduction of the Free Preschool Year (DCYA, 2013b) has led to standardisation of qualifications, with a minimum of FETAC level five for preschool leaders. According to Pobal (2013), this has resulted in the proportion of staff with FETAC level five or above increasing to 87%, which is a significant increase from 76% in the previous year. However, in terms of international provision, Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) argues that this level of qualification is insufficient. Furthermore, these requirements apply only to staff working with children availing of the Free Preschool Year, and thus, does not apply to staff working with the under three cohort (Start Strong, 2012). This may have significant implications on the quality of outdoor and risky play provision for children under three.

It is argued by Waller et al (2010) that quality outdoor and risky play experiences are not exclusively dependent on the professional status of early years educators, but are also influenced by pedagogical decision-making. This converges with Kernan (2010) who states that ability to recognise affordances within the environment directly correlates to individual pedagogic practices. As outlined by Sandseter (2010), early years educators’ perception of and attitude toward risk impacts upon risky play opportunities. Significantly, Sandseter (2013) has demonstrated that male early years educators have a more positive attitude toward risk, and facilitate greater opportunity for risk-taking. Due to the predominately female-led ECCE workforce in Ireland (Willoughby, 2011), it is evident that a greater awareness is required of the role male early years educators have within the early years sector. Furthermore, early years educators must examine their own attitudes in order to ensure that their personal needs and boundaries are not constraining children’s outdoor and risky play.
Parental attitudes and expectations

Parental attitudes present a major barrier to facilitating children’s adventurous outdoor activity (Moloney, 2010). According to Little and Eager (2010), increasingly, parental safety concerns have yielded restrictions on children’s play. Gleave (2008) identifies the role of the media in this disjunction between children’s actual safety and societal concerns regarding risk-taking behaviour. Little (2008) contends that media emphasises what could go wrong, with little regard to the likelihood of such outcomes occurring. For example, statistics (DCYA, 2012) demonstrate that the risk of a child being involved in traffic accident is significantly higher than the risk of sustaining a serious playground injury. However, due to the high occurrence of traffic accidents, it is argued by Gleave (2008) that they are not publicised to the same extent that playground injuries are. According to Herrington and Nicholls (2007), in taking such an approach, the media is instrumental in the manipulation of the public’s perception of risk.

Furthermore, in terms of parental expectations, it is argued by Hayes (2010) that a number of ECCE settings are adhering to a school-preparation approach. O’Connor and Angus (2012) maintain that due to the market-led approach, early years educators are pressured by expectations of parents to introduce academic-based learning. According to Waller et al (2010), given this “schoolification” approach to the early years, parents may perceive that play is dispensable to early learning. This facilitates the shift from outdoor play environments to indoor structured environments. Therefore, it is essential that early years educators clearly articulate the role of outdoor and risky play to parents. Furthermore, Start Strong (2013) argues that if Ireland adopted an approach similar to that of Finland, in which ECCE is predominantly funded by the government, this may help to eradicate the market-led approach, and thus, facilitate greater opportunity for children and early years educators to exercise autonomy in relation to outdoor and risky play.

Children’s Rights

In recent decades, the importance of upholding children’s rights has permeated discourse and policy (Hayes, 2010). Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was instrumental in this shift towards a rights-based approach (Kiersey and Hayes, 2010). However, in relation to outdoor and risky play, it is evident that there is an over-emphasis on the right to protection, while participation rights appear to be neglected (Pramling-Samuelsson, 2010). This is significant given that the UNCRC (United Nations [UN], 1989) emphasises the indivisibility of the articles, and places equal importance upon each. Waller et al (2010) argues that this focus on
protection rather than participation reflects societal views of children’s competencies and resilience. Tranter and Sharpe (2008) argue that this has led to the perception that children are vulnerable, and contributes to restrictions imposed on risk-taking. This is demonstrated by Herrington and Nicholls (2007) who found that children’s play spaces do not reflect developmental and play needs, but rather reflect the goals of risk reduction. In addition to impinging on children’s rights under the UNCRC (UN, 1989), this characterisation of childhood as a period of dependency contradicts the premise of early childhood pedagogy outlined in core documents underpinning practice such as Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) which emphasises that children are capable and competent. Therefore, in order to uphold the UNCRC, and adhere to practice outlined in Aistear, children must be afforded their right to participation in outdoor and risky play, and enabled to express autonomy in structuring play environments.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the regulatory framework impinges on optimal provision of outdoor and risky play. Therefore, policy-makers alongside early years educators and other stakeholders must engage in revision of the regulations. Policy-makers must prioritise the requirement of an outdoor environment in sessional services. Furthermore, inspectors should have specific training within the field of ECCE to ensure understanding of the need for outdoor and risky play during the early years.

Given that a professional ECCE workforce is fundamental to effective provision of outdoor and risky play, the current qualification requirements are insufficient. Therefore, increasing qualification levels must be prioritised. In terms of provision of quality pedagogy, initiatives must be developed to generate greater male presence within the sector in order to enhance risk-taking opportunities.

Due to parental preoccupation with safety, it is essential that early years educators recognise their role in educating parents regarding the need for outdoor and risky play in the early years. Further research may be required in order to gain increased clarity in this area.

It is evident that practice is predominantly informed by children’s right to protection at the expense of participation rights. In order to uphold children’s rights, the dominant image of children must be one of competence rather than vulnerability. This may require the development of policy documentation which explicitly states the requirement of outdoor and risky play, and child involvement in the structuring of outdoor play environments.
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