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practice

Assessing risk in adventure playgrounds

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Adventure playgrounds in the Netherlands vary in size, characteristics and the methods of supervision. There has never been an inventory of the number of playgrounds and kind of structures. However, adventure playgrounds are generally natural playgrounds with sand and water play and trees to climb, as well as building playgrounds where huts can be built, and some sites combine both types. The supervision of the daily practice ranges from parents, volunteers and professionals to public playgrounds with no supervision at all.

This article describes a small-scale case study about the supervision of risk in play on an adventure playground (van Rooijen, 2012). A session that involved children in construction activities was followed by interviews with the playground staff. The analysis of the interviews raised a number of issues that gave more insight about this kind of children's play and the actions of practitioners. It also provided information that could be relevant for playwork practitioners in their daily work.

The adventure playground in this case study is a public, freely accessible playground in the city of Utrecht where professionals from the local community organisation monitor and supervise activities. In the design, implementation and supervision there is a vision to give children the space for their exploratory play. The professional playground workers have an accompanying role. The principles of the Polish educationalist, Janusz Korczak, underpin the operation of the playground. Korczak was a doctor in Poland at the beginning of the 20th century; he was particularly known as a pedagogue, writer of (children's) books and principal of an orphanage. He had organised initiatives with and for children that focused on respecting the rights of and responsibility for children, such as a 'children's court'. He stressed the importance of equality and the need for dialogue with children.

Korczak states that adult's perception of risk in play may be based on fear, and sometimes they see dangers that are not there. This influences children's perceptions about what can and cannot be dangerous. Korczak says that children are capable of discerning what is and is not dangerous. In his book *How to love a child* he argues the right of a child to his own death: 'From fear that death will take our child away, we deprive our child his life; because we do not want it to die, we will not allow it to live' (Korczak, 1984, p 50). The educational approach of the adventure playground is based on this vision and is translated in the guideline: 'Every child has its right to its own bruise.' In daily practice it can sometimes be difficult for the playwork practitioners to find a balance between letting the children be completely free in their play and jumping in to help solve situations and problems that children face.

This is especially evident in play where there is any risk, such as building huts where a child may hammer a thumb. The following examines in more detail the role of professionals supervising this risky play.

Interviews with staff

The case study was conducted in holiday time during a session in which 24 children aged 7-12 were divided into three groups. Each group was allocated one of the following tasks: jumping over a ditch, making a bonfire, and demolishing household junk, which were all normal activities in the playground. Two playground workers and a childcare professional were assigned to each of the tasks. The children were given a brief explanation of the task and were told: "Go and do it!", although they did not have to take part if they did not want to. The professionals were instructed to stay in the background and allow the children to make all the decisions within the play context. Parents were instructed not to be present at the sessions, although a notification sheet was given to parents with explanation of the activity and the evaluation.

Just like play itself, supervising play is very subjective and personal. Playwork intervention is a very complex process that is influenced by many variable factors (Delahoy, 2012). Although playwork intervention has general principles on which it is based (PPSG, 2005), the way in which these *Playwork principles* are put into practice is very individual and judgement-laden. Immediately after the play session the practitioners took part in a semi-structured interview about their attitudes to supervising risky play. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and the responses of the practitioners were categorised into different themes and issues.

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Significant themes

The playwork practitioners reported the following beliefs:

- Risky play is essential, but only if it contributes to the development of the child.
- Practitioners should be aware of what can possibly go wrong.
- It is not necessary to take too much risk.
- The practitioner must be able to assess the children's abilities and skills.
- Practitioners need to prepared if an accident should occur.

A further significant theme to emerge from the interviews is that practitioners use many terms to describe their approach to intervention during this session. The forms of intervention that were mentioned by the practitioners were classified and placed in a 'ladder'. The model of the ladder is used to order the terms that professionals were using to describe intervention in risky play, from no intervention to complete takeover of the activity.

Intervention ladder

1. They can do it on their own.
2. Leave them to it/sit on your hands.
3. Consciously pay attention.
4. Let them think for themselves.

5. Give them a choice.
6. Stimulate.
7. Suggest.
8. Explain.
9. Help.
10. Let them see by doing.
11. Interfere/do it for them.
12. Direct.
13. Take over.

The use of a ladder could suggest that supervision is a static process, that the practitioner chooses a certain method of intervention and then they can go lower or higher during the activity when a more or less intensive style of supervision is needed. However, the interview with the practitioners indicated that the process is, in fact, much more complex. The professionals indicated that they are constantly trying to make an assessment, going back and forth as well as skipping steps in the ladder. They reported using the following guidelines in order to try to make conscious decisions about which steps to use:

- Know your boundaries: be aware of your own standards and values.
- Set your boundaries: if you consider the risk too big, your involvement can increase.
- Push the boundaries: like the children, your boundaries are flexible and will change over time.

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These assumptions denote a balance between freedom and security, between protection and providing challenges. There is an acknowledgement of the child's right to develop and that the practitioner should be able to assess the children's abilities and skills (Prott, 2010) and the risk potential.

In literature about risk in play, little is said about how certain observations of children can affect the reactions of the supervisor. Delahoy (2012) uses the term 'tipping point' as a specific example of when an observation of a child needs immediate intervention. Usually there are general statements about the things that should be taken into account, such as the characteristics of the child, including age, skills and maturity, and the way children can use their capabilities (Lindon, 2011). According to Playlink (2011), professionals must be available for support when problems occur and subsequently make an assessment of the degree of intervention. In the case of a child who is very anxious or overwhelmed by the risky situation and may not be crying but exhibits physical and mental signals that they cannot manage the situation, a supportive intervention is needed by a professional.

Supervising play involving risk seems to be, among other things, based on what the practitioner observes about the child's behaviour, and the subsequent assessment and choice of intervention. From the interview data it appeared that the practitioners mentally process their observations of the children in an internalised, sequential process wherein they question the risk involved in play at every stage. This assessment was based on what the supervisors saw, and did not take into account the children's version of risk assessment.

In addition to the above elements that emerged from the case study interviews, the practitioners felt that that there were certain basic conditions that had to be considered if children were to engage in play that involved risk, as follows:

- *Parents* – should be informed about the risky play possibilities, although explicit permission should not necessary.
- *Age limits* – setting an age limit is necessary for certain activities, like making a bonfire.
- *Supervision* – this is a contentious element that the practitioners could not answer easily as to whether children should be left completely alone and unattended during risky activities.
- *Time* – practitioners should have the opportunity to fully focus on the children and the activity.
- *Little leaders* – children engaging in risky play as a group need the leaders within, as they will provide an example to follow, supervision and help other children.
- *Materials* – it is important to make available what the children need for this type of play.

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Risk in children's own terms?

In understanding risk in play we can learn from the French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). He made an important contribution to the discourse on raising children, in particular in his book *Emile*. Rousseau emphasised the importance of children learning from their own experiences. He wrote about 'negative parenting' whereby a parent doing nothing in essence created a 'miracle of education' (Rousseau, 1980, p 109). Nevertheless, Rousseau advised connecting with what the child could handle and not to confront him prematurely with situations that he still could not understand. Rousseau wrote that an attitude to hazards was required: 'the obstacle must be appreciated in its reality and not a priori prevent all acting.' He stated that man was subject to pain, and finally to death or life-threatening accidents, and that you needed to make the child familiar with these ideas: '... but one should not teach the child to learn this by their names, but by letting him from tasting, without him knowing what he tastes' (Rousseau, 1980, p 133). With this in mind, Rousseau can be regarded as an early advocate for risk in play, where the child can learn to deal with risk and danger from their own experience.

In conclusion, a final provocative thought on this idea of children learning from their own experience. The *Synthesis report and policy recommendations*, in response to the Seminary Outdoor Games describes evidence 'to suggest that the lives of children are increasingly institutionalized, and there is less time for unstructured play' (van Gils, 2008, p 21). Organised activities in adventure playgrounds have the potential to displace the non-organised outdoor play. In other words, if playwork practitioners are providing risky play, do children still have the time and opportunity to discover this form of play for themselves? (van Gils, 2008, p 21). This raises the question of whether, perhaps, risky play is something children must do on their own, without a parent or professional nearby. Could playwork practitioners be in danger of inhibiting the very type of play in which they are hoping children will engage?

Note

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