The right to a bruise: professionalizing ECEC educators to increase children’s risk competence

-Martin van Rooijen, PhD Candidate
University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht

-Mieke Cotterink, MSc
Consumer Safety Institute, Amsterdam
The Netherlands

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Introduction

• Professional experience in Dutch playgrounds, Master’s in pedagogy, PhD candidate, involved in networks on outdoor play

• Research focus: professional dilemmas towards facilitating children’s risk-taking in their play

• Preliminary results of empirical research: exploring influencing factors in Dutch afterschool childcare settings

• Note: Early childhood in the Netherlands:
  ➢ Birth to four years: daycare
  ➢ Four to twelve years: afterschool childcare (research focus)
Dutch context (1): legal framework

- Until 2018: Annual obligatory Risk-Assessment
- From 2018: New law
  *Innovation and Quality in Childcare Centers:*
  *’We learn children to deal with small risks, but protect them against big risks’*

- Every childcare center works with an up-to-date Health and Safety policy;
- Formulated, implemented and evaluated together with the whole professional team;
- Parents are informed and aware of this policy
Rationale (1): Problem Statement

• Leading cultural discourse that children are vulnerable and therefore have to be protected against danger and harm (Hewitt-Taylor & Heaslip, 2012)

• Trend of overprotection resulted in intensification of safety standards leading to significant limits on children’s everyday play (Brussoni et al., 2015)

• Increasing levels of monitoring is one of the concerns in the ‘Right to play’; risk and challenge is considered an essential component of children’s play (UNCRC, 2013)

• Engaging with risks is important to children’s well-being. It enhances their resilience, self-confidence and risk competence (Rutter, 2006; Sandseter et al., 2017, Lavrysen et al., 2015)
Rationale (2) Childcare Settings and Children’s Risk-taking in Play

• Outcome of overprotective tendency is intensified adult supervision on children’s free time, including childcare (Wyver et al., 2010)
• Children’s opportunities to take part in risky play in ECEC settings is frequently considered to be too limited (Brussoni et al., 2015)
• This creates dilemmas for professionals in making clear decisions, yet their tolerance of risky play is crucial (Little, Sandseter & Wyver, 2012)
• Need to create and implement policy that professionalizes educators in such a way that they are capable of offering children challenging learning situations (Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2016)
• Educators should also be equipped to deal with the risk-averse policy of employers, resistance of parents, and their own personal limitations (Van Rooijen & Newstead, 2017)
Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model of Development (1979)

Model based on international literature review and survey in Dutch context (Van Rooijen & Newstead, 2016, Van Rooijen, Wyver & Lensvelt-Mulders, under review)
Aim and Methodology

• The aim of this study is to enhance educators’ competencies and skills, with respect to facilitating risky play and interacting with stakeholders: policy makers, parents, colleagues and children.

• Methodology:
  ➢ 7 After school childcare teams, of varying size and operating in different contexts (Multiple case-study, Yin, 2009)
  ➢ Participatory research: ‘teaching and Learning process’: researcher brings in theory, stakeholders bring in their practice (Pawson & Tilly, 1997; Cartmel & Branelly, 2016)
  ➢ Quantitative: TRiPS analysis before/after program (Hill & Bundy, 2012)
  ➢ Qualitative: evaluation forms and minutes of discussion after program were analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Professionalization Program and intervention

• Three 2-3 hour sessions with the after school childcare team: knowledge; attitude; risky play supervision; parents’ and management’ role; evaluation and implementation, including:
  ➢ Risky play categories (Sandseter, 2007)
  ➢ Resilience (Van Gils, 2005; Ungar, 2008)
  ➢ Risk-competence (Lavrysen et al., 2015)
  ➢ Pedagogical sensitivity (Korczak, 1984; Van Manen, 2014)
  ➢ Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)
  ➢ Children’s Right to Play (UNCRC, 2013)

• Loose parts play intervention six weeks period (Nicholson, 1971; Hyndman et al., 2014; Patte, 2017)
The ‘Play container’ or ‘Play shed’, in collaboration with local recycle shops and local stores
Crates:
Great Heights
Ladders and stools: Great Heights
Buckets and stretchers: Rough & Tumble
Tires and mattresses: High Speed
Buggys and office chairs: High Speed
Stuff for making huts: disappearing/get lost
Cable reels and tree trunks: Balancing
Role of the practitioner: facilitating, playing along...
Roofs:
Great Heights
Ethical considerations

• This study complies with the Association of Universities in the Netherlands codes for scientific research, the Scientific Integrity code and the Dutch Personal Data Protection Act.
• Informed consent of participants, individual anonymity is guaranteed.
• Parents of minors are asked explicitly for their consent.
• Children are informed by student-researchers.
• Consent of child care organization and parents for introducing loose parts as an intervention.
• Certificate of conduct for (student-) researchers.
Tolerance of Risk in Play Scale (TRiPS) (Hill & Bundy, 2012)

• Valid and reliable instrument for:
  - Measuring success of interventions to change adults’ everyday risk beliefs
  - Exploring the impact of adults’ risk tolerance on children’s play and development

• Scoring a visual analogue scale 0-100: How much do you encourage the child to take everyday risks?

• Self-assessment: at the start of the program and at the evaluation; participants choose age child: 4-6; 7-9; 10-12 years.

• A 31-item survey of risk tolerance based on a Norwegian model of risky play, reflecting six categories (Sandseter 2007, 2009):
  ➢ Would you allow the child to continue playing if they get a few scrapes during play?
  ➢ Would you let the child use a hammer and nail unsupervised?
  ➢ Would you let the child climb up a tree within your reach?
Demographic characteristics of participants

- 62 participants from 7 settings (6 to 16 per setting)
- 47 practitioners; 12 supervisors; 3 management
- 48 female; 14 male
- Age: from 20 to 62, Mean 34
- Years working with children: 1 to 40 years, Mean 11
- Education: 30 Middle Education; 26 Higher Education; 5 academic; 1 unknown
- Present work with children: 4-7 years, 8-12 years, 4-12 years equally
- 41 participants completed both surveys (n=41)
- Analysis by SPSS 24 software
Findings (1): TRiPS instrument

*Encouraging risks: T1 – T2; Scoring Attitude 0-100 scale: How much do you encourage the child to take everyday risks?*

- Overall attitude towards risk-taking is increased after professionalization program (Mean increase on 0-100 scale 9.1; T-Test One-Sample and Paired Sample significant ($p < .000$))

- Significant difference between male and female professionals: Male score 82 before and after; Female score 64 before and 75 afterwards

- Professionals’ attitude age group 4-6 years is significantly more increased in comparison to 7-9 and 10-12 years.

“Groundbreaking, novel experiences” (educator)
Model of influencing factors is static.

Program induces change: Dynamic process for educators in their professional context.
Findings (2): Qualitative Analysis

Program shows changing competencies towards:

Factor: Personal attitudes

• Awareness of overly play involvement
• Understanding of their own boundaries, willingness to stretch own risk-taking

Factor: View on the individual child

• Increased observation of play leads to notion of resilient children
• Aware assessment on the ‘right’ intervention, which is in fact demanding

Related factor: Collaboration with colleagues

• Positive mutual influence on attitudes
• More discussion and a strong need to attain a shared approach for all children (Cultural)

“Children know their own boundaries so you don’t have to point out this to them”
Findings (3): Qualitative Analysis

Program shows no changing competencies towards:

Factor: Parental relationship

- Parents show little involvement, no possibilities to engage/discuss
- Inability to act due to fear of reaction

Factor: Organizational policies and external regulations (safety inspection)

- Vision, rules and policy can give support
- Barely contact with safety inspection about risky play; need for guidelines

Conditional factor: The play environment

- Specific loose parts stimulate risky play
- This provides ‘different play’; more outdoor play; more together play, also with other children; more communication

“Voyage of discovery, both for the children as for myself”
Limitations and Discussion

• First analysis of data, so cautious with conclusions. Other theories on preliminary outcomes possible.

1. The program seems to affect professionals on their awareness of children’s needs, on their attitude, and on the way they support children’s risk-taking in play (Pedagogical sensitivity, Van Manen, 2014)

2. May be this could be seen as a ‘loop of risky play change’: change of play environment provides change of children’s play, what affects professional views on children, subsequently their attitude, which changes their intervention, that contributes to more autonomous, free, risky play etc. (Experiential learning, Kolb, 1984)

3. A professional is part of a professional team; a balance between individual attitudes and a shared view is important, however it should benefit individual children in their risk-competence growth
Recommendations: implications for practice and policy

- The play environment has to provide risk-taking possibilities so children and professionals both can experience step-by-step *(Theory of affordances, Gibson, 1977; Kyttä, 2002)*
- You cannot just start with risky play in overprotective context; a professionalization program specifically on facilitating risky play is important for equipping professionals
- Attention should be paid to involve parents on reframing attitudes *(Risk reframing, Niehues et al., 2014)* towards risky play and on how they see the role of childcare in order to give professionals autonomy on supporting individual children
- An important condition is implementing risky play in organization policies and the involvement of safety inspection
Questions and areas for further research

- How to include parental permission in trajectory?
- How can management stimulate professional autonomy?

Further research:
- Analysis of qualitative data in this study regarding the child’s perspective could give insight in children’s experiences of risky play and how they value the role of adult interventions
- Professional attitudes towards risky play for ECEC birth to 4 years
- Longitudinal research to implementation, if professionals keep risky play on their agenda in practice, and on development of children’s risk-competence and well-being through risky play
Dutch context (2): the Risk Monitor, a digital tool

This tool supports Childcare centers on 6 policy topics, including ‘Exploring Safely’

• The Childcare team runs through the following steps:
  - Quickscan on risks;
  - Group discussion about current health and safety policy;
  - this leads to an update of the health and safety policy.

• The Risk monitor-tool supports this process with a discussion guide, for instance on sub theme *Playing at heights*:
  - What are the appointments we make about playing at heights?
  - Do all children en staff know about these appointments?
  - How do we discuss these appointments with the children?
  - Are staff members able to support children in playing at height?
Dutch context (3): National campaign towards parents ‘With a bit of risk, they will make it’

- 2017: successful campaign to create awareness among parents on the importance of risky play for their children; *Position Paper on risky play* (Kuiper, Cotterink & Van Rooijen, 2017)
- 2018: second phase by developing an online application, the ‘Groeiboom’ (Growth Tree).
- Focus on parents with children aged 5-7 years
- With a positive attitude towards risky play
- Tool to get insight into their own behavior and that of their child(ren)
- Tailored advice based on their profile how to facilitate risky play.

veiligheid.nl
Questions: ‘The right to a bruise’

- Contact: martin.vanrooijen@phd.uvh.nl
- @risicovolspelen

The element of tension in play ... plays a particularly important part. Tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide the issue and so end it. The player wants something to “go”, to “come off”; he wants to “succeed” by his own exertions.

(Huizinga, 1938, p. 10-11)