

Mothers' beliefs about risk and risk-taking in children's outdoor play.

Helen Little

Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Changes to social and environmental contexts impact on children's opportunities for and the nature of outdoor play in many ways. A number of studies over the past decade have noted a trend towards over-protective parenting practices that restrict children's activities and limit children's independent mobility and engagement with their neighbourhoods. Through semi-structured interviews with mothers of four-year-old to five-year-old children, this study examined beliefs about children's outdoor play opportunities and exposure to and management of potential risks in outdoor environments. Whilst the mothers overwhelmingly acknowledged the benefits of risky outdoor play, tension existed between their desire to provide opportunities for their children to safely engage in such play, and overcoming their own fears and concerns about their children's safety. The study has implications for examining ways in which children gain access to outdoor play and the role that Early Childhood settings may have in providing access to outdoor play environments that compensate for children's decreased opportunities in other areas of their lives.

Keywords: Australia, child development, early childhood, outdoor environments, parenting.

Introduction

Within both academic literature and the media, the past 10 years has seen an increased discussion of changes to children's environments and activities as a consequence of changing social and environmental contexts particularly in the developed, western world. There is no doubt that children today are growing up in a world that is very different to that of their parents and grandparents. Yet the same can also be said of previous generations. It is how these changes are responded to that ultimately impacts on how children experience their world and live their childhoods.

A number of studies over the past decade have documented the impact on children's independent mobility and engagement with their neighbourhoods (see for example, Gaster, 1991; Kinoshita, 2009; MacDougall, Schiller & Derbyshire, 2009; Tranter & Pawson, 2001). Others have noted a trend towards over-protective parenting practices that restrict children's activities (Carver, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch, Bagley, Ball, & Salmon, 2006). In addition, concerns for the high rates of unintentional injury associated with childhood

activities such as playground equipment usage, have led to an increased interest in identifying ways in which the risks associated with such activities might be minimized (see for example, Morrongiello, Corbett, & Brison, 2009; Schwebel & Barton, 2005; Sherker, Ozanne-Smith, Rechnitzer, & Grzebieta, 2005). On the other hand, whilst inappropriately designed and poorly maintained play equipment represents a genuine hazard for children, a growing risk aversion within society has seen many childhood activities curtailed with an emphasis on providing safe environments for children where all risks are removed (Gill, 2007). This concern about the risks associated with outdoor play and the risk-taking behaviour of children is situated within a wider 'culture of fear' which has seen children's independent mobility and opportunities for outdoor physical play greatly reduced (Carver, et al., 2008; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch, et al., 2006; Weir, Etelson, & Brand, 2006) and children's play become more structured and under greater adult control. Consequently, children today are often referred to as the 'bubblewrap' generation (Malone, 2007).

In recent years, however, researchers, educators and health practitioners have begun to express concerns that the restriction of free play activities and independent mobility, and risk reduction strategies in playground management paradoxically contribute to the risk of adverse developmental and health outcomes. Consequently, research has begun to explore factors that may have contributed to the growing risk aversion (Gill, 2007) that seems to be impacting on children's play and freedom to explore their environment.

Defining risk and risk-taking

At the centre of the risk dialogue are issues related to the way in which risk is defined. The term risk often has negative connotations. Definitions of risk often emphasise loss or adverse outcomes (Aven & Renn, 2009). Within the developmental psychology literature, risk-taking is usually defined as the engagement in behaviours that are associated with some probability of negative outcomes (Boyer, 2006). The problem with the focus on the negative outcomes of risk in these definitions is that they fail to acknowledge that risk-taking actually encompasses "an endless spectrum of behaviours and activities" (Madge & Barker, 2007, p. 8) which are socially constructed varying from one context to another and both within and across cultures. So risk is perhaps better defined as situations in which the outcome is uncertain (Aven & Renn, 2009).

Risk has a personalised and subjective significance, and individuals respond to risk situations based on their appraisal of the situation, their affective response, and their perceived controllability (Nikiforidou, Pange, & Chadjipadelis, 2012). Consequently, risk-taking involves making choices about alternate courses of action where there is some uncertainty about the outcome.

In making decisions in such situations we weigh up the benefits against the possible undesirable consequences as well as considering the probability of success or failure based on our own personal experiences and characteristics. Hence, the outcomes may be positive or negative and the likelihood of us being prepared to take the risk is dependent in part on the degree to which the positive outcomes outweigh the negative and our perception of the risks involved.

Furthermore, there is frequent confusion about the terms risk and hazard, with these terms often being used interchangeably (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). As I have just argued, the term risk encompasses situations where the outcome is uncertain regardless of whether that outcome is predominately positive or negative whereas the term hazard refers to situations in which there is an identifiable source of harm that carries with it a high probability of serious injury or death (Little & Eager, 2010).

Children's independent mobility

Parental concern for the risks children may encounter in their environment potentially impact on children's activities, and particularly their independent mobility. Independent mobility refers to children having the freedom to explore and move about within their neighbourhood or community without adult supervision (Romero, 2010; Zubrick, Wood, Villanueva, Wood, Giles-Corti & Christian, 2010). This practice supports children's healthy development, satisfies their curiosity, and allows them to appraise risks in their environment and practice safety strategies. Experiences such as these allow children to independently make decisions that gradually prepare them for adult responsibility (Romero, 2010). Despite the benefits to be gained from this independence, a number of studies documenting the experiences of children from Australia, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the UK, have identified a common trend towards reduced opportunities for children's independent exploration of their neighbourhoods (see for example, Gaster, 1991; Kinoshita, 2009; MacDougall, Schiller & Derbyshire, 2009; Tranter & Pawson, 2001). Highlighting the changes to children's independent mobility over time, the intergenerational studies conducted by Gaster (1991) and Kinoshita (2009) illustrate changes to children's play spaces. These studies provide evidence that whilst all the generations studied experienced greater independent mobility with increasing age, all age groups experienced greater restrictions on their independent roaming than previous generations as a consequence of both changes to the physical environment and greater adult intervention. Madge and Barker (2007) point out that on the one hand children are deemed to have greater autonomy, being seen as having the right to be involved in decisions that affect them and to make a difference in their own lives. But on the other hand their autonomy is constrained as children become 'a group that is highly protected from all kinds of dangers and excluded from

many public places' (Madge & Barker, 2007, p. 12), with parental concerns for children's safety being identified as a major contributing factor for children's decreased independent mobility. Even when children are seemingly allowed to independently access their local neighbourhoods, they are still subject to parental control with children's movements being monitored through the use of mobile phones (Fotel & Thomsen, 2004).

Parental concerns

Lester and Russell (2008) believe that whilst parents remember their positive experiences of playing outdoors and recognise the benefits of positive risk-taking in this context, their desire to protect their children means that increasingly parents restrict children's unsupervised play and limit access to particular activities. Similarly, Kelley, Hood, and Mayall (1998) found that parents of 3-year-old to 12-year-old children believed that encouraging their children to take appropriate risks was important for them to become competent adults but at the same time they needed to protect them from risk. In their study of how parents and 12-year-old to 13-year-old children negotiate risk in everyday situations, Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004) found that parents varied in their risk assessment and hence their decision making in risk situations. In turn, this influenced the degree to which they allowed children to exercise agency or conversely restricted their children's freedom. As a consequence of parental fears for their children's safety, today children are more likely to be driven to school, friends' houses and so on, and their time is more structured and adult controlled, with opportunities for free play more likely to be restricted to the home environment (Soori & Bhopal, 2002; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch, et al., 2006; Weir, et al., 2006).

The studies reviewed above identify recurrent themes in the sources of parental fears with 'stranger danger' figuring very strongly in their concerns, followed by hazards related to increased traffic and exposure to bullying and other anti-social behaviour from older children (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch, et al., 2006; Weir, et al., 2006). While each of these may be valid reasons for holding concerns for their child's safety, the extent to which these factors represent real or perceived risks is a matter of debate. However, whether parental fears are justified and rational or not, they nonetheless exist in the minds of parents and consequently impact the experiences they provide and the freedom they allow their children.

It is clear from these studies, that environmental changes and restrictions placed on children's activities as a consequence of parental concerns have changed the nature of children's outdoor play with children more likely to be involved in structured, adult-controlled activities rather than independent free play. Furthermore, spaces for play are likely to be confined to children's homes or other locations that can be readily supervised by adults. Previous studies have mainly

examined these issues in relation to school-aged children. The present study focused on the views of parents of four-year-old and five-year-old children as the preschool years represent a period of rapid development during which children learn many of the skills necessary to support their increasing autonomy and independence as they enter into formal schooling. It is important to gain an understanding of how parents support young children's awareness of risk and encourage their children to challenge themselves whilst avoiding excessive risk-taking, at the same time protecting them from hazards in the environment. To further explore how adults view risk in relation to children's activities and independent play, the present qualitative study aimed to examine parental perspectives on factors related to risk and children's risk-taking behaviour specifically in the context of outdoor physical play.

Method

Participants

Parents of children aged four to five years attending six early childhood centres in Sydney were recruited as part of a larger study of outdoor play and risk-taking. All parents with children meeting the age criteria were invited to participate in the study and only those returning a signed consent were included (approximately 45% of eligible families). The Early childhood centres from which the families were recruited were strategically selected to draw participants from areas with different housing density, and socioeconomic status. Based on community level statistics from the Socio-economic Indexes for Area (SEIFA) data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), ranking of centres were as follows: C1 and C2 (decile 10); C3 (decile 8); C4 (decile 4); C5 and C6 (decile 9), with higher rankings indicating higher levels of socioeconomic advantage. Two centres (C5 & C6) were located in inner city suburbs characterised by high density housing. Three centres (C1, C2 & C4) were located in suburbs approximately 20km north-west or south-west of the Sydney CBD and were characterised by medium density housing. The sixth centre (C3) was located in the outer western region of Sydney and attracted families from a wide area that included both medium density urban areas as well as semi-rural areas. The study involved 26 mothers of children aged four to five years ($M = 55$ months; 19 boys, 7 girls). Mothers were mainly from Anglo-Australian backgrounds (73%), with post-secondary school qualifications. Refer to Table 1 for further demographic details of children and mothers.

Data Collection

Mothers' beliefs about factors influencing risk-taking in play were explored through semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were developed based on the extant literature and explored mothers' beliefs concerning the benefits of children's outdoor play, their definition of risk and risk-taking and personal attitudes to risk-taking, safety and injury, factors that may influence children's opportunities for outdoor play, as well as their own childhood experiences of outdoor play and risk-taking. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Table 1: Child and parent demographic information.

Child age (months)	
Range	48 – 64
Mean	55.0
SD	5.46
Child gender	N (%)
Male	20 (74.1)
Female	7 (29.9)
Child birth order	
1	20 (74.1)
2	5 (18.5)
3	1 (3.7)
4	1 (3.7)
Number of siblings	
0	5 (18.5)
1	15 (55.6)
2	6 (22.2)
3	1 (3.7)
Mothers' age range (years)	
26-30	4 (15.4)
31-35	9 (34.6)
36-40	10(38.5)
41-45	2 (7.7)
46-50	1 (3.8)
Mothers' educational level	
Secondary school	3 (11.5)
TAFE ¹	6 (23.1)
University	17 (65.4)
Mothers' country of birth	
Australia	19 (73.1)
Other English speaking country	4 (15.4)
Non-English speaking country	3 (11.5)

NB: One mother had two children in study

¹TAFE – Technical and Further Education

Findings

The findings are presented in relation to the key questions asked in the interviews. Qualitative analysis using constant comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was employed to identify themes emerging from the responses. NVivo8 software (QSR International) was used to facilitate analysis of the interview responses. The codes used throughout the findings section identify the contribution of particular parents (P) from each of the centres (C1-C6). Mothers' beliefs about the value of outdoor play and attitudes towards risk-taking in play revealed that a tension exists between their desires to provide their children with opportunities for challenging outdoor play in a variety of environments and their need to keep their children safe. Opportunities for challenging play that involve risk-taking and potential exposure to other risks related to children's independent mobility emerged as two separate factors thus creating issues for these mothers in finding the balance between fostering their children's emerging autonomy and agency on the one hand, and protecting them from perceived risks in the environment, on the other. Issues related to each of these are illustrated through the following themes emerging from the interviews.

Importance of outdoor play

All the mothers placed great value on outdoor play and indicated that their children had opportunities for outdoor play on a daily basis. The mothers acknowledged that children experience many benefits from playing outdoors and emphasised the significance of outdoor play for fostering their child's health and development. Many of the mothers focused on the role of outdoor play in supporting motor development, general physical activity and fitness. Engagement with nature and learning about the natural environment was another significant aspect of outdoor play:

I think for physical co-ordination and strength as well as mental; I think it embraces both in terms of their play and their development (P38C6).

Being able to have the amount of space to run around in and to experience the earth and being out in the earth is really important (P31C4).

Other mothers had a more holistic view and considered that outdoor play contributed to all aspects of their child's development - physical, cognitive, and social. In particular, outdoor play was identified by some mothers as being crucial for their child's emotional development.

They need the fresh air and it's good to learn their skills for climbing and maybe trying to play with other children too (P18C3).

It's how he copes. If he's cranky he'll sit in the tree...he'll swing around. He doesn't function if he's not climbing or playing outside (P16C3).

Beliefs about risk and risk-taking in play

As with outdoor play in general, the mothers acknowledged that being able to take risks during play was beneficial for many aspects of their children's development and learning. In response to this question, a number of themes emerged.

Initially the mothers explained what they meant by risk and risk-taking. Overall, the majority (n = 21) of mothers spoke about risk and risk-taking in positive terms and emphasized the learning potential of opportunities for risk-taking in play. Of these 21 mothers, eight mothers acknowledged that risk-taking could also have negative outcomes. Only five mothers spoke about risk-taking solely in negative terms.

Some people think risk taking has to do with something where they're going to hurt themselves or it's going to be that behaviour where there's going to be a serious risk. To me that's not what risk taking is about – it's about them challenging themselves to get an outcome from what they've challenged themselves in (P36C4).

Risk taking to me would be embarking on something without any thought of the safety ... whether they're going to hurt themselves or ... without thinking of their safety, without thinking whether they've got the skills to do it – things like that (P29C3).

In particular, the mothers believed that taking risks in the context of outdoor play was important for skill development across a range of areas and was a foundation for life and understanding themselves and their capabilities.

It's their way of reaching the next level in an activity. Unless they actually try something that takes them beyond what they're used to then they can't progress (P4C1).

I think nearly every aspect of learning involves risk. Not necessarily physical risk but social risk or emotional risk. Like learning to speak, learning new words, making new friends, all of that, there's potential for you to get hurt in some way (P19C3).

The mothers often spoke of how risk-taking in play contributed to their child's psychological wellbeing and social and emotional development. In particular, they believed it was important for building confidence and self-esteem and for fostering resilience.

They're learning how to deal with their own anxieties. So one of the things they learn is how they personally deal with situations they're uncomfortable with and how they need to manage any fear or anxiety they may have (P12C2).

I've been aware of wanting the kids to take risks for their resilience. That's something you need to teach your children. Right from the very beginning, I've always said to

him if he's failed at something, 'that's alright, just try again', and not making a big deal about it, you know, that failure's really normal and you just get up and try again (P19C3).

Risky play was identified by the mothers as a context in which children learn how to appraise risk and how to manage it. This involved learning about their own capabilities, being able to 'read' and understand their own emotional and physical responses to risky situations, and learn from the consequences of their behaviour.

They learn about assessing levels of fear, they learn about fear and anxiety. I think it's good to learn about because they learn how to keep themselves safe...so they learn this doesn't feel right (P32C4).

Sometimes if they do something and it's not really a good thing to do and they hurt themselves, then they never go near that again. I know it's a terrible lesson to learn but sometimes it's the only way (P38C6).

Within this context the mothers also spoke about their role in fostering their children's ability to appraise and manage risks for themselves by discussing the situation with their child and helping them to make the connections between their behaviour and the potential outcomes and to understand what they may need to do to in the future and developing strategies for coping with risky situations. But the mothers also felt that at this age, the responsibility for making risk decisions could not be left to the child:

They've got to be able to look and determine what are the issues, what are the hazards, and what risks they're willing to take, and that's where if you've given your child the opportunity to discuss things, look at risks and objectively make decisions, at this moment of course with parental assistance, then they'll be able to handle those situations much better than a child that doesn't have that. Risk-taking is all about that we have to let children use trial and error to learn from their mistakes. And it's all about them discussing what they've learnt...it's the follow up that you give them, 'what did you learn from that', whether it's positive or negative (P36C4).

The mothers believed that risk and their tolerance of the children's risk-taking was also contextual. Their approaches to risk management and the degree to which they reported they would intervene were dependent on their assessment of whether the potential benefits outweighed any

negative consequences and a consideration of environmental hazards that might increase the level of injury risk.

If there's a purpose to the activity then you weigh that up and if the purpose is more valuable than the potential risk then you go ahead with it (P12C2).

There's a possibility that he might fall down the fireman's pole but he's not really going to hurt himself but I wouldn't like to see it done in an environment where he could really get hurt like walking along a tall brick wall balancing when there's only concrete on either side. Whereas I know some children would be keen to do that and it sort of makes it more fun if it's even riskier but I wouldn't be comfortable with seeing him do that (P15C2).

Finally, some mothers raised concerns about the lack of opportunities children had to explore risky play, believing local playgrounds often offered little appeal for their children as safety concerns had removed all the challenge and interest from these play areas. They also raised concerns about the likely long term impact on children's development if they were not provided opportunities for risk-taking in play.

I worry about kids these days that aren't allowed to take risks because it must affect them so much in their ability to do new things in life because they don't know what they're capable of. I just think we're going to see less and less physically capable people in this generation as a result (P31C4).

Mothers' childhood experiences versus children's experiences

The value the mothers placed on outdoor play and their beliefs about the benefits of risk-taking in play were strongly influenced by their own childhood experiences. The mothers' recollections of their childhood play experiences were similar and all spoke about spending most of their time outdoors engaging in a wide variety of activities from a young age. Their play was characterised by spontaneity, a connection to their neighbourhood and other children, and freedom to explore their environment. Whilst many of the examples provided by the mothers reflected their early school-aged experiences, they also spoke of their experiences at the same age as their children currently were.

Play environments identified by the mothers from their own childhoods were many and varied both in terms of locations and the activities they engaged in. Many recalled exploring their neighbourhood and the natural environment and engaging in activities such as bike riding, bushwalking, and climbing trees.

I actually lived in this house as a child and there were quite a few kids in the street and we enjoyed going into the bush, making cubby houses, exploration and things like that (P4C1).

I lived in a cul-de-sac so it was pretty safe to ride on the road. All the neighbours' kids were out there doing it too so everyone was aware, car-wise. (P27C3).

Although there were individual differences in the level of adult supervision provided and hence opportunities for independent mobility, overall the mothers reported they experienced limited adult supervision from quite young ages. They all reported that they played unsupervised in their own yards from very young ages and opportunities for independent mobility and exploration increased with age.

I had a couple of friends who lived nearby and I can remember walking to their house by myself but mum was quite cautious perhaps even more so than was necessarily the norm then...I can remember going to the shops by myself for the first time – I would have been about eight or nine. It was only a short walk. (P15C3).

I went to a friend's house next door but we never went further than that and I would say from the age of 4 or 5 (P37C5).

By comparison, their own children experience fairly restricted environments and play is always supervised by adults. Despite acknowledging that the neighbourhood in which they live is reasonably safe, many of the parents indicated that they would not allow their child to experience the same freedom they themselves had:

I do love that we're in a cul-de-sac here and there are often young families outside playing street cricket or riding bikes...and I feel comfortable with them doing that [but] I think I'd like to be fairly close by though (P12C2).

I can remember going across the road playing in the bush when I was 5...but I don't let my kids out of the yard. I don't let them go. They're in the security of my yard and if they go out, if they go for a bike ride, I go with them. No, they don't go anywhere by themselves (P13C2).

In addition, although the children in this study were only aged 4-5 years and consequently still needed to be fairly closely supervised, their mothers did not believe they would allow their children the same freedom they experienced even when they are older. Whilst they acknowledged it was

difficult to predict what they might do in the future, at this stage these parents could not see themselves allowing their child to venture too far from home without some level of supervision.

I'll be more nervous and there's no real reason to be because things happened then as they do now but... we're lucky we live in a very quiet street and he has a friend who lives two doors down so I think when he's six he'll be able to walk down there without me being with him so to that extent he'll have a bit of freedom but I wouldn't let him go further than the neighbours in the same road by himself (P11C2).

Probably it would be upper primary [before he could play at park across the road by himself] and then I would probably be sitting on the verandah [watching] anyway (P16C3).

Factors influencing children's opportunities for outdoor play

In reflecting on their own childhood experiences in comparison to their child's, the mothers identified a number of issues that to explain the differences. When asked why they felt their own children would not experience the same freedom and opportunities for outdoor play and exploration of their neighbourhood as themselves, the mothers identified a number of social and environmental factors that caused them concern. These factors focused on both identifiable hazards in the environment as well as the parents' own subjective views on potential risks to their children's safety.

Traffic hazards were a major concern regardless of where the families lived. There were few differences between the comments made by those that lived on busy roads and those that lived in quiet streets or cul-de-sacs:

A lot of older kids play on our street...cricket and baseball...and J wants to go out and play with those boys...but it's just too dangerous...the cars (P19C3).

But increased traffic was not the only issue. Some felt that safety strategies that had been introduced (e.g. 40km/hour zones around schools), and lack of experience and education led to complacency, both on the part of drivers and children.

There's a lot more cars on the road, a lot more drivers that don't watch...silly drivers. But we've also got children that think it's OK to walk off the side of the road because there's a 40 [km per hour] zone (P36C4).

Specific physical characteristics of the areas or properties where the families lived also presented hazards that impacted on children's opportunities for outdoor play and exploration, including unsupervised play within the relative safety of their own yards:

We have a steep driveway, so that always worries me (P17C3).

I live in a very hilly area so I wouldn't feel safe [about] him walking around the place on his own (P20C3).

Interestingly, two of the parents actually lived in the same house that they themselves had grown up in. Whilst both these parents reported that they experienced a great deal of freedom and independence in their play, and that their play in this environment was unsupervised, they considered the same environment as containing hazards that prevented their own child from playing unsupervised. Neither parent discussed ways in which they helped their child to develop an awareness of these hazards or develop strategies for avoiding the dangers associated with them.

We have a very sloping, rocky yard (P4C1).

Outside I'm always with them because of the way our block is. One of the boundaries is actually a creek which the majority of time is dry but still it means we can't actually fence that side and so I would never leave them outside on their own (P12C2).

Other safety concerns raised by the mothers related to hazards present in areas specifically designed for children such as local park playgrounds. There were concerns that local authorities did not adequately maintain the play spaces or that that equipment did not meet appropriate safety standards. Whilst some of these hazards represented potential sources of moderate to severe injury risk (e.g. glass, syringes), others (bark impact absorption material) represented less of an injury risk, and indeed are associated with injury prevention strategies.

It depends on what park you're at and how they're actually set up and if they're monitored...there's the issue with needles, glass, all those sorts of aspects to take into account. And even the equipment...sometimes you've got rusted equipment or it's not padded properly (P21C3).

The bark... falling on the bark... Broken glass. We don't take her down there [to the park at the end of their road] because there's always broken glass (P22C3).

Apart from safety concerns associated with physical characteristics of the environment, social issues were also a source of concern. 'Stranger danger' and the fear of their child being abducted or harmed was identified as the main source of the mothers' concern for their children's safety and the determining factor in restricting their independent mobility. Although some parents acknowledged that statistically it was very unlikely that their child would be abducted/abused by a stranger this knowledge did little to allay their fears. The media was identified as having a

significant influence on contributing to these mothers' fears. Their concern for their children's safety was not only in terms of the children's current age (4-5 years); rather this concern would be on going even when children were older. This suggests that despite the focus on raising children's awareness of 'stranger danger' through media and school education programs, these parents felt this was still a significant issue:

I would not let my kids go to the park. Not even if they were 8 and 10. I wouldn't let them go even though we have a park almost directly across [the road] from us. I'm concerned about dangerous men really ...it's the stranger danger thing. Even though I feel it's quite unlikely because I firmly believe that most abuse occurs in the home...it's that fear of them being alone in a situation where someone might harm them (P31C4).

I think in this day and age we have become like that because it's in the press. It just seems to be everywhere nowadays that there is [sic] issues that you have to worry about (P36C4).

This wariness about other people's intentions went beyond the 'stranger danger' issue and revealed that there was perhaps a more general lack of connectedness with their community. This lack of connectedness and feelings of mistrust appeared to also influence how some mothers felt about other peoples' ability to adequately supervise their child:

I occasionally let him out the front without me, but knowing there's another adult out there but I still prefer it to be me or my husband because I think we supervise a bit better than the neighbours (P27C3).

Finally, there was a belief amongst some mothers that their parenting skills could be called into question. They felt their decision-making could be scrutinised by others, consequently some mothers placed greater restrictions on their children than they might otherwise:

I feel judged because I know how good he can climb, and friends are now okay that he's climbing the top of their tree because they can see what he does. But if we're in a playground and he's on top of those monkey bars, every other mother is staring at me – like I'm being bad. And I'm often not with him; I'm with my eldest child so people are even more staring at you thinking 'you've left this tiny little kid'. But I know what he can do (P16C3).

Discussion

The belief that a willingness to take risks is an essential part of human learning and development was strongly expressed by the mothers in this study. The mothers in the present study were very aware that risk behaviours could have both positive and negative outcomes and were supportive of those behaviours that they believed contributed to their children's development and learning and were prepared to accept minor injuries as an inevitable part of this learning process. However, they also ensured the safety of their children in high risk situations, thus inappropriate behaviours or activities that were well beyond their child's capabilities were viewed as unacceptable risks that warranted intervention. These beliefs reflect the definitions of risk discussed earlier that propose risk-taking encompasses 'an endless spectrum of behaviours' (Madge & Barker, 2007, p. 8) that can result in either positive or negative outcomes. These beliefs about the benefits of risk-taking in play and the encouragement and guidance that these mothers reported that they provided for their children do not lend support to many of the risk discourses that propose parents are overly-protective and risk averse. The views of these mothers, however, need to be interpreted cautiously as they may not necessarily be representative of wider parental viewpoints and practices due to the majority of these mothers being well-educated (65% with university degree).

Despite their acknowledgement of the importance of exploring risk through play, the mothers in the present study also identified environmental and social factors that placed constraints on their ability to actually allow their children the freedom to experience managed risks. Given the age of the children (4-5 years), it is understandable that these mothers would still want to maintain a high level of supervision over their child, especially when not in the immediate proximity of their home. Whilst these mothers cannot predict with certainty how they will respond in the future, it is nevertheless a concern that they currently express reluctance towards allowing their children greater freedom with increasing age, with many indicating that they would be uncomfortable with their children independently accessing the places within their neighbourhood (e.g. friends' houses, playgrounds, shops). These views support those found in previous studies (e.g. Soori & Bhopal, 2002; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch, et al., 2006; Weir, et al., 2006).

The key issue from the present study, however, is the apparent mismatch between the mothers' acceptance of their child's risk-taking during play as an important and necessary part of development, compared to their apparent over emphasis on the risks associated with potential hazards in the environment. The mothers' expressed need to constantly supervise their child when away from the immediate home environment meant that the children had limited opportunity to make decisions for themselves in risk situations. Adults are better able to anticipate potential risks

and hence they often prevent children's exposure to risk or do not allow their child adequate time to assess the situation for themselves before intervening. In doing so, adults can deny children the opportunity to explore their capabilities for themselves, and to succeed or fail on their own (Lester & Russell, 2008).

The experiences of the parents and their children and the types of play activities and places for play were markedly different. To explain these differences, the parents in this study identified a number of hazards within the environment that were cause of concern and influenced their decisions regarding the degree of independence their children experience (or will experience in the future). While some (e.g. increased traffic) were not experienced by the parents themselves as children, others (e.g. proximity of bush land, creeks, sloping/ rocky yards) were environments that parents themselves had experienced and consequently negotiated the risks involved. Despite acknowledging the importance of children learning to recognize and manage such hazards, it appears these parents would not allow their children the same opportunities to do so. This represents a contradiction in relation to parent beliefs about supporting their children in learning to appraise and manage risk whilst still under their watchful eyes, and actually being able to independently put these skills into practice. Parents play a vital role in socializing their children and supporting their acquisition of risk appraisal skills by providing experiences, establishing guidelines and limitations that gradually allow children to independently manage risk and avoid dangers. Hyson and Bolin (1990) argue that parents' decisions about when and how they allow their children to play unsupervised are influenced by two factors: parents' knowledge of their child and child's capabilities in a variety of situations; and their more general knowledge or perception of the risks children may face. When parents have distorted or inaccurate knowledge, then they may unnecessarily restrict their child's independent exploration and play. A number of studies indicate that children want to be trusted with appraising risks and making risk decisions for themselves, and when provided with the opportunity demonstrate that they can indeed do so (Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008; Green, 1997; Valentine, 1997).

Real versus perceived risks

To understand the tension experienced by these parents in wanting their children to learn about risk and risk management on the one hand, and protecting them from danger on the other, there needs to be a consideration of real versus perceived risks and the exaggeration of the significance of some risks encountered in children's lives. As with previous studies (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Veitch, et al., 2006; Weir, et al., 2006), these mothers identified traffic and 'stranger danger' as the two main factors that led to the restrictions placed on their children's independent mobility.

Although many of the mothers conceded that the likelihood of their child being abducted was very low, they nevertheless were unable to move beyond this fear or suggest ways in which they could allow their child greater freedom and independence. It appears that the issue here relates to the point raised earlier that an individual's response to risk situations based on their affective response and their perceived controllability (Nikiforidou, et al., 2012). In the case of stranger danger, providing a high level of supervision of their children and restrictions on independent mobility is their way of controlling an otherwise uncontrollable situation.

Bundy, Tranter, Naughton, Wyver, and Luckett (2009) argue that parents' protective behaviours in response to traffic hazards and 'stranger danger' include driving children to destinations rather than allowing children to use independent forms of transport (walking, cycling, public transport). Responses such as these may inadvertently make the situation worse. Firstly, by driving children to their destinations, parents contribute to increased traffic especially around schools. And secondly, with greater reliance on private transport there are fewer people around in the neighbourhood to provide passive supervision of children and protect children from 'stranger danger' (Bundy et al., 2009). Furthermore, the mothers' responses in this study suggested that there was perhaps a general lack of connectedness within the community. Tranter and Pawson (2001) found that in Germany there was a greater sense of collective responsibility for children compared to Australia and New Zealand where people were more likely to adopt an attitude of not interfering in other peoples' business. It is perhaps this issue that needs to be addressed in providing environments where children can safely experience independent mobility and consequently the opportunities for autonomous decision making. Whilst on the one hand there may be reluctance for other people to be involved in looking out for other people's children, the parents in this study felt that their parenting was also under scrutiny from others in the community. Valentine (1997) similarly noted that many parents felt they needed to treat their children as less competent than they actually believed them to be in order to meet with the expectations for appropriate behaviour held by other parents. For example, picking children up from school even though they believed their child was quite capable of walking home independently.

The way ahead

The subjective nature and complexity of factors leading to parents adopting an overprotective approach to their children's access to outdoor play environments make it difficult to suggest solutions and make practical recommendations. Potential solutions involve finding ways of promoting behaviours that simultaneously improve safety and promote child independence (Brussoni & Olsen, 2012). It is clear from this study and other studies reviewed that a tension exists

between parents' desire to support children's growing independence and agency on the one hand, and dealing with their own fears and concerns for their children's safety. Strategies that seek to reduce/eliminate the source of parental fears are one way of approaching this. One such approach that has emerged in recent years is the increased support for strategies aimed at making urban areas more child-friendly (see for example Karsten & van Vliet, 2006). Other approaches may involve utilising other community resources and environments that many children have access to. For example, early childhood centres and schools potentially have a role in providing access to outdoor play environments that compensate for children's decreased opportunities in other areas of their lives. This can be achieved both within the safe confines of the centres/schools themselves and through excursions. In particular, excursions can have an important role in connecting children with their communities (Wyver, et al., 2012).

Conclusion

A return to how it was in parents' day is neither possible nor appropriate. The aim should be to construct childhood for the present generation in a way that allows children to experience autonomy and explore risk in safe environments where hazards are reduced or eliminated but opportunities for self-chosen risk remain thus allowing them to gain the skills necessary to become competent adults. To achieve this, we cannot keep complaining about children not having these experiences without providing a workable solution. This is not something that is only the responsibility of individual parents or indeed something that can be managed by individuals but rather it requires change at a community and societal level in providing safe spaces for play where children can exercise their agency and learn to manage risks for themselves.

Author biography

Helen Little is a lecturer in child development at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Australia. She is a trained early childhood teacher and previously taught in preschools and primary schools in Sydney. Her main research interest focuses on individual, social and environmental factors influencing children's engagement in risk-taking behaviour in outdoor play. Her current focus relates to how the physical features available in the outdoor environment and pedagogical practices relating to outdoor play provision in early childhood settings impact on children's experiences of risk-taking in play.

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