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# Fraught with frights or full of fun: perspectives of risky play among six-to-eight-year olds

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## ABSTRACT

Outdoor play provides children with unique opportunities to explore and expand their worlds, and to incorporate risk and challenge into play events. However, international research indicates that children are being exposed to fewer opportunities to engage in outdoor, risky play, while few studies have explored risky play among children aged six-to-eight years in differing cultural contexts. This qualitative study explored children's perspectives and experiences of outdoor risky play in a rural Irish town. Ten children took part in focus groups, drawings, photography, a child-led tour of the local community and a map-making session. Three themes emerged; *Risky play and me, my power to play and 'sometimes it is kind of worth it!'*. Findings suggest that risky play categories evolve as children age, and some new categories surfaced, including risky construction and breaking the rules. Further exploration of risky play is warranted to ascertain its characteristics more fully among this age group.

## KEYWORDS

Outdoor play; children; nature; participatory methods

## Introduction

Play is recognised as the primary occupation of childhood and a window into the child's well-being and development, particularly for the first eight years of life (Lynch and Moore 2016; Moore and Lynch 2018). Especially in outdoor play, children's autonomous decision-making and sense of competency are enhanced (Brussoni et al. 2020), self-control and emotional regulation are developed and social interaction skills are mastered (Pellegrini 2009). This is partly due to the flexible nature of the outdoors, which provides unique risk-rich experiences for children (Bjorgen 2016). The natural environment affords a higher level of risk in children's play and provides greater affordances for the challenge in comparison to a structured indoor environment (Kilkelly et al. 2015; Sands-eter 2009a). Here children can engage in outdoor 'daredevil activities' (Parham 2008, 23) to master movement through trial and error, often without adult interference (Bundy et al. 2009). Although risk and play have been a focus of research for many years, it has been a disparate area of study due somewhat to the lack of a coherent relationship

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between play and risk. For the most part, the emphasis has been on risk in play as problematic and related to issues such as hazards, injuries and adult neglect (see, for example, Bauer, Brussoni, and Giles 2020; Morrongiello and Cox 2020). However, the term ‘risky play’ has contributed significantly in providing a new way of talking about positive risk-taking in play and has been a useful contribution in counteracting adults’ over-emphasis on risk as a negative issue affiliated with dangerous consequences (Brussoni et al. 2015; Niehues et al. 2013).

Risky play ‘provides opportunities to challenge and test limits, to explore boundaries and to learn about risk’ (Sandseter 2014, 434). It takes on varied forms, which have been summarised into six core categories according to Sandseter (2007a) (Table 1).

Risky play occurs most often outdoors when children are not engaged in organised play (Sandseter 2009b) and usually without adult surveillance (Niehues et al. 2016). In a systematic review of 21 studies on risky play, a positive relationship was found between outdoor risky play and healthy development in children, including a positive impact on physical and mental health, increased social interactions, enhanced creativity skills and increased self-esteem (Brussoni et al. 2015).

Despite this, barriers to outdoor risky play exist and are highly related to cultural values and attitudes towards risk and safety (Bundy et al. 2009; Little, Wyver, and Gibson 2011). Evidence from international studies shows that the focus in many families is on risk aversion, and protecting children from the risk inherent in the modern world (Niehues et al. 2016; Gill 2007). Consequently, caregivers are transitioning from *supervising* the child to *monitoring* the child at a later stage than before (Bundy et al. 2009; Brussoni et al. 2015). Typically, this occurs between the ages of five and nine, where responsibility for risk appraisal is passed to the child, as they loosen ties from their caregiver and home environment (Blinkert and Weaver 2015). Similar to other countries, children in Ireland are less likely to play in their outdoor environments compared to children in years gone by, despite children’s preferences to play outside (Kilkelly et al. 2015). Indeed, in a national longitudinal study of 10,000 nine-year old children in Ireland, Ward found that the most significant issue

**Table 1.** Risky play categories.

| Categories            | Sub-categories  |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. Great heights      | Climbing<br>Jumping from still or flexible surfaces<br>Balancing on high objects<br>Hanging/swinging at great heights   |
| 2. High speed         | Swinging at high speed<br>Sliding and sledging at high speed<br>Running uncontrollably at high speed<br>Bicycling at high speed<br>Skating and skiing at high speed |
| 3. Dangerous tools    | Cutting tools: knives, saws and axes<br>Strangling tools: Ropes, etc.   |
| 4. Dangerous elements | Cliffs<br>Deep or icy water<br>Fire pits  |
| 5. Rough-and-tumble   | Wrestling<br>Fencing with sticks, etc.<br>Play fighting   |
| 6. Disappear/get lost | ‘Going exploring’   |

for supporting outdoor play was the perception of having safe places for children to play near their home (Ward 2013, 2014).

Studies of risky play have been most commonly conducted with pre-school aged-children, for example, in Norway (Sandseter 2007b, 2009a), Australia (Little and Wyver 2010), the UK (Nikiforidou 2017) and Canada (Coe 2016), while Kleppe has conducted a recent study with one-to-three-year olds in Norway (Kleppe, Melhuish, and Sandseter 2017). Individual factors that influence risky play across these studies include the age, gender, personality and play preferences of the child. Studies with children older than nine years tend to focus more on independent mobility and urban risk, for example, in Canada (Brussoni et al. 2020), the UK (Allin, West, and Curry 2014) and in Portugal (Preto et al. 2017). So, the evolution of play as it transitions from risky play (which relates to early childhood primarily) to risky leisure or socialisation (which concerns older children and adolescents) is yet to be examined.

There is a challenge in researching the meaning of risky play with child participants, as young children may not be able to communicate the concept so easily. A common way to communicate risky play for children is to name it according to the associated feelings. For example, pre-schoolers said, 'it tickles in my tummy' (Sandseter 2010, 76). In another study, four-year-olds named risky play as 'scary' (Stephenson 2003, 35). Hence risky play is highly associated with sensation-seeking, concerning 'the pursuit of novel, intense and complex sensations and experiences' (Zuckerman 1994, 27). Children in these studies identified the concurrent experiences of fear and exhilaration, which was found to be the core value of risky play (Sandseter 2010). While this fear-exhilaration relationship seems dichotomous, it represents a well-known characteristic of play: that it is ambiguous (Sutton-Smith 1997). It is thought that children develop feelings of competence by managing these uncomfortable, ambiguous feelings while also making responsible choices (Niehues et al. 2013). Studies on risky play indicate that it is through exposure to carefully managed risks, that children learn sound judgement in assessing and confronting risks in relation to their own capabilities (Sandseter 2009c; Wyver et al. 2010).

To summarise, risky play is known to be an inherent aspect of play experience and underpins children's development of independence and autonomy. Opportunities for children to access risky play are dependent on the sociocultural context and on their personal preferences. However, few studies have explored risky play with children beyond pre-school, when they are transitioning to more independence and increased autonomous responsibility for their own decision-making in risky situations. Hence, this study sought to explore children's world of risky play to answer the question 'What are the perspectives of risky play among children aged six to eight years?'. The aim of this study was to discover children's perspectives of risky play in Ireland.

## Research design

### *Methodology*

This qualitative study was informed by an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) to guide the exploration of children's subjective experiences and the meaning of risky play in their everyday contexts and environments. Data were collected through the multi-method Mosaic approach which combined focus groups,

photography, tours, map-making and observations to create a ‘mosaic’ of children’s lives (Clark and Moss 2005). The use of diverse child-centred methods in data collection supported triangulation and strengthened the rigour of this study. A pilot study was conducted to test methods and adaptations made accordingly (Van Teijlingen and Hundley 2002). Ethical approval for was granted (anonymised for peer review).

### **Recruitment and participants**

Participants were recruited from a small town in order to generate data from one local community. One town in Munster was selected that represents a typical rural Irish town, with about 6000 inhabitants, 2000 of whom live in the main town. Inclusion criteria included children aged between six and eight years of age who were known to each other and living in the designated community. Consequently, snowball sampling was chosen as the recruitment approach, as it ensured that the children who elected to take part were familiar with each other and living in the same area. A pre-school teacher known to the researchers provided the link to other children who met the inclusion criteria. The researchers met potential parent and child participants to detail information on the purpose of the study and answer questions. Informed parental consent, as well as child assent, was then obtained if they agreed to participate (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012). Ten participants were recruited, and included siblings, cousins and friends (Table 2). Children were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Data generation**

The multi-method process was conducted over one month in a specific sequence to maximise the effectiveness of data collection: focus groups, photography, tour and map-making and final discussion. Ethical concerns were discussed with parents and children in advance of the study, and strategies identified to ensure the risk-benefit balance in conducting this form of research were addressed and that safety measures were incorporated (DCYA 2012). Parents and children were advised of the researcher’s role in ensuring safety and what measures were in place to mitigate any potential harm. An adult known to the children was identified and accompanied the researchers during the tour. However, as risky play most often occurs out of sight of parents, parents were not present during the focus group and the tour/map-making session. Participants were informed that the research process would be suspended should any safety concerns arise during data collection. Finally, a protocol was included to ensure ongoing consent

**Table 2.** Demographics table.

| Gender   | Age         | Relationship   |
|----------|-------------|--|
| 3x Boys  | 1 × 6 years | 1x Brother and Sister (Owen, age 6 and Chloe, age 7) |
| 2x Girls | 2 × 7 years | 1x Brothers (Dan, age 7 and Charlie, age 8)          |
|          | 2 × 8 years | 1x Friend (Aoife, age 8 [Chloe’s friend])            |
| 2x Boys  | 2 × 6 years | 2x Siblings (Joe, age 8 and Shane, age 8)            |
| 3x Girls | 3 × 8 years | 1x Cousins (Faye, age 6 and Eva, age 6)              |
|          |             | 1x Friend (Rosie, age 8 [Joe & Shane’s friend])      |

Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

of child participants so that if the child appeared agitated or upset, researchers would cease the activity (Wiles, Charles, Crow and Heath, 2004).

*Focus groups.* First, focus groups were held in which the sample was divided into two groups according to those who play together, which proved effective as they had already formed relationships and were comfortable with each other. Focus groups provided the researchers with an opportunity to establish a relationship with the children and discuss each participant's experiences of risky play. Projective techniques were used to stimulate conversations about play as well as ice-breakers and child-friendly games, that is, 'Would you Rather' and 'The Secrets Game'. To conclude, the children drew a picture of a risky play activity that they had discussed to elaborate on their experiences.

*Photography.* Following this, children were given cameras to take home to photograph places they play outdoors. Cameras are a child-friendly participatory tool that enables children to take control of their own data collection and hence express their world as they see it (Burke 2005). The pictures taken provided the foundation for a further in-depth discussion with the children about their play experiences.

*Tours and map-making.* Tours and map-making followed the use of cameras (Clark and Moss 2005). The aim of the tour was for the children to lead the adults on a walk through their local area. They chose to bring us to the local playground, 'The Weirs', a forest area and a green area (Figure 1).

Following this, children were encouraged to make a map of the tour on which they added their drawings, words and feelings that they associated with different playspaces (Figure 2).

Three adults (two researchers and the pre-school teacher) accompanied the children on the tour and adopted a non-interventionist approach: children were free to engage in a variety of risky play activities. The children were encouraged to be co-investigators by documenting their own views and experiences through leading the tour and map-making session and taking pictures of places they play.

*Final discussion.* Photos, drawings and maps provided material for elicitation and final discussion.

Data took the form of field notes, photographs, drawings and maps and audio recordings, which were transcribed, while images were named and charted for analysis. Data were analysed across the data set using six stages of thematic analysis: familiarisation with data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up a report (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, the children participated in the initial stages of data analysis by selecting, naming and organising the photos of their favourite places and ways to play. This aided reduction and prioritisation of data. Then a more in-depth process of coding took place, accompanied by a search for potential themes. Themes evolved subsequently through an active process of triangulation of data from multiple sources, alongside a review with the children, who helped name, define and prioritise them further. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), final themes were refined, and examples were extracted of risky play processes that contained key meanings for the children.

## Findings

Through the process of data analysis three significant themes emerged:





**Figure 1.** The four-play places were selected by the children.

- (1) Risky play and Me (outdoor risky play events)
- (2) My power to play (environmental affordances)
- (3) 'Sometimes it is kind of worth it!' (the meaning of risky play)

### ***Theme 1: risky play and me (outdoor risky play events)***

From the analysis of the children's discussions, they consistently used similar language and feelings to describe the risky play, describing it as '*exciting*', '*epic*', '*not boring*' and '*not relaxing*'. Initially, when asked what they like to do outside, the children named





**Figure 2.** Map-making.

structured activities, for example, ‘*practicing soccer*’ and ‘*playing tip-the-can*’. The children did not associate risky play with these forms of play. Instead, questions such as ‘*Tell me about something you do that makes you feel excited?*’ prompted them to share their experiences of risky play. Children gave detailed descriptions of risky play, which were categorised into eight categories (Table 3).

Children identified that risky play was associated with fun combined with scary experiences concerning heights, speed and use of exciting tools. These play events were often accompanied by imaginative play. For example, in the focus group, Dan was keen to depict how he climbs trees at home to be a spy who jumps out and shoots people (Figure 3).

For Dan, the tree motivated him to engage in risky play combined with fantasy play: ‘You could just climb the tree, get the sniper, go like this, bang bang and jump out’ (Dan). So, tree climbing was not the main provider of risky play; instead, it formed part of a more advanced play scheme that combined varied forms of risky play (height, speed, dangerous elements and tools) alongside imaginative play to contribute to an enhanced play event with others. Similarly, materials within the natural environment inspired a variety of risky play events. On the tour, the children sharpened sticks for fishing at the Weirs and used them as swords (Figure 4).

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Fieldnote: The boys used sticks to ‘attack’ each other in a fight calling themselves the ‘musketeers’. They poked, hit and clashed sticks against each other. They hit the sticks off the path to ‘sharpen’ them for fishing and poking frog spawn.

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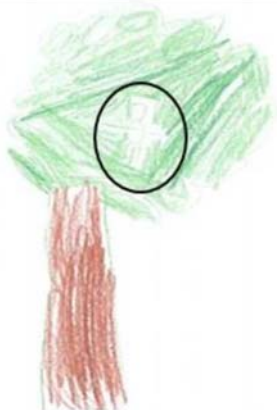
Afterwards, the boys drew and labelled play fighting with sticks as their favourite part of the tour.

These children also talked of **risky construction** as an aspect of risky play. This depicted children’s manipulation of tools and materials to create their own play space, such as a ‘see-saw’, ‘hideout’ and ‘conker-tree-swing’. Rosie outlined how she and her ‘24 cousins on [her] Dad’s side’ gathered tyres and rope from the farm (Figure 5):

We went into this place on the farm and we got loads of tyres and we made lots of things with rope. And we have a swing and there’s another thing that you climb up a rope on. And we made a hammock out of it. (Rosie)

**Table 3.** Table of categories guided by Sandseter's categories of risky play.

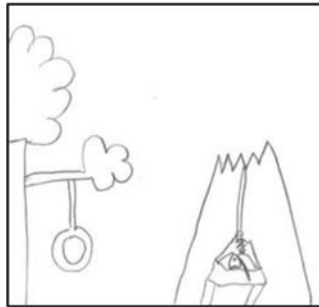
| Types                             | Examples  | Child's Language – describing risk and challenge   |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Heights                        | Climbing the trees<br>Jumping off trees<br>Sinking in hay bales   | 'You can go really high and you might fall off'<br>'Monkey trees'<br>'As high as this house with a shop on top of that'<br>'Jumping out and shooting them' [affords fantasy play]  |
| 2. Speed                          | Rolling/running downhill<br>Playing on the see-saw<br>Racing across bales<br>Going on ramps                               | 'I can't stop, I might bash into something'<br>'You can make them go fast when you want'<br>Fieldnote: Children chose to run down the hill rather than walk on the path  |
| 3. Dangerous tools and materials  | Axe, Rocks, Saw, Hammer, Sledge Hammer, Sticks, Electric fence  | 'It is heavy and dangerous, and I like dangerous'<br>'It gives me electric'<br>Fieldnote: Hitting the stick off the ground to sharpen it   |
| 4. Risky natural elements         | Water, Muck, Moss on the tree trunk, Puddles<br>Going in with the animals [i.e. calves, bull, ram]<br>Feeding the animals | 'Going into the water ... I nearly got taken away'<br>'Getting stuck in the mud'<br>'You can slide down ... it's more fun cos it's slippery'<br>'We knew it was dangerous and we stayed in there'<br>'When they bite you it just feels ticklish' |
| 5. Rough-and-tumble               | Throwing stones at each other<br>Fighting each other with sticks  | Fieldnote: Boys threw stones at girls to guard their territory: 'This is the boy's side'.<br>'Attack'  |
| 6. Disappear/hide                 | Hiding in the hideout<br>Hiding in the long grass<br>Hiding in the tree   | 'Blocking out everywhere'<br>'It is like a big cave'<br>Fieldnote: The monkey trees are better to hide in when they have leaves  |
| 7. Risky constructing             | Making hideouts/dens<br>Making a see-saw out of wood<br>Making a hammock with tyres and rope                              | 'Building a den with bricks and bags'<br>'We got some wood ... then we got a log'.<br>'There is a huge branch and we made it into a swing'   |
| 8. 'Not allowed' (Breaking rules) | Going places and doing things you are not allowed to do:<br>Cycling in a neighbour's driveway<br>Sneaking into the barn   | "extra fun when we are not supposed to be there"<br>'the camera near the milking parlour ... kinda scary if it catches us'   |

**Figure 3.** Dan was hiding in the tree, getting ready to jump.

Rosie's account included a detailed description of creating the playspace over time with her cousins and using this for further risky play endeavours. While this could be a form of dangerous tool use, it went beyond that as it prolonged the risky play element in many



**Figure 4.** Sticks for fishing in the river.



**Figure 5.** Constructing the playspace.

ways, both in the process of construction and in the outcome of the risky play affordances that they created.

**Risky natural elements** were a central feature across the outdoor risky play experiences documented by these children. This included slipping on wet, slimy surfaces. For example, on the tour, one of their play places involved climbing on a mossy tree trunk which they described as ‘slippy’. The children also engaged in risky play in a ‘big puddle’ and a shallow pond. These *natural elements* were identified as having high risky play value and demonstrate the affordances from an Irish geographical context, where rain is prevalent, and winters rarely bring snow for outdoor risky play. Risky natural elements also included animals. For Rosie, ‘going in with the calves’ with her friends was one example of risky play (Figure 6).

Rosie was familiar with the calves, unlike her friends, and described them as ‘cute and soft, and when they bite you it just feels ticklish’. In the focus group, Rosie recalled how her friends felt differently after putting their hands inside the calves’ mouths: they ‘ran out of the milking parlour and hid behind the milk truck’. According to Rosie, her friends ‘think it hurts because they never felt it before’. This depicts that the children not only recognised risk in each other’s play but also recognised that it was a different experience for each other.



**Figure 6.** Playing with the calves.

**Breaking rules** was also identified as a specific form of risky play that involved choosing to engage in play while knowing it was not permitted. Chloe recalled a time when she rolled into a '*big puddle*'. The factor enhancing her enjoyment was that she was not allowed to do it, because the puddle was in '*someone else's driveway*', she wore her '*school coat*' and '*it was raining*'. This combination of being somewhere she was not allowed to go while wearing her good school coat and in the bad weather, all contributed to her motivation to engage in this occupation which collectively made it '*extra fun*'. This example illuminates a form of play that involved doing something risky as it relates to the social environment, where certain behaviours were '*not allowed*'.

### **Theme 2: my power to play (environmental affordances)**

These children accessed risky play experiences from within the risk-rich social and physical environments of their homes and local community, in farms, and along the river (the Weirs) and woodlands near their small town. Data from the tour, photographs and pictures, showed that risky play was usually a social form of play, most often done together with friends and siblings, and without adult surveillance. When the children played together, they encouraged each other to test their boundaries further, which also augmented the risky play potential. For example, for Joe and Shane, 'practicing soccer' was not exciting enough, so they used the trampoline to add thrill (photograph and focus group data). The trampoline offered height, and unpredictability, and engaging in soccer games on the trampoline felt 'like you are exploding your head' (Joe). From the tour and map-making data, the local playground was documented as an important place that provided another source of fun involving peer influence. Children were observed to motivate others to test their boundaries by making remarks such as 'watch me, I'm better than you' (Figure 7).

They also were observed to try out new things in response to these comments. Hence, peer influence increased their engagement in risky play. This influence was not always motivated by being the best but also about including others. For example, Charlie shared his knowledge with Aoife on the tour:

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Fieldnote: When sitting up on the top of the rock-climbing apparatus, Charlie started to tell Aoife what to do – 'get on the big bar, then put your foot here ...'. Aoife then pushed her boundaries and tried to climb as high as Charlie

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**Figure 7.** See what I can do!

These observations demonstrated the influence children could have on developing each other's confidence in taking risks.

In this rural physical environment, play events typically involved multiple types of risky play concurrently that facilitated inclusion, for example, playing on hay bales. The children described through pictures, photographs and discussion 'climbing the bales' and 'racing across the bales' at top speed. For Joe, the excitement involved anticipation alongside action: 'looking inside the shed to check out the height of the bales', then 'going up near the bales'. The hay bales inspired risky play at heights, as according to Joe they were 'as high as this house with a shop on top of that'. Through the children's eyes, the bales afforded other risky play opportunities, also 'sinking in the hay bales' which was enhanced for Owen when he wore his 'goggles'. Owen drew this as his favourite place to play and took a picture of the bales for the camera task (see [Table 4](#) and [Figure 8](#)).

While these children utilised their physical environment to engage in risky play, children also talked in the focus group about knowing about danger and managing risk. Eva liked 'safe' environments and explained how she is careful to prevent injury on the farm. For example, she reported that she only feeds the sheep when they are 'in the pen' and takes extra precautions by picking 'long grass' so that they cannot bite her. In summary, the children demonstrated how their power to play was enabled by physical and social environments that provided affordances for thrill and excitement.

### ***Theme 3: 'Sometimes it is kind of worth it!' (the meaning of risky play)***

This theme explores the meaning of risky play for children. A heightened tone of voice and excited facial expressions and body movements were observed during the final discussion, and the word '*might*' was the term used. For example, Eva explained that she enjoyed the feeling of uncertainty and loss of control when rolling down the hill because she 'might bash into something if [she] can't stop'. On the tour, Rosie expressed her desire to go down the slide headfirst as it was something she had not done before. The enjoyment of uncertainty was a common theme associated with the thrill of risky play for these children.

**Table 4.** Multiple risky play categories combine to maximise play value.

| Play event   | Physical environment   | Physical & social affordances: categories of risky play   | Meaning according to child  | Other aspects of play value   |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| 1. Looking inside the shed to cheque out the height of the bales 2. Climbing hay bales 'as high as this house with a shop on top of that' 3. Racing across the top of the pile of bales 4. Jumping off the top bales 5. Wearing goggles to sink in the hay bales | Large, dry shed/milking parlour<br>Hay bales<br>Muck<br>camera | <b>Heights:</b><br>'as high as'<br>'it's so easy to climb'<br>'I might fall'<br><b>Speed:</b><br>'racing across the bales'<br><b>Risky natural elements:</b><br>'I can't stop and might bash into something'<br><b>Disappear/hide:</b><br>'blocking out everywhere'<br><b>Breaking rules:</b><br>'extra fun when we are not supposed to be there' | 'kinda scary'<br>'my cousin ... have no clue what will happen, but I do so I am more scared!'<br>'exciting and also dangerous'<br>'they are soft'<br>The hay just goes everywhere'<br>'it gets into my t-shirt and doesn't feel good' | Anticipation<br>Competition<br>Rules of the game<br>Dangerous but exhilarating<br>More fun together |



**Figure 8.** (a) The hay bales, and (b) diving in the hay bales with goggles on.

Yet, the risky play was a subjective experience: all children in the study experienced risky play differently, and the play events which elicited risky feelings changed over time. For example, during the tour, children shared an example of what they find risky and fun: tree climbing.

Fieldnote: Aoife (aged 8) stepped on the lowest branch. She described this as 'scary' and 'exciting'. Dan (aged 7) climbed effortlessly to the top of the tree, remarking, 'it's so easy'.

The climbing tree enabled Aoife and Dan to engage in risky play, with differences in experiences of ‘great heights’. For Aoife, risky play meant climbing onto a low height, and the characteristic of height did not need to be ‘great’ to elicit the feelings of risky play. Dan had mastered climbing at a low height and no longer experienced risky feelings, unless he climbed higher. Interestingly, this was not age-related (Aoife was older than Dan) but related to experience. Similarly, ‘great speed’ changed over time and with mastery. Chloe explained during the final discussion that ‘running up and down the ramps’ [at a skatepark] was challenging to begin with as it ‘took [her] a while’. She described ‘feeling really good’ after mastering it but sought more challenges for her enjoyment. These examples portray how the risky play experience changes over time and is part of a challenge and mastery process.

The children described during photo and picture elicitation discussions how they negotiated the restrictions adults placed on their play and shared ways to avoid surveillance while making independent choices. For example, Rosie and her cousins were not allowed to play in the barn. Her father had ‘this camera near the milking parlour’ that they could be seen on, which made it ‘kinda scary’. To overcome this, Rosie described how she and her cousins waited until her father was occupied milking the cows before going near the barn, as she knew it was less likely he would catch them. Similarly, Shane recalled observing his father cutting wood. Shane had not used a saw before and reported that he wanted to do it ‘cause it was dangerous’ so ‘my Dad was cutting wood. He left it there. It was all rusty. I started cutting’ (Shane). In contrast, other children chose not to risk disapproval due to their fear of parental reaction. For example, on the tour, Eva did not go near the water, as she stated that she was not allowed by her parents. So, while some children chose to avoid ‘getting in trouble’, others waited for opportunities to avoid parental supervision to enable engagement in risky play. If the risky play was meaningful for a child, restrictions did not always prove to be barriers to engagement. When asked if parents’ negative reaction dampened the experience, one child replied, ‘No, sometimes it is kind of worth it’ (Chloe).

## Discussion

Using the participatory methods, this study offers an insight into the experiences of risky play for one group of six-to-eight-year olds children living in one rural area in Ireland. Like other studies (Sandseter 2010; Stephenson 2003), these children associated particular feelings with risky play: ‘scary’, ‘exciting’, ‘more fun’ and ‘not relaxing’. This clearly positions fun and excitement alongside scary and uneasy, which demonstrates the ambiguity of play noted earlier (Sutton-Smith 1997). The consistent use of the word *might* be associated with the feeling of fun in uncertainty, and the unknown, showing the centrality of anticipation, as noted in other studies (Nikiforidou 2017). The children proposed alternative ways to view the varied forms of risky play associated with these words and feelings. From their perspective, the danger was not the important part of risky play, but uncertainty and scary were Sandseter’s category of *great heights* or *great speed* became *heights* and *speed*, while natural materials were risky rather than dangerous. This highlights their view that risky play can occur with elements at various levels, that is, a low wall or a steep cliff, re-emphasising the subjectivity of risky play. The cultural context of their lives meant that animals were important and included as part of natural elements,



while other risky play categories included breaking rules and construction. Although surveillance is a known issue in risky play, the conscious breaking of rules and doing things that are 'not allowed' was an important aspect of risky play for these children. This finding illuminates the emergence of autonomy in these six-to-eight-year olds, and has been noted in other studies where children chose to break the rules as risky fun for its own sake (e.g. Promona, Papoudi, and Papadopoulou 2019). Other studies have identified these emerging tensions also, whereby adults place restrictions on the play, but children differ in their views of what they should be permitted to do (e.g. Glenn et al. 2012; Nicholson et al. 2014). Clearly, as children develop, their sense of agency in play expands, but often in the presence of adult disapproval, and hence is viewed as risky.

Natural affordances provided risk-rich opportunities for these children that they appeared to value highly and select over playground opportunities. Playing with natural elements provided much more excitement and potential in comparison to the playground due to the 'might' factor. While daredevil activities were possible in all settings, places like the Weirs afforded more unpredictability, such as slipping on the moss, climbing trees, playing with found objects such as sticks by the water, which shows how unstructured materials in the natural environment contributes to risky play potential (Sandseter 2012). As noted by Bundy, in such spaces, children imagine what can be played, and play is about daring and challenge, and less about ability (Bundy et al. 2011). In many of the play events described, the physical environment also incorporated diverse and flexible opportunities for risky play engagement so that one child could climb on a lower branch while another went up higher or one ran across the bales while the other slid down. The flexibility of these natural environments enabled to play at the 'just-right' level of the child and offers insights into how natural playspaces can become the just-right environment for play (Lynch and Hayes 2015).

Central to their risk-taking was the influence of siblings and peers, who proposed novel ways of playing which extended and enhanced the play events, as noted in other studies of five-to-six-year olds (Nikiforidou 2017) and six-to-twelve-year olds (Morronegiello et al. 2013). This is an important aspect, as it enables children who do not perceive play affordances for risk or who differ in their motivation for risky play to engage in play that may otherwise be absent from their experiences. Children in this study showed different levels of prowess irrespective of age, showing that exposure and experience were a more influential factor, which has been identified elsewhere (Lynch 2009). In Lynch's study, time-diaries showed that children who were part of the same social group had similar activity profiles despite being a year younger or older. So, although findings show that children's risky play engagement is determined by many factors, including play preferences, age, gender and motivation, this study advances our understanding of risky play as an important social phenomenon.

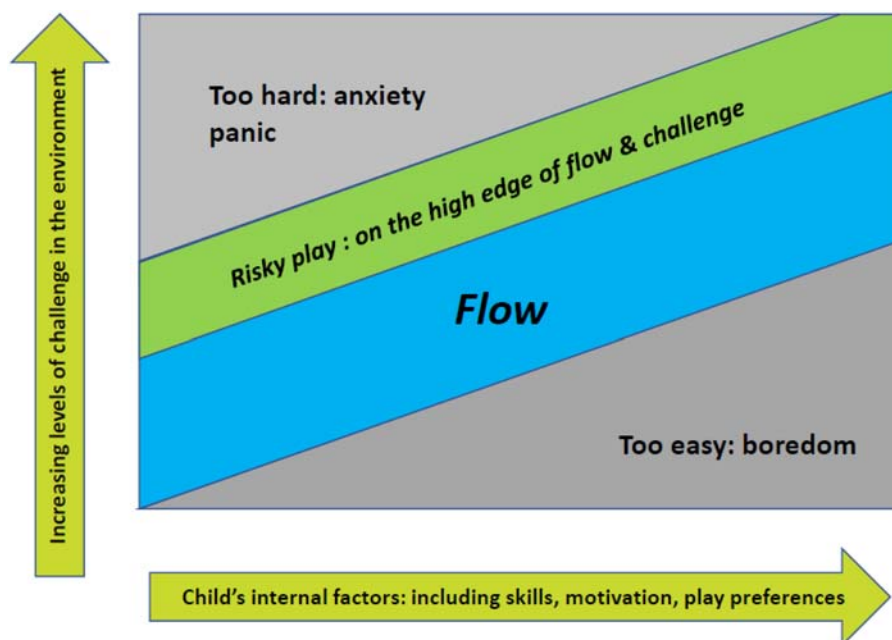
However, it has been noted that a child's motivation to engage in risky play is also determined by adult supervision and culture (Sandseter 2012). For these Irish children, risky play experiences were an outcome of the socio-spatial-cultural context of their lives. These six-to-eight-year olds lived in a small community and had freedom and autonomy to roam near their homes either on the farm or around the small town. Families knew each other and were beginning to give the children the freedom to play outdoors while trying to set rules to keep the child safe from harm. This has been noted as a balancing process (Little 2006; Sandseter 2012), that requires consideration of the *risk-*

*benefit balance* (Ball 2002). There is evidence of how this risk-benefit balance is beneficial for children and that when children play freely with unstructured materials, they are encouraged to take manageable risks and overcome challenges together (Bundy et al. 2011). Furthermore, through opportunities in risky play, children learn sound judgement in assessing and confronting risks in relation to their own capabilities (Sandseter 2009c; Wyver et al. 2010). While no child talked of experiences of misadventure or unfairness in risky play, this is an area that requires further investigation as children may have edited their stories (Curtin 2001) and a more longitudinal approach to researching this issue would be valuable.

It was evident that risky play was a subjective experience for these children, which evolves overtime. If the level of risk did not meet their needs, the children labelled this as ‘too easy’, as it did not provide enough challenge. When the level of risk in the environment was greater than their play abilities, the children tagged this as ‘too dangerous’. Hence the level of risk of the environment must also increase for the child to continue to experience risky play over time. This mirrors the concept of flow, which describes a state of optimal experience when individuals are engrossed in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Yet, for risky play, the point of satisfaction lies at the border, where flow is close to the high challenge. Equally, as a child master a task, they naturally progress to seeking greater risk and master challenges at a higher level (Stephenson 2003), which in turn enhances their risk appraisal (Brussoni et al. 2012). What is risky for one child may not be not risky for another due to each child’s varying combination of internal factors [capacities, knowledge, skills and attitudes] (Hocking 2009) combined with the affordances in the environment. Thus, risky play occurs when the fit between the level of risk and challenge in the environment and the child’s internal factors provides an appropriate challenge (Little and Eager 2010). The term *risky play process* captures these concepts and is illustrated in the graph below (Figure 9).

## Limitations

This was a small-scale study with a small sample size, time constraints in one rural town. The rationale of choosing one small town was in order to recruit participants who were more likely to have a close knowledge of each other and of the playspaces and affordances within the town. This was a strength of the study in that it enabled the children to become at ease quickly with the researchers and the research under investigation; however, it may also have limitations as an approach, as the children were from a similar sociocultural-spatial background. In addition, the data that children shared with us may have been influenced by the relationships that children had with each other, being friends, siblings or cousins. While this may have limited what they wished to tell us, it appeared however to enhance their wish to share their experiences. The presence of adults during the tour in data generation may have influenced the findings alongside peer influences, as risky play most often occurs out of sight of adults. Furthermore, the majority of literature concerning risky play is based in school environments, while this study examines children’s risky play engagement in their home and local suburban communities. Further extended exploration of risky play with similar age groups and from a gendered perspective in other geographical areas and contexts (diverse urban and rural settings) is important to add to the body of evidence.



**Figure 9.** The risky play process.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore children's perspectives (aged six to eight years) of outdoor risky play in Ireland through a child-friendly, multi-method approach. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledges the child's right to play and emphasises the duty to consult the child in all matters affecting them (1989). For risky play, there is a need to explore children's perspectives, as adults may not be privy to the play occupations of children (Lynch 2018). Risky play experiences of children in this study formed eight risky play categories, which comprised variations to existing categories, and included play with animals, risky construction and breaking rules. These forms of play were embedded in the culture of rural Ireland, and the subjectivity of the children's risky play experiences overtime was captured as a *risky play process*. For these children, the risky play was significantly related to social play, and enhanced by peer influence, and considerably meaningful for these children. However, engaging in risky play occupations sometimes required negotiating environmental barriers and seizing opportunities. While adults placed restrictions on play to minimise risk, children of this age group were becoming more autonomous in their play. Although this brought the risk of disapproval, in the children's words, 'Sometimes it is kind of worth it'.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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