The Trouble with Risk

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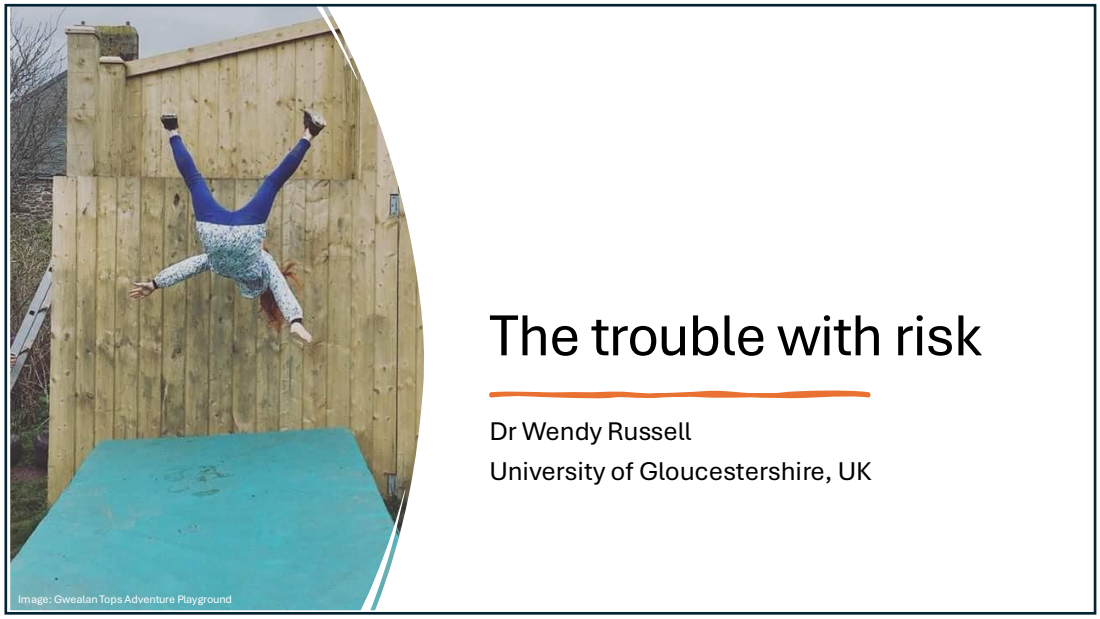


Thank you for inviting me here. This is a conference all about risk taking in children's play, a conference in praise of risk. We will be promoting the benefits of risk taking, exploring how as adults we can support and facilitate this. And I will be doing this too. But, in the spirit of the conference, I am going to take a risk. I will be troubling some of the concepts that have become "common sense wisdoms", turning them upside down and inside out and exploring how we might think otherwise – a bit like children do in their play. It might go horribly wrong, but I hope not. How do we expand our knowledge without risking thinking against the tide? So here goes.

I want to start off with a story from a different adventure playground in London, UK. It's a very old story, over 10 years old, and it has been used before in an article my late colleague Stuart Lester and I wrote (Lester and Russell, 2014). But this story just keeps on giving and giving, as it sums up a lot of the issues I will be exploring. It's written by one of the playworkers and is from a piece of work we did with this adventure playground.

> One summer afternoon, some children had been investigating around the edges. One boy emerged with the red plastic slide from the kit house that is scattered around. He said "Look what I found! What can I do with it?" Several other children followed him. They decided to take it up the water tower structure. They worked together to lift the slide up the structure. They got to the level where the rope hangs over the sand pit. The group of 4–5 boys involved were all very competent climbers

> so I decided to watch from a distance what happened next. They pushed the slide out over the end of the structure above the sand and two of them sat on the slide, stopping it from falling over the edge with their weight. Then after a countdown, the boy at the back got off and the slide dropped with one boy still on it.
>
> He grabbed the rope just in time to stop himself falling along with the slide. The level of excitement was something I've not seen before on the playground. He climbed down. The other boys congratulated him on surviving. He said "That was sick! That was sick you know!" One of the other boys said "We could do this every day!" The first boy said "I didn't know I was going to make it! I thought I was going to die!" (Research participant's blog).

I'm just going to leave the story there for now, and will return to it.

Fast forward to today, and I think the reason why Martin asked me to speak to this conference is not because I have written a lot about risk and play, but because I have, with colleagues Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil, recently published a review of contemporary research into childhood, children's play, social policy and practice, with the title *Playing and Being Well* (Russell et al., 2024). *Playing and Being Well* is a weighty document, and we looked at a huge number of sources (there are over 100 pages of references in the full version). Obviously, it couldn't be a systematic review, so we brought a creative and narrative approach, synthesising sources to create an original and political commentary, some of which I will be drawing on today.

I decided to see how many references there are to risk in *Playing and Being Well*. Of 400 pages of substantive content, there are 388 mentions of the word 'risk'. So clearly, we have something to say about risk. I thought I would do a little exercise and see in what sense the word was used. This is what I found (embellished with a bit of historical context).

Not all the references were about risk-taking in play. Largely, they fell into these four groupings:

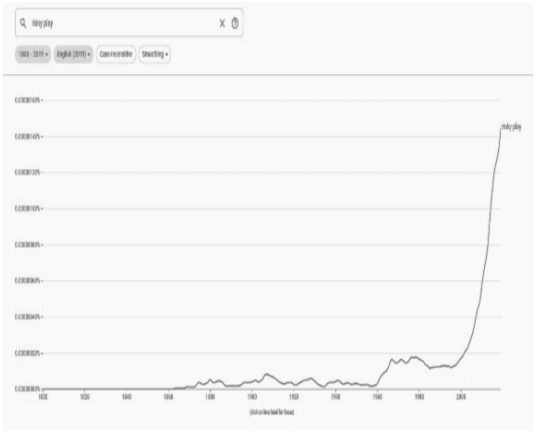
1. *Global risks and uncertainty:*
2. *Risk management*
3. *Children at/as risk*
4. *Risk-taking in play*

1. Global risks and uncertainty: we live in risky times. Humans have always lived with uncertainty, and today, risks related to geopolitics, wars, climate change, global economics, pandemics and new technologies have intensified. But it's only in the last 40-50 years that we have talked about this using the language of risk. Sociologists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens started talking about this in the 1980s and 1990s, suggesting that the way we view the world had shifted from the distribution of the

resources needed for a good life to a future focus on what might go wrong – from "goods" to "bads".

As Walklate and Mythen (2010, p. 49) say: "The language of risk has become omnipresent in everyday life and assumed status as a filter through which people react to and make sense of experience."

We see this also in references to children's risky play. In her article on the risk of risky play, Tatiana Zakharova-Goodman (forthcoming) used Google Books Ngram viewer to produce this graph showing the steep rise in references to risky play in books since 2000.



Graph: Tatiana Zakharova-Goodman, forthcoming, using Google Books Ngram Viewer

But this is more than a question of the words we use.

It is to do with what philosopher of physics Karen Barad (2007) calls "material discursive practices", the way that language, material objects, meanings, and what we do are all tied up together – the words we use are entangled in the ideas and things we live by and lead to what we see as "common sense" practices. And "risky play" can be considered as a material discursive practice.

2. Risk management: This risk narrative means we all have to be risk managers now, from professional playworkers, playground designers and builders, to parents and caregivers and to children themselves. Some people talk about 'responsibilisation' – an effect of neoliberalism that has personalised risks that were once covered by the state through the provision of public services and welfare. We see this material discursive practice in the way we talk about how children taking risks help them to develop risk management skills.

3. Children at and as risk: We even use this risk lens in the way we think about, make policy about and work with children. Policy narratives, from the UK at least and I suspect elsewhere in similar countries, bring a future-focus to childhood, aiming to maximise their productivity as adults and reduce their cost to the state, for example through health, welfare or justice systems. It's called a social investment narrative,

using the language of capital: spending public money on children, including their play, can be justified if it is seen as an investment in them as future producing and consuming citizens. Some children are identified as *at risk* and in need of protection. Equally, some children are seen *as a risk* and in need of correction. Often, these are the same children. And here's the political bit: despite the best of intentions, policies targeted towards those seen as at risk have different effects across intersectional groupings that are classed, racialised, gendered and dis/ablised, in ways that often further entrench inequalities, responsibilising 'poor mothers' (in every sense of the word) and not effectively addressing structural inequalities. This applies to many children using adventure playgrounds that are usually sited in areas of high economic and social deprivation.

So now we come to the nub, risk taking in children's play. Before I talk about that, I just want to make one more comment about what we found in our literature review *Playing and Being Well*.

Over the last 15 years or so, there have been changes in conceptual and methodological approaches to studying childhood and children's play, across the natural and social sciences, away from atomising and individualising and towards relationality. At its most radical, such relationality sees phenomena (for example, play, bodies, space and life itself) as continually in a process of becoming through relations with others. These others include the tangible, such as other bodies (human, non-human), material objects, landscapes, and also the less tangible, such as affects, sensations, desires, as well as systems and processes (for example, calendars, codes of behaviour, systems of oppression). This radical understanding of relationality goes beyond ecological models as it both flattens scale and extends the idea of interaction to one of intra-action.

These relational approaches both build on and challenge dominant narratives of childhood and play. For example, they move away from the single 'ideal' universal child evident in over-simplified forms of developmental psychology (sometimes called 'developmentalism'), particularly challenging how such a paradigm produces expectations of norms. Relationality also helps move away from stark binaries such as adult/child, or nurture/nature, or even safe/risky.

4. Risk taking in children's play: So, let's return now to the opening story. In one sense, this is a classic story of risk and playworking. It is the kind of story playworkers like to tell. It is about:

- Risk of physical harm, and playing at great heights, the first and perhaps the most common of Sandseter's (2007) categories of risky play.
- It is boys

- The playworker is at pains to point out that she is aware of the risk and making a judgement based on knowledge of the children involved
- It is a 'success' – the boys' exclamations of their heightened excitement brought smiles around the room.

Just to disturb this heartening story a little, I'll dig deeper into the material discursive practices engaged here, and prod at our ways of knowing about childhood, play and risk.

How might we read the episode through the lens of the relationality? This lens can challenge our familiar theories of childhood and play, most of which are still rooted firmly in ideas from the European Enlightenment with its values of rationality, individual freedom (but only for some) and progress, and its belief in a knowable and controllable world. One example is the desire to define play, to pin it down through what Karen Barad (2007) calls 'boundary-making practices'. And then to atomise it further into categories such as risky play. And we can clearly see it in the definition of play that is used in the Playwork Principles, the UK official professional and ethical framework for playwork, and which have been increasingly adopted in other countries. Here, play is defined as:

"a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated."

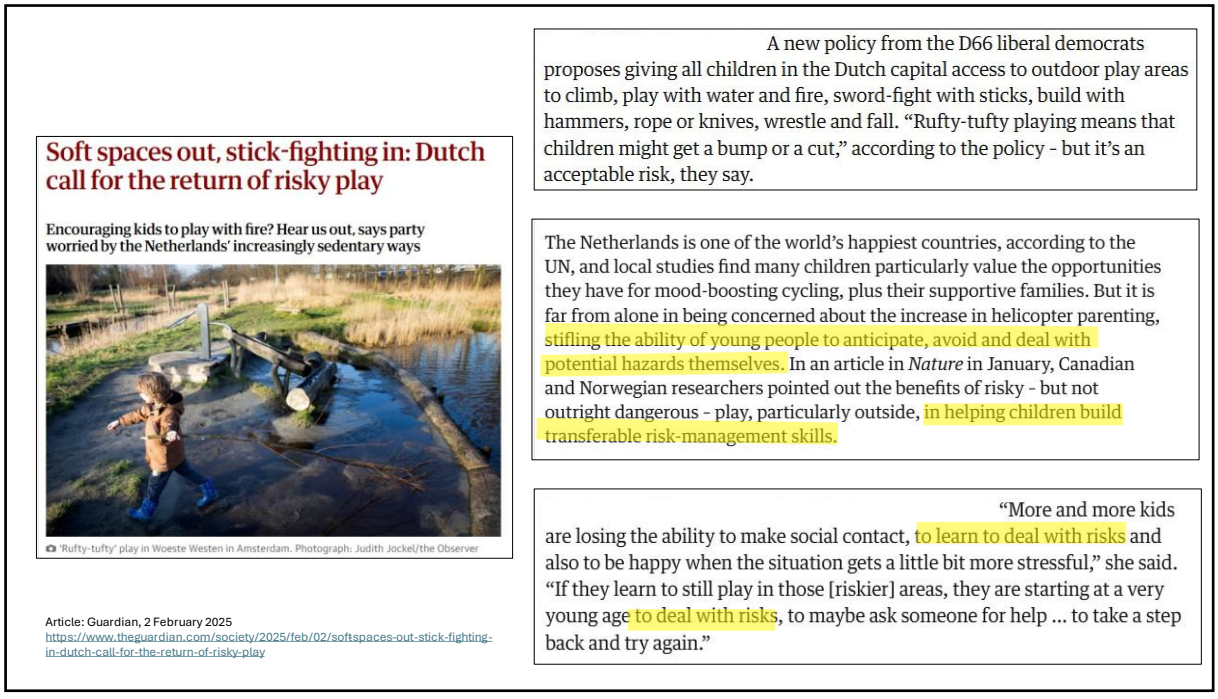
This reflects the individualism inherent in the legacy of Enlightenment thinking. If we bring a relational lens to this, it becomes clear how play emerges from encounters between everything that is to hand at any given moment, including other children and adults, children's desires and capabilities, material objects and the materiality of the space, and also less tangible things like atmosphere, relationships, the culture of the place, the weather, and so on. It is a constant dynamic process of adjustment – not all children want to play in the same way, and power relations in groups are rarely equal. Stuff bites back – the slide pays more attention to the laws of gravity than the desires of the children, but it is that that brings the uncertainty and therefore the thrill of the endeavour. The playworkers add to both a culture of permissiveness and feelings of being looked after. All this affects how the slide and tower scenario unfolds.

So, how much of the child's actions were freely chosen and personally directed in this scenario? The entanglements of the child's discovery of the slide ("Look what I found! What can I do with it?"), their desire both to jump and to succeed in front of their friends, their fear, their physical capabilities, and probably the expectation that the adult would tell them not to jump if they thought it was too risky – all this is thrown into the mix.

Let's look also at risk management in this scenario and the complexities of the adult role. It seems that the playworker felt she had to say something in telling the tale about her own risk assessment processes, highlighting her knowledge of the children as good climbers and making explicit her decision to watch. I won't say too much about that

here, except to prod a little about what lies behind this tension for adults between promoting risky play and keeping children safe. Here I will draw on what Zakharova-Goodman (forthcoming) calls the "normative disciplinary powers" of the discourse of risky play. No longer something that children just do, play has become a site for technical practices aimed at supporting children's development, namely the development of risk management skills. We can even extend this into the field of responsibilisation: it becomes an obligation or a duty for adults to promote risky play and for children to engage in it. And the focus on physical risks perpetuates norms of the universal child as stereotypically male, non-Disabled and neurotypical.

We can see this discourse clearly in a recent article published in the UK about the promotion of risky play in Amsterdam: "A new policy from the D66 liberal democrats proposes giving all children in the Dutch capital access to outdoor play areas to climb, play with water and fire, sword-fight with sticks, build with hammers, rope or knives, wrestle and fall." The rationale given by those interviewed focuses heavily on children's development of risk assessment and management skills, as you can see in the highlighted sections.



Soft spaces out, stick-fighting in: Dutch call for the return of risky play

Encouraging kids to play with fire? Hear us out, says party worried by the Netherlands' increasingly sedentary ways

'Rufty-tufty' play in Woeste Westen in Amsterdam. Photograph: Judith Jockel/the Observer

A new policy from the D66 liberal democrats proposes giving all children in the Dutch capital access to outdoor play areas to climb, play with water and fire, sword-fight with sticks, build with hammers, rope or knives, wrestle and fall. "Rufty-tufty playing means that children might get a bump or a cut," according to the policy - but it's an acceptable risk, they say.

The Netherlands is one of the world's happiest countries, according to the UN, and local studies find many children particularly value the opportunities they have for mood-boosting cycling, plus their supportive families. But it is far from alone in being concerned about the increase in helicopter parenting, stifling the ability of young people to anticipate, avoid and deal with potential hazards themselves. In an article in *Nature* in January, Canadian and Norwegian researchers pointed out the benefits of risky - but not outright dangerous - play, particularly outside, in helping children build transferable risk-management skills.

"More and more kids are losing the ability to make social contact, to learn to deal with risks and also to be happy when the situation gets a little bit more stressful," she said. "If they learn to still play in those [riskier] areas, they are starting at a very young age to deal with risks, to maybe ask someone for help ... to take a step back and try again."

Article: Guardian, 2 February 2025
https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/feb/02/softspaces-out-stick-fighting-in-dutch-call-for-the-return-of-risky-play

But the children in this scenario are clearly already very competent risk managers. And the development of risk management skills is certainly not what motivates them to play. As the playworker notes, "The level of excitement was something I've not seen before on the playground." And the boy exclaims "That was sick! That was sick you know! [meaning 'amazing'] I didn't know I was going to make it! I thought I was going to die!"

It is this thrill that is the motivation, the vitality of overcoming fear. If we see playing as an emotional endeavour through the deliberate creation of uncertainty rather than risk, we can perhaps look at it a little differently and become a little less in the grip of the power of the material discursive practices attached to the idea of risky play and its contribution to the project of neoliberalism. Here is a quote from *Playing and Being Well:*

"The pleasure of playing can arise from experiencing the vitality of emotions such as fear, anger, disgust and surprise and overcoming them, for example through pretend play, rough and tumble play, risk-taking, rude rhymes, horror stories, video games and generally mucking about.

Such forms of playing help to prime neural networks to respond flexibly and creatively to novel situations without over-reacting, thereby developing the capacity to deal emotionally with being surprised or temporarily out of control" (Lester and Russell, 2024, p. 405).

This is also supported both by Martin's research with children themselves and by a recent paper from Ellen Sandseter and colleagues (2023) updating their original categories of risky play that focused on the physical, including playing with emotions and social taboos, with sexuality and so on. Benefits from these forms of risk-taking are both immediate and deferred, helping to develop emotion regulation and good mental health.

- Sandseter (2007): (1) play with great heights, (2) play with high speed, (3) play with dangerous tools, (4) play near dangerous elements, (5) rough-and-tumble play, and (6) play where children go exploring alone.
- Sandseter et al (2023): playing with emotions, with taboos, with sexuality, etc.
- Immediate and deferred benefits including emotion regulation, vitality and mental health

It may seem like these instrumental outcomes are similar to the development of risk management skills, but they are broader and more nuanced and not tied into the risk narrative. They also allow for a broader range of forms of playing beyond the physical that can appeal to different children, not just those who are attracted to and capable of playing at height or speed.

In summary, then, what is the trouble with risk?

It is not that I don't see the value in engaging in risky play, I do. But I also think that the lens of risk gives rise to material discursive practices that are embedded in the neoliberal project and can be deeply unjust. Such as the assumption that all children enjoy, or can, or should engage in physical risk taking. Or the insurmountable tension for playworkers between the duty to keep children safe and to promote risky play.

It is not the playing itself I have a problem with but the way we talk about it and how that affects policy and practice.

I suggest that talking about playing with emotions or with uncertainty – a we did 10 years ago - might allow for a fresh way of thinking and doing.

Thank you.

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