

Risky Play Among Four and Five Year-old Children in Preschool

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Risky play can generally be defined as thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury. A previous study has divided risky play into six categories (Sandseter, 2007). The present study aims to explore these categories further by trying to confirm them.

Introduction

Children seek and engage in risky forms of play (Ball, 2002; Readdick and Park, 1998; Smith, 1998; Stephenson, 2003; Stine, 1997). During an observational study, Sandseter (2007) revealed six categories of risky play: a) Play with great heights and danger of injury from falling, b) Play with high or uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something or someone, c) Play with dangerous tools that can lead to injuries, d) Play near dangerous elements where children can fall into or from something, e) Rough-and-tumble play where the children can harm each other, f) Play where the children can disappear or get lost (for instance, when the children are without supervision and where there are no fences). However, this was a minor study and the author calls for further research to validate and explore these categories.

Few studies to identify risky play have been conducted, but in addition to Sandseter's (2007) research there are some studies that at least partly deal with risky play as a theme. These studies will be referred to throughout the discussion of the results in the present paper.

Method

The study was carried out at two Norwegian preschools from February to June 2006. The two preschools in this study were chosen because children at both spend a great deal of time outdoors. This selective choice of participants makes the sampling procedure in this study purposive sampling (Berg, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 1990). However, all Norwegian preschools are regulated by governmental pedagogical laws, and more than 80% of children from one to five years of age attend preschool in Norway. Thus, the sample in the present study should be representative for preschools and preschool-aged children in Norway.

All of the four and five year-old children (N=29) in the two preschools were observed and videotaped while playing. Informed consent to observe the children was obtained by proxy from parents (Greig and Taylor, 1999).

A total of nine days was spent in each of the preschools, observing all their outdoor activity. The setting of the observations was naturalistic (Greig and Taylor, 1999; Patton, 1990), meaning that the children played in their usual preschool setting. The researcher took a somewhat reactive approach (Corsaro, 1985), having a visible presence in the environment (Flick, 2006). However, the children quickly became used to the researcher, and took minimum notice of being observed.

The video observations in this study were based on previously developed categories (Sandseter, 2007), meaning that selective observations on predefined categories were intended to purposively grasp central aspects (Flick, 2006; Pellegrini *et al.*, 2004), to create a focused study, and to limit the amount of data gathered to what was readily analyzable (Silverman, 2005).

A total of six hours of video observations was reviewed and transcribed electronically into a word-file (forty-three pages, single spaced). The transcribed data and field notes were first read thoroughly with the research questions in mind (Vedeler, 2000), then analyzed using thematic coding (Richards, 2005). The identified categories of risky play (Sandseter, 2007) were used as main headings for this level of analysis; and, several subcategories emerged. Next, analytical coding was conducted, creating conceptual categories and gathering the data needed to explore them. (Langdridge and Tvedt, 2006; Richards, 2005). Finally, these categories were explored and tested against current theory and research, (Langdridge and Tvedt, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The analysis confirmed the six categories of risky play (Sandseter, 2007). However, there were differences in the occurrence of the different categories, and several subcategories were identified.

Great Heights

The videos showed climbing to great heights to be the most popular activity. This is in accordance with Sandseter's (2007) original findings. Several studies such as Heft (1988), Readdick and Park (1998), Smith (1998), Kaarby (2004) and Davidsson (2006) have also concluded that climbing is a very popular activity among children, and Davidsson (2006) revealed through interviews with the children that they thought climbing was exciting and challenging. In the present study the amount of climbing activity was extensive, occurring repeatedly on all of the days of observation. Children climbed trees, towers, big rocks, rocky walls, fences, small roofs etc.

Jumping down from high places involved jumping down from both still and flexible surfaces. Still surfaces were big rocks, cliff edges, climbing towers, solid tree branches,

play hut roofs, etc., while flexible surfaces were moving swings (jumping off swings in motion was very popular), thinner and less solid tree branches, etc. Several other studies similarly found a lot of children jumping down from a height (Davidsson, 2006; Kaarby, 2004; Smith, 1998). Kaarby (2004) reported children climbing up and jumping down from big rocks or small cliffs whilst in nature areas; Davidsson (2006) discovered a strong interest for jumping off swings in motion; and Smith (1998) describes children jumping down from various pieces of playground equipment. Sandseter (2007) found that this popular activity evoked both excitement and fear among the children.

Balancing on high objects such as fences, brick walls, playground equipment, fallen branches, cliff edges and big rocks was observed somewhat less frequently than climbing and jumping down, but it was still a very common play activity. Often it was done in combination with climbing up, as in balancing on the climbable feature (Heft, 1988; Kytä, 2002; 2004). This is also in accordance with Sandseter's (2007) categorization study and Kaarby's (2004) study where balancing on stones and fallen trees was a popular and common form of play.

Another kind of play that involved great heights was hanging, swinging and dangling at great heights. This was often observed, as when children climbed up in a tree and hung by their arms from a branch, or when they swung with such a high speed on swing equipment that they achieved a great height in the pendulum (Smith, 1998). Similar to the above subcategories of play with great heights, this kind of play was also found in Sandseter's (2007) study.

High Speed

Within the category of play with high speed and in accordance with Sandseter's (2007) earlier findings, swinging was observed as a very popular activity. The children used both standardised swinging equipment in the preschool playground and self-made swings, with ropes tied to tree branches, etc. When the children were swinging they constantly sought to increase the speed of the pendulum to make the activity more exciting. Additionally, they often tried out new and more risky and challenging ways to swing, for example, as several children joining together on one swing, standing upright on the swing, twisting the swing to make it oscillate in unnatural directions, and making two swings bump into each other with extensive power. This was similar to the observations of both Davidson (2006) and Smith (1998).

The children enjoyed repeatedly sliding at high speed down steep hillsides and rocky slopes on an extensive number of occasions. In accordance with Sandseter's (2007) study, the children often explored different ways of doing this: sliding head first, on their stomachs, backwards, several children together in a row, etc. This was also a common

activity in both Kaarby's (2004) and Smith's (1998) study. In addition to the sliding activity described above, this study also revealed that sledging on snow at high speed was a particularly frequent and popular activity during the winter season. This was observed on all of the observation days in the winter when the ground was covered with snow. Similar to sliding, this was also performed in different ways (head first, etc.). Sometimes the children even stood upright (alone or several together) on snow-sliding-mattresses.

Other forms of play with great speed in the present study were bicycling, running uncontrollably down steep hills and skating and skiing at high speed in the winter. Sandseter (2007) observed bicycling and running down steep hills in her study, but her study was not carried out during the winter season, so the current findings of skating and skiing are an addition to this category.

Play with Dangerous Tools

In this study, play with dangerous tools was not as common as in the study of Sandseter (2007). The use of knives in play was only observed on a couple of occasions, while none of the present videos showed the use of axes, hammers and nails (Sandseter, 2007) or bows and arrows (Kaarby, 2004). The use of such tools could vary a lot from preschool to preschool, however, and the findings in Kaarby's and Sandseter's studies show that in particular, the use of whittling knives (but also sometimes bows and arrows, hammers and nails, and saws and axes) is quite common in Norwegian preschools. As Sandseter (2007) argues, this is possibly uncommon in non-Scandinavian countries. Another possibly dangerous tool that children involved in their play in the present study was ropes. This was observed on some occasions, but not frequently.

Play Near Dangerous Elements

The findings of play near dangerous elements in the present study were very similar to Sandseter's (2007) study, showing that this included play near the edge of steep hillsides, rock walls or cliffs; play near deep water or the sea; and play near a fire pit. In addition, the present study also contained observations of play near icy waters in the winter. Both studies showed that the children were often completely preoccupied with their activity, such as role play, play chasing etc., and unaware of the fact that they performed this near a dangerous element and the potential hazard this represented. However, in some of the present observations the children consciously walked on cliff tops, climbed trees hanging out over cliffs, ran and chased each other near water, tumbled and threw twigs into the water, clearly expressing that the dangerous element was an important and exciting factor in their play.

Rough-and-tumble Play

Similar to Sandseter's (2007) former study, the findings in this category of play included wrestling on the ground (especially on snow in the winter), play fighting by hitting and throwing things at other children, and fencing with sticks or other available artifacts. This kind of play was always done with a threatening atmosphere, and the children would make threatening noises and angry or scary faces at each other. This is in accordance with Blurton Jones' (1976) and several other researchers' (Humphreys and Smith, 1984; Smith, 2005) descriptions of children's rough-and-tumble play. Similar to these former studies, this kind of play gives the observer the impression of a fine balance between play and real fighting. In the present study, several rough-and-tumble play situations went beyond the play atmosphere and became real fights and threats that brought about real fear and anxiety in the threatened child. These situations often resulted in a flight by one of the children, and the play dissolved. Kaarby (2004) described similar situations in her study where children were fighting, sometimes in the trees, and as soon as the intruder was a real danger, they surrendered, climbed down, or negotiated a solution.

Similar to former research (Blurton Jones, 1976; DiPietro, 1981; Epstein *et al.*, 2001; Humphreys and Smith, 1984), only boys engaged in rough-and-tumble-play in the present study. Often (but not always) it occurred as part of role play where the children pretended to be characters such as Spiderman, King Kong, pirates, characters from Star Wars, etc., often inspired by films or TV programs the children had seen (Humphreys and Smith, 1984; Kaarby, 2004; Smith and Conolly, 1980). They played out these roles and recreated wrestling, fencing and fighting combat.

Play Where the Children Can Disappear/Get Lost

One of the preschools in this study did not have any fences around the preschool playground. At this preschool there were a lot of play situations where children could disappear or get lost. These are "*occasions where the children were given the opportunity to 'cruise' on their own, exploring unknown areas where the danger of getting lost was present*" (Sandseter, 2007: 247). This is called 'going exploring' (Kaarby, 2004; Sandseter, 2007). In the outdoor preschool in this study, this happened often because the children had an extensive mobility license (Kytä, 2004), meaning the degree of independent mobility with which the staff trusted the children. They were allowed to move around freely in their surroundings, close to woods, steep hills and cliffs, and a small lake. This kind of situation was also observed in the ordinary preschool, but only when the group of children went on hikes in nature areas outside the preschool playground. However, the staff in this preschool were far more restrictive about giving the children the license to move around freely, and carefully supervised the children. Kaarby's (2004) research was conducted in an outdoor preschool, and similar to the present study she observed that the children 'went exploring' and made expeditions that set out to discover something on

their own when hiking in nature areas. In Davidson's (2006) study the feeling of freedom and the opportunity to play 'away from the eyes of adults' was important for the children, and similar to the studies above, the results showed that this was associated with playing in the woods.

Conclusion

Sandseter's (2007) categories were confirmed in the present study. In addition to these, several subcategories were identified.

Table 1: Categories and subcategories of risky play

Categories	Sub-categories
Great heights	Climbing
	Jumping from still or flexible surfaces
	Balancing on high objects
	Hanging/swinging at great heights
High speed	Swinging at high speed
	Sliding and sledging at high speed
	Running uncontrollably at high speed
	Bicycling at high speed
	Skating and skiing at high speed
Dangerous tools	Cutting tools: knives, saws, axes
	Strangling tools: Ropes, etc.
Dangerous elements	Cliffs
	Deep or icy water
	Fire pits
Rough-and-tumble	Wrestling
	Fencing with sticks, etc.
	Play fighting
Disappear/get lost	'Going exploring'

The children clearly expressed a strong interest in risky play, and this study supports previous research suggesting that children have an urge to seek and engage in risky forms of play (Ball, 2002; Readdick and Park, 1998; Smith, 1998; Stephenson, 2003; Stine, 1997). The present study is therefore a contribution to the rather unexplored field of children's risk-taking in play, and its results would greatly contribute to the discussion on

the risks (for injury) and benefits (to development) of risky play. However, further research with a broad range of perspectives is required to obtain more knowledge on this theme.

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