

Outdoor Risky Play in Preschools in Ireland: Practitioners Perspectives

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Context for Study

- ▶ Debate on balance between ensuring children's safety and allowing children freedom to engage in risky outdoor play.
- ▶ Growing interest in Forest Schools and growing availability of forest training
- ▶ Growing research evidence of benefits of outdoor play and risky play for children.
- ▶ Siolta and Aistear
 - ▶ Acknowledge need for young children to experience challenge
- ▶ Right from the Start
 - ▶ Outdoor environments and the opportunities for risk taking

Defining Risky Play

- ▶ Risky play - defined in context of outdoor environments
- ▶ “Risky play can generally be defined as thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve risk of physical injury”. (Sandseter 2007, p.248).
- ▶ Sandseter categorises risky play to include
 - ▶ a) play with great heights,
 - ▶ b) play with high speed,
 - ▶ c) play with dangerous tools,
 - ▶ d) play with dangerous elements,
 - ▶ e) rough and tumble play,
 - ▶ f) play where children can disappear and get lost”. (Sandseter 2009, p.441).

Methods

- ▶ Qualitative in depth semi structured interviews conducted in 2014
- ▶ Nine practitioners from Dublin and Meath
- ▶ At least two years practice experience
- ▶ Aims
 - ▶ Examine practitioners conceptualisations of risky play,
 - ▶ Outline practitioners experiences of the incorporation of risky play in a variety of early childhood settings,
 - ▶ Examine of practitioner perspectives on the benefits and challenges of implementing risky play outdoors in early childhood care and education settings.

Findings

- ▶ Outdoor risky play is a new concept for Irish practitioners.
 - ▶ Most participants gave no comprehensive definition of risky play.
 - ▶ Generally referred to the regular type of play and play equipment available to most children at home or in playgrounds, e.g. swings, slides, football, climbing frames.
- ▶ Small number had incorporated risky play in service
- ▶ Steps to inclusion of risky play included education in following areas:
 - ▶ (a) safety regulations as defined by HSE and other statutory bodies,
 - ▶ (b) benefits to children as reported in studies from abroad,
 - ▶ (c) cost of implementation and funding available
 - ▶ (d) planning permission requirements,
 - ▶ (d) best methods for including and bringing parents on board,
 - ▶ (e) training of staff.

Findings: Planning and curriculum

- ▶ Staff have important role in planning, incorporating, and supporting the provision of outdoor risky play.
- ▶ Most practitioners were eager to embrace risky play outdoors
- ▶ Positive attitudes on outdoor risky play,
 - ▶ Saw outdoors as part of the job,
 - ▶ Recognised importance of outdoors for children's development in relation to challenging themselves
 - ▶ Derived enjoyment from being outdoors themselves
- ▶ Risky outdoor play lay in the realm of an impromptu activity rather than a planned and prepared portion of the daily routine
- ▶ Dependent on individual staff attitudes and preferences.
- ▶ Dependent on staff personal interest and drive

Findings: Benefits

- ▶ Developing social skills
 - ▶ *“Also I think their socializing much better.” (P.9)*
- ▶ Having freedom
 - ▶ *“I think it’s a freedom feeling, there’s more relaxed atmosphere. Freedom and the air...” (P.7)*
- ▶ Engaging with the natural world
- ▶ Testing boundaries
 - ▶ *“It’s testing their boundaries, there able to experience challenge.” (P.5)*
 - ▶ *“So it makes children more aware of their limits.”(P.9)*

Findings: Barriers

- ▶ Practitioners ‘playing it safe’ or reducing the experiences of risky play for fear of litigation.
 - ▶ Reported recent litigation cases in which they had been involved,
 - ▶ Expressed a genuine fear of litigation.
- ▶ *“I have been involved in litigation from outdoor play and it’s incredibly hard, that’s the one thing that worries me.” (P.4)*
- ▶ *“I would have a fear of being sued because you know.” (P.7)*
- ▶ *“I think there’s a fear around children getting hurt and being sued too.” (P.3)*

Findings: Barriers

- ▶ Tension existed between practitioner's pedagogical beliefs and compliance with H.S.E. requirements.
- ▶ More qualified practitioners expressed confidence in being able to back up the benefits of outdoor play to the HSE if challenged by them.
 - ▶ *"I would have been as guilty as anyone of out of pure fear,, and the HSE coming and saying you can't use this, so you want everything sterile, everything clean, everything neat tidy.. but I would definitely challenge them now."* (P.2)
- ▶ Parent's lack of co-operation in dressing children appropriately was another concern expressed by a few practitioners.
 - ▶ *"A dress of 300 euro!!! Absolutely scandalous. Yea, the clothes is a definitely a barrier. Yep, yep."* (P.4)
 - ▶ *"but they mightn't send in hats or gloves, on a particularly snowy day"* (P.8)

Conclusion

- ▶ More awareness of risky play needed
- ▶ Training that would support practitioners in incorporating risky play is critical. The development of programs that include strategies for managing risky play is important.
- ▶ Wider study on this issue - to be carried out in 2015

Bibliography

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