

# **What are the views of early years practitioners on the provisions of risky play and its relevance in supporting children's development and self-confidence?**

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## **Figures and Tables**

Figure 1 A table to show participant profiles..... p 6

Figure 2 A chart to show participants levels of comfort with children engaging in risky play in their care.....p 7

Figure 3 A graph to show the age group participants work with and their levels of comfort in facilitating risky play.....p 7

Figure 4 A graph to show how participants scored their levels of comfort with each area of risky play.....p 8

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## **Introduction**

Risky play is a type of play children engage in for their own innate desire; it often involves challenge, risk of injury and experiencing feelings of fear and exhilaration simultaneously (Sandseter 2011). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2017) states practitioners have a duty to protect children in their care but are also required to provide enabling environments which support children's individual needs and interests. Development Matters (Early Education 2012) includes 'managing risks' as part of the guided milestones for children, suggesting that risks are positive and necessary for children's development of self-regulation, creativity, problem solving and socialisation skills (Brussoni et al 2017); however, some practitioners may show reluctance for this type of play to happen in their care. Phrases such as "get down," "don't climb," and "be careful" may be heard in early years (EY) settings which can deter children from exploring risk-taking opportunities (Schumaker 2016). However, not all practitioners are uncomfortable with this type of play; some actively encourage it and I was interested to explore what influences practitioners' comfort with this kind of play.

Working in the EY for over 10 years, I have worked in settings that value risky play and actively encourage it, but I have also worked in settings where risky play was considered dangerous and something to be avoided (Schumaker 2016). This led me to wonder what influences how practitioners respond to children taking risks in their care. On returning to my workplace setting after being furloughed during the first UK lockdown, I had noticed some changes to how children approached risky play. As this was a current situation there was very little research, other than from Ofsted (2020) who had started to compile practitioner's views, but other research had not been published at this point so I was keen to explore this. As I delved into research surrounding the topic of risky play, I found a wealth of material supporting the importance of risky play for self-regulation, self-confidence and developing resilience (Nelson Niehues et al 2013). However, I found little evidence on whether there was a difference between children who regularly engaged in risky play and those that did not and I wanted to see what other practitioners had found in their experience. My aims led me to conduct an ethnographic research study where I collected mostly qualitative data through an online questionnaire.

## **Existing Literature**

Children naturally seek out play which challenges their abilities (Little, Wyver and Gibson 2011), infants and young children are curious about the world around them (Veselack, Miller and Cain-Chang 2015) as humans have an innate desire to take risks (Early Education 2021). Risk can often be perceived as negative and something to be avoided, especially with young children (Obee, Sandseter and Harper 2020), however, with the opportunity to experience it, children can learn about consequence and build confidence in their own abilities (Boyer 2006 cited in Karaca 2020). Piaget (1936 in Featherstone 2017) suggested children's learning is influenced by first-hand experiences and the people around them. If children are repeatedly made to believe they are not capable, their self-confidence in their abilities will not grow (Featherstone 2017). Adult's own anxieties may deter children from risk-taking which could affect them developing self-confidence in their own ability and skills (Little, Wyver and Gibson 2011).

Perceptions of risk can vary between cultures and existing research suggests the Western culture is more risk averse than others (Little, Sandseter and Wyver 2012). Children are playing outdoors less than in previous generations which could be due to a heightened awareness of safety and

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**Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University**

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risks with more parental and societal concerns of danger (Brussoni et al 2012). Western adults tend to apply more control to children's play to lessen the chance of injury due to fear of accountability and litigation (Little, Sandseter and Wyver 2012). As more children are attending early childcare settings, it is important they have access to a stimulating environment, which allows them to take risks and empowers them to construct their own learning (Stonehouse 2001 cited in Little, Wyver and Gibson 2011). Not all adults are opposed to risk and many actively encourage children in their care to engage in challenging play (McFarland and Gull Laird 2017), however, much of children's play is supervised and regulated by an adult (Sandseter, Kleppe and Sando 2020). Infants especially are perceived as fragile with a need to be kept safe (Johnson 2010, cited in Veselack, Miller and Cain-Chang 2015), therefore their environments tend to be very safe, risk-free zones but may not fully support their development.

McFarland and Gull Laird (2017) state risky play is having the opportunity to explore gross motor skills freely and assess risk themselves. Sandseter (2007) suggests there are 6 categories of risky play: heights, high speed, harmful tools, dangerous elements, rough and tumble and being out of sight. Tovey (2010) describes it as play where children can climb, balance, jump, hang or slide off objects. There is little research on infants playing outdoors and taking risks as existing literature focuses on children over the age of 3 (Kleppe 2018; Veselack, Miller and Cain-Chang 2015). Babies from birth take risks daily when mastering new movements, trying new foods and exploring different textures (Early Education 2021), these may not be risks to older, more developed children, however, they pose the same experience of accomplishing a challenge (Kleppe 2018). Babies need time and opportunity to learn about the world around them through repetition to feel secure in their abilities and self-worth (Arnerich 2018).

Practitioners seem to understand the importance of risky play for children's learning and development and believe they actively encourage it, however, Little, Wyver and Gibson (2011) found when observing for research, risk taking opportunities were often limited. A balance is needed between allowing children the opportunity to test out their abilities but also having a supportive adult close by if they welcome assistance (Brussoni et al 2012). Bottrill (2018) suggests children should be involved in assessing risks with practitioners to deepen their understanding, and practitioners should model risk-taking skills for children to observe how to measure and determine risks. Bandura, (1977 in Johnston et al 2018) believed adults demonstrating the behaviour desired helped children to understand what was expected from them, suggesting that if practitioners are open to risk taking and display a willingness to have a go themselves then children will feel safe and encouraged to have a go at something that challenges them. White (2014) argued a strong knowledge of the children and their abilities is needed to effectively support the child and their individual needs. An adult's role is important in risk taking as children need to feel a sense of security to have the courage to try out an idea independently (DfE 2017). Bundy et al (2009) found practitioners may be reluctant towards risky play as they fear being held personally responsible if a child is injured. Play England (2020) argues that minor injuries are part growing up, essential for building resilience and a necessary part of learning which should not be denied as children cannot learn about risk if they do not have the opportunity to experience it (Early Education 2021).

Play England (2020) stated one of the most toxic outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic was how it had affected children's play, mental and physical health and development. In March 2020, the UK entered a nationwide lockdown where settings were closed to most children, forcing them to stay at home for a prolonged period (Public Health Scotland 2020), depriving some children of

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**Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University**

---

access to outdoor risky play opportunities and limiting their freedom and sense of autonomy (Ball, Gill and Yates 2020). The EYFS (DfE 2017) suggests children should access 3 hours of play outside each day, however some children had no access to outdoors in lockdown due to their home having no garden and their families worried about contracting the virus (Ofsted 2020). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds spent less time playing and being outside than more advantaged families, resulting in some babies and toddlers missing out on activities that support their development (Local Government Association 2021). On children's return to settings, many gravitated towards physically challenging activities, some with better control over equipment such as bikes and scooters, yet other children lacked stamina (Manners 2020). Nearly all of practitioners asked in research conducted by Ofsted (2020) felt all children had been affected in some way by the first lockdown, with some providers reporting a need to focus on children's wellbeing and emotional needs and others prioritising outdoor play and gross motor skills.

Children need to experience risk to master their environments, failure and persistence helps them to build resilience to cope with adversities (Nelson Niehues et al 2013, Play England 2020). Personal, social and emotional development and physical development are prime areas of the EYFS (DfE 2017), to develop in these areas of learning, children need a supportive but challenging environment to build their self-confidence and physical abilities. Denying children the opportunity to risk take may hinder their development of emotional resilience and physical capability (Johnston et al 2018, Schumaker 2016). When children have learnt to overcome a challenge, their self-confidence in their own abilities will rise and they will experience a sense of pride in their achievements boosting their self-esteem (Sandseter 2011). In risky play, failure is just as important as succeeding as it can help children to explore different ways of doing something to achieve (Tovey 2010). To keep attempting a task they find difficult builds a child's internal motivational drive to master a challenge and accomplish what they set out to do (Mcfarland and Gull Laird 2017). The Characteristics of Effective Learning (Early Education 2012) are used in settings to help practitioners observe how children test out their ideas, think critically, have a go and to keep trying until they achieve. Allowing children to access risky play frequently enables deep levels of learning to take place, when a child repetitively engages in an activity, not only do they become familiar and secure with the movements but mastering an activity helps to develop and strengthen new neural pathways (Arnerich 2018).

## **Methodology**

As the researcher, my ontological assumption was that practitioners working in EY settings may or may not have some reservations about risky play and I wanted to explore further what influences their views. The epistemological assumption was that practitioners may understand the importance of risky play, but did they value it enough to ignore any reservations they have to facilitate it effectively in EY settings? Finally, my axiological assumption was that there was a substantial amount of research informing on the benefits for risky play but little evidence to support whether there was a difference between children who regularly engaged in risky play and those who did not, providing a different perspective to explore.

An interpretivist approach was used as I collected mainly qualitative data of practitioner's attitudes and what influenced them (Denscombe 2017). The participants were asked questions and had the opportunity to expand on their answers to further explain their opinions, enabling me to gain further insight into their beliefs and values (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2017). Due to my

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experience in EY education, my own knowledge was used to interpret data, whilst remaining as unbiased as possible through approaching the data analysis with an open mind (Coles and McGrath 2010). An ethnographic approach was used as I have an insider's view and knowledge of EY culture (Brewer 2000).

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic I decided to use an online questionnaire that could be accessed remotely to collect data. The aims of the study and existing literature were reflected upon when planning questions to ask which would enable findings to be compared. As observations can give researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of participant's social world (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight 2010), I contemplated incorporating them into my data collection. Unfortunately, all data had to be collected online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, so observations were no longer an option. A representative sample was obtained through sharing the questionnaire to my private Facebook account asking people who worked in EY to complete it and onto EY specific groups to ensure all data collected was relevant (Denscombe 2017) and I received a full 20 responses.

Ethics are the moral principles which underpin all research and must be considered throughout (Atkins and Wallace 2012). Ethics consider how research may affect participants involved and it is the researcher's responsibility to consider all possibilities of potential harm and how to avoid (Sikes 2004, Denscombe 2017). I used the Ethical Guidelines for Education Research (BERA 2018) to ensure my research was ethical and before collecting any data, I sought approval from the Nottingham Trent University Ethics Committee. Before any participant involvement, informed consent was obtained, acting as an agreement to ensure participants understood the purpose of the research and that I, the researcher, was taking all steps to protect them and their data (Atkins and Wallace 2012, Oakley 1999), I did this by using the first question in the questionnaire to provide participants with the purpose of the research, how their data would be used, their ethical rights and asked them to create a password if they consented to taking part, they could only move on to the next question if they created a password and gave consent. Participants were reassured that confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld so they felt comfortable in giving their honest opinions with the knowledge that they would not be caught up in controversy in present and future situations for the answers they provide (Atkins and Wallace 2012). Participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. The researcher worded the questions to ensure participants would not experience offence or harm and could not be identified by any answers provided (Reardon 2006). Participants were informed their data would be stored securely and when it would be destroyed (Punch 2016).

To analyse the qualitative data, I categorised the questions that answered each research aim, then used thematic coding to go through the data and identify answers which were similar by highlighting key phrases and patterns to group together and interpret their meaning (Clarke 2017). Existing literature was revisited throughout the analysis to see if the findings supported or contradicted what was already known (Coles and McGrath 2010). Iteration was used by revisiting the data multiple times to make deeper connections, sharpen focus and ensuring no links were missed (Srivastava 2009).

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Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University

## Findings and Analysis

Figure 1 shows the profile of all participants. When directly quoting a participant, I will use P followed by their number to abbreviate:



Participant	Gender	Job Role	Years' Experience	Age of children worked with
1	F	Senior	8	2-3
2	F	Senior	9	0-1
3	F	Nursery Practitioner	12	2-3
4	F	Child Minders Assistant	7	Not Set
5	F	Forest School Leader	8	3-4
6	F	Nursery Practitioner	6	2-3
7	F	Assistant Psychologist	7	3-5
8	F	Nursery Practitioner	4	2-3
9	F	After School club Assistant	9	4-5
10	F	Nursery Lead	10	3-4
11	F	Teacher	14	4-5
12	M	Teacher	14	4-5
13	F	Nursery Practitioner	2	2-3
14	F	Teacher	20	4-5
15	F	Teaching Assistant	25	4-5
16	F	Nursery Practitioner	4	2-5
17	F	Teacher	5	4-5
18	F	Teacher	6	4-5
19	F	Teaching Assistant	23	4-5
20	F	Support Practitioner	4	1-3

Figure 1

# What are the views of early years practitioners on the provisions of risky play and its relevance in supporting children's development and self-confidence?

Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University

## Risky play and Practitioner's level of comfort facilitating

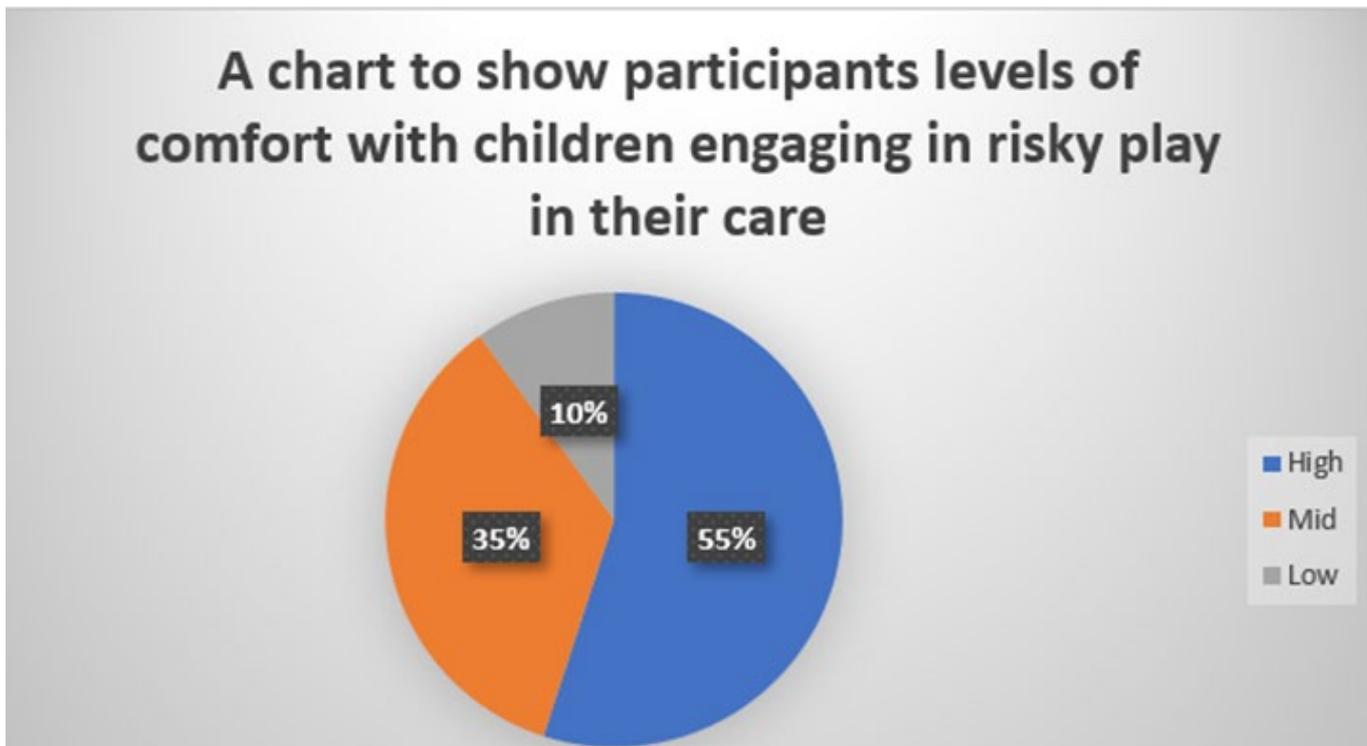


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows most participants scored themselves highly comfortable with facilitating risky play. However, I found that there was a difference in levels of comfort depending on the age group participants worked with as seen in figure 3.

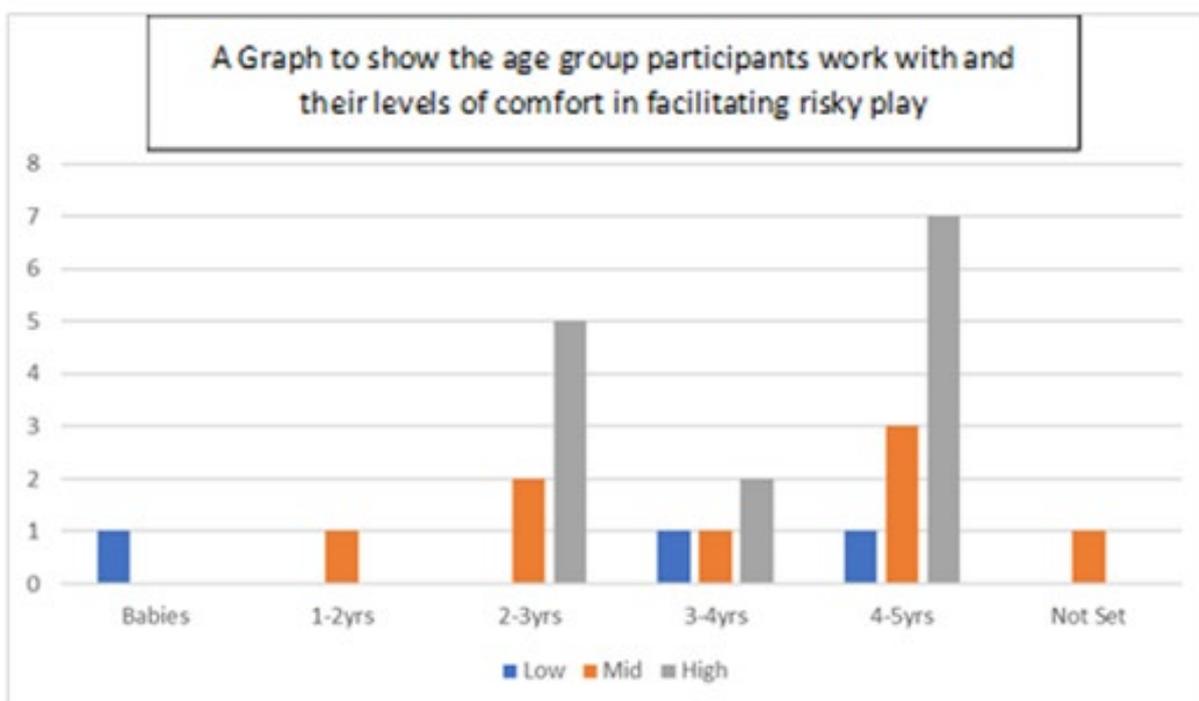


Figure 3

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Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University

Figure 4 shows most participants do not feel comfortable with children being out of sight or engaging in rough and tumble play. Some participants felt supervision was needed in the initial stages of children risk taking, until:

*“rules and trust were established.” -P11*

Overall, respondents scored highly in levels of comfort with climbing, balancing and using tools. The participant who worked with 0-1 year old's listed painting and sensory experiences as a risky play opportunity for that age group.

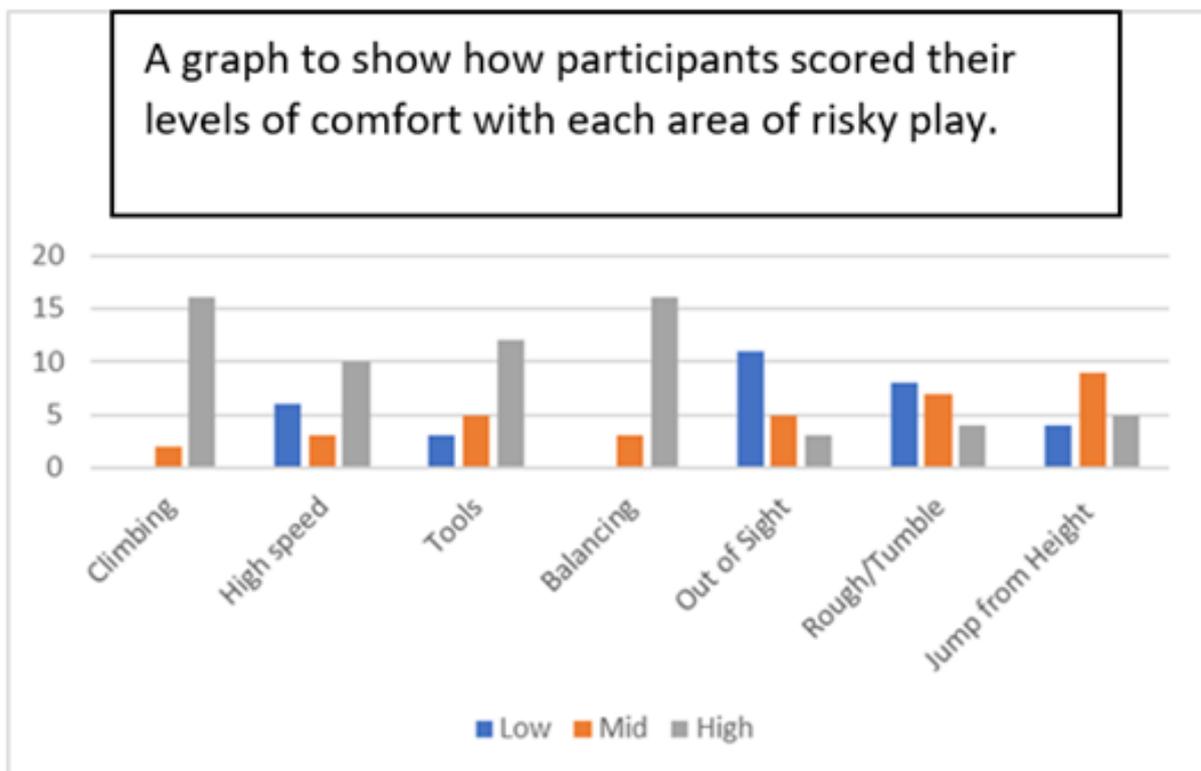


Figure 4

There was a difference found between job roles participants held. Nursery practitioners, teachers and the forest school practitioner scored highly in levels of comfort compared to participants in assistant roles. P20 stated a reservation they had was:

*“risk of injury and questions that could follow from others.”*

3 participants who held positions that were not assistant roles mentioned some of their reservations to risky play were untrained and inexperienced staff members supporting children when risk-taking.

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## **Influences of risky play on children's self-confidence**

All participants agreed that risky play was beneficial for children with over half stating it was important for risk management and supporting learning and development. 19/20 participants felt there was a difference in self-confidence between children who regularly engaged in risky play and those who did not, particularly in classroom activities such as answering questions. Although they did not state what they felt influenced this, some participants described children who engaged in risky play more as having high confidence whereas the children who did not appeared to be hesitant. P2, said she did not feel it was something she could tell when working with 0-1 year olds, however she acknowledged some 0-1 year olds were more drawn to climbing and messy play activities compared to others.

8/20 participants said children who engaged in risky play showed higher levels of self-confidence in new situations. 3 participants stated children who did not engage in risky play were more hesitant, compared to children who did who were more resilient, showing persistence with activities.

## **Influences on practitioner's confidence in facilitating risky play**

Over half of the respondents said that parent's attitudes were the main influence on their reservations to facilitate risky play due to some parents not understanding the benefits and that this varied across parents from different cultural backgrounds. P2 stated past experiences and being a parent herself contributed to her reservations. To overcome the parental barriers, P14 stated their setting ran stay and play sessions to help parents feel more comfortable with children engaging in risk.

Although many participants mentioned parental views as a reservation, most did report that parents were actually positive about risky provision. P6 stated some parents chose their setting because of the forest school facilities, P8 stated parents were glad children did it in the setting and not at home and participants 2 and 10 stated parents trusted them to manage the risks effectively with their children. However, ¼ of participants stated parents had a negative view on risky play. 3 out of the 5 teachers reported parents were more negative, the other two teachers said views were mixed and no teachers reported all positive parental views. Yet 4/5 nursery practitioners said parent's views on risky play were positive and only one reported views were negative. P14 who is a teacher stated:

*"Many are now on board, but we have some who ask for their children to not take part in various activities. We always insist the children do!"*

## **Effects of Lockdown**

Half of the participants stated they felt they saw a change in children when they returned to settings after the first lockdown.

*"some children who had used to engage with risky play before had stopped doing so"-P11*

A ¼ of the respondents felt children had had less opportunity to risk take during lockdown. However, P18 felt that the bubble system on return to school had a greater impact due to time

# **What are the views of early years practitioners on the provisions of risky play and its relevance in supporting children's development and self-confidence?**

**Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University**

---

and access limitations on certain resources which needed to be shared between different bubbles. Some participants talked about how children had embraced being able to take risks in play again on their return.

*"it was something they missed whilst being at home & when returning to settings they embraced having the chance to use these types of equipment" -P15*

*"many children had lots of pent-up energy that was released through risky play."-P10*

## **Literature Discussion**

Knowing the children and their individual abilities is fundamental for the practitioner to support them appropriately (White 2014), to establish ground rules to effectively support children's needs. Existing research by Little, Sandseter and Wyver (2012) suggests the Western world is more risk averse than other cultures, however my research found that some practitioners in the UK believe parents from other cultures are the most worried about their children participating in risky play, perhaps many cultures are also risk averse and some more than others.

Although there is very little existing research exploring babies and risky play, the idea of a baby engaging in risk seems to be unpopular, possibly due to adult's desire to protect infants. How adults view and respond to the needs of children is vastly shaped by how they are viewed within the society they are raised in (James and Prout 2000). During current times, the social construct of the child is more respectful to their needs and views with a desire to protect from harm. However, if adults are overprotective this could result in babies missing out on challenging experiences that are important for their development (Johnson 2010, cited in Veselack, Miller and Cain-Chang 2015). Children are naturally curious and capable and adults can show respect too through trust (Little Wyver and Gibson 2011). It could be argued that everyday routines and experiences are challenges to babies (Kleppe 2018), as they explore the world around them, they are constantly being exposed to new stimuli which pose a risk and they need to master movements and new experiences through repetition to feel secure (Arnerich 2018).

Even though some participants aired reservations or may have scored their comfort with risky play as low, they all listed risky play opportunities children could access whilst in their care, this supports evidence that although practitioners may be reluctant toward risky play, they do not let this interfere with the child's learning experience (Bundy et al 2012).

## **Recommendations**

A recommendation for further study would be to involve more practitioners who work with babies. Although there was only one participant who worked with this age group, they provided a different perspective to what could be considered a risk to very young children. As existing research is minimal with this age group, further exploration could provide more evidence on what a risk-taking opportunity for a baby is and how early years practitioners can facilitate appropriate challenges for this age.

Although participants shared great insight into their views and what influenced them, obtaining observations in the research study would have enabled me to collect first-hand accounts of

# What are the views of early years practitioners on the provisions of risky play and its relevance in supporting children's development and self-confidence?

Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University

---

practitioners facilitating play which would have provided a greater insight into how practitioners may react in the moment and if it is the same as how they think they do.

Further study could incorporate an international view of risky play and comparisons across different countries and cultures could be explored to truly understand cultural influences and how this may impact children's outcomes in terms of self-confidence. Learning about how different cultures facilitate risky play could be beneficial to all practitioners working with children in the EY to share best practice and high-quality learning environments.

Practitioners could feel more comfortable with facilitating risky play through further training and continuous development to support understanding of their role when facilitating risks, what is an acceptable risk for the age of the children they work with but also assessing each individual child's capabilities. The new Birth to 5 Matters guidance (Early Education 2021) supports the new EYFS (2021) and has an abundance of information to support practitioners understanding of the whole child, the importance of observation to gain knowledge but also a trusting, loving relationship being fundamental for a child's emotional wellbeing. Although it is not the only framework which can be used and is non-statutory, it presents a research-based perspective which can support child-led practice.

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# What are the views of early years practitioners on the provisions of risky play and its relevance in supporting children's development and self-confidence?

Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University

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# What are the views of early years practitioners on the provisions of risky play and its relevance in supporting children's development and self-confidence?

Rebecca Staples - Nottingham Trent University

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# What are the views of early years practitioners on the provisions of risky play and its relevance in supporting children's development and self-confidence?

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