

Sheridan | Faculty of Applied Health and Community Studies

RECEs Perspectives on Risky Play in Outdoor Settings.

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Abstract

This qualitative study was to understand Register Early Childhood Educators (RECE) perspectives and beliefs about risky play in outdoor childcare settings. The researcher conducted five semi-structured interviews to gain insight and provide a voice for RECEs to share their examples and opinions about risky play. Based on the analysis of the data collected the researcher found five main themes; benefits to skill development for young children, safety, educators' values and beliefs, educators' opinions on parents' views and the outdoor environment. These themes are translated throughout literature as according to McFarland and Laird (2017), they state that in "today's increasingly regulated and controlled society, and safety concerns have lend to reduced opportunities for risky play" (p.159). The research revealed that RECEs understand and express the potential benefits for children when promoting and engaging in risky play, but they also highlighted the various factors that can contribute to the lack of implementation of risky play in childcare settings. This supported the researcher in answering the overarching research question and sub-questions as there was a correlation to previous research studies.

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand RECEs perspectives and beliefs about their definitions of risky play in outdoor settings and provide examples and opinions. Gill, Power & Brussoni (2019) defined it as "Play that is seen as thrilling and exciting, where the possibility of physical injury may exist, but [children] can recognize and evaluate challenges according to their own abilities"(p.31). This research study is important because, since the 1900's children have played outdoors in nature, however recently we have seen the decline in children playing outdoors and engaging in risky activities. The need for more exposure to natural outdoor play is essential to the learning and development of young children. Posing the main research question of "What are Register Early Childhood Educators' perspectives on risky play in outdoor settings? Allowed the researcher to develop a better understanding of the values, beliefs and opinions of experienced RECEs within the field working with young children.

Literature Review

The following literature review provided an outline for the present study

Importance to Development

Besides allowing children to test their limits, develop skills and evaluate potential dangerous situations, risky play provides curiosity about nature, gives a sense of pride and accomplishment, as well as, endless possibilities (Gill et al., 2019 & Brussoni et al., 2012). Therefore, it is imperative to the study that young children should get enough unstructured free play and physical activity, which is essential for young children's lifelong learning.

RECEs Perspectives

Research has shown that perspectives on risky play can be influenced by many factors within the Early Childhood Education field and centers. Is said that "Early Childhood Educators nature experiences seem to be related to adult attitudes and behaviour relating to the environment" (Ernst & Tornabene, 2012, p. 644). Educator's connectedness to nature, and how one's appreciation or mindset for natural environments can influence their practices. RECEs perspectives on risky play tend to be associated with physical and social development, and this can be detrimental to children's learning as they do not have opportunities to explore risk and injury.

Barriers for Risky Play

Ernst and Tornabene (2012) study results show that a "lack of training, access to transportation or natural spaces, safety concerns, lack of supervision and parental support, and accessibility /disability needs" (p.655), seems to be the majority of recurring barriers for young children to engage in risky play. Literature states that societal influences can project clear messages to parents about how to "properly" parent young children and what is good/bad for them. These types of barriers neglect young children to explore new settings, discover new skills and knowledge for themselves, as adults try to keep children "safe".

Environments

Childcare centers outdoor settings should provide opportunities for children to build on or master skills as well as engage in risk and injury play while being supervised. Within the literature it is evident that these outdoor settings "offer limited play value, and are often isolated from the larger landscape, as well as, they tend to follow a "cookie-cutter" design" (Brunelle, Herrington, Coghlan & Brussoni, 2016, p.18). Within a study conducted by Torkar and Rejc (2017) they found that children who played amongst a natural playground had "a wide range of play and learning opportunities" (p. 29), that were not available in the traditional playground.

Summary Statement and Research Questions

Overall, the literature emphasizes the need for more education and communication about risky play with RECEs and parents to support them in understanding the benefits. Along with providing more natural spaces and materials within outdoor settings is necessary more than ever within today society. As a result the overarching research question for this study is what are RECEs perspectives on risky play in outdoor settings? These sub-questions; what is risky play? What is the importance of risky play on child development? What are RECEs perspectives on risky play in outdoor settings? What are the barriers to risky play in outdoor settings? What are outdoor childcare settings lacking?

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative Study, Semi- Structured Individual Interviews.

Instrument

- One to One audio recoding interviews
- 13 questions: 3 demographic, 10 open ended questions
- Interviews were 30-45 minutes in length

Interview Questions

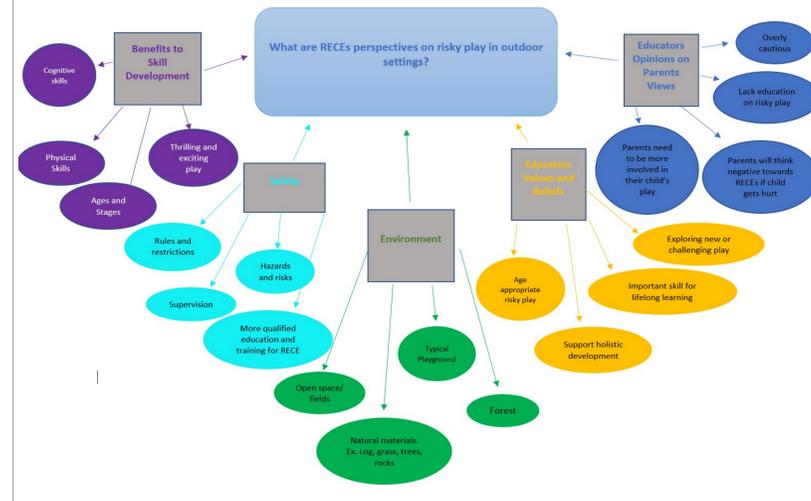
1. Are you a Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE)?
2. How long have you been working with young children in the field?
3. What is the age group do you work with?
4. What is your definition of risky play? What does it look like? Give an example.
5. What is your response/action to a child climbing and or jumping on materials/ equipment?
6. What is your response/action to a child running up or down hill?
7. What is your response/action to a child balancing on uneven surfaces? Ex. rocks, buckets under their feet, etc.
8. What age do you think risky play should start? Why did you choose that?
9. How do you explain your outdoor setting at your center? What material do have you promote risky play?
10. Do you believe that natural outdoor spaces and or materials support risky play? Explain, why?
11. Does your center allow "off/away from center" play spaces? If so, where do you go and how long? How do you get there?
12. What do you think contributes to how you perceive and implement risky play in your outdoor settings?
13. Are you influence by a parents opinion about risky play? If yes, explain what influences you? If not, why?

Procedure

- Obtained permission from the Sheridan Research Ethics Board.
- Recruited participants using purposeful and snowballing sampling.
- Participants were provided with an information letter and consent form to read and sign.
- Interview dates and times were scheduled once participants agreed to the study terms.
- Audio recoding consent forms were signed the day of the interview.
- All interviews were transcribed after conducting each interview.
- Transcriptions were sent to participants by email to ensure quality and accuracy by using member checking.
- Once all participants agreed to transcriptions, they were sent back to then analyzed by the researcher and through the process of triangulation, along with using a coding and thematic analysis.

Participants

- Five participants
- Register Early Childhood Educators
- Ages 20-40 years old
- Gender: Women (100%)



Results and Discussion

Benefits to Skill Development

- Participant 1: "It is useful and important that child play like this as it builds skills that will help them later on in life, like eye hand coordination, balancing and jumping"
- Participant 3: "Every child approaches it differently as they have different skill levels and thinking skills"
- Participant 5: "Which I think is important for brain and physical development"

Safety

- Participant 1: "Children aren't too young to understand safety rules when playing, they just need to be reminded"
- Participant 2: "You would just always need to be on the lookout for hazards or possible danger when children are playing"
- Participant 4: "Just making sure that you are close and that you are supervising the play so the child doesn't get hurt"

Environment

- Participant 2: "We have a field near us, so we would walk there and explore, the children would see trees, flowers and dig for bugs"
- Participant 3: "The playground is a fenced in area that has soft flooring and a play structure"
- Participant 4: "I wish that more centers had more access to nature, unfortunately with urban centers and the vast amount of them, that becomes a downfall to the amount of nature and natural experiences these children can have"

Educators Values and Beliefs

- Participant 1: "It's how you look at it, the risky play. I would look at it different and implement it differently than some lese would"
- Participant 2: "I would also say trust is important, do I trust the child to run from one end to the other safely"
- Participant 4: "My own upbringing allowed me to understand the benefits to risky play and how fun and exciting it can be for young children"

Educators Opinions on Parents Views

- Participant 2: "I would take the parents values and opinions into consideration, but its important to inform parents of the benefit of risky play"
- Participant 3: "I feel that parents don't give their children enough credit for what they can do"
- Participant 4: "I am influenced by parents in the way that I am a bit more cautious when the children are doing risky play"
- Participant 5: "I have to remind the parents that their children are going to be outside and get dirty and fall, its normal"

Results

The findings throughout the data analysis showed that the significant five themes were evident. Themes showcased are benefits to skill development, safety, environment, educators vales and beliefs of risky play and educators' opinions on parent's views of risky play. All five participants answered all thirteen questions in-depth, where their voices and perspectives were heard. During the data analysis process, each participant's answers exhibited common similarities and phrases that contrasted throughout previous literature studies. Ex. Children needing supervision and gained skill development. These common similarities that highlighted each theme are in participants' quotes in the chart above.

Discussion and Limitations

The themes presented support pervious literature studies as there was an overlap of the results. Finding similarities within the present study's codes and themes to the themes found throughout literature helped gain a better understanding of the research topic. The questions asked during the interview process allowed the researcher to gain valuable information from participants that were supported in the literature to answer the main research question and overall study. An example would be the first theme, benefits to skill development. It is seen in literature when Ernst and Tornabene (2012) report, "young children playing in a natural environment had a greater increase in gross motor skill development, motor fitness, balance, and coordination than their peers in traditional playground setting" (p. 645). Common similarities with participant one, who stated during the study, question seven, line twenty-seven, that risky play is "useful and important...as it builds skills that will help them later on in life, like eye-hand coordination, balancing, jumping etc."(1.Participant, personal communications, January 16,2020). The literature supported the present research study conducted as it provided similar results and conclusions. Contrasting evidence from the literature review to the concluded results of the data collected, showcased a wide spread of similarities for various other themes present within this study. Understanding what barriers are stopping educators and children from engaging in risky play, can support changes or recommendations that need to be addressed by policymakers. The research study provides information to educators, parents and childcare centers on the importance and benefit of risky play for young children in outdoor settings. Allowing children to explore and play without limits or boundaries can support their holistic development and provide them with a sense of autonomy. Some limitations of the research study were only having female participants, which lacked a male perspective, as well as having a small sample size of participants, which limits the data collected.

Implications for Future

Understanding all the barriers that limit children from engaging in risky play. Educate and inform caregivers, parents, childcare centers, etc. on the importance of risky play and how to implement it safely. This can be through workshops or webinars. Providing more natural and risky elements to an outdoor setting or providing more natural play spaces like forests, that can support the growing development of young children to provide them with a better understating of themselves, their capabilities, and to respect and love the environment.

References available upon request.