

I'm not scared!

Risk and challenge in children's programs

by Dr Anne Kennedy

Regulations and accreditation requirements are intended to protect children and to support best practices to achieve quality outcomes for all children. The benefits for children from these requirements are reduced if child care professionals use them to limit what they provide in the way of interesting and challenging environments and experiences. The 'cotton wool' approach can result in over-restrictive limitations on children's right to play, experiment, explore, and to extend themselves within a stimulating, yet safe environment.

Research suggests that children will engage in less risky behaviour when environments offer a variety of experiences with appropriate levels of challenge (Knackstredt & Wellisch, 2005; Elliott, 2008). Children are more likely to add or create risks or to engage in unsafe behaviour when their environments are sterile or boring. Children deciding to climb over a high fence or trying to find ways to escape from a playground could be responding to being bored or under-stimulated.

The value of risk taking for children's overall development

Children need to take different types of risks in order to develop and learn (Rinaldi, 2006; Sutterby, 2009). When toddlers learn to walk, they

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	2.1 – 2.3 and 3.1 – 3.7
OSHCQA Principles:	4.2, 4.3 and 5.1 – 5.4
QIAS Principles:	3.2, 3.3 and 4.1 – 4.6

take physical risks as they wobble, fall over and make an effort to get up again. The bruises they develop from these efforts are a sign of the risks they take in order to achieve this developmental milestone. Older children who invite a younger child to join in a game are taking a risk. The younger child may not have the physical, social or mental skills for the game which could disrupt the game or require revising the rules. The older children accept these possible risks as a part of peer socialisation.

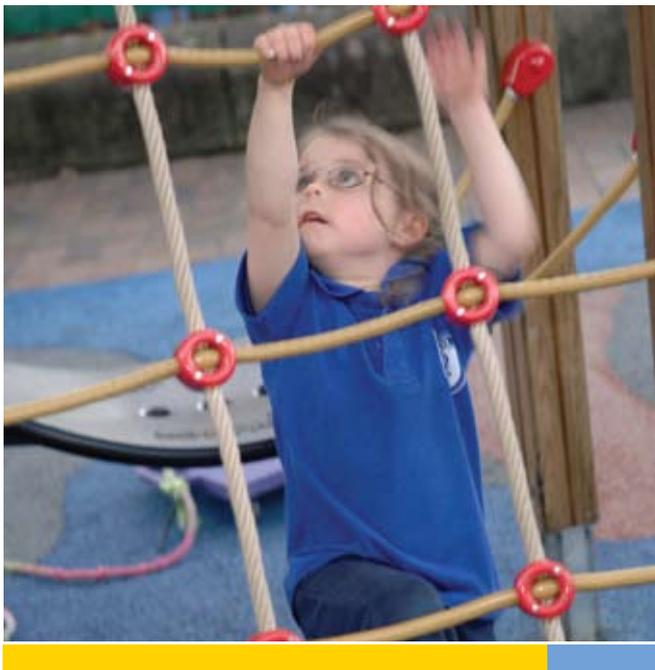
Different domains of development can be supported by providing children with opportunities to take reasonable or 'safe' risks.

Safe risk taking supports:

Cognitive development – children take risks as they use problem solving skills when exploring materials or ideas. This type of risk taking helps to build cognitive skills of persistence and creativity. Children also learn the importance of trial and error in learning when they are encouraged to take risks with their thinking and doing.

Social development – children build resilience and social competence from taking risks when working or playing with others. Give and take social experiences support children's learning about how to belong and contribute positively to a group.

Emotional development – children who are provided with opportunities to make decisions are learning about taking safe risks. Being able to make decisions from a range of choices is an important life skill that supports emotional wellbeing. Learning to take the risk of expressing an opinion in front of others is another example of supporting the development of emotional competence through risk taking.





Physical development – developmentally appropriate, physically challenging activities which involve safe risk taking help children to build and extend their strength, fitness levels, physical skills and coordination. Vigorous activities such as completing an obstacle course or running also help to reduce obesity.

Risk factors to consider

There are many factors for child care professionals to consider when they are thinking about managing risks. These include:

- Children's ages, stages of development and temperaments
- Gender – research indicates that boys are more likely to engage in risky behaviour, and that sterile environments increase this type of behaviour
- Additional needs – some children with particular disabilities or behavioural disorders may be less aware of risks and dangers, particularly in the outdoor environment and therefore may require closer adult supervision at all times (Kern & Wakeford, 2007)
- Family backgrounds – children may have experienced being over or under protected which means that they may respond differently to their environments and the experiences provided

- Environments including indoors, outdoors and excursion sites. Each environment has unique risk potentials which need consideration. For example, more adults might be necessary on excursions as children's behaviour can be different in new surroundings or when participating in new experiences.

Multi-age group settings have unique planning challenges to ensure each age groups' needs, strengths, interests and their right to challenging experiences are met. There is a danger in mixed age settings that a 'one size fits all' approach will be used, which will 'offer something for everyone, but not a lot for anyone' (Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2004, p. 54).

Safe and unsafe risks

Child care professionals have a duty of care to children which is enshrined in regulations and other mandated requirements. Supporting and extending children's capabilities and their learning about safe risk taking have to be balanced with protecting them from harm by using a common sense and professionally informed approach. All experiences have some level of risk attached to them.

A safe risk means that:

- The benefits from the experience far outweigh the risk of possible harm
- The consequences of the potential risk are likely to be minor or insignificant
- The adults think carefully about the risks, know the children well and have taken appropriate action to minimise the risks.

Considering the risk factors mentioned previously helps to highlight the differences between safe and unsafe risks in different contexts and for different children.

For example, children's level of physical development and previous experiences would influence decisions about the placement of outdoor equipment to ensure safe climbing and at the same time extend children's climbing skills. If a child in the group was not physically or emotionally ready for a particular climbing experience, the relative risk that is to be found in any climbing activity would shift to being a dangerous one. In this situation, staff would need to physically support the child as he or she climbs or provide an alternative climbing experience to meet the child's capacities.

Strategies to support children's risk taking

'We need to raise our level of listening, our dialogue and attention toward children, to observe them and to stay close to them, but not to scrutinise them, spy on them, impede them from maintaining their privacy, and above all not to inhibit their curiosity and joyous outlook on the world.' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.94).

While Rinaldi's comments were directed at parents, her ideas apply equally to child care professionals when they are planning strategies to support safe risk taking for children. Her ideas suggest that safe risk taking can be supported by:

- Thinking carefully about the environment from a child's perspective – is it interesting or sterile? Is there a diversity of options? Are there places where small groups of children can be private while still being supervised by adults? (Robinson & Radich, 2007).
- Using children's curiosity or questions as a starting place for planning and spontaneous learning. If experiences connect with children's expressed interests, they are more likely to be deeply engaged in their work or play, reducing the chance that they will engage in dangerous activities.
- Acting confidently about children's capacities in all areas of their development and learning. Anxious adults make for anxious children which increases the likelihood of accidents. Confidence in children's capacities can be shown in words of encouragement and the choices provided for them.

- Involving children in making decisions about what is an acceptable or safe risk by raising their consciousness of risks and the consequences of particular actions. Children's literature can be a good catalyst for discussions to raise children's consciousness about risk taking.

Conclusion

Children's lives are often tightly prescribed by adults through after school activities, playing in competitive sport teams and doing extra homework. Very few children walk or ride bikes to child care or school or are allowed to play freely in their local neighbourhoods (Sutterby, 2009). In these contexts, it is important that child care professionals provide children with opportunities to:

- Make choices and engage in problem solving and diverse creative experiences
- Participate every day in vigorous physical unstructured and planned activities
- Learn how to cope socially and emotionally as a member of a group.

These types of experiences are connected to children being and becoming active participants in their communities, as well as knowing how to regulate their own behaviours. They also support children's lifelong learning about safe risk taking ■

References and further reading

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