



CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES OF CHILDHOOD

# Risky Play

## An Ethical Challenge

Øyvind Kvalnes · Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter



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# Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood

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## ADVANCE PRAISE

“This book is a must read for all those interested in children’s play. The authors draw on their collective knowledge of risky play in the early years and philosophy to present an engaging, evidence-based resource that clearly articulates the benefits of risk-taking in the context of play for children’s learning, development, and wellbeing, as well as providing the means for educators and parents to navigate the ethical dilemmas often faced in supporting risky play whilst ensuring children’s safety from serious injury.”

—Helen Little, *Senior Lecturer and Associate Course Director, Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Australia*

“Risky play is a uniquely tricky topic for educators. On the one hand, they know the value of letting children explore, imagine, and follow their natural learning impulses. On the other, they rightly worry about what might happen if things go wrong. This short, engaging, subtly humanistic book brings a sharp ethical eye to this topical yet still underexplored dilemma. It summarises the growing body of evidence and argument in support of risky, adventurous play. It brings to life key abstract moral concepts—intention, emotion, agency, consequences, the role of luck—through anecdotes and real-life situations. Perhaps most importantly, it invites all of us—educators, parents, regulators, and the media—to ‘show our workings’: to avoid rushing to judgement, but instead to take a thoughtful, balanced approach that maintains a focus on children’s long-term growth and development, while respecting the adult duty of care.”

—Tim Gill, *Independent Scholar and Author of No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society and Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities (2021)*

“This book is an incredible and timely resource on risky play for all readers! Those new to the topic will find a comprehensive introduction. Experts will be challenged with new theory and concepts that have not yet been explored. Along with these exciting ideas, practical insights and wisdom are provided for readers wanting to put these ideas into practice.”

—Mariana Brussoni, *Director of Human Early Learning Partnership and Professor, University of British Columbia, Canada*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Risky Play and Ethics

**Abstract** Risky play is important for children’s mental and physical development. This chapter introduces the topic of risky play and the connection to ethical theory. It presents the authors’ motivation for combining their research interests to provide a knowledge-based account of the significance of risky play and why it poses an ethical challenge to adults who have the power to influence children’s scope for activity and play. The chapter outlines the structure of the book, where Chaps. 2–4 explore the concept of risky play, while Chaps. 5–7 provide an ethical perspective on the topic.

**Keywords** Risky play • Risk perception • Childhood • Ethical theory

*During the pandemic, I have seen kids use every nook and cranny in the neighborhood like never before. Or I have experienced it before, but that was many, many years ago. Now they race around on bicycles, run through the woods here and lie in wait behind a car or a tree while playing hide and seek. These are kids who are otherwise at school or kindergarten and sit inside a lot. After all, it is a great sight to see active and playful children around the houses here again.*

*Magnus (78)*

Research on children's development and learning has documented the significant benefits children have from engaging in risky play beyond the eyes of adults. When boys and girls are given scope for wild and exploratory play not supervised by adults, they also get the chance to develop mental and physical strength. Risky play enables them to learn how to master difficulties and gradually grow into autonomous and independent individuals who can stand on their own two feet.

In this book, we provide a systematic account of risky play as an ethical challenge for decision-makers who have the power to affect children's scope of action. Adults set the boundaries for what children can and cannot do. This holds for teachers and others who work professionally with children, for lawmakers and for parents and other relatives. They all have an ethical responsibility to ensure that children have sufficient scope to engage in meaningful and adventurous play, but also for the consequences of the activities they open for. The general ethical challenge is to find a reasonable balance between letting go and preventing harm. To examine the tension between these two considerations, we will distinguish between do-good-ethics, on the one hand, and avoid-harm-ethics, on the other. The first of these ethical perspectives focuses on the responsibility to create positive and uplifting experiences for children, while the second is about the responsibility to protect the children from harm. Sound assessments of the framework for risky play rely on a reasonable balance between these two ethical perspectives.

In this book we combine research on risky play with ethical theories and concepts. We hope that this contribution will form the starting point for further studies and enquiries into the ethical dimensions of how teachers, legislators, and parents set the boundaries for children's activities and development. We invite researchers in childhood studies, philosophy, psychology, and other research areas to elaborate further on this important topic. Furthermore, we reach out to teachers and other practitioners in kindergartens and schools, with an invitation to reflect on risky play and its significance for children's development. Parents and legislators are also an important target group. The book is concerned with how professional and nonprofessional adults can strike a balance between concerns about safety and protection, on the one hand, and creating a scope for joyful, lively, and adventurous play for children on the other.

Some of the examples used and the research quoted in this book are from a Norwegian cultural context. In the Norwegian society, the concept

of *friluftsliv* (which is similar to the concept of “outdoor life” but with stronger connotations of values and lifestyle) is an important part of the cultural heritage. The traditions of visiting nature areas, hiking in mountainous or forested areas, sleeping out in the wild, fishing, hunting, and exploring have been maintained over generations as part of daily life. Furthermore, many Norwegians habitually travel to parks, playgrounds, and nature areas for hiking and recreation with family and friends in their spare time. This culture is also visible in the Norwegian way of schooling and teaching children. For example, the Norwegian kindergarten and its curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017) has a strong emphasis on outdoor play and particularly mentions risky play as a way to learn mastering risks and challenges. The curriculum also focuses on children’s right to participate, to be responsible, and to be active. Children shall have a large degree of freedom in terms of choosing activities, and they shall be able to express their views on the day-to-day activities in kindergarten. As such, the Norwegian cultural context is quite liberal to children’s risk-taking compared to many other Western societies. Nevertheless, we believe that the examples provided in this book are translatable and relevant beyond the Norwegian context. It is our assumption that risky play has universal and cross-cultural relevance and that readers from other parts of the world can imagine their own, local examples.

## THE AUTHORS

The two authors of this book share a professional and personal interest in childhood, mastery, and learning. Ellen Beate is a childhood researcher and has her professional background from sports science and psychology. Physical activity and physically active play are the topics she has been most concerned with. Psychological theories of why and how people seek excitement and risky experiences, combined with the knowledge of the importance of physical activity and challenges for a healthy and positive development, have been her main interest since she was a student. Her curiosity for risky play was aroused in earnest when in the 1990s she discovered how playgrounds were erased and redeveloped in the name of safety and how kindergartens constantly limited children’s development due to fear of accidents or injuries.

Ellen Beate has been interested in the intrinsic value of risky play and also how it can be a source of development and learning. Children engage

in risky play to have exciting and ecstatic experiences. Risky play provides intense mastery experiences that facilitate individual growth. Risk-taking can lead to mistakes and negative experiences to learn from. A society that deprives children of the opportunity to seek exciting experiences, learn to assess and manage risk, and get to know themselves, their local environment, and their own boundaries does a disservice to the children. In the short term they may avoid harm, but in the longer term, children will be less able to make appropriate risk evaluations and choices in situations that are potentially dangerous.

Øyvind is a philosopher and has for a long time been concerned about how children's scope for risky play has decreased. In 2009 he wrote a newspaper article entitled "Let the Cotton Children Free!" It was inspired by Ellen Beate's research as well as his own experiences as a father. The article created a debate about the unintended negative consequences of protecting children against anything that can be physically and mentally harmful. In the debate, he was branded a "blood romantic" by a child psychologist, who thought he went too far in advocating risky play. The psychologist pointed out that safety for children has improved over the years, since, for example, the use of a seat belt in cars has become mandatory. This argument does not affect Øyvind's position, since he does not believe that it is by being allowed to sit unsecured in the back seat of a car that children should have the chance to experience mastery and learning. He has later researched how risky activities help to prepare the individual for setbacks and adversity (Kvalnes, 2017). Adults who are going to contribute to innovative processes in organizations need to be prepared for failure and adversity. Risky play lays the foundation for learning to live with one's own and other people's fallibility in an unpredictable world.

The Greek philosopher Socrates' motto was "Know thyself" and can serve as inspiration for commitment to risky play. Anyone who wants to get to know themselves needs a scope to experiment and try out different activities. A child who gets opportunities to climb, run, jump, swim, and be on a journey of discovery beyond the adults' radar has good opportunities to get to know him- or herself. The playground in the kindergarten provides opportunities to explore risk and become familiar with sources of excitement and fun. The various playground tools provide opportunities to get to know new aspects of oneself. Risky play makes it possible to explore what it means to be just me, this person who lives here and now, with his or her own unique history.

## CHILDHOOD IN CHANGE

Children's scope of action has shrunk dramatically in recent decades. Adults have restricted their scope for play, on the assumption that they need protection from the dangers of the world. The situation was different when the authors of this book grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. In that period, a seven-year-old could be all over the place, without her parents knowing where she was, what she was doing, who she was with, and when she had planned to come home. This freedom of movement provided a platform for dizzying experiences of mastering the world. These were also experiences that laid the groundwork for becoming resilient and having the ability to come back after adversity.

The authors have previously collaborated on a course for adults in further education, where they have invited students to share their own experiences and reflections on risky play. A concrete invitation was to share stories about own mastery and learning in childhood. Here are some of the contributions:

When I was eight years old, we lived two and a half kilometres from the slalom slope. I participated in training and running at least twice a week. I had to walk alone back and forth. The backpack with the slalom shoes was heavy, and the skis were hard to carry. I needed to be creative and found a shortcut. If I walked less than a kilometre from the top of the hill and downwards, I could leave the road, put on my skis and drive straight through the forest and across the fields to my home. I had to pass through an area with many tall trees, and the evenings were dark. I also had to wade through quite deep snow, but it was exciting and much more fun than going home on the safe road. I remember I was close to a moose one night, and that I told myself that scary trees in moonlight were after all just trees. No one asked how I got home, and I asked no one for permission. No one knew that I was going through the forest alone.

Fearless ... that's the first word I think of when I reminisce back to my childhood. I was free ... completely, and very active. And with that comes the memory from growing up in Karasjok, at the cabin in Assebakte, and a Sami knife! I think that many people recognize themselves in this experience when they become too eager and do the opposite of what they have been told: Never cut yourself—always push the sharp edge of the knife away from you! That's what I forgot. I made a deep cut in my finger with the knife. I snuck into the cabin to find something to hide the bleeding with but was discovered. Luckily it went well, and I remember that mother was upset, but calm. I still have the scar, as a good reminder from a great childhood.

I was three years old and had long seen the older children go alone to the store with a bag and a note. I had asked to be allowed to do the same. We lived near a construction site with little traffic. The store was close by. My mother was nervous, but still allowed me to go. When I came back I was very proud, and my mother says that I grew very much on the experience. Today, she probably thinks herself that she was quite irresponsible who let a three-year-old go alone like that. She says I never asked to do it again.

I was around three years old and had to go to kindergarten alone. It was not far, so Dad stood on the terrace and looked to see that I arrived safely. But to get to the kindergarten I had to walk on a road along a field where there were cows. I was terrified when the cows hung their heads over the fence, stared at me and roared. I shouted for Dad but was too far away to hear. So I bit my teeth together, avoided looking at the cows and marched on as fast as I could all the way to the kindergarten. I made it there and was so proud!

My mother is a fearless person and wanted me to be fearless too. One day we came home from the store and had bought cream that was sour. Then my mother told me to go back and get new cream. I walked a kilometre back to the store and got to talk to store manager Gunnar, who arranged a new cream. An adventurous experience for a seven-year-old.

These five stories come from adults who were children in the 1970s and 1980s. They illustrate how children had a scope to move outside the adults' radar. Something important is lost when such opportunities are curtailed.

An important reason why adults today are more protective of children is that the context for their children's upbringing is foreign to them. Parents in a big city choose the cautious line, since they lack experience in growing up in such a densely populated and busy area. One of our informants has worked in a kindergarten in central Oslo. She tells us about her encounters with protective parents:

I experience that most parents have grown up in other parts of the country. This means that they do not know what it is like to be a child where their own children grow up. I have experienced this as a challenge. The few times when the parents themselves have grown up in this local area, their children are much freer than the other children. The parents know the local community, which gives them security. Most other parents find the big city scary and dare not let go of their children. Those children then get fewer experiences of risky play in their free time. They are not allowed to climb trees

alone with friends in the afternoons. They never engage in what I call “is there a God game”, the risky games that challenge fate.

When parents are strangers to the context in which their own children grow up, it can lead to unfortunate caution. These parents need to align with parents who are more familiar with the local circumstances and can help them to lower their shoulders and give their children opportunities to engage in risky play.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In this book, we connect insights from childhood research with ethical theory, to shed light on ethical dilemmas related to children’s scope for risky play. We convey research results about the importance of risky play for children’s physical and mental development and how perspectives and priorities have changed in recent decades. This is important knowledge for teachers in kindergartens and schools. They are responsible for setting the framework for children’s activities. Here they encounter ethical dilemmas, situations where different ethical considerations stand against each other. Whatever you decide to do in an ethical dilemma, something of ethical value will be lost. There may be many affected parties who have different views on what is important in such situations. Therefore, one needs conceptual resources to analyse and justify one’s choices. We have an ambition here to present the language and the concepts needed to make wise decisions in ethical dilemmas related to risky play. The basic idea is that such decisions should be rooted both in knowledge of children’s play and in ethical theory.

This is also reflected in the book’s structure. Part I consists of three chapters and presents research-based knowledge about childhood, risk, and play, while Part II contains three chapters on ethical aspects of risky play.

### *Risky Play (Part I)*

Play is a child’s primary activity and form of expression. It is in play that children get to know themselves and their surroundings. Play is crucial for children’s experiences, development, and learning. Chapter 2 sheds light on the part of children’s play that involves thrilling experiences and elements of risk. Children’s opportunities for risk-taking have changed in



recent decades, and in this chapter, we also discuss the reasons for this development. Why are we more concerned about child safety now than before? This is a particularly relevant question because everything indicates that the world is a safer place now than before, with lower injury rates, fewer fatalities, and less crime.

The positive aspects of risky play can make adults with responsibility for children more confident in their assessments of the activities they should allow. Chapter 3 deals with what we know from research about the importance of risky play. In this chapter, we point out the positive and exciting experiences children have when they step by step approach risky situations and experience mastery. It involves positive experiences of taking chances in situations where they may have had doubts about their own abilities. Mastery builds self-confidence and good health and provides joy and well-being. Risky play is also important for the process of building up the risk competence that is needed to live a rich and varied adult life.

In Chap. 4, we focus on the negative consequences of excessive protection of children. Childhood research indicates that overprotection and strong restrictions on play and free exploration have negative consequences for children, both during their childhood and later in life. It can be difficult to document that the children who have been allowed to participate in risky play avoid negative consequences such as injuries or mental problems precisely because of the play. From a research ethics perspective, it is problematic to facilitate studies where children are deprived of opportunities for risky play and then observe what happens to them. It would also be unethical to force children to take risks and then see how things go. Nevertheless, we will identify empirical studies that indicate negative consequences for children who grow up under overprotective regimes.

### *Ethics and Risk (Part II)*

The ethics of risky play addresses the task of (1) giving children a scope of action where they can become familiar with risk and learn from it, under (2) reasonably safe conditions. In this book we will draw a distinction between two branches of normative ethics. Chapter 5 describes how, on the one hand, we have do-good-ethics, concerned about the responsibility we have to contribute to positive and meaningful experiences for others.

What can we do to create rich and joyful experiences for others? On the other hand, we have avoid-harm-ethics, which addresses the responsibility we have to shield others from negative and harmful experiences. How can we protect others and refrain from actions that cause them pain?

Kindergarten teachers and teachers in schools are regularly faced with ethical dilemmas where they have to balance ethical do-good considerations and ethical avoid-harm considerations. Chapter 6 presents conceptual tools they can use to analyse these dilemmas and justify their own decisions. A decision-maker can initially have a moral intuition about what is the right decision. That intuition can be put to the test through ethical analysis. The first reaction we have to a dilemma—should Anne be allowed to climb that tree?—is often quick and intuitive. It immediately seems morally right or wrong to proceed in this way. The next step is to think through the situation and consider the pros and cons. That process constitutes the ethical analysis of the alternatives at hand.

Chapter 7 discusses how people who work with children can be vulnerable to moral bad luck. What is it like to be a responsible professional in the play area on the day a child falls from the climbing frame or gets a stick in the eye? Even with a reasonably good safety margin, children can end up injuring themselves in kindergarten or school. Most people can agree that the risk of allowing just that activity with just those kids was perfectly acceptable. Still, it went wrong. The coincidences led to injury and a trip to the emergency room. The teacher who was at work when it happened has not done anything different from others who have had similar responsibilities in the past. Nevertheless, this person risks being subjected to sharper moral criticism and condemnation, since the actual outcome often affects the assessment of what this person has done or failed to do. These are situations where the leadership in the kindergarten and in the school is put to a serious test. Employees need and deserve their moral protection and support.

The book concludes with a chapter where we share our reflections on future frameworks for risky play. We indicate directions for further research on risky play and ethics and provide suggestions for practitioners in kindergartens and schools regarding how they can facilitate discussions amongst themselves and with parents and guardians about the value of risky play and reasonable levels of risk in the activities children are allowed to engage in.

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PART I

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# Risky Play



## Risky Play, Then and Now

**Abstract** Play is an essential part of childhood. It is through play that children explore, experience, learn, and develop. An important element of play is unpredictability. Much of children's play is about crossing boundaries, stretching limits, trying new things, and putting themselves to the test. Children seek risk experiences and thrills through play. This chapter focuses on what risky play is and how children engage with and handle risks. It also discusses how children's opportunities to engage in risky play have changed during recent decades, where adults are increasingly restricting children's freedom to explore. Concerns for safety have become more dominant than the willingness to protect children's right to play.

**Keywords** Risky play • Risk management • Play opportunities • Safety • Risk perception • Play environments

We did many things. We ran away. We just jumped over the fence and took a walk from the kindergarten. The staff did not go after us, because they probably assumed we would get bored and come back. And we mostly did, when we got a little hungry or things like that. But out there, we went on an expedition in the neighbourhood. It was absolutely magical. There was little to do in the kindergarten, so that's why we ran away. We wandered around to see if we could find something to do. We did not get any reprimands from the grownups when we ran away. They might have mentioned

their disapproval, then, but no higher fences were built in the kindergartens or anything like that. (Man born in 1973)

Children can in many ways be described as being on a journey of discovery in the world, where they explore opportunities in the environment around them, develop and learn new things, and get to know themselves and what they are capable of. On this journey of discovery, it is necessary to dare to try things we have never done before and to face unpredictability. Therefore, children often seek play that can be perceived as a little scary and that involves physical risk-taking, overcoming fear and testing physical strength. Owen Aldis published in 1975 the classic book *Play Fighting*, analysing both human and animal play. Aldis pointed out that much of children's play is related to fear and that young children actively seek out the excitement in risky situations, such as swinging in high speed and jumping down from heights (Aldis, 1975). All children naturally seek to become acquainted with the possibilities and limitations of their own body, and this must be done through play and exploration and by gaining a broad base of experiences.

### EVERYBODY PLAYS

Brian Sutton-Smith (2009), one of the most well-known play researchers in the world, stated that play is a lifelong activity that occurs in various forms at all ages—from toddlers' pretend play to adults who create entertainment by imitating celebrities or dressing up in carnivals. Everyone plays and everyone knows what play is when they see it or experience it, but play is challenging to define (Eberle, 2014). According to Fromberg and Bergen (2006), play is a relative activity, with changing functions and forms in different environments and among *various* individuals, age groups and cultures, and it is therefore difficult to define. However, even though there is no universal and agreed-upon definition of play, play researchers still agree on some of play's characteristics. Play is a voluntary activity where the activity itself is more important than the goal, and it is driven by intrinsic motivation *that is* self-initiated and self-controlled (Bateson, 2005; Lillemyr, 2021). This is consistent with how children themselves describe play—*that is*, as fun *activity that* they invent on their own, where the adults do not *make decisions* and where anything is possible (Ívrendi et al., 2019).

Play is a child's primary way of being. Although it exists in various forms throughout the life cycle, play is the arena where children explore opportunities in the environment around them and develop and learn new things. They get to know themselves and what they are capable of. An important element of play is unpredictability, and much of children's play is about crossing boundaries, stretching limits, trying new things, and putting themselves to the test.

## RISKY PLAY

Children play most of the time when they are given the opportunity to do so (Sandseter & Storli, 2020). Play starts in infancy, where the small child constantly explores the world they were born into and what they can manage to do in their environment. With great courage and unpredictable prospects, they gain new experiences from the first curious lift of their head, the day they get up on two legs and stand for the first time, when they dare to take their first steps, and further into childhood when they start to climb, run, jump, and engage in other challenging physical activities. It is through daring to take the chance to throw themselves into play and activity they have not tried before—to try and fail—that children learn about the world and themselves.

The kindergarten is on its way to the shore, and we have come to a bay along the fjord where we leave our bags to play. On the south side of the bay, there are steep mountains that rise, and which partially plunge straight into the sea. Tom (four years) exclaims: "Oi! I want to climb here!" He climbs up where the rock is at its steepest. Some of the other boys lose interest in the seaweed on the shore and start climbing after him. Tom has reached all the way to the top and stretches his arms in the air: "YES! I managed to climb all the way up!" He climbs further up the hill—approximately four meters above the beach. Simen (four years) and Jan (five years) come running. Simen shouts loudly, "YES! Climbing!" They both start climbing too. (Observation in kindergarten)

Children seek risk experiences and thrills through play. Unlike many adults' search for excitement through white-water kayaking, technical climbing, mountaineering, or bungee jumping, children can achieve the same experience by balancing on a slippery log or sliding head first down a slide. Stephenson (2003) found through observations and interviews of

four-year-olds that trying something they had never done before, feeling on the verge of not having control (often due to height or speed), and overcoming fear were important criteria for experiences of excitement and risk in play. This is similar to what Hughes and Sturrock (2006, p. 42) called deep play, which is described as activities children try out, often for the first time, and which involve risky or demanding movements. According to them, one should look for signs of hesitation and fear to discover situations of deep play. According to Stephen J. Smith (1998), who made observations of children who play, children's risk-taking in play can be seen in connection with activities such as climbing high, sliding, jumping off something, balancing, and swinging at high speed. Similarly, studies of slightly older children have shown that climbing (often combined with jumping from great heights), swinging (often in experimental and challenging ways), and going out to explore on their own (preferably away from the eyes of adults) are what the children point out as fun and exciting activities (Coster & Gleave, 2008; Davidsson, 2006). From the adults' point of view, rough-and-tumble play is also highlighted as a risky form of play (Sandseter, 2007). Rough-and-tumble play includes the chance that children inadvertently hurt or injure each other while wrestling, fighting, fencing, and so on.

In the Norwegian context, one of the authors of this book (Sandseter, 2007) observed and interviewed children (four to six years old) and employees in Norwegian kindergartens to explore what they experienced as risky play. Although it is difficult to define play, risky play, based on the results of this study, is described as “thrilling and challenging play that involves uncertainty and a risk of physical injury” (Sandseter, 2014, pp. 14–15). To be able to recognize risky play when observing children playing, Sandseter (2007) suggested six categories:

1. Play with **great heights**: danger of injury from falling—for example, climbing (in all kinds of forms), jumping from heights, hanging/swinging in great heights, and balancing in great heights.
2. Play with **high speed**: uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something (or someone), such as cycling at high speed, sledging (in the winter), sliding, and running (in uncontrolled speed).
3. Play with **dangerous tools**: that can lead to injuries, such as axes, saws, knives, ropes, and hammers and nails.



4. Play near **dangerous elements**: where children can fall into or from something, such as steep cliffs, water/sea, and campfires.
5. **Rough-and-tumble** play: where the children can harm each other, such as wrestling, play fighting, fencing with sticks, and chasing.
6. Play where the children can “**disappear**”/get lost: where the children can disappear from the supervision of adults or get lost when they are allowed to explore (e.g., on hikes in the forest).

In addition, a recent observational study among the youngest children (one- to three-year-olds) in Norwegian kindergartens identified two additional categories for risky play (Kleppe et al., 2017):

7. Play with **impact**: when a child, for instance, speeds up the tricycle and crashes into a wall or fence just for the sake of the play.
8. **Vicarious risk**: when a young child observes an older peer doing something scary and shares the thrilling and exciting experience from it.

Although the degree of risk a child takes in play is individual from child to child (Sandseter, 2009a), studies have shown that all children, both boys and girls, engage in this type of play in one way or another (Sandseter et al., 2020b). Risky play has been found among children and young people in a wide range of age groups, including one- to three-year-olds (Kleppe et al., 2017), four- to six-year-olds (Sandseter, 2007; Sandseter et al., 2020b), and four- to thirteen-year-olds (Coster & Gleave, 2008). Risky play is also a fairly common type of play among children. In a study where children’s free play in kindergarten was examined, in both indoor and outdoor environments, the researchers found that around 10 per cent of children’s play could be described as risky (Sandseter et al., 2020b). In the indoor environment, this type of play accounted for approximately 7 per cent, whereas in the outdoor environment, risky play was slightly more common and accounted for 13 per cent.

## CHILDREN’S ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Several observational studies of children’s risky play have indicated that children are aware of the risk they are taking. It is also documented that the children have strategies for reducing or increasing the risk and adapting it to their own individual limit for how much risk they dare take, their

competence level, and how they experience the situation. An ethnographic study in Denmark, which included ten- to twelve-year-olds, shows that they actively seek out, regulate and in a good way manage the everyday risk they encounter when they travel around the local community and participate in activities (Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008). Research among children aged seven to eleven has also shown that children have knowledge of the risk level in a play situation and know how they can reduce the risk to avoiding accidents or injuries. This study also found that children primarily base the regulation of risk on previous experiences they have from similar situations (Green & Hart, 1998). Similarly, Sandseter (2009b) observed four- to five-year-old children and found that their risk decisions are a balancing act in which they assess the possibility of a positive or negative outcome of the play situation based on previous positive and negative experiences.

In studies where more targeted tests have been conducted to determine whether children are able to perceive and assess risk in various situations, researchers have shown pictures to children of situations with different degrees of risk. These studies found that children from the ages of four to ten are able to distinguish between different levels of risk (Hillier & Morrongiello, 1998; Little & Wyver, 2010; Nikiforidou, 2017). In Little and Wyver's study, interviews with the children also showed that they use their risk assessment competence to make risk decisions when they play. It thus seems that children who have previous experience with risky situations gain an experience base that they actively use when assessing and managing risk in other situations.

Interviews with children aged four to five show that children are even able to orally express and describe the strategies they have for increasing or decreasing the risk in play. For example, they seek higher risk and excitement by increasing speed or altitude or choosing creative and more risky courses of action such as sliding head first down the slide on their stomachs. Otherwise, they seek to reduce the risk by actively avoiding too much speed or altitude, being more careful, and choosing less risky strategies, such as climbing a little further down the tree before jumping (Sandseter, 2010).

## CHANGES IN CONDITIONS FOR RISKY PLAY

I probably think I'm more ... I'm maybe more protective of my own kids than my parents were when I was growing up. I do not know if it's about me, but it probably is. But it's also the fact that more of the play now happens indoors. When I was growing up, we were more outdoors. At that time, the kids went outdoors to meet and didn't meet so much in each other's homes and houses. (Man born in 1973)

Because risky play involves exposing oneself to potential dangers, much of the discussion around this type of play has focused on important issues of child safety. This has been particularly prominent in Western societies where safety legislation is strongly emphasized when planning and designing children's play environments and how children's play can be practically organized and controlled (Sandseter et al., 2017). At the same time, there has also been a pronounced concern about society's overprotective approach to children, which has resulted in discussions about the balance between safety, risk, and the opportunities children need in order to play and develop. In this discussion, it is argued that it is not possible to protect children against all risks and challenges and that experiencing risk and learning to manage risk contribute to children's development (Brussoni et al., 2014).

It is difficult to find a balance between the concerns that children could injure themselves on the one hand and that they should have the opportunity to seek excitement and challenges in play on the other hand. The development in recent decades has unfortunately shown that concerns for safety have been more influential than the willingness to protect children's right to play. A number of international studies have shown that children's opportunities for free play, especially outdoors and in natural environments, are on a steeply declining curve (Brussoni et al., 2012; Gray, 2011; Moss, 2012). During only one generation, a rapid decline in opportunities for play in varied outdoor environments has been observed (Sandseter et al., 2019). Changes in urban environments have made it more difficult for children to find places for play and development in their neighbourhoods (Francis & Lorenzo, 2006), with increased traffic and fewer playgrounds and parks. Children's opportunities to move around freely and on their own in the local environment—for example, to and from school—to leisure activities and play areas have become very limited (Lester & Maudsley, 2006; Shaw et al., 2015). This development has been

documented in most Western countries in the world, and in many places children no longer have the opportunity to experience the joy of free play in stimulating and diverse play environments. A study by William Bird at Natural England found that the radius of action of eight-year-old children had dropped drastically over the course of four generations (Derbyshire, 2007). An eight-year-old in 1919 was allowed to walk alone about ten kilometres on a fishing trip in the forest, whereas his son, who was eight years old in 1950, was only allowed to move alone around 1.5 kilometres. In the next generation, for his daughter who was eight years old in 1979, the radius of action had shrunk to the point that she was not allowed to walk alone more than 800 metres to the swimming pool in the local area, while in 2007 her son was only allowed to move freely 300 metres to the end of the street where he lived.

In Scandinavia, this negative development has been slower. Most would say that children's free play and opportunities for exploration, challenge, and excitement are still important parts of childhood. The Scandinavian approach to children's play has been less limited by a focus on safety than has been the case in many other countries (Guldberg, 2009). Nevertheless, things are changing in Scandinavia as well, with increasing restrictions related to children's play. Norwegian children, for instance, are more closely monitored by their parents, they move around and play less in nature areas or their neighbourhoods now than in previous generations, and they participate less in self-organized play outdoors (Gundersen et al., 2016; Skar et al., 2016; Skår & Krogh, 2009). Children spend more time doing sedentary activities indoors and less physically active play outdoors. There are also signs that kindergarten employees in Norway are starting to restrict children's outdoor play due to safety rules (Sandseter & Sando, 2016).

When it comes to safety in kindergarten and school now...From the first time I worked in the kindergarten around 1996, to the last time in 2019, a lot has happened. There have been routines and many forms to fill out, which include writing logs and checking the outdoor area. If you come first to work, for example, you have to check everything, and then one more time check that you have checked everything if any rubbish can be found in the outdoor area, for instance—check, check, check. We did not do that in kindergarten in 1996. That's just not how it worked. (Male kindergarten teacher)

## WHY ARE WE MORE WORRIED NOW THAN EARLIER?

There are several reasons why, in recent years, we have continually limited children's opportunities for play and development, especially in various outdoor environments. Adults often have an urge to eliminate all possible risks in children's lives because they do not want them to be hurt. One cause for concern is what is called "stranger danger" (Brussoni et al., 2012), despite the fact that kidnappings are statistically negligible. Part of the safety focus that has emerged is also based on increased concern about the traffic situation in children's neighbourhoods and the fear that children could be injured by cars (Sandseter et al., 2020a).

Although some parents are sceptical that children spend too much time in front of screens, many parents are also happy that their children stay at home in front of a computer because they at least know where they are and that they are safe (Gray, 2011). Furthermore, research has found that factors such as rain or cold weather, fear of being bullied by older children, and poor or lack of play environments are barriers to children's afforded freedom to move outside and play wherever they want (Sandseter et al., 2020a; Witten et al., 2013). At their own expense, adults are also often concerned about being sued if an accident or injury should occur, and many kindergartens and schools experience pressure from the insurance industry to avoid injuries (Brussoni et al., 2012; Sandseter & Sando, 2016).

Outdoor kindergartens are good at safety, that is for sure. I am more worried about kindergartens that have no experience taking children to environments with water, and then they go on a bathing day with forty children. I actually stopped that in my daughter's kindergarten. They had sixty children who were going for a hike in quite a hilly terrain by the seashore. I asked if any of the staff had lifesaving expertise. I was not so worried that my daughter would drown, but I was worried about the future of that kindergarten if something were to happen to a child and they had no idea what to do. (Kindergarten teacher in a nature and outdoor kindergarten)

Kindergartens that to a greater extent than others engage in activities that may involve risk, such as nature and outdoor kindergartens, often have a higher level of awareness and more experience in how to ensure safety. They more often participate in hikes to the seashore or to areas with water than an ordinary kindergarten does. If one takes children to such places, it is important to have good routines for how to organize the trip in a way that children are given freedom and positive experiences and, at

the same time, ensure that it takes place in a safe environment. Of course, one must also avoid drowning accidents. Another thing is that it should take place in a way that makes parents and other external actors perceive it as justifiable so that one can maintain trust and have the opportunity to continue to offer such activities.

### THE PERCEPTION OF RISK HAS CHANGED

Just a few generations ago, taking risks was seen as a necessity for survival and a requirement to get food on a family's table. For example, children were often involved in farming and participated in work tasks that, in today's view, may seem risky. Views on children and childhood have changed, and they are looked upon as more vulnerable than in previous generations. Adults feel they must protect children from all accidents and possible injuries.

In general, the view of accidents and injuries has changed from looking at them as something that occurs due to carelessness, bad luck, or fate, to now looking at them as something that can be predicted and prevented (Green, 1999). Among other things, it was proposed to remove the word "accident" from the *British Medical Journal's* vocabulary in 2001:

We believe that correct and consistent terminology will help improve understanding that injuries of all kinds—in homes, schools and workplaces, vehicles, and medical settings—are usually preventable. Such awareness, coupled with efforts to implement prevention strategies, will help reduce the incidence and severity of injuries. (Davis & Pless, 2001, p. 1320)

It is fair to say that accidents can be foreseen and prevented. Those who carry out risk assessment and management—for example, on oil platforms and in airlines—have the responsibility of identifying the risk of accidents and implementing measures to minimize this. This works in contexts where there is a vision of zero tolerance for accidents and injuries. Nevertheless, it does not work very well in contexts such as playgrounds, where the purpose is to promote play, development, and learning, and in ensuring that children can thrive and find it attractive to be active there. Formal risk management strategies have emerged in several countries, and they involve relatively strict regulations of play environments and playground equipment. Many of these regulations include maximum fall height, shock-absorbing surfaces, removal of sharp edges and unstable

equipment, and reduced probability of being stuck, squeezed, or hit by something (Spiegel et al., 2014).

### ARE THERE MORE CHILD INJURIES NOW THAN EARLIER?

Injuries are a possible result of thrilling and risky play. Serious disabling injury or death, in the worst case, is of course something we should protect children from. Much of the excessive safety in the Western world is based on the fear that serious accidents will happen. Nevertheless, official statistics on playground accidents from several countries have shown that despite the introduction of laws and regulations that will make playgrounds safer, the number of playground accidents has not decreased (Ball, 2002; Chalmers, 1999). Most playground accidents are considered small in terms of the kind of damage they result in. Often these injuries are abrasions, sprains, and fractures that occur due to falls from swings, slides, or climbing towers. A Norwegian survey of injuries in kindergartens found that 98 per cent of the injuries were minor (Sandseter et al., 2013). Serious and disabling accidents are very rare.

There were no serious injuries, and no one died when we played in the street. And it's pretty amazing. The road where we played was quite steep and ended in a larger (and busier) street. In those days, they did not put sand on the snowy road in winter, or at least only on a part of it. So we used to start riding our kicksleds and toboggans from the top, and the street is long and has turns so you get a very high speed. And if you could not stop, you would turn right into the heavily trafficked road at the bottom. So there we had races, from when we were quite young, and it was even more fun when it was dark. If we had kicksleds, there was always someone sitting and someone standing behind, and there was a fight on the way down, so you could push the one you were racing against; everything was allowed, and you could throw snowballs and such. And we used steering-wheel sleds and toboggans. If we had hit a car, it would have been over. But it was a lot of fun. (Man born in 1973)

Norwegian injury statistics have shown that children in Norway have never been as safe as they are now. These statistics do not distinguish between accidents during play and other types of accidents such as traffic accidents, which account for a large proportion of accidents. Nevertheless, there has generally been a sharp decline in the number of accidents and deaths among Norwegian children in the last fifty years (Ellingsen, 2008).

Many believe that these are not just positive numbers. It is good that we lose fewer children in accidents, but at the same time this is a result of Norwegian children's childhood becoming more protected. Some will think that they are overprotected and that children today experience a more boring childhood than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. Gunnar Breivik (2001) claimed that children have entered a time dominated by adult-controlled indoor activity, passivation, and caution. This is in contrast with earlier years when self-directed play, physical activity, and independent exploration dominated Norwegian children's upbringing. This leads to childhood becoming both unexciting and less stimulating and developing.

### POOR AND UNATTRACTIVE PLAY ENVIRONMENTS

Growing up in the neighbourhood, it was just excitement and fun. It was like pushing each other constantly. In the street where I grew up, there were many new houses and families with two to three kids in each house. We had the street at our own disposal. There were a lot of untouched areas. There was an old small farm there, and we had forest areas, so we had plenty of space to explore. Some were the same age (as us), but many times there were children of all ages out at the same time. (Man born in 1973)

An unintended consequence of the excessive focus on safety is that play environments for children to a lesser extent give children opportunities for challenges and exciting experiences. Playgrounds and playground equipment have increasingly been characterized by shock absorbers, fences, evenly distributed steps, fall-absorbing surfaces, levelled surfaces, low constructions, and inflexible equipment. The design is based on a belief that people are not able to use the equipment at their own risk but that built-in restrictions and control in the environment are better than the choices made by human action (Gielen & Sleet, 2006).

These regulations have a drastic effect on children's play in two respects. Firstly, the inability to explore the excitement and risk of a playground could lead to inappropriate risk-taking—either by children seeking excitement in fearless ways on the playground or by children going elsewhere to seek excitement (e.g., on construction sites or train tracks). Secondly, too many safety regulations on playgrounds are linked to what is called “risk compensation.” This means that the experience of risk, among both children and their parents, is altered in a situation where the environment seems safer because of safety measures, such as a shock-absorbing surface



on a playground, or safety gear, such as helmets, knee pads, and the like. Studies have shown that both children and adults in such cases unconsciously misunderstand the risk and are willing to take higher risks (Morrongiello et al., 2007; Morrongiello & Major, 2002).

## SUMMARY

Taking risks with intention and consciousness is an important part of play. However, risky play can in the worst case lead to injuries. There are few serious injuries related to children's play, but due to adults' concerns that this will happen, play, especially thrilling and risky outdoor play, has been restricted in recent decades. Nevertheless, it is difficult to regulate oneself away from the human factor when one wants to reduce risk in an activity such as play and to believe that one can regulate risk as long as human actions are fallible is an impossible utopia. No matter how many safety measures are put into place, there are no environments that are 100 per cent risk free. In children's play environments, it should not even be a goal that they are risk free.

Too strong a focus on physical environmental measures can reduce the child's sensory-driven skills. Through the practice of sight, hearing and motor skills, the child can become better able to assess and manage risk. If the child becomes accustomed to "dangerous places being fenced in," they will be exposed to greater danger the day the "fence" is gone. Precisely because the home and the environments in which the child moves do not consist of standard solutions with regard to safety, it is important to preserve and develop the child's natural abilities to be able to sense danger in the surroundings. When children climb trees, it is not only to expose themselves to risk but also to practice becoming better at managing risk. (Boyesen, 1997, p. 208)

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## Experiences, Mastery, and Development Through Risk

**Abstract** Children engage in risky play even though there is a chance of failure and negative experiences. They climb a tree to feel joy, even though it is safer to stand still on the ground. The question is how taking risks can be good for experiences, development, and learning. This chapter discusses the potential benefits of engaging in risky play, focusing on the positive and thrilling experiences children may gain, on developing life mastery skills, and on physical and psychological developmental benefits, as well as how children through risk-taking in play get better at managing real-life risks.

**Keywords** Risky play • Fearful joy • Life mastery skills • Physical development • Psychological development • Motor skills • Risk management skills

And in the days that followed, Ronia watched out for what was dangerous and practiced not being frightened. She was to be careful not to fall in the river, Matt had said, so she hopped, skipped, and jumped warily over the slippery stones along the riverbank, where the river rushed most fiercely. She was to stay by the waterfalls. To reach them, she had to climb down Matt's Mountain, which fell in a sheer drop to the river. That way she could also practice not being frightened. The first time it was difficult; she was so

frightened that she had to shut her eyes. But bit by bit she became more daring, and soon she knew where the crevices were, where she could place her feet, and where she had to cling with her toes in order to hang on and not pitch backward into the rushing water. (...) and in the end she was like a healthy little animal, strong and agile and afraid of nothing. (Lindgren, 1983, p. 17)

Although risk often involves the possibility of negative experiences, there are also many situations where we consciously expose ourselves to risk with the aim of achieving something positive. We may climb a tree to feel joy, even though it is safer to stand still on the ground. The question is how taking risks—for example, through risky play—can be good for experiences, development, and learning. However, it can potentially lead to injury and sometimes even death. In evolution, it is often thought that if the usefulness (development or learning) of a type of behaviour outweighs the costs (injury or death), then the behaviour will be maintained and attractive to us through natural selection (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2000). We will continue to do things that are good for us in the long run. In adulthood, we depend on being able to adapt to new situations and problems, and then we deal with challenges. This is the knowledge and competence we build through childhood and the rest of our life. If we had never been willing to take risks, we would have never learned to walk, run, swim, ride a bike, boil eggs, invite someone on a date, drive a car, or do many other activities that involve some form of risk. All of these activities have one common element: For each of them, there are a number of unknown factors that make us uncertain if we will succeed or fail. The positive aspects of risky play can thus be many, and they can be seen from different perspectives, ranging from the individual experience of the person doing it to a more social relevance as part of risk management and accident prevention.

### JOY AND GOOD EXPERIENCES

Aldis (1975) pointed out that much of children's play is related to fear and that young children actively seek out thrill and excitement in risky situations such as swinging, climbing, and jumping from heights. Children mainly seek excitement and risk in their play because they are provided with good and positive experiences such as fun, joy, excitement, thrill, pride, and self-confidence (Coster & Gleave, 2008). The fact that the

outcome of the play is positive is not 100 per cent certain; it depends on whether the child masters the risk. Failure to do so can lead to unpleasant and negative experiences such as fear, anxiety, and perhaps injury. In addition, the level of excitement must be high in order to achieve the most intense and wonderful feeling as possible. This means that when the scariest risk is mastered, the positive feeling of mastery is better and more intense. The point of risky play is to balance on the edge between intense excitement and pure fear—one feels both emotions at the same time. Children’s descriptions of what they experience through thrilling and risky play show that they have great pleasure in feeling both joy and fear and often both of these feelings at the same time (Sandseter, 2009b). The children describe this as “scaryfunny.”

It’s fun to make long sticks from straws and use them in play fencing, but it’s a little scary too ... but it’s more fun than scary, actually, and it tickles my stomach when I do it! (Maria, five years old)

In fact, one of the main goals of this type of activity is to balance on the edge between intense exhilaration and fear, without it becoming too scary and switching over to pure fear, so that they pull away and end the play (Sandseter, 2009b). The contrast between mastery/injury and excitement/fear gives a thrilling feeling of fearful joy that few other types of play can provide. The chance of experiencing fear and possible harm is what one “pays” to experience the intense excitement and well-being it gives to master something one would not ordinarily dare to do. This was indicated quite well by a boy who described what he preferred to do in play and activities: “The funniest thing I know is what I almost don’t dare to do” (Mjaavatn, 1999, p. 53). Children often choose challenging climbing, sliding, and sledging at high speed and in creatively dangerous ways to increase the physical and mental exhilaration in an activity so that the experience will be extra intense. They often consciously increase the risk level in the play situation by, for example, increasing the height, speed, and degree of difficulty in the activity (Sandseter, 2009a). Children who experience excitement and joy when they engage in risky play, on the verge of danger and fear but with joy and mastery as the dominant emotion, will continue to seek out this type of play again and again.

As children age, they still need excitement. Hansen and Breivik’s (2001) study of twelve- to sixteen-year-olds showed that risk-seeking young people were primarily involved in positive risk activities such as skiing, cycling,



and climbing. However, this study also showed that young people who lacked opportunities for positive risk instead often engaged in more negative forms of risk, such as petty crime, intoxication/drinking, and speeding violation. Similarly, interviews with young people in prison have shown that they had often committed crimes because they sought excitement in an otherwise unexciting everyday life situation where there was a lack of leisure activities that provided them the risk experiences and thrills they needed (Robertson, 1994). In the same way, it has been warned that if we make all play environments safe but boring and limit children's opportunities to engage in risky play, then children will seek out other and more unsafe places where they can experience risk. For example, construction sites and train tracks are other places we would rather not have them play in. Having the opportunity to experience some risk and excitement in life is therefore important and provides good experiences, both for children and for young people, and as an extreme consequence, depriving them of the opportunity to do so can have negative consequences.

### LIFE MASTERY

The Ministry of Education and Research in Norway describes life mastery as having good mental and physical health, as well as experiencing well-being, joy of life, mastery, and a sense of self-worth. In such an understanding, the educational system should be a place that gives children both security and challenges:

Life mastery is about being able to understand and be able to influence factors that are important for mastering one's own life. The theme will contribute to the students learning to deal with success and adversity, and personal and practical challenges in the best possible way. (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 13)

The kindergarten should be a safe and challenging place where children can try out different aspects of interaction, community and friendship. Children should receive support in overcoming adversity, dealing with challenges and getting to know their own and others' feelings. (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2017b, p. 11)

Kindergartens and schools thus have a responsibility to ensure that children and young people face challenges and have the freedom to explore

them and learn to master them. At the same time, this must take place within a safe framework. When children seek out risk naturally in play, they do so in a progressive way. They do not simply climb all the way to the top of a tree and jump down, but they largely understand their own competence and usually adapt their activity to an appropriate progression with regard to motor skills and risk management skills (Sandseter, 2009c). Children usually seek challenges adapted to their own skill level—challenges where there are good opportunities for them to have new mastery experiences. In this way, children play, learn, and develop within what Csikszentmihalyi calls the flow state. According to Csikszentmihalyi, it is optimal for development and learning that we are in a flow state where there is a balance between the skills we have and the challenges (degree of difficulty) we are faced with in the situation. In this state, boredom as a result of the task or challenge being too easy is avoided, and at the same time the task is not so difficult that it becomes an anxious situation where you do not have a chance to master it. When children are in a flow state, they have good conditions for learning and developing new abilities, and it will provide an experience of joy and mastery. When they are in the flow state, they forget time and place and “float” into a purposeful and pleasurable condition. Play is a flow experience in the true sense of the word (Csikszentmihalyi, 1977).

Experiencing mastery of activities and situations that children initially perceived as a little scary provides useful knowledge about their own skills and competence. It helps them to confirm that they are capable of handling challenges that may seem too great. This is positive for building self-confidence and gaining good self-esteem.

We were on a hike in the woods one day, and we found some fallen trees lying there. And there was a little three-year-old girl who wanted to climb up the logs, but she fell down all the time, you know. She asked for help, but I wanted her to do it herself. She wanted to get up so badly, but it was too difficult for her. They had to climb, pull themselves up and get up, and then there were some branches that you had to climb and then drop yourself down to the ground. It was not very high, but for a three-year-old it was high enough. At least it was so challenging that she couldn't do it. But she had such courage, and she did not give up. And then she finally got up there! How proud she was! There is something about the fact that sometimes you have to practice a lot, and other times you manage things faster. So

when we walked home to the kindergarten, we talked about this, and then I said, “I can’t believe you did it ... you tried again and again.” Then she said, the day before she turned three years old, “But I did not give up!” Right there I got chills down my spine. And when I told her mother a few days later, the mother had tears in her eyes. (Female kindergarten teacher)

A study of children’s play in Norwegian kindergartens, both indoors and outdoors, found that risky play was positively associated with children showing strong involvement and engagement in play (Sando et al., 2021). High involvement in a situation is an indication that the learning potential in the situation is optimal (Laevers, 2000). The children are completely engrossed in what they are doing. In the same study, the results also showed that risky play had a positive correlation with well-being (Sando et al., 2021). Children thus clearly express that they thrive and have fun when they explore risk in their play. It is not difficult to understand that children become well and happy when they master something they may not have thought they should dare to do and which they may have even tried and failed at quite a few times already.

Can risk-taking be good for children’s health? One might have to assume that children who are exposed to risk also experience more injuries. A systematic review of research on the relationship between risky outdoor play and health (Brussoni et al., 2015) showed that this type of play mainly has positive health effects. This applied to both physical and psychosocial health. Children who engaged in risky play were more physically active, creative, and social than their peers who were not given the opportunity to engage in this type of play. It was thus associated with better physical and social health, social competence, and resilience. Contrary to many people’s beliefs, there was no association between risky play and fracture injuries, which are often a presumed result of play at great heights, and rough-and-tumble play was not associated with aggressive behaviour. No evidence was found that a higher number of serious injuries occurred in risky play compared with other play. One would think that playgrounds that invite more risky play cause more accidents and injuries. However, a study showed there were actually less injuries in so-called adventure playgrounds (where children explore different types of loose materials, build structures themselves, and play with fire, water, and earth) compared to a regular standardized playground (Leichter-Saxby & Wood, 2018).

## PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MOTOR COMPETENCE

Risky play often involves a certain degree of physical activity and active use of the body. Research has shown that there is a connection between risky play and a high level of physical activity (Sando et al., 2021). Risky play is a type of play and activity that involves, among other things, height, speed, and adaptation of bodily movements. Children engage in sliding, spinning around, jumping, falling, climbing, and cycling. All of these are physical activities where the child practises and improves in a range of physical and motor skills, and they help to develop muscle strength, endurance, and bone quality (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). The fact that children seek excitement through motor and physical challenges in play is therefore also important for their physical development and the practice of ever-improving motor competence.

Research has shown that when children play in nature, in a challenging and unpredictable play environment, they acquire better motor control and higher coordination skills than those who play mostly on standardized playgrounds (Fjørtoft, 2000).

It's about three meters, maybe; it's not so steep. If you fall, you land in the grass. Those who master, they climb right up, and those who do not dare usually find a less steep path to get up. And those who do not dare any of those alternatives, they help to pull up those who climb. They are still part of the experience. But I think to date no one has fallen down. The group of children I have this year, they have so much fun climbing there. And then I like to sit on top with a high five when they reach the top. They give me a high-five, and then they run down to try once more. There is always a queue of children who want to climb up, so they have to use another path to get down. Then they climb up again, and then there is another high-five. There is such a strong feeling of mastery. And even those who are very careful and need a little help, they get up step by step. We, the staff, are so happy on their behalf, and the kids experience our enthusiasm because they do something that they really think is a little scary. (Female kindergarten teacher)

Children have an inherent urge to explore that which makes them constantly dare to take the risk of engaging with the unknown and untried. They develop into mastering new and difficult tasks, such as when a small child dares to rely on their own strength, gets up on their own two feet, and eventually takes the chance to lean forward and take their first unsteady steps. They dare to trust that the balance is good enough, that the strength

of their legs carries the weight of the body, and that they are ready to master the challenge of taking the first step, even though they have never done this before and that the consequence of failing is to fall straight to the floor. Children practise and develop various motor skills and physical characteristics such as muscle strength and endurance through engaging in physically challenging activities and play. All such advances in children's physical and motor development depend on them daring to take the risk of throwing themselves into new and unknown tasks, movements, and surroundings.

Another important factor in being able to master motor challenges is spatial orientation skills. Studies have shown that children who play a lot in challenging and unpredictable natural environments have a better spatial orientation competence than those who play mostly on standardized playgrounds (Fiskum, 2004). The assumption is that play in nature, including risky play, are activities where children gain experience and training in perceptual competence such as depth, shape, size, and movement perception and assessment as well as general spatial orientation skills (Rakison, 2005).

This is competence that is important for children, both in activities in childhood and later in life, to be able to assess how to move their own bodies in environments where there are other objects or other people. This becomes especially important in situations where these other objects or people are also in motion—for example, in traffic. Being able to calculate how a car or bicycle moves is crucial for them to be able to move unharmed when crossing the street.

### PREVENTION OF ANXIETY

There are many indications that children also learn not to be afraid and anxious through risky play. During play, this happens quite naturally and with a natural progression of exposure to what they are initially afraid of. According to Sandseter and Kennair (2011), through play founded on their own initiative and interest, children do exactly what a therapist does to help people overcome anxiety: They approach the thing that triggers anxiety step by step, closer and closer, and gradually learn to master what they fear.

People can be afraid of, and anxious about, many things. Some fears we learn by conditioning through, for example, negative occurrences like a trip to the dentist, which some eventually experience as painful drilling or

removal of a wisdom tooth. Other fears are non-associative innate tendencies, in that we, without having negative experiences with them, are sceptical and afraid of things that might be dangerous to us. Such fears already manifest themselves in infants and young children and develop naturally as an evolutionary adaptation for us to be better able to survive. However, if such fears are not resolved during childhood and rather continue into adolescence and adulthood, this can lead to fear and anxiety that inhibit normal functioning.

Some of the typical innate fears we have are those of heights, water, and separation (Poulton & Menzies, 2002). These are stimuli that children are basically sceptical and afraid of but which they seek out and explore through play. This may include climbing, playing near or in water, and going out to explore alone. They approach what they fear progressively and gradually learn to master it within the relatively safe context of play. In this way, risky play has a habituating effect on their innate fears: They do not have to fear something they have mastered. This has an anti-phobic effect (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011).

This is supported by research showing that children who have climbed a lot, bathed, and played a lot in water and experienced many planned separations from their caregivers are not to be found in the group of adolescents and adults who have a fear of heights, a fear of water, or separation anxiety (Poulton et al., 1998, 1999, 2001). This is even true if, for example, they have been seriously injured in a fall while climbing. On the contrary, those who are inhibited by anxiety about these risks have little experience with them from childhood, which may indicate that they have missed an important learning of these fears. It is therefore reasonable to assume that risky play is a natural way to reduce the innate fear of things that may be harmful to us. Exploring them through gradually enables us to master them and thus stop fearing them. This is part of getting to know our surroundings and learning what is safe and what is dangerous.

In line with this, studies from the Netherlands have shown that a so-called challenging parenting behaviour has a positive effect on children's mental health (Majdandžić et al., 2018). The fact that parents encourage their children to seek challenges and support them, rather than preventing them, when they take risks in play and activities helps to prevent anxiety problems. Similarly, psychologists believe that risky play can be a good strategy for reducing anxiety because it can help children deal with inappropriate cognitive behavioural strategies. Such strategies are, for example, avoidance (moving away from what feels threatening), lack of coping

(disaster thinking, negative focus, and inappropriate handling of stressful situations), intolerance of uncertainty (a fundamental fear of the unknown), and misinterpretation of physiological arousal (a fear of fear and misinterpretation of bodily signals such as increased heart rate) (Dodd & Lester, 2021). When children engage in risky play, such as climbing trees, cycling fast down a hill, balancing on a log, and jumping from rock to rock, they experience emotions such as fear and excitement. Dodd and Lester explained that the positive, ecstatic, and exciting experiences associated with such self-initiated play entail exposure to potentially anxious situations and thus give children the opportunity to learn about increased activation, insecurity, and mastery.

### RISK MANAGEMENT

Taking a risk is not always about being careless or reckless but rather about taking an uncertain chance in order to achieve a specific goal. Risk management requires that we assess the likelihood of success or failure based on relevant knowledge or information related to each individual situation compared to our individual skills. It is only through meeting risks and challenges that we learn to assess risk and make realistic assessments of our likelihood of success (or failure). Therefore, risky play should not only be seen in the light of what it can contribute to children's development but also as training in dealing with the unexpected. This is in line with kindergartens' and schools' responsibility in promoting children's life skills (Ministry of Education, 2017a, 2017b). Having a body that is strong, agile, and coordinated, in addition to gaining experiences that give courage and mental resilience in the face of risky situations as well as experience in how to act in them, is crucial for children so that they can master risks in the future.

Risk management is also closely linked to risk perception—that is, how one perceives and assesses a risk. Children approach the world around them through play, they are driven by curiosity and the need for excitement, they practise dealing with risky situations in real life through play, and they discover what is safe and what is not. Children with little experience of risky situations will not necessarily have a perception of the degree of risk that corresponds to the actual danger they face. By facing dangers and risks in play, the child will gain experience with risk, and the child's subjective perception of the risk will be more similar to the objective, real risk in the situation. In Belgium, Lavrysen et al. (2017) conducted a study in which they found that an experimental group of children, who engaged

regularly in risky play, significantly improved their assessment of risk compared to a control group that did not engage in risky play. Therefore, children must, through play and activity, be given the opportunity to develop a realistic sense of risk. From a risk theory perspective, through experience with risky situations, children will practise a more realistic perception of the objective and actual risk in the situation and thus be better able to choose appropriate reactions and actions to master the risk. Boyesen (1997) was critical of the overemphasis on physical safety measures in children's environments because she claimed that it can reduce the child's own sensory-motor skills. She further explained that children who are accustomed to dangerous places being fenced in will be exposed to a greater danger the day the fence is gone. At the same time, by having been "tested" in risky situations in the past, they will also have acquired the physical skills that enable a correct reaction, just as we saw in the story about Ronia practising fearlessness and not falling into the river at the beginning of this chapter (Lindgren, 1983).

When children are able to master challenges in their environment, safety automatically increases. Through experiencing risky situations, children gain a broad perceptual experience about both the level of risk in various situations and what actions are necessary to handle the risk in a good way. At the same time, this is a dilemma for adults who are responsible for children, such as parents, grandparents, kindergarten instructors, and schoolteachers: For children to learn to master risks, they must necessarily be allowed to approach risks. If we protect children from exploring risks, we are probably doing them a disservice by robbing them of important learning and development.

### TO PROVE THE ABSENCE OF ANYTHING THAT COULD HAVE BEEN

One of the challenges in the argument that children must be given the opportunity to engage a lot in free, outdoor, and risky play is that it is often opposed by those who disagree with so-called "hard facts." It is quite easy to count the number of accidents and injuries there are in play, on playgrounds, in forests, and in natural playscapes, as well as how many children have been kidnapped when they have been allowed to move around freely in the local environment. For those who want to focus on the benefits of play, risk experiences, exciting emotions, and well-being, the challenge is much more difficult. How can one "prove" that children



avoid, for example, injuring themselves or being kidnapped precisely because they have been allowed to engage in risky play and they practise better risk management and independence? This is a difficult task. It may seem that all of the good things about play and risk are difficult to measure, whereas the negative effects, such as accidents, injuries, and costs, are easy to measure and are therefore experienced as much more real (Ball, 2002). Play has a number of positive aspects and benefits, but most of them are intangible and difficult to measure. One can easily count deviations and damage, but there are few who count friendship, joy, and mastery.

There are also obvious ethical problems in conducting studies that are designed for children to take risks (with the potential for harm), just to see what effect it has. In the same way, it is problematic to restrict children from play in order to assess the results. There are also challenges in finding scientific and reliable ways to measure the long-term effects of risky play, as well as what to measure later in life to gain this insight. Nevertheless, research on risky play is a fairly new and promising field where we are constantly gaining new knowledge.

### SUMMARY

On the one hand, risky play involves potential costs through the possibility of physical injury. On the other hand, research has identified a number of positive effects of children seeking risk in play. In this chapter, we have shed light on the positive and exciting experiences children have when they step by step approach risk and experience situations that they may not have thought they had the courage to throw themselves into. Risk builds self-confidence and good health and provides joy and well-being. The fact that children have the opportunity to meet, explore, and overcome physical challenges and activities they were initially afraid of through play will thus contribute positively to their physical and mental health. They become physically strong, agile, and healthy, and they gain mental strength and an increased belief in their own mastery.

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## Negative Consequences of Protection

**Abstract** What would the result be if we restricted children from risky play with the argument that it would keep them safe? If risky play has many positive benefits, we should expect that the downside of such a strategy is that you miss out on much learning, development, and fun. In this chapter, we will go deeper into knowledge about the effects of growing up with little opportunity for risky play. Research shows that an overprotective parenting style and an environment strongly characterized by injury-avoidance strategies could negatively influence children's risk management skills, psychological well-being as well as life mastery skills.

**Keywords** Risky play • Overprotection • Parenting style • Mental health • Play deprivation • Negative consequences

Johanne was never allowed to go with the rest of us to the sea to swim. Her mother was far too scared that anything would happen. Then the terrible thing occurred during the war when the ferry was bombed and sunk not far from the shore. Johanne and a friend were in the ferry. The friend could swim, so she managed. But poor Johanne had never learned to swim, so she drowned. (Marit Boyesen, 1997)

Marit Boyesen wrote this story in her doctoral dissertation (Boyesen, 1997, p. 204) examining parents' views on child accidents, accident prevention, and their experience of risk. In her work, Boyesen showed how parents are in a dilemma when they have to decide whether they want to let their children, their most valuable possessions, take risks, and thus increase the likelihood for things to go wrong. In the story above, Johanne's mother was so afraid that her daughter would get hurt or drown if she joined the others in swimming in the sea and that she had not yet learned how to handle the risk that the deep water entailed.

We have previously mentioned how risky play can contribute to children's development and learning in a positive way. This can provide good reasons for providing a practice where children are allowed to explore and test boundaries because we believe it is good for them both here and now and in a longer perspective. If risky play has so many positive aspects, one can further consider what it means for a child if the main focus is to protect them by stopping or banning play that involves risk. Simply put, the downside of such a strategy is that you miss out on all of the positive effects of this type of play. In this chapter, we will go deeper into research on the effect of growing up with little opportunity for risky play, with overprotective parents and an environment strongly characterized by an injury-avoidance strategy.

### THE ETHICAL DILEMMA OF PROVING NEGATIVE EFFECTS

It is ethically difficult to prove the positive effects that risky play can have. For example, negative consequences in children's play are avoided because they have been allowed to engage in risky play throughout childhood; therefore, they have learned to master risks appropriately. It is also challenging to point to hard facts to prove that children are less skilled, develop slower, and learn less if they are deprived of the opportunity for this type of play. How can one "prove" that children who have poorer risk management are injured more? Forcing children, for research purposes, not to play freely or to seek challenges and risks in their activity is unethical and not something that a researcher can do within the required research ethics. We also believe that no researcher would be interested in such a dubious experiment; all the while, existing knowledge gives reason for assumptions that such deprivation from play will have negative consequences for children. It is therefore a more sustainable strategy to enter the field with a retrospective perspective where one examines whether

there are connections between how children have grown up and what they have been doing as children, as well as how they handle risks, how much they injure themselves, or other health-relevant factors.

### LACK OF DEVELOPMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Few studies have managed, in an ethically sound manner, to investigate the positive or negative effects of children engaging in risky play. Nevertheless, one can find indications of this relationship by looking at research that is thematically related. One example is what we know about physically active play and how it affects physical and motor development.

Research has shown that children with poorer motor skills injure themselves more than those with good motor skills (Myhre et al., 2012). Good motor skills are thus an important factor in avoiding injury when you face situations that require proper and effective physical action in order to handle the risk in a good way. Risky play challenges children's motor competence and contributes to enhanced motor skills being practised and improved, and, as such, research has indicated that risky play could also lead to fewer injuries. On the other hand, risky play leads to a greater degree of exposure to the possibility of injury. However, research has also shown that children who are physically inactive injure themselves more than those who are more physically active (Bloemers et al., 2012), even though the physically active children are more exposed to the possibility of injury. One would think that the opposite was true. The reason for this may be found in what we know about what happens when children participate in risky play, as well as through experiences gained in situations that challenge them both physically and mentally. Simply explained, this means that children who are not given the opportunity to engage in risky play are worse at assessing and managing risks than those who gain the experience and learning that risky play entails.

In Chap. 2 we argued for the positive effects of risky play. Similarly, we would assume that being restricted from risky play may have a negative effect and may cause children to become more inactive and demonstrate poorer social competences and psychosocial health. There is also reason to believe that children who have not been involved in rough-and-tumble play will be less able to handle their own and others' aggression and that this type of play is more often characterized by real aggression in those who have not been "trained" in it (Eide-Midtsand, 2009, 2015). If we follow this logic, it will also be in line with the argument from Chap. 2

that risky play has an anti-phobic effect where innate fears, such as a fear of heights, a fear of water or separation anxiety, are habituated by children learning to deal with these fear-triggering situations through play. Research has found that children who were never allowed to play by water and learn to swim, to a greater extent, are among those who have a phobia for water as adults (Poulton & Menzies, 2002a, 2002b), as Johanne in the introductory story might have had if she had survived the accident.

## MENTAL PROBLEMS

The opposite of play is not work; it is depression. (Sutton-Smith, 1997)

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) pointed out that play is a voluntary and life-long activity that occurs in various forms at all ages and that it gives those who engage in it an optimal experience of engagement, excitement, fun, thrill, joy, and exhilaration. Sutton-Smith also pointed out that play gives children the opportunity to try out and realize their full potential. In this also lies the opportunity to gain experience with the dark aspects of play, including feeling at risk and being anxious, and learning to master these sides of life. This can be illustrated through the following episode:

The fact that the children walk around on this uneven surface in the kindergarten and stumble around a bit gives them a very good feeling that “This is a little too much for me; I have to practice a little more, then I can do it!” ... We want them to be confident that they can handle the real world and learn how to work their way through resistance, whether it is here on the rock wall when they shout “I want to climb up!” but are unable to manage it, or when they stand in frustration when they are angry or upset. Experiencing that, you can come out on the other side of the frustration and see that “I did it! It was not so bad.” We believe that we work to teach children to manage their emotions in a good way, which means that they may not need antidepressant pills when they reach puberty but can endure their first grief of love and see that, “Okay, it feels awful now, but life goes on!” (Katharina Søreide, kindergarten director)

In the United States, psychologist Peter Gray (2011) argued for the importance of play in people’s lives and, among other things, expressed a strong scepticism about how the education system and safety hysteria rob children of the opportunity for free and exciting play. He drew a logical



line between the fact that children's opportunities for play have been greatly reduced in the last fifty years, both in the United States and in other Western cultures, and that in the same period there has been a sharp increase in anxiety, suicide, experience of helplessness and narcissism among children, adolescents, and young adults. Among other things, research among American college students has shown that the proportion of students diagnosed with anxiety or depression has increased between five and eight times during the course of fifty years (Twenge et al., 2010). The same trend applies to psychopathic disorders and hypomania (manic disorders).

Corresponding Norwegian figures, although not entirely comparable, do not show an equally gloomy picture, although there are tendencies in the same direction, especially among girls. According to Reneflot et al. (2018), there has been a decline in mental health among fifteen- to seventeen-year-old girls, but not as much among boys. The decline in girls' mental health can be seen in figures showing an increase in general mental disorders, anxiety disorders, depression, consultations for mental health problems, and an increase in the use of antidepressants in the years from 2008 to 2016 (Reneflot et al., 2018). Bakken (2017) reported the same trends, where some of the figures also go in a negative direction for boys aged thirteen through nineteen. Bakken points to stress in connection with school work and less physical and social contact with friends, as a result of more screen activity and virtual contact, as possible reasons for the decline in Norwegian young people's mental health. Similarly, Twenge et al. (2010) went so far as to point out how American society's emphasis on external goals such as money, status, and academic success, rather than unity, meaning in life, and belonging, is a reason for the gloomy development in American youth's mental health. Similarly, Gray (2011) highlighted how a society that emphasizes such values has downgraded children and young people's opportunities for play, as well as how this in turn is a cause of the trend of increasing mental health problems.

The story is both ironic and tragic. We deprive children of free, risky play, ostensibly to protect them from danger, but in the process, we set them up for mental breakdowns. Children are designed by nature to teach themselves emotional resilience by playing in risky, emotion-inducing ways. In the long run, we endanger them far more by preventing such play than by allowing it. And, we deprive them of fun. (Gray, 2014)

In particular, Peter Gray highlighted that today's youth are deprived of the following important health-promoting skills: joy, unity, and friendship with other peers, emotional regulation, decision-making, problem-solving, and rule following. As mentioned earlier, research has shown that a challenging parenting style has a positive effect on children's mental health (Majdandžić et al., 2018). This parenting style is characterized by parents often encouraging their children to stand up for themselves; thus, children are challenged and learn to handle things that can be difficult, such as risky play. On the other hand, some parents take a more protective parenting style, ultimately what is also referred to as overprotective.

### THE EFFECT OF BEING OVERPROTECTED

Children and young people may experience being overly protected and restricted in their activity in various contexts. Kindergarten teachers, teachers in schools, leaders of leisure activities, parents, and grandparents often have the opportunity to place restrictions on what children are allowed to do. There is virtually no research on the effect of children being overprotected in kindergarten, school, or leisure activities, but there are some studies exploring the effect of parents' overprotection.

Overprotective parents are sometimes called "helicopter parents" or "curling parents," and their parenting style usually differs from normal and healthy parental involvement; for example, whereas normally involved parents may recommend their child to talk to the teacher about a character they are dissatisfied with, helicopter parents will call, or seek out the teacher themselves to speak up for the child and thereby influence the grade (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014). It is thus a much greater involvement, intervention, and/or limitation on the part of the parents in the children's lives and activities than what has normally been regarded as the limit for what parents should care about. The term *helicopter parents* is meant to conjure a picture of how parents hover over their children like a helicopter and constantly ensure that nothing bad happens to them. In the same way, the term *curling parents* depicts how parents constantly sweep away all the bumps and humps that their children may encounter. The point is more or less the same: to make sure that the child is as comfortable as possible and that they do not get injured or feel upset or defeated. This is a parenting practice where the principle is to protect the child from negative and harmful experiences. Somers and Settle (2010) estimated that the proportion of American helicopter parents is between 40 and 60 per cent.

A young mother from a small village told me about her experience in the city. She was in the maternity group where she met the “mother police,” as she called it. They were shocked by how irresponsible she was to have taken the boy with her on a hiking trip up in the mountains. The boy was no more than seventeen days. They were utterly upset by the fact that she could do something like that. And they additionally disapproved that she had bought a used pram for her boy. So, she found out that, no, she would not spend time with the “mother police” in the city. (Female kindergarten teacher)

Researchers have tried to investigate how growing up with overprotective parents affects children’s health in childhood, and a study that examined seven-year-olds found that this was associated with mental internalized difficulties such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and loneliness (Bayer et al., 2010). Similarly, Affrunti and Ginsburg (2012) found that children aged six to thirteen with over-controlling parents had a higher level of child anxiety and lower self-esteem than those with normally controlling parents. These studies have suggested that overprotection and too much parental control limit children’s access to the environment around them and reduce their ability to develop skills or coping, especially in the face of new and unpredictable situations. Overprotective parents can negatively affect their children by communicating that they do not have the skills to succeed in dealing with challenges in the environment around them and life in general. As a result, children may themselves be in doubt about their own competence and coping ability, which in turn makes them more withdrawn and further reduces the chances that they can develop appropriate problem-solving skills (Affrunti & Ginsburg, 2012). In some cases, the doubt about their own skills can also be well-founded because they have never had the opportunity to practise vital skills, as in the introductory example where Johanne, due to her mother’s concern for water, never learned to swim.

Also later, in adolescence and early adulthood, the negative effects of growing up with overprotective parents have been found, especially when it comes to mental health. LeMoyné and Buchanan (2011) found in a study among 317 college students in the United States that having helicopter parents was negatively associated with mental well-being and functioning and positively associated with the use of painkillers and prescription medications for anxiety and depression. The study showed that children of helicopter parents had more negative feelings about themselves and that parents largely hindered their children from the opportunity to develop and learn to deal with current and future challenges alone.

What will become of young adults who look accomplished on paper but seem to have a hard time making their way in the world without the constant involvement of their parents? How will the real world feel to a young person who has grown used to problems being solved for them and accustomed to praise at every turn? Is it too late for them to develop a hunger to be in charge of their own lives? Will they at some point stop referring to themselves as kids and dare to claim the “adult” label for themselves? If not, then what will become of a society populated by such “adults”? (Julie Lythcott-Haims)

Julie Lythcott-Haims had so many experiences with more or less helpless and poorly functioning students in her work as dean of Stanford University—a prestigious university in the United States that is very difficult to get into—that she expressed her frustrations above in an interview with WBUR, Boston’s NPR News Station, on 28 August 2017. Lythcott-Haims had observed what several studies have also documented. Segrin et al. (2012) conducted a study of more than 500 pairs of parents and their children who were then young adults. They found a negative correlation between an overprotective parenting style and the young adults’ sense of responsibility for their own situation. The children who grew up with helicopter parents had a stronger belief that others would solve their problems, and in general they were more helpless in dealing with things on their own than their peers. Also, Schiffrin et al. (2013) found that having helicopter parents showed a negative correlation with students’ autonomy, competence, and belonging, as well as a positive correlation with depression and low life satisfaction. Overprotective parents are also associated with a wide range of negative characteristics in the student, such as lower self-control (Kwon et al., 2015), higher levels of narcissism, more ineffective coping skills, anxiety, and stress (Segrin et al., 2013), as well as a lower sense of coping ability and poor adaptation in the workplace (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014).

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we looked at the more unintended consequences of adults overprotecting children in their play and activities. We have pointed out that children who are restricted from facing risk in their play may also be less able to consider dealing with risky situations both here and now and later in life. We have discussed research showing that young people and

adults can end up with more mental problems, lower quality of life, and more helplessness if they are overprotected when growing up. Although protecting a child is a well-meaning strategy on the part of parents and those responsible for children, it can have negative consequences, which in the long run can hardly be considered to be in the child's best interests. At the same time, it is challenging to investigate the negative effects of the absence of play on children in an ethically sound manner. Depriving children of such an essential element of life in the service of research cannot be defended. Therefore, there is a need for new ways of conducting research on this, which can both safeguard children's best interests and at the same time provide the knowledge we need to continue to fight for children's right to freedom, play, and exploration.

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PART II

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## Ethics and Risk





## Doing Good and Avoiding Harm

**Abstract** This chapter introduces a distinction between do-good-ethics, which highlights the responsibility to contribute to positive and uplifting experiences for others, and avoid-harm-ethics, which emphasizes the responsibility to protect others from negative experiences and injury. Adults who can influence children's scope for play need to find a reasonable balance between these two ethical perspectives. Like other risk assessments, the ethical evaluations of the scope for risky play should consider the likelihood that harm will occur and the seriousness of the harm. It should also consider not just the short-term benefits and harms, but also the long-term ones. Keeping children passive may in the short term lead to fewer instances of harm but may be harmful to their long-term development.

**Keywords** Risky play • Ethics • Do-good-ethics • Avoid-harm-ethics • Risk assessment

*Four-year-old Pia would like to climb the apple tree with the five-year-olds. Now she stands frustrated on the ground and watches her friends joke and laugh up in the treetop. There is a rule in the kindergarten that only the oldest children may use the apple tree as a playground. The kindergarten teacher believes that Pia is really strong and good enough to be allowed to climb. He thinks it would be okay to make an exception for her. Maybe it will create*

*expectations in other four-year-olds about the same thing, but Pia is special. She is agile and strong and will enjoy climbing. The teacher thinks she should be allowed. He needs to check with her parents, however, and they say no. They believe that Pia should wait another year, like the others of the same age. Both mother and father are anxious for their girl to fall from the tree and be injured. They have heard about a fall from the same tree a few years ago. Now they listen to the teacher's assessment that this will most likely go well, and that Pia will rejoice and grow from this challenge. Still, they put their foot down for climbing. Best to be careful.*

Previous chapters have presented research that shows how children need to engage in risky play to have a healthy physical and mental development. They need opportunities to explore the world off the radar of adults. This is necessary for the children to develop into independent, autonomous, and robust individuals. Then we have seen that children today often lack a scope of action for such play. In many societies, we can observe that caution prevails, both when the children are in kindergarten or at school and when they are at home in their own neighbourhoods with parents, family, and friends.

This chapter discusses two ethical perspectives that can provide conflicting advice when setting the framework for children's life development. On the one hand, there is what we can call the do-good-ethics, which says that we should create the conditions for positive, meaningful, and empowering experiences for children. Adventure, play, and fun are a prerequisite for children to have a good life. Do-good-ethics addresses how we can contribute to this.

On the other hand, there is what we can call avoid-harm-ethics. It calls for caution. We should avoid activities and actions that in various ways can be harmful to affected parties. Avoid-harm-ethics in the current context addresses the need to protect children from what can be painful, uncomfortable, and harmful, both physically and mentally.

Do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics provide complementary perspectives for the organization of activities for children. Parents as well as teachers and other professionals who work with children need to find a reasonable balance between the two ethical perspectives. From childhood research, they can gain systematic knowledge about what inhibits and promotes children's development. By familiarizing oneself with this knowledge, one can establish an informed balance between ethical perspectives which in itself may be contradictory, but which can be reconciled in a way of thinking about what are healthy and good conditions for children to grow up.

At the beginning of this chapter, it is also in place to clarify how ethical disagreement may come about. Parents and staff in a kindergarten may disagree on the scope of action for risky play for one child. Should Pia be allowed to climb the tree in the playground? Her parents are sceptical, while the kindergarten teacher believes she is ready for it. This disagreement may be due in part to (1) different perceptions of what the facts are and (2) different ethical assessments of what is acceptable risk. The parents may think that Pia is not motorically ready to climb the tree, while the kindergarten teacher thinks the opposite. In that case, there is a disagreement about (1) the facts. Then the parties may agree on the facts and what motor level the girl is at but differ when it comes to whether the climb will involve (2) a morally justifiable risk. In such cases, it is helpful to clarify the source of the disagreement. It can prevent misunderstandings and lead to a faster clarification of what should be done next.

## TWO ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Ethics is about how our actions and choices affect ourselves and other people. It is common to distinguish between morality and ethics (Kvalnes, 2019). Every human being tends to have a personal morality, that is, a set of attitudes and perceptions about what is right and wrong in the interaction between people. In a society there is also a more or less common morality, overlapping, and shared attitudes and perceptions about right and wrong. Ethics, on the other hand, can be understood as systematic thinking about what is right and wrong in relation to other people. We can go to ethics to get advice on what is the responsible and right thing to do in each situation.

Ethics is important because it gives us concepts and language to speak about normative issues. What is the right and responsible way to proceed here? Morality alone is often reflected in how we perceive and what we feel about particular actions and alternatives, whether they are acceptable and right, or unacceptable and wrong. We have a moral intuition or gut feeling telling us that this is something we should or should not do. We need ethics when we are in doubt or disagree with someone about what is the right alternative in this situation. The language of ethics allows us to investigate and discuss the matter together, and not just stand there with conflicting emotions. Two people may have different moral intuitions

when a five-year-old girl asks to be allowed to climb a tree. One immediately thinks yes, while the other has a gut feeling that says no. These two will not get anywhere if they do not have the ability to reflect ethically on the situation.

At its best, ethical reflection is an open and curious examination of what is morally right and wrong in a given situation. The philosopher Dagfinn Føllesdal (1997) points out that the ethics strategy differs advantageously from three alternatives. They can be described as follows:

- Dogmatic strategy: I have decided that this is the only right alternative, so then there is nothing more to talk about.
- Emotional strategy: I feel that this is right alternative, so will I do it this way.
- Traditional strategy: This is how we have always done it, so we continue on this path.

What these strategies have in common is that they are closed and stand in the way of further investigation and reflection. Ethics is about using factual argumentation and justification. Through ethical reflection, it is possible to clear up misunderstandings, identify precise reasons why people disagree, and find solutions that more people can agree with.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2013) distinguishes between two ways people make decisions. One he calls system 1. This is the quick, immediate, impulsive, and intuitive way to decide. Most of the decisions we make in a day are governed by system 1. Then we can also use system 2, which is the slow and analytical strategy. Here we weigh the pros and cons and spend time getting to grips with the matter properly. It can be about finding out what the facts are, what considerations are at stake, and what principles we should apply.

Should Pia be allowed to climb to the top of that tree? It depends on several things, including how good she is at climbing, how close together the branches are, and how hard the ground is in case she falls. How likely is it that she will fall, and if so, how seriously may she be harmed? These are considerations that come into play when we use system 2 to make the decision. We can start with a moral intuition (system 1) that says yes or no to climbing and then make an ethical assessment (system 2) to find out if the girl should be allowed to climb or not. Such a slow assessment can either end up with the intuition being confirmed or we must correct it, in light of what ethics and the facts tell us.

Within ethics, we can draw a distinction between the part that is concerned with the moral responsibility to contribute in positive ways in the lives of others and the part that emphasizes the moral responsibility not to expose others to negative and harmful experiences (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh et al., 2009). We can call them do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics. The Norwegian author of children’s books Torbjørn Egner has captured the two ethics perspectives in the Cardamom Law: “You should not bother others, you should be decent and kind, and otherwise you can do what you want.”

A further division of the two ethical perspectives can be made between actively doing something and deciding to be passive and refrain from certain actions. Then we get these four variants.

	<i>Do-good-ethics</i>	<i>Avoid-harm-ethics</i>
Active	Take initiative and do good deeds: help, support, encourage, contribute to positive development	Prevent damage through active interventions, intervene to stop processes that can have negative and harmful consequences
Passive	Refrain from intervening, so that the individual learns to master the situation himself	Refrain from committing harmful acts yourself, do not expose others to unreasonable risk, and do not harass and bully others

Some actions may fit into more than one of these variants, depending on perspective. For example, helping a girl to take the first climb up to the lower branches of the tree can be an active do-good effort, but also an active avoid-harm effort, if the reason for doing so is to avoid that the girl stumbles and falls in her attempt to climb. In other words, the boundaries between these levels are not sharp and unambiguous. Nevertheless, this is a useful division to clarify ethical priorities.

The figure above gives a general presentation of active and passive aspects of the do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics, respectively. Let’s use the same mindset to zoom in on ethical aspects of risky play for children. Two fundamental ethical concerns emerge, and professionals and family members need to strike a reasonable balance between creating a framework for children’s opportunities for risky play and adventure.

	<i>Do-good-ethics</i>	<i>Avoid-harm-ethics</i>
Principle	Promote positive and uplifting experiences for children	Protect children from negative and harmful experiences
Consequence	Encouragement for risky play <b>Active:</b> Take initiatives to give children the chance to play and explore the world. Contribute to them getting challenges that provide development and the joy of mastery <b>Passive:</b> Do not intervene when children climb trees or engage in other risky activities	Restrictions on risky play <b>Active:</b> Intervene and stop the approach to play with too high a risk. Adjust the activity so it becomes less dangerous <b>Passive:</b> Do not create and contribute to risky and dangerous situations for children

Anyone who cares about children will recognize that all the factors mentioned in this figure can be legitimate and important in given situations. Then there is also real disagreement about what is a sensible and good balance between them. As mentioned earlier, this disagreement can be about facts—how dangerous and risky will it be for the girl to climb that tree?—and about ethical principles—what ethical principles should prevail in this case?

Both ethical perspectives can be exaggerated. When it comes to do-good-ethics, it can be taken too far, especially in its active variant. A person that stands up for others and is constantly willing to make a positive effort for other human beings may end up passivating the recipient. A well-meaning helper can create what is often called learned helplessness in the other. The recipient of help and support becomes so used to others solving tangles and sorting things out, that he or she does not develop the ability to master challenges on his or her own. This can be avoided by ensuring a balance in the do-good-ethics between the active and the passive part. Sometimes the best contribution to a positive experience for the other is to remain passive in the background.

## PROTECTED CHILDREN

In the first part of this book, we saw that childhood research shows a trend in recent decades where protection and risk reduction dominate. Said with the terms in this book, it is the avoid-harm-ethics that prevails, and more specifically the active, preventive part. It happens at the expense of do-good-ethics, in both its active and its passive parts.

Among professionals, it is especially teachers in schools and kindergarten teachers who provide narratives about the dominance of avoid-harm-ethics. Here are some statements from interviews we have done with people who work with children.

Playground equipment has been replaced, trees have been cut down, the use of knives and axes in the forest is very limited—virtually non-existent—and activities such as the use of hammers and nails is rarely done.

We have stopped making campfires on trips, and never take the children with us to swim. We are always two adults when a child is not picked up within opening hours. We are restrictive when it comes to climbing.

Several parents expressed concern that their children might not be able to climb some of our apple trees. After talking to the kindergarten authority in the municipality about this, they recommended that we do not let the children climb trees, they should rather do it with parents privately. Today, children are not allowed to climb trees in the backyard.

Several previously popular climbing frames have been removed. Parents are more sceptical now than before about climbing trees on racks and the like.

These statements indicate a transition from a past where children would be allowed to engage in risky play, to a present where these possibilities are restricted.

Notions that this restriction may be unfortunate for children are also present in our material. The staff ask themselves if they are helping to passivate the children in ways that hinder motor development.

The staff intervenes faster than before when the children explore climbing skills and are running in uneven terrain and cycling downhill. We wonder if such a focus can help to hinder motor development of skills and can create more passive children in the long run? We work in collaboration with the parents regarding this issue. We walk a lot in the fields, here there is not a well-secured play area as in the kindergarten, yet the few accidents we have experienced have happened in the outdoor area, not in the forest.

Based on the childhood research that we have referred to in previous chapters, there is indeed a tendency towards restrictions of risky play. It is well documented that restrictions on the opportunities to jump, climb, and run through terrain have a negative impact on motoric development. Here a paradox emerges for avoid-harm-ethics. It seems that enforcing its

principle of avoiding short-term harm now creates long-term harm in the form of poorer motor and mental development. The next section deals in greater detail with how such a paradox can arise.

## RISK ETHICS

Earlier in the book, we have seen that children describe risky play as something scary-fun, an activity that is exciting and dangerous at the same time. In order to strike a reasonable balance between avoid-harm-ethics and do-good-ethics we need a more precise understanding of risk, since the conflict between the two perspectives often arises in connection with attempts to determine what is acceptable risk.

An action is risky if there is a possibility that it could lead to a negative outcome. If the girl is allowed to climb the tree, there is a danger that she will fall down and hit herself. In general, the risk is determined by two factors, namely the probability that an outcome will occur and the severity of this outcome. In the case with the girl who wants to climb, the risk is determined based on two factors:

- How likely is it that she will fall from the tree?
- How seriously injured can she be from the fall?

It may be that the probability of her falling down is quite high, but she will only be slightly injured, since the surface is soft and the distance down to the ground is short. The combination of these two conditions indicates that letting her climb involves an acceptable risk. It is different if the probability of a fall is high, at the same time as the surface and the fall height indicate that the girl can be seriously injured if this happens. A third possibility is that the probability of the girl falling down is very small, since she is a flexible and good climber. If she should still fall down it is likely that she will have a concussion or break an arm, or both. Here it is more difficult to assess whether the risk of her being allowed to climb the tree is acceptable or not.

Both the probability of fall and injury and the severity of injury can be graded. In other contexts where one relates to risk, a so-called risk matrix is often set up. It can be used to analyse and estimate combinations of probability and possible negativity in consequences.



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<i>Harmless</i>	<i>Quite harmful</i>	<i>Very harmful</i>	<i>Critical</i>	<i>Disastrous</i>
Very likely				
Likely				
Less likely				
Very unlikely				

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The fields in this matrix can be coloured green (acceptable risk), yellow (doubt about risk), and red (unacceptable risk). It is not certain that such a matrix is directly transferable as a tool for structuring risk assessments in kindergartens, schools and the neighbourhood, but it does bring out the two dimensions of risk. It may also be suitable for putting into words what a disagreement is about. The parents who do not want their girl to be allowed to climb the tree can consider that it is very likely that she will fall down and that the negative consequence will be critical. The teachers in the kindergarten may think that a fall is less likely and that the consequence will in any case also be less dangerous. Once this disagreement has been clarified, it is possible to have a conversation about what should happen next. The arguments behind such different perceptions of the situation can come to the table.

Within research on risk, it is common to draw a distinction between real and perceived risk. There can be a significant gap between the two. A possible explanation for the emerging climate of protection around children may be that the perceived risk of, for example, climbing trees and children exploring their own immediate environment without adults is characterized by horror stories about what has gone wrong in some cases. Media coverage and sharing of such stories on social media can disrupt the risk assessment and create a perception that such incidents are more likely and more harmful than they actually are.

Concerns about possible harms that can befall children can have different sources. In a neighbourhood we know, there lived a paediatrician. In his professional work, he encountered battered and bleeding children who had to be sewn together after unpleasant meetings with the outside world. As a result, the paediatrician himself set strict limits on how his own children could get around in the parks and gardens where they lived. Other neighbours observed this and worried that they were not protective enough towards their own children. From other research, we know that behaviours and attitudes are contagious, especially when an authority

takes the lead. In this case, the paediatrician acted as a source of infection for a restrictive and strict enforcement of children's room for manoeuvre for risky play. Then there are also examples of the opposite, that some parents go in the breeze to let go and let the children get roosters on their own in the neighbourhood.

### LONG-TERM ETHICS

We have seen that avoid-harm-ethics lays a protective hand over children and will restrict their scope of action for risky play. The guiding normative assumption is that decision-makers should minimize painful physical and mental experiences for children and not inflict pain on them. This is often an understandable way of thinking, which many will sympathize with. Children are fragile and vulnerable beings, and the world can often be dangerous to them. As long as they are not fully equipped to face the dangers of life, it is important to protect and take care of them. Therefore, it is important to intervene against climbing, handling knives and matches, fighting and other wild and physical play, and trips in unknown terrain, outside the adults' radar.

On closer inspection, this way of thinking is not sufficiently long term. Avoid-harm-ethics provides norms for protecting people from negative consequences of decisions and actions. For this to be a credible ethical perspective, it must include both damage that can occur here and now and damage that can occur in the long term. One of the main arguments for opening up to risky play is that in the long run it is beneficial for children's development and that the alternative of restricting risky play may not be immediately harmful but will most probably be so in the long run.

To clarify this way of thinking, we can draw a distinction between short-term and long-term variants of the two ethical perspectives we have discussed so far.

	<i>Do-good-ethics</i>	<i>Avoid-harm-ethics</i>
Short term	Promoting sudden positive and meaningful experiences	Zero tolerance for sudden cuts, fractures, and traumatic experiences
Long term	Promoting positive experiences and mental and physical well-being in a life perspective	Zero tolerance for gradual development of motoric and mental deficiencies and harms

From this figure we can see that there is an internal tension within avoid-harm-ethics. A zero tolerance for immediate harm here and now can weaken the possibility of fulfilling the zero tolerance for harm that occurs slowly and gradually. The gradual harms can often result from limited scope of action from risky play. There can be an internal tension in the do-good-ethics as well. If the short-term part is allowed to dominate, it can create situations that become so extreme that children are exposed to serious injury. This in turn can mean that they are not given the opportunity to have a mature and robust adult life. The most important lesson to be learned here, however, is that it is not the avoid-harm-ethics per se that puts a stop to risky play. It is rather the short-term version that has this feature. The fear of sudden and dramatic harms that can occur when children fall off trees here and now leads to a general ban on climbing. A more comprehensive avoid-harm-ethics will balance this fear of cuts and breaks here and now against the damage that can occur from passivity and lack of practice in getting from branch to branch in a tree.

Childhood research has, as we have seen earlier in the book, documented that the reduced opportunity for risky play inhibits motoric development. There is a high probability that the girl who is not allowed to climb trees will thus be deprived of the possibility for healthy motoric development. Then the question is how such a condition should be assessed. How negative and dangerous is it to walk around the world with limited motoric skills? The details of the answer may vary, but most will agree that this counts as a significant disadvantage. This shows that the restriction of children's scope for risky play entails a significant risk of serious harm, which deserves attention here and now, in decision-making processes concerning childhood.

To round off these reflections on the two ethical perspectives, we can say that risky play raises ethical challenges where there are two types of considerations in particular that need to be properly balanced. Firstly, there is a need to strike a reasonable balance between:

- Avoid-harm-ethics and do-good-ethics

We have seen that there is currently a tendency in many countries to give priority to avoid-harm-ethics when children's scope of action for risky play is defined. The practical consequence is that children have limited

possibilities to roam on their own and learn to master the world. The anti-phobic effects that we have previously mentioned are thus weakened. This shows that, secondly, there is a need to find a balance between:

- Short-term avoid-harm-ethics and long-term avoid-harm-ethics

The fear of immediate and visible damage here and now can lead to restrictions and protective measures that have problematic consequences from a long-term avoid-harm-ethics perspective.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have seen that decisions about children's scope of action for risky play can be made on the basis of either moral intuition or ethical assessment. These decision-making methods correspond to Kahneman's distinction between decisions based on the quick system 1 and the slow system 2. Ethics, in turn, can be divided into do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics. A comprehensive ethical assessment needs to balance these two perspectives. It is unfortunate if one of them dominates over the other. Within both, it is also enlightening to distinguish between active and passive compliance and between short-term and long-term considerations. An informed ethical assessment will seek to set a reasonable framework for risky play, where risk is taken into account in the form of the probability of immediate and subsequent injury and the severity of both.

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## Ethical Navigation

**Abstract** Risky play poses ethical dilemmas for decision-makers. This chapter introduces a methodology for ethical analysis. A central component is the Navigation Wheel, which outlines how decisions about risky play rely on clarifications regarding law, identity, morality, reputation, economy, and ethics. The chapter describes how the traditions of consequentialist ethics and duty ethics can provide conflicting answers about risky play. It also identifies the principle of equality and the principle of publicity as core elements in ethical analysis.

**Keywords** Risky play • Ethical dilemma • Consequentialist ethics • Duty ethics • Navigation wheel

In the previous chapter, we discussed the difference between do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics. Here we will take ethics a few steps further and present philosophical tools that can be used to analyse dilemmas around risky play, both in advance of a decision and when one looks back at it and wants to evaluate one's own efforts. This is a tool chapter, where an important element is the Navigation Wheel, a figure that can be used to analyse the diversity of decision-making considerations when you are in a dilemma.

Ethical navigation is the heading we use for a method of thinking through and finding answers to ethical dilemmas, situations where no

matter what you do, something of ethical value will be lost. When you are in an ethical dilemma, there are good ethical reasons to do A and equally good reasons to do B. Regardless of whether you decide to do A or B, someone may have reasons to be disappointed. Ethical navigation is the activity of trying to set a steady and responsible course and identifying a good alternative under the circumstance. The process also prepares you to provide reasons and justification for your decision.

We start from a set of ethical dilemmas from a kindergarten teacher who has shared stories about risk with us. They are suitable for shedding light on ethical dilemmas connected to risky play and how you can navigate when you are in them.

I remember a boy once. We were going to make a ski jump, and we thought that at best they might be able to jump 7 or 8 meters. They are pretty good at jumping when they land that far down the slope. And this boy was good at jumping and he wanted extra speed, and then he jumped somewhere between 14–16 meters! He stood for a while, but then he fell. Then I remember there was a suction going through my stomach when I saw that the kid just flew and flew.

It is the kindergarten teacher who has given the go-ahead for this jump. When adults compete in the ski jump, there is usually a trainer at the jump, signalling with the arm when it is okay to go downhill. Then there is no question of ethics, since the jumper is an adult and goes downhill at his own risk. It is different with children. They need adult help to assess whether this is too dangerous or not. The adult is responsible for saying yes or no to the activity. The same goes for the next story:

We had two-wheeled bicycles in the kindergarten, and we rode on long trips with them. And once it was a bit on the border, because we came to a rather steep path that wound its way down. I'm betting quite a few adults had not been able to cycle down there. And I remember that I cycled down first, and stood on the brake down and the bike slipped ... And then my colleague stands at the top and shouts "shall we send them down?" And then I replied that «yes, you can send them, but you must say that they must be careful and STAND on the brake all the way down! They have to stand all the way on the brake». And then of course one boy wants to challenge us, and he whizzes down without using the brakes and disappears into some green forest. And I think "is this going well?" And then I hear from inside the forest "ha, ha, ha, ha". So it went well.

Here, the assessment takes place quickly and is perhaps governed more by a gut feeling that things are probably going well than by a risk assessment of whether it is safe for the children to cycle when it is so slippery and steep. Sometimes it is caution that trumps, as in this story:

I have experienced that the children stand in the window and watch the rain. They can see that the ponds and puddles fill up with water. Then they shake their heads when they see adults coming and draining away all the water before they go out. Because the teachers have read that if it is so and so deep then the one-year-old can drown. Then you do not understand the participation of children. There are also kindergartens that go on trips to the lake, and then the children are not allowed to play by the water. Then you step on the influence of children. Then you should not go there.

These three stories come from a kindergarten teacher with a basic view of the balance between do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics. He can acknowledge that both ethics have something to do with it. The situations he finds himself in are ethical dilemmas, since there are good reasons to say yes to the activity that the kids are ready to throw themselves into and at the same time also good reasons to hold back and say no.

In the first two examples, it is the teacher himself who defines the scope for risky play and must balance between do-good-considerations and avoid-harm-considerations. In the third, he witnesses someone else defining what he perceives as too narrow a scope of action for play, in that they drain away the water. Those who decide are in a dilemma between allowing water play with a minimal probability of an absolutely terrible outcome, namely drowning, and removing the water so that this type of play is impossible. The teacher himself is also in a dilemma, since he can choose between accepting that caution wins in this case or raising his voice to challenge and oppose what he sees.

The decisions made in all three situations should build on both factual knowledge and ethical principles. We will take a closer look at what can be a systematic approach to making a good decision in such cases.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY

We have previously drawn a distinction between morality understood as personal and common perceptions of right and wrong and ethics understood as analysis and reflection on what is right and wrong. Morality is often expressed in quick and intuitive assumptions about what should be



done or not—in line with what Kahneman calls system 1 for making decisions. Then we can move on to ethics and system 2 by spending time assessing what speaks for and against different alternatives. In this field, we draw the distinction between do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics.

Morality and ethics can be linked in different ways. Teachers in kindergartens and schools can suddenly end up in situations where there is no time for ethical analysis. They have to make a quick decision about risk, without any time to think. This was the case, for example, with the teacher who had cycled down the steep and slippery ground in the story above. Was it safe to let the kids down the same hill by bike? He spent only a few seconds deciding that the answer was yes. Should not a teacher who is in such a situation sit down and evaluate for and against before making the decision? Is it not unjustifiable to blindly follow the moral intuition? Not necessarily, because the teacher may have spent time assessing such situations earlier, alone or among colleagues and others who are concerned with children's upbringing and opportunities for mental and motoric growth.

The link between system 1 (morality) on the one hand and system 2 (ethics) on the other may be that you prepare for situations that require quick decisions by thinking through similar scenarios in advance. You will not be totally surprised, since you know that such dilemmas accompany your job, and you have made up your mind about how they should be handled.

Such a way of thinking also makes sense in work situations far away from kindergartens and schools. For example, people who are going to move to other cultures to work there can train themselves to face dilemmas that can suddenly arise in these environments. Suddenly you are faced with someone who will give you an expensive gift. You have no time to think and have to accept or reject it, there and then. Then it is good to have thought through dilemmas in advance and received advice from someone who knows the culture. How to draw the line between bribes and gifts? What would be a polite and acceptable way to say no in this culture?

Let's say you have made a decision based on moral intuition, an immediate impulse about what is right in the situation. Later you sit down to think about whether this was a good decision. You waved a clear signal in the jumping hill to the boy who was ready to jump with extra speed. You agreed that the kids could ride down the slippery, steep hill. Or it was you who decided that the water had to be drained away before the kids could

go out and play. These decisions were impulsive and not well thought through, there and then. Now you can calmly and critically revisit them to consider whether they were right. In other words, you go from morality to ethics.

In order for this ethical reflection to hold true, it is important to avoid what is called confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). When people have made up their minds about an issue, they tend to notice information that confirms this opinion and overlook even the most obvious reasons why it is wrong (Kvalnes, 2019). This is how it can be when we reflect on a morally intuitive decision afterwards as well. We may look for confirmations that the original instinct we followed was correct and ignore information that points to the fact that it was incorrect. For the ethical reflection to maintain good quality, it is necessary to keep the possibility open that we should revise our perception of the matter. We need to be receptive to arguments that point to the fact that we were wrong in the first place.

What resources can we find in the ethical toolbox? A tool that lies there is called the principle of equality (Kvalnes, 2019):

Equal cases should be treated equally. A difference in treatment requires that there is a morally relevant difference between the two cases.

This is an ancient principle, written down by the Greek philosopher Aristotle more than 2000 years ago. Even though it is a principle with a long history, young children can insist that we follow it, long before they have learned to read and write. The principle of equality is rooted in a sense of fairness, that advantages and disadvantages in life should be distributed on a factual basis. Siblings can insist on getting exactly the same amount of soda in the glasses when sharing a bottle. A brother may be outraged at the fact that a sister is allowed to participate in fun that he himself is excluded from. It can also feel unfair if one has to clean up after the game, while the other escapes and is allowed to go straight to football training.

It is worth noting that the principle of equality does not mean that everyone should be treated equally. Equal treatment can be deeply unfair and not in accordance with the principle of equality. Imagine if a ten-year-old is denied the opportunity to go out in the neighbourhood alone, because the parents want to treat all their children equally, and have a three-year-old who is not ready for this. There is a morally relevant difference in maturity between a ten-year-old and a three-year-old, so it is

obviously right to give the ten-year-old more room for manoeuvre than the three-year-old. It is important to avoid the misunderstanding that the principle of equality means that everyone should be treated equally.

It is important to follow the principle of equality when determining children's scope for activity and risk. Who will be allowed to jump on the new ski slope? Both Per and Kari want to do it. Should both, only one, or neither of them be allowed? It depends on what we know about these children and what we think counts as a morally relevant difference. We can choose to take into account that:

- Per has light hair and Kari has dark hair.
- Per is a boy and Kari is a girl.
- Per is six months younger than Kari.
- Kari has somewhat more experience with jumping in such slopes than Per.
- Per has anxious and protective parents.
- Kari's parents are supporters of risky play in kindergarten.

Here we have a list of candidates to make a morally relevant difference between Per and Kari. Hair colour is on the list to illustrate a difference that indisputably does not constitute a morally relevant difference. The gender difference might have previously been considered a reason to open up for jumping only for Per, but this is hardly the case today. Furthermore, the age difference is probably too small for it to play a decisive role. There is also no particular difference in what kind of experience they have as ski jumpers. Does it matter that the parents are at each end of the scale for what they tolerate of risky play? It will certainly influence the reactions to the decision of whether to allow jumping or not. No to both will be applauded by Per's parents, while Kari's will probably be negative. If both are allowed to jump, her parents will be happy, unlike his.

A justification based on the principle of equality should also be available to the children for assessment. Imagine if the kindergarten says yes to Kari being allowed to jump and no to Per and explains that it is because the parents have different views on protection and risk. It is probably perceived as deeply unfair by the person who is denied to jump. It is extra bad if the reasoning is also perceived as awkward. Per will probably have a reasonable expectation of being assessed on the basis of his maturity and skiing skills and not based on his parents' attitude towards taking chances.

What about cycling in the terrain? In the example above, a boy challenges the adults and drives straight down the slippery slope without standing on the brake, in violation of what he has been told to do. It creates a more dangerous situation for himself than what the adults planned. Later, this can be a basis for being more careful about taking him on risky cycling trips. He can at least benefit from getting a warning before the next bike ride on trails and slippery surfaces. Why do the others have to go to their bikes and get ready for a ride, while he has to stay and have a serious chat with the teacher? Because on the previous trip he thundered down the slippery steep slope without applying the brakes. On this trip he has to do as the adults say.

The principle of equality is at the heart of all ethics. It is related to the golden rule, which says that you should do to others what you want others to do to you. This rule is enshrined in most religions and cultures. It also has a relation in Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, which states that each individual should behave as if the rule of action they follow can be used as a general norm for anyone who ends up in a similar situation (Kant, 1998 [1785]). The teacher who is at the bottom of the steep and slippery ground can say yes to the kids cycling down there, only if he thinks that any other teacher in the same situation should be able to do the same.

The thinking enshrined in the principle of equality seems to be universal. What can vary enormously is what is the result when the principle is in use. Although the principle is an element in every ethic, there are great differences in what is considered to be a morally relevant difference. For example, gender may be considered morally relevant in some cultures and not in others. In some cultures, boys have significantly more room for manoeuvre for play than girls, on the assumption that they are basically more robust and have a greater need to toughen up before adulthood. Per can be let into the ski jump because he is a boy, while Kari has to give up because she is a girl. When we follow a completely different practice in our culture, it is based on exactly the same principle of equality, but with different perceptions about the existence of morally relevant differences between boys and girls in this field.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF PUBLICITY

Ethics is inextricably linked to transparency and openness about our decisions and actions. If we sense that it will be embarrassing and awkward if others get to know what we are about to do, then it is a sign that we are on ethically thin ice. Actions and decisions should withstand the light of day. This way of thinking is embodied in what is often called the principle of publicity (Kvalnes, 2019):

You should be willing to defend your decision publicly and be open about it to relevant people.

This principle is important when teachers in kindergartens and schools define the scope of action for risky play and say yes or no to activities for children. Are they prepared to justify and explain their decision? This question may be relevant both in an organization where do-good-ethics dominate and there is a high level of activity and in a place where avoid-harm-ethics and caution are prevalent. In both places, those responsible can ask themselves whether the practice can withstand the light of day, or whether they prefer to see it as secret and obscured.

It is important to avoid two possible misunderstandings of the principle of publicity. Firstly, this is not a reputation principle. It is not about how likely it is that someone will find out about your own decisions and practices and how likely it is that the press will appear and ask pertinent questions. The ethical principle is detached from such probability assessments. Instead, it invites reflection about how it will feel if what you do actually gets public attention. The chances of this happening may be zero, but from an ethical point of view it is still relevant to make this assessment. It is a thought experiment that can strengthen or weaken the perception that a certain action is something we should move forward with.

Another possible misconception is that the principle of publicity will provide dramatically different conclusions, depending on whether the decision-maker is introverted or extroverted and comfortable speaking in public or not. Some people find it stressful to stand in the spotlight with a microphone in front of them, while others are inspired and get positive energy from it. Thus, one would think that they can also come to different answers as to whether they will be willing to defend their decision publicly.

The introvert can say no, without it meaning that the action that is up for consideration is unethical in this person's eyes. It's perfectly fine to let children out in mud ponds to play before we have drained away the water, but it's not something I want to front or debate in public, the introvert may think. It is the idea of being in public that motivates the negative answer. The extrovert can say yes, even if the action itself from this person's own point of view appears to be ethically questionable. Yes, I would like to make sure that the water is away from the ponds before we let the children into the outdoor area, even if it means that they do not get a chance to splash around in the water and make dams, which they love. I like to defend this view in full public, says the extrovert and debate-happy. It is the idea of the spotlight that brings out the positive answer and not an ethical quality assessment of the action.

In order for it to make sense for different people to apply the principle of publicity, they need to imagine a form of open arena where their decision will get some public attention, where it either feels right or not to defend it. The introvert and extrovert will probably envision completely different contexts, but both can benefit from this ethical principle when making a decision, since it safeguards the very basic ethical idea that what we do should withstand the light of day.

### THE GOOD AND THE RIGHT

A distinction in ethics is between the duty ethics, which claims that conduct (the right) is more important than the outcome (the good), and consequentialism, which goes the opposite way and believes that the outcome (the right) is more important than conduct (the right) (Kvalnes, 2019). To illustrate this difference, we can imagine how these ethical theories view honesty about risky play that children have participated in. Specifically, we can examine what they would advise staff to do after a child has participated in an activity that is far more dangerous than what the parents will appreciate.

The boy has jumped fifteen metres on skis in the kindergarten and might have harmed himself in the process. It went well, and the kid was proud and happy to have mastered the conditions so well. If the parents hear about his risky ski jump, there will be uproar. They will probably require a sharp reduction in the child's opportunities to engage in ski jump activities. The unrest can quickly spread to the rest of the parent

group as well. Thus, the opportunities for creating joy and involving children in anti-phobic activities will be reduced for both this child and other children. Should the teacher talk openly about the long ski jump, or get the child involved in a little concealment? This will be between us. Mom and Dad do not understand how much you enjoy the ski jumping. Best for you if they do not get to know about today's hill record. We do not have to lie, just do not tell everything. This is the consequentialist solution. The overall outcome will be best if we say nothing to the parents.

Duty ethics would define this alternative as highly dubious and unacceptable way of dealing with the situation. The truth must come out. Honesty is more important than a positive outcome, and we cannot include a child in a deceptive plan. Respect and human dignity point in the direction of saying it as it is, even though this alternative will reduce the scope for healthy and beneficial risky play.

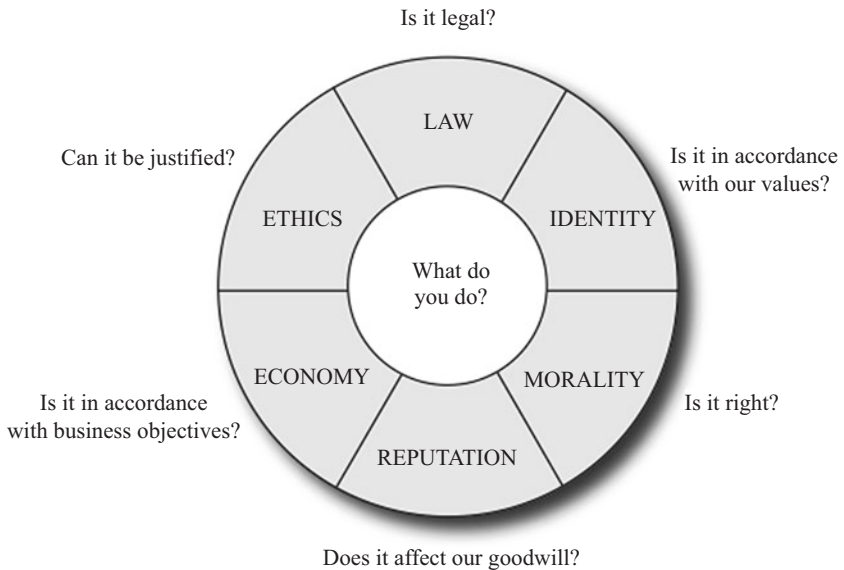
Consequentialist ethics will at least try to map possible outcomes of openness versus concealment about the long ski jump. How do we bring out the best consequences for affected parties? If it is the case that the parents will probably be hysterical upon hearing about the long jump, and thus want to start controlling the activities in the kindergarten and restrict the boy's room for risky ski jumps, then this speaks for a concealment. The long-term consideration for the child's motoric and physical development trumps the consideration of telling the truth and sharing all information with the parents.

How should we place do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics in relation to the two traditions we have become familiar with here, duty ethics and consequentialism? Basically, that distinction is about doing good and avoiding harm and so about positive and negative consequences of actions. Thus we can think that such assessments belong under consequentialist ethics. However, duty ethics can also be concerned with consequences. It does not say that consequences are ethically irrelevant, but that there are ethical considerations—honesty, respect, and human dignity—that are more important than the consequences. This means that a duty ethicist can be happy to take part in a discussion about the balance between do-good-considerations and avoid-harm-considerations. The duty ethicist may appreciate the value of giving children opportunities to engage in risky play, because it can be documented to be mentally and physically healthy for them, but nevertheless be sceptical of the alternative of lying so that anxious parents will not hear about this activity.

## THE NAVIGATION WHEEL

So far in this chapter, we have looked at ethical concepts and principles for assessing what kind of scope of action children should have for risky play. Both the principle of equality and the principle of publicity can be used to think through the alternatives. The same can be said of duty ethics and consequentialist ethics, which emphasize different aspects of the situation and give different answers to what should be considered to be morally relevant characteristics of it. The Navigation Wheel (Fig. 6.1) can be used to place ethics in a broader decision-making context (Kvalnes & Øverenget, 2012).

The Navigation Wheel points out six considerations that can be relevant when making a decision, without pointing out how they should be prioritized or ranked. It is up to the decision-maker to decide which considerations should weigh the heaviest in a given situation. Normally, however, a “no” to the legal question will be enough to put an end to that alternative. In a well-functioning society, there is often little reason to go beyond the law. Then there may still be exceptions, cases where the



**Fig. 6.1** The Navigation Wheel



legislation seems unreasonable, which may open the door for civil disobedience, an effort in which moral and ethical considerations are considered to be more important than the legal one.

We can imagine a situation where the alternatives under consideration are to continue with or shut down the three risky activities described at the beginning of the chapter. Ethical assessments can be about whether it is right that kindergarten children are given opportunities to:

- Make long ski jumps
- Cycle in muddy and hilly terrain
- Splash and make dams in rainwater

In the examples, the adults in the kindergarten gave the go-ahead for the first two activities but put their foot down for the last one. What does it look like when we take these options through the Navigation Wheel?

When it comes to LAW, it is the national laws regarding activities in kindergartens that set the conditions. Let us use our home country Norway as an example. It has laid down the legal framework for play and activity in the kindergarten. Paragraph 1 states:

The kindergarten shall provide children under compulsory school age with good development and activity opportunities in close understanding and cooperation with the children's homes.

This general description gives no indication as to whether the activities mentioned above are legal or not.

The activities shall be planned, designed, arranged and operated so that the regulations' provisions on well-being, health, hygiene and safety conditions are met in a generally accepted manner.

The Kindergarten Act in Norway has elements that link it to both do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics, but the main emphasis is on protection and injury avoidance:

Both outdoor and indoor conditions must be pleasant and designed so that the risk of accidents and health damage to the children is prevented.

In connection with risky play, parents can appeal to the Kindergarten Act to complain when a child has been injured. Per broke his foot in a kind of ski jump that children at his age are not ready for. Kari suffered a concussion after overturning a bicycle on a steep and muddy hill. An injury in itself cannot be used as proof that the law has been broken. In some cases, a reasonable risk is taken, and the outcome is still that the child is harmed, due to a series of unfortunate circumstances.

It is also possible for parents to refer to the Kindergarten Act when they call for greater scope of action for risky play. The kindergarten may have barred children from engaging in ski jumping, mountain biking, and water activities, and parents may perceive this as an unacceptable restriction of the children's development and activity opportunities.

In reality, both of these legal initiatives are more theoretical than real. Parents and other affected parties very rarely use the Kindergarten Act actively to criticize the scope of action for risky play. There are other aspects of the Navigation Wheel that seem more relevant.

IDENTITY in this context means the core values that form the basis of the activities in an organization or profession. Who are we? What does it mean to be us? An organization can also formulate a vision that tells something about what can be expected from those who work there. Ferista is a Norwegian outdoor kindergarten. It states the following about its own identity and values:

Our vision is to run a kindergarten based on the children's basic needs for activity. We want to give the children a safe and good upbringing based on good nature experiences, friendship, co-determination and physical activity.

Here again we see that the balance between doing good and avoiding harm is articulated. Does the statement provide guidelines for employees who are in doubt about whether they should allow ski jumping, mud cycling, and water play after rain? Not really. Like other formulations of values and visions, they are at such an overall level that it is difficult to read out any specific advice for how dilemmas and cases of doubt should be handled.

The trade union for Norwegian teachers (Utdanningsforbundet) has formulated a professional ethics platform for teachers. It contains statements that can also potentially provide a guideline for allowing or restricting risky play in kindergartens and schools. Here is what the platform says about teachers' core values:

The teaching profession's ethical platform is based on the following universal core values: Human dignity and human rights as well as respect and equality. The values of professional integrity and privacy are concretizations of these previous values.

Again, the value statement seems to be so overriding that it does not provide any clarification as to what kind of scope teachers should provide for play that involves both a risk of injury and can be decisive for children's physical and mental development. The pattern when we go to core values is that they are formulated so generally that they do not provide a specific guideline for how specific cases should be resolved. However, they can have a function by acting as reminders, for example, that professional integrity is important. Then it is reasonable to ask for meaningful content for this term. How does a professional with integrity proceed to make decisions about risky play for children?

MORALITY is, as we have seen before, about personal and common beliefs about what is right and wrong. When we face a decision, we often have a moral intuition about what is right and what is wrong. When the teacher stands at the bottom of the hill and sees that the most eager ski jumper moving further back to gain extra speed ahead of the jump, a gut feeling often arises as to whether this is okay or not. It is Kahneman's system 1 that is in operation. The moral intuition can be to let the ski jumper assess this himself or to intervene and ask him to get further down the upper slope, to reduce speed. When there is little or no time for reflection, we tend to make impulsive decisions, partly formed by our moral intuition.

What about REPUTATION? What is under consideration here is whether following a specific alternative will strengthen or weaken the decision-maker's status among others. A reputational assessment can include a specific kind of risk assessment. How likely is it that the action we are considering will become public knowledge, that others will find out what we have done? If it is unlikely that anyone will ever get to know that we let the kids cycle down a steep and muddy path on their bikes, there will be little reason to worry about reputation. If, on the other hand, the decision-maker considers that there is a significant probability of receiving negative attention for such a decision, then the reputational warning lights flash red. A decision-maker who is particularly concerned about reputational risk could end up choosing caution every time.

Reputational thinking often takes the form of wanting to look good in the eyes of others. What will he or she think about us if we do so? This can

be in contrast to a value-based thinking, where what matters is to act on the basis of what one stands for, and not try to please the outside world and other people's expectations. It is not uncommon for organizations to be unclear as to whether they prioritize identity or reputation considerations. A municipality writes about itself under identity and values that it wants to "appear to be a service-friendly municipality." This can be read as a reputational statement and not an identity statement. The municipality is eager to create the impression that it is service-friendly, rather than to actually be so.

ECONOMY is the decision-making consideration in the Navigation Wheel that is least relevant for assessing the scope of action for risky play. The wheel is intended to be used in many different situations where considerations can stand against each other, and finances can then often be relevant. In a context where it is about ski jumping, cycling, and playing with water, this will play a marginal role and only to the extent that activities like this take up financial resources.

When it comes to ETHICS, we have already seen that there are many different questions and principles that can apply. We can assess ethics of an activity on the basis of (1) the balance between do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics, (2) the principle of equality, (3) the principle of openness, and (4) consequentialism and duty ethics. We can distinguish between ethics in the narrow sense, which consists in using tools (1) to (4), and ethics in the broad sense, which involves using the Navigation Wheel and making an overall assessment in advance of a decision.

A process of evaluating the alternatives in light of the Navigation Wheel provides us with reasons for and against particular instances of risky play. How can we sum up and reach a conclusion about what is right in this particular case? The Navigation Wheel helps the decision-maker to analyse and get an overview. In the end, it is up to the decision-makers to weigh and prioritize among the reasons that have been provided. It is not a good strategy to simply count the number of reasons for and against a particular alternative and go for the alternative with the highest number of positive reasons and the lowest number of negative reasons.

### ETHICAL PRE- AND POST-WORK

We have defined ethics as systematic reflection about right and wrong. Ethics can also be seen as the language that we can use to clarify the issues at hand and have a conversation about what is the fair and right alternative in each situation. Without ethics, it is difficult to deal with moral

disagreement. Bente thinks it is right to let the children out before all the water has been drained away, so that they can play and have fun in the rainwater. Bent disagrees and thinks it is unjustifiable to do so. Here there are two moral intuitions that stand against each other. In such situations, a common language and some common principles are needed to guide a conversation. Without this, two people with conflicting moral intuitions can end up shouting at each other. They lack the words to express their own viewpoints. If they are in possession of ethical principles, they can engage in a systematic conversation to identify the sources of their disagreement and try to find a solution that is acceptable to both.

The Navigation Wheel can be used in ethical preparation, that is, in processes to find out what should be done. Another important area of use is for ethical debriefing. Did we do the right thing in that situation? Did we pay enough attention to law, identity, morality, reputation, economy, and ethics when we proceeded in that way? Ethical debriefing is often a neglected activity. We move on and imagine that we are ready for new ethical challenges. Research in other fields shows that experience alone does not create learning. It is experience in combination with reflection that makes us learn and be better equipped to face similar situations later. Therefore, it makes good sense to sit down to think through an incident and consider whether it was handled well and where there is room for improvement. It can be about the actual implementation, but also about the process that led to a decision. This process can be evaluated on the basis of both whether important considerations came to light and gained sufficient weight and whether people experienced being listened to and taken seriously.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have moved on from the distinction between do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics to provide a more comprehensive presentation of ethical navigation. We have seen that alternatives can be assessed on the basis of the principle of equality and the principle of publicity. The first principle states that equal cases should be treated equally and that a difference in treatment requires that there is a morally relevant difference between the cases. In the assessment of alternatives for risky play, this is an applicable and concrete principle. Which children are ready to climb the trees, cycle in the mud, and explore the world around the street corner? Both children and adults have a sense of fairness which is reflected in the fact that we want a justification for why she is allowed, but not him. It is

reasonable to expect that differential treatment can be justified by pointing to relevant facts of the matter. She has some relevant qualities that he lacks, so therefore only she is allowed. Then it is also natural to think that the decision we make should withstand the light of day, as the principle of publicity says. If we have a feeling that it is best if no one gets to know about this, then we are probably in dubious ethical territory. Duty ethics and consequentialism give us guidelines for what is the right action and may point us in conflicting directions. Is it the course of action or the outcome that should have priority? The Navigation Wheel helps us to keep track of the various concerns that are relevant for the decision, both as preparation ahead of the decision and when it's all over and we sit down to try to learn.

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## Moral Luck

**Abstract** This chapter analyses how a fear of bad moral luck can create hesitation about allowing children to engage in risky play. Moral luck is a paradoxical concept. On the one hand, it seems reasonable that moral praise and criticism should be directed at what people have control over. On the other hand, moral judgements tend to be coloured by the outcome, even though factors beyond the agent's control have played a crucial role. Teachers and other decision-makers can hold back and choose a cautious approach, because they are afraid of being held responsible for harm even in situations where the risk they have allowed children to take is reasonable. Leaders of schools and kindergartens can alleviate the fear by providing moral protection to teachers and other employees in such circumstances.

**Keywords** Risky play • Moral luck • Ethics • Moral protection • Childhood • Risk

At school, there is a football tournament between classes from all the different year levels. This is a highlight of the school year. The pupils look forward to participating in dramatic matches out on the grass. There will be uneven matchups when pupils from different age levels meet each other. The pupils from the seventh grade are bigger and more powerful

than those in the fourth grade. The oldest can tackle and shoot the ball harder than the youngest. The younger pupils enter the field in joy and horror when they face sixth and seventh graders. Here they get to test themselves against the school's biggest and toughest pupils. These are boys and girls that they usually follow with admiration in their eyes during recess. Now they get to experience close contact with them out on the playing field. If they are lucky, they can get in one tackle or shoot the ball towards their goal. Scoring against them seems implausible. Imagine dribbling past the older pupils by sending the ball between their legs!

All the pupils are engaged and give everything in such matches. The teachers have discussed whether it is safe for pupils from different age levels to meet. The risk of some of the younger ones being injured is higher than usual. Normally, they play football with each other and are more or less at the same physical level. In this school tournament, they come up against bigger and stronger players. Nevertheless, the teachers have concluded that the risk of harm is acceptable. They consider it healthy for the youngest to encounter physical superiority. It is joyful, risky play, which is good for the children's development. Then they have also asked the older pupils to show consideration for the younger ones. This is good training in adaptation for them as well.

Max is in goal for his class in the fourth grade. He has made a heroic effort in several matches already. He has fearlessly thrown himself after the ball and knocked it away from the danger zone. It is both wonderful and scary to stretch your arms to catch the ball in matches against older players. The ball comes towards him with greater speed than he is used to. Older pupils have also noticed Max's efforts and praised him for good saves.

Then comes the match against the best team in the seventh grade. Max finds his place in the goal. His heart beats extra fast. The referee blows the whistle, and the match is underway. After ten minutes, a seventh grader gets the ball just a few metres from the goal. He hits the ball as hard as he can, and Max throws himself after it to make a save. The young goalkeeper feels intense pain as the ball hits his forearm. He screams. The referee stops the match, and several adults bend over Max to check his condition. They understand that this is serious. A teacher takes Max to the emergency room at the local hospital, where they find arm fractures. Max has to be plastered and cannot stand in goal for a while.

Afterwards, teachers and parents reflected on the incident. What lessons could be learned from it? Did it show that it is unreasonable to have a football tournament where pupils meet across grade levels? Was Max's



arm fracture proof that the pupils should rather play football in a safer environment, with opponents of the same age? Or should his injury be seen as an example of what one must reckon with and tolerate in children's development towards becoming robust and strong individuals? When the teachers allowed the football tournament to take place, they gave priority to do-good-ethics over avoid-harm-ethics. Did Max's injury document that they were wrong in doing so?

### MORALITY AND LUCK

The philosophers Bernard Williams (1981) and Thomas Nagel (1979) introduced the concept of moral luck to point out how the moral assessment of actions is often coloured by actual outcomes. This happens even if the outcome is affected by conditions that are beyond the person's control. A good outcome is used as evidence to say that a person has done a good deed, while a bad outcome supports a conclusion that what the person did was wrong. Attempts to save people from a burning building are often considered more morally commendable if they succeed, than if they do not. We can imagine two people storming into the building and each making their own rescue attempt. Only one comes out again carrying a person from the house. The other comes out empty-handed, because a burning beam got in her way. Both have risked their own lives to save others, and only one of them succeeded. We can assume that the difference in outcome is due to coincidences. Initially, both have made a great moral effort, but the one who saves a life is likely to receive significantly more moral praise.

In the same way, we differentiate between people who have endangered the lives and health of others. Two people drive home from a party in their own car, after consuming a considerable amount of alcohol. One of them hits and injures a pedestrian, while the other gets all the way home without causing any accident. The first driver is often blamed more than the one who has had luck and not run down anyone. The risk they have exposed others to is exactly the same, but coincidences lead to only one causing an accident, and on that basis receive much sharper moral criticism than the other. One thing is that the accident makes others aware of the drunk driving, which does not happen in the case of the person driving home without injuring anyone. This form of luck concerns what others learn about a person's reprehensible actions. Moral luck is something else. It affects the moral judgement of what has been done. The assumption

here is that when we hear both stories, we direct sharper moral criticism at the person who caused the damage.

Moral luck is a paradox. On the one hand, we think that moral praise and criticism should be directed at what people have control over. What was their motivation, and what did the risk picture look like? What was the probability that they would succeed in doing good or avoid inflicting harm? On the other hand, the moral judgements are coloured by the outcome, even though coincidences have played a crucial role.

Professionals who work with children can be exposed to moral luck. The football tournament at Max's school has been considered a success for years, since it has created a lot of joy and happiness, and no one has been seriously injured. Then Max's arm fracture happens, and people immediately reconsider the activity where old and young pupils meet for pretty rough matches on the football field. The assessments of the teachers who are responsible are seen in a different light. Is the arm fracture proof that it is morally irresponsible to let fourth graders play football against seventh graders? Have the teachers had moral good luck until now and suddenly experienced moral bad luck?

It is possible to reject that luck has anything to do with morality and say that the moral judgement must put the spotlight on intent and risk, regardless of whether someone breaks their arm or not. Risk is determined, as we have seen, by a combination of probability and severity. Teachers who say yes or no to a football tournament across grade levels must assess the positive consequences of the activity against the risk of injury. Is this worth taking a chance on? It should be possible to make a factual moral assessment in advance and build on the knowledge that is available when the decision is made. It may well be morally justifiable to take a chance now that later turns out to lead to a negative outcome.

Research on moral luck shows that people's immediate moral judgements are often coloured by actual outcomes (Martin & Cushman, 2016). In fact, we have a tendency to be morally stricter towards those who cause harm than those who do not, even though the risk they expose others to is identical. In that sense, moral bad luck is a real phenomenon, but it is also documented that the effect weakens when people have time to think about. When we gain knowledge about the course of events and reflect on what has happened, the moral luck disappears (Kneer & Machery, 2019).

In the previous chapter, we mentioned the distinction that Kahneman (2013) draws between quick and intuitive decision-making (system 1) and slow and analytical decision-making (system 2). Now we can see that this

distinction is also relevant in terms of moral luck. It is only in the quick and thoughtless assessment that we find moral luck. In thinking where the pace is slower, chance does not affect the conclusion about how morally right or wrong a particular action is.

It is natural that a dramatic and sudden outcome of a decision leads to immediate moral criticism of those responsible, especially from people directly affected. Goalkeeper Max's parents had reason to be morally upset and angry that the teachers let their son be a goalkeeper against seventh graders. They are close to the situation and react impulsively to it based on their system 1 thinking and will then understandably point a critical finger at the teachers and the school. Even their assessment may be different when they think more closely about it. Then they can conclude that the risk that Max was exposed to through a football match against older pupils was, after all, morally acceptable.

A natural human reaction after an accident is to look for someone to blame, a scapegoat. Who has failed in the situation? This is a reaction that is typical of system 1. Professional accident investigators say that they always try to shift attention from blame to causes (Kvalnes, 2017). How could this happen? The inquiry activates System 2 and a process geared towards learning from the situation. These investigators interview people who have been active in the situation or witnessed it all. If the focus is on blame, people will respond defensively and cautiously, so as not to put themselves or others in a bad light. When attention is shifted to causes, the answers immediately become more honest and concrete. This makes it easier to capture how the risk assessment has been and whether it was correct or deficient.

School and kindergarten teachers are constantly in situations where they have to weigh what is an acceptable risk in play and activities for children. Based on previous experiences with how parents, management, authorities, and the media react when children are injured during play, they may have more or less good reason to fear that they can suffer from moral bad luck. Patterns and habits can exist for how accidents and injuries are handled. If it is system 1 that prevails in their work environment, then it generates caution. If, on the other hand, there is also room for system 2—a way of thinking that has no room for moral luck—then it provides professionals with sufficient safety to implement risky play. Teachers depend on some form of moral protection for in their work. The next section is about how this protection can come in different degrees, affecting how much risky play professionals dare to allow children to engage in.

## MORAL PROTECTION

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (385–323 BC) claimed that good human qualities lie on the golden mean between extremes. For example, being brave lies on the middle ground between being cowardly and being overconfident. Aristotle proposes an alternative to thinking in opposites and pairs of concepts. Instead of the division between brave and cowardly, kind and naughty, open and closed, caring and indifferent to others, we can have a division that shows that good qualities can be exaggerated and turn into something negative:

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Insufficient	Golden mean	Excess
Coward	Brave	Overconfident
Naughty	Kind	Naive
Indifferent	Caring	Self-destructing
Secretive	Transparent	Loose mouthed
Villainish	Honourable	Fanatic
Suspicious	Realistic	Naïve

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We can also use this way of thinking in an attempt to define what is reasonable moral protection for adults who have an influence on children's opportunities to engage in risky play. Here we are talking about risk on two levels:

- What risk does the adult allow the children to face?
- What risk does the adult expose himself to by opening up to risky play?

The last form of risk can be assessed on the basis of the same pattern that we have presented previously, by comparing probability and negative outcome. By allowing children to engage in risky play, the school or kindergarten teacher exposes himself to the possibility of being affected by negative consequences. What will be the reaction from your own leader, parents, and other affected parties if a child injures himself? How likely is it that this will have negative consequences in the form of accusations and criticism, and career repercussions?

Teachers and others who work with children need some form of moral protection when making decisions that concern children's scope of action for risky play. We can define the reasonable level of protection by thinking

in terms of the golden mean. Professionals can get both too much and not enough moral protection. If they feel morally under-protected, a natural reaction would be to be very restrictive about what kind of activities children are allowed to participate in. In the worst case, it can lead to moral paralysis, where professionals do not dare to release children in play and activity, even if the risk of injury is minimal. The other extreme is when professionals experience moral overprotection, where they assume that they will always escape negative consequences for themselves, even though they have allowed high risk and children are harmed.

The three levels of moral protection can also be linked to the degree of personal and systemic responsibility. The middle ground is one where both are present. When the ten-year-old breaks his arm in a football match at school, it is the responsibility of both the teachers who arrange the tournament and the school, the principal, and leader at the school. A main reason for perceived moral under-protection may be that the professional feels alone in having to bear the burden and become a scapegoat if things should go wrong, and an absence of systemic support. Conversely, the experience of moral overprotection may be due to the actors assuming that they can always blame the system if someone is harmed and thus can abdicate any personal responsibility.

The balance between do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics can also be linked to the perceived level of moral protection. Extra low levels nourish avoid-harm-ethics. Then the practitioner will be nervous to allow any activities that may lead to injury, in the first instance for the child, and in the second instance for the practitioner himself, although this process is very unlikely. Extra high levels of protection can lead to the blossoming of an unrestrained do-good-ethics, which neglects the ways in which things can go wrong. With this addition we get an overall picture that looks like this:

<i>Level</i>	<i>Mindset</i>	<i>Consequence</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Ethical orientation</i>
Moral under-protection	If something goes wrong, I have to take it completely on my mantle. Fear of moral bad luck	The agents become morally paralysed. They choose the cautious solution every time	Only personal responsibility	Avoid-harm-ethics dominates

(continued)

(continued)

<i>Level</i>	<i>Mindset</i>	<i>Consequence</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Ethical orientation</i>
Reasonable moral protection	If something goes wrong, we get a factual assessment of whether it was justifiable to take that risk	The agents become morally active and engaged, creating reasonable scope for risky play	Both personal and systemic responsibility	Avoid-harm-ethics and do-good-ethics are in balance
Moral overprotection	If something goes wrong, then I do not have to take any responsibility. It is the system that takes the brunt. No fear of moral bad luck	The agents become partly morally hyperactive and can also partly neglect long-term negative consequences that result from passivation	Only systemic responsibility	Do-good-ethics dominates

The test of where a kindergarten or school is located in this landscape often comes when a dramatic event occurs. How is the situation handled by the kindergarten director or principal? In the event of serious injury, it can be tempting for management to shift the responsibility onto their employees and make them scapegoats. Then they go free themselves. Such a reaction will reinforce the impression among their own employees that they are morally under-protected. The other extreme will be that there is an injury and no one meets affected parties face to face to convey compassion or personal responsibility. The system is to blame, and no individuals take responsibility.

There may be ambiguity in the moral overprotection of people who work with children. Firstly, it can lead to the release of dangerous activities, since any sudden and immediate negative consequences are something that the individual does not have to take responsibility for. It is very unlikely that harm to children will have any negative consequences for the professional's own life and career. Secondly, overprotection can provide fertile ground for a reduction in opportunities for risky play. There can be laziness among the actors, since they do not have to take responsibility for the long-term negative consequences of children not getting enough physical and mental challenges. No one is going to point to them and ask for an explanation of why they have kept the children indoors for long periods of time, so that they have had limited motor development.

Moral protection of employees in a kindergarten or school is to a large extent a managerial responsibility. It is the managers who need to find the right balance between doing good and avoiding harm and who should stand by the employees' side when things go wrong. An employee may have allowed children to engage in unreasonably risky play, and thus deserve some form of moral criticism. The situation may also be that the risk has been within the acceptable range, and then it has nevertheless led to harm. A leader should in principle be dismissive of moral luck and put the spotlight on what one knew and how one assessed probabilities and severity in advance. Parents and other upset parties may be dazzled by the drama of the situation, but a principal or kindergarten leader needs to keep a cool head and give a sober assessment of the situation at hand.

### AGENT REGRET

Max had to go to the hospital and have his arm plastered after his heroic save of a hard shot from a seventh grader. Some adults have decided that it is acceptable for teenagers to play football against younger children, even though there is a considerable difference in physical strength between them. From time to time, the younger pupils will be injured in clashes with the older ones. Teachers and their leaders are aware of risk, have decided that it is reasonable, and also have a responsibility to cope with the situation when pupils are harmed. Therefore, it is natural that Max and his parents get to meet one or more teachers who can show compassion and regret. These teachers can do this without necessarily claiming or admitting that they consider the risk of such unequal football matchups to be morally unacceptable. They can explain, apologize, and show responsibility, without it having to involve a retreat from a positive attitude to risky play of this kind.

When things go wrong, the active party who directly or indirectly caused the injury are involved in the matter in a way that is different from an ordinary spectator, even if what they have done is not morally unacceptable. The term *agent regret* has emerged from the discussion of moral luck and can be used to account for this relationship (Sussman, 2018; Williams, 1981). This is a form of regret that is linked to being the agent who caused or allowed something to happen that had a negative outcome. The agent has a special connection to the harm that has occurred, even though there is no reason whatsoever to blame him. Nagel uses the example of a driver who keeps the speed limit and has full attention to the traffic

in front of him and still hits a child who runs straight onto the road in front of the car. There is no time to slow down or turn away. Everything happens so fast, and hitting the child is inevitable.

An assessment of this situation may be that the driver can consider himself a spectator to the incident. There is no rational basis for criticism or blame. Therefore, the driver has no stronger reason to apologize than any other person who has witnessed the accident.

Williams (1981) has offered a different view, one that takes into account the special relation of the person who through no fault of his own has caused harm. He has launched the concept of agent regret and uses it to explain that anyone who has had their hands on the steering wheel and their foot on the accelerator can actually feel a deeper connection to the event than someone who happened to be a passive witness. Even if the driver has not done anything morally wrong, and so deserves no moral blame, it is this person's actions that have led to harm. The agent has a unique relation to the events at hand and may thus have a particular kind of responsibility for expressing regret and concern in relation to family and other people affected by the negative outcome.

In 2002, the Norwegian ice hockey player Espen Knutsen was a professional in the club Columbus Blue Jackets in the United States. During a game against the Calgary Flames, he sent off a shot where the puck changed direction when it hit the stick of an opponent. The puck disappeared into the crowd and hit a thirteen-year-old girl on the forehead. She was sent to hospital and died the following week from a blood clot that had occurred when her head was thrown back. There was no reason to blame Knutsen for the death. Here it was rather a systemic error that allowed a hard puck to sail over the fence and hit a person in the audience. After the incident, protective netting was introduced in all arenas in the league.

After this tragic event, Knutsen has met the family of the girl who died. They have conveyed that they are obviously not critical of him in any way. By meeting them, Knutsen expresses a form of agent regret. "It's clear. I was the one who shot the puck. If I had not done that, it would not have happened" (VG 19.12.10). The ice hockey player admits that he cannot consider himself a spectator to the event. It was he who set in motion a causal chain that led to the loss of a life.

Teachers and others with influence on children's scope for risky play can also adopt an attitude of agent regret when an accident occurs in a school or kindergarten. They are more than mere spectators to the events,



although they have not done anything morally wrong. It is reasonable to expect that they show particular care and compassion for those who have been directly or indirectly harmed, similarly to how the ice hockey players Knutsen took time to meet the family in the example above. He does not distance himself from the tragic event but admits to having a particular causal relation to what has happened. This would not have happened without his action. Teachers who have allowed football to be played between pupils of different ages can also tell the pupil who gets injured and his parents that they set the stage and thought that this was acceptable. Without their approval, there would have been no match and no harm. They can admit this, without taking moral blame for the outcome, since they still believe that the risk they allowed was reasonable.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter we have seen that the outcome of our actions tends to influence the moral assessment of them. Anyone who opens for risky play for children can have moral bad luck in circumstances where a child is injured while partaking in such play. It is first and foremost the quick and intuitive moral judgements that are influenced by what happens as a result of a particular action. When we have time to think about it, the element of moral luck tends to disappear. Then we understand that the moral assessment of actions should focus on the knowledge that was available when the decision was made. We can assess whether something is a reasonable risk, given the information people had at the time of the decision. It is understandable that people who are directly affected by a negative outcome react with moral anger and outrage. Even they have the opportunity to adjust this reaction when they consider the incident from a distance and can decide whether it was actually morally unacceptable to let the child participate in the risky play.

We have also seen that it is crucial in schools and kindergartens to put in place a reasonable form of moral protection for employees. The fear of moral bad luck can lead to professional people restricting the scope for risky play. They can become morally paralysed by the fear that they alone will have to take the burden if risky play should lead to harm. The opposite situation is where employees are morally overprotected, and experience that will escape any form of responsibility or blame if an activity should lead to harm. The golden mean is a state in which both personal and systemic responsibilities are recognized. The employees dare to allow

children to develop within the framework of what is perceived as an acceptable risk.

The last concept under discussion in the chapter was that of agent regret. We consider it to be a useful term to acknowledge and reflect on how those who are opening for risky activities can end up with a special responsibility to express regret when things go wrong. The risk involved may have been reasonable, but the outcome was nevertheless negative. We can imagine that Max's teacher felt an extra responsibility for the brave goalkeeper's arm fracture. This is a teacher who has not done anything morally blameworthy or wrong, but who is still involved in the situation differently than a passive spectator.

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## CHAPTER 8

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# Ways Forward

**Abstract** In this chapter, we point to some of the latest developments towards a more risk-tolerant society for children. We provide readers with some tips on how to work to allow children to engage in free and risky play, and how to navigate and handle the ethical challenge that lies in the balance between keeping children safe on the one side, and that they should have the opportunity to seek excitement and challenges in play on the other hand. We suggest topics parents and teachers in kindergartens and schools can explore together regarding the scope for risky play.

**Keywords** Risk tolerance • Tips for stakeholders • Risky play

The kindergarten [shall] ensure that the children have the opportunity to experience, assess and master risky play through physical challenges. (Framework plan for the kindergartens, page 49)

In this book, we have focused on children's risky play and why this is important for children's experience, learning, and development. We have also discussed how risky play creates ethical dilemmas for adults who are responsible for children's safety. When short-term avoid-harm-ethics is allowed to dominate, it does so at the expense of the children's ability to develop physical and mental strength. We have highlighted do-good-ethics as an important counterweight to the protection regimes around

children. We also have tried to show that the balance between allowing children to explore and take risks in their play while making sure that they do not injure themselves seriously is not an easy exercise. On the one hand it is important to protect children against serious harm. On the other hand, they need opportunities for challenging activities and excitement. Many studies show that there has been a marked decline in children's opportunities for risky play and access to varied environments that inspire excitement and exploration. Therefore, it is important that there is opposition from parents, teachers, legislators, and others who influence children's scope for risky play. Together, they have a responsibility to ensure that children have the chance to engage in risky play, beyond the adults' radar. It is well documented that this is crucial for children's positive development.

The philosopher Socrates claimed that he who knows the right will do the right. He expressed a strong belief to the effect that knowledge governs action. Today, it is easy to find apparent counterexamples. Mankind knows that the climate crisis is created through our own actions but struggles to change our habits. Each of us can have unhealthy habits that we continue to follow, even though we have knowledge of what they lead to. There also seems to be a gap between what we know about the importance of risky play for children's development and what kind of framework we provide for play. The knowledge that children need to engage and find excitement in play is growing, side by side with the fact that protection and caution characterize the legislation and practice among parents and teachers. We can interpret Socrates to mean that what is required for people to do the right things is really thorough and deep knowledge about the consequences of what we are doing. If we really knew about the connection between our own lifestyle and climate change, then we would do something about it. If we really knew how crucial risky play is for children's mental and physical development, then we would have expanded their scope for adventure. The authors of this book may not be as optimistic as Socrates about the power of knowledge, but still have a hope that our reflections can have an influence on how adults think and act when it comes to children's opportunities for risky play.

We see some signs in official documents in our own country Norway that there is a growing understanding of how important risky play is for children's development. The quotation at the beginning of this chapter is taken from the Norwegian framework plan for kindergartens, which was introduced in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2017). This was the first time

that a statutory framework plan for kindergartens mentioned risky play. The wording gives kindergarten employees backing to allow that children must be given opportunities to test limits for physical challenges and risks—and through that get the opportunity to exercise judgement and experience mastery. The Norwegian framework plan for kindergartens is strongly linked to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, also called the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), which was ratified by Norway in 1991 and became part of the Norwegian Human Rights Act in 2003. Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child deals with children's right to play and leisure. It emphasizes equal opportunities and freedom to participate in play, leisure activities, and cultural activities. In 2013, the UN assessed the achievement of Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 2013) and expressed concern that children's right to play and leisure was not adequately recognized in many countries and that this right was not fulfilled for the coming generation. The UN report points to several factors that threaten the implementation of this child right and emphasized, among other things, the need to find a balance between risk and safety. The adults' fear that children will be harmed generates surveillance and restrictions on children's freedom and thereby limits children's opportunities for play and leisure activities. According to the UN report, it is important to find a balance between, on the one hand, ensuring that children's local environments and play environments do not pose a danger to children's lives and health and, on the other hand, giving children space to experience, learn, and handle risk. The fact that the UN sends such clear signals and addresses how the emphasis on safety can pose a threat to children's rights is an important signal for anyone who makes decisions that affect children's lives. It applies to parents, kindergarten teachers, school teachers, and politicians.

Another important premise provider for children's opportunities for play are the regulations for how play environments, including playgrounds, are to be designed. The European standard for playground equipment was first launched in 1999 and was then perceived as regulations that primarily focused on making children's play environments and play equipment as safe as possible. This led to what many called a deterioration of the quality of children's play environments. Stimulating and exciting opportunities for play were removed and disappeared. Later, the European Standard came with a revised version (EU, 2008) of the standard for playground equipment. In this new version, it was initially pointed out that risk-taking

is a natural part of children's play and that risky play will give them valuable experiences that will enable them to better manage risk on their own. It was therefore specified that the standard should help to make children's play environments as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible.

Government agencies within health, environment, and safety have also come to the fore and pointed out that 100 per cent risk-free living for children is inappropriate. In the United Kingdom, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 2012) has issued a position statement, which clearly communicates that health, safety, and environmental regulations are often misunderstood or misused as an argument to restrict children's scope for play and leisure activities. HSE shows in its position statement how to focus on preventing dangers and serious accidents, but that this does not mean removing all risk from children's lives, precisely because it is of great importance for children's development and learning: "No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton" (HSE, 2012, p. 1). In Canada, a similar position statement was published in 2015 (Tremblay et al., 2015).

Both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the commentary on Article 31 and the EU standard revision have been around for many years, but, they are still living documents that have an impact on how we as adults manage our power over children's upbringing. More and more countries are introducing legislation and guidelines that emphasize children's right to free play, preferably in stimulating outdoor environments, and with acceptance of the risk it may entail.

In recent times, the World Economic Forum has also expressed the importance of play for children (WEF, 2018). WEF argues that this is a central right children have and that it nourishes children's development and learning. Play helps to give children experiences with conflict resolution, problem-solving, and social interaction that are important in future community building.

Children's right to free play, including that which involves risk and testing of boundaries, has gradually come high on the agenda of large and important actors in the world community. It is up to the individuals—professionals, parents, and others—to ensure that these concerns have practical consequences and that children have the opportunity for play and leisure in the manner described in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This book has been written by a childhood researcher and a philosopher. We have a common engagement for children's need for risky play

and how that need has come under considerable pressure in recent decades. When researchers are deeply engaged in their subject matter and take a normative stand in this manner, there is a risk that we become unbalanced and disregard arguments against the position we take. However, what we have set out to do here is to establish a middle ground between two ethical extremes. On the one hand, we have described a position where caution and protection dominate:

- Avoid-harm-ethics: Children must be protected and shielded from what may be physically and mentally harmful to them.

The opposite to this position is one where protection is downplayed.

- Do-good-ethics: Children must be allowed to engage in exciting and risky play that can give them positive experiences, even though it may be harmful to them.

The balanced middle position that we want to advocate is that both ethical perspectives must be taken seriously. We have described a societal tendency where avoid-harm-ethics, especially in its short-term form, dominates. Children are wrapped in cotton by well-meaning adults, to protect them against anything that may cause them mental and physical harm. These adults do not seem to understand that they are thereby weakening the children's opportunities for healthy physical and mental development. The alternative is not to replace it with an equally myopic do-good-ethics. What we believe is necessary is to develop a perspective and a way of thinking that allows for ethical considerations from both sides.

Further research on risky play and ethics can go deeper into the issues we have suggested in this book. Empirical studies can explore how the balance between do-good-ethics and avoid-harm-ethics is maintained in different societies and countries. It is also of great interest to find out whether teachers and others who work professionally with children experience a fear of moral bad luck, or whether they sense that proper moral protection from their leaders is in place. There is also a need for more knowledge concerning risk assessment in relation to play. Studies can highlight both descriptive and normative dimensions. Researchers can contribute to an understanding of how such risk assessments are currently conducted and also provide suggestions about how they ought to be done.

In the final pages of this book, we would like to give practitioners some overall tips on how to work systematically with the ethical dilemmas associated with risky play.

- Politicians and legislators should ensure that laws and regulations regarding children's upbringing, play, and learning do not create a culture where it becomes common to sue each other whenever things go wrong. Such legislation contributes to a culture of fear among parents, kindergarten staff, teachers, or others who work with children. It is important not to encourage or create a framework where there is money to be made from compensation cases after even small and nonserious injuries.
- Legislation should instead create a scope for do-good-ethics and the establishment of routines and norms where children have sufficient opportunities to explore the world on their own and to seek excitement and fun outside the adults' radar.
- Kindergarten teachers, school teachers, and others responsible for children's play and activity should have risky play and activity as a topic they discuss with parents and guardians. Exchanging knowledge about the importance of play for children and finding a common understanding of where the boundaries should go provide security for all parties. They also give teachers in kindergartens and schools the courage to find a reasonable balance between avoid-harm-ethics and do-good-ethics. They can then to give the children the opportunity to play in challenging environments and enable exciting play. A conversation about risky play can also create a foundation for practices where children make their own assessments and make their own decisions about the risk element in their play and thereby develop a capacity for good risk management.

We would suggest that risky play becomes a topic at parent meetings and in other forums where those who work with children meet parents and guardians. Knowledge sharing and invitation to reflection are suitable for creating a common understanding and uncovering disagreements and misunderstandings. Such meetings can also help parents become more familiar with what kind of scope for play their children have in their everyday lives in the school and kindergarten and thus alleviate worry and



anxiety. A more or less common understanding of risk is also good to have as a foundation on the exceptional occasions where a child is injured.

Parents and guardians of children should be aware of the influence they have as promoting or limiting factors for children's ability to seek excitement, adventure, and challenge. They are caregivers for the children and must of course set boundaries. But they should also provide the necessary freedom so that children can explore their own boundaries and explore what is safe or dangerous in the environments in which they travel and are active. For the adults, it can be a good exercise to hold back and not always intervene in situations they themselves find to be scary. Then they will often discover that the children master the situation themselves. Parents and guardians also have an important role in collaborating with kindergartens and schools. If they express that they trust kindergarten staff and teachers, and give them backing in the practice they choose, then there is a greater chance that children will have sufficient freedom there as well.

Ultimately, it is about facing, experiencing, and living with uncertainty. Let the child climb if that's what she wants, even if you as an adult have your heart in your throat. We have seen that the dominance of a short-term avoid-harm-ethics can lead us to limit children's scope for risky play. We try to avoid harm here and now but forget that this has negative consequences in the long run. It limits the children's opportunities to develop into confident, autonomous, resilient, and independent individuals.

With this book, we have tried to contribute to a richer understanding of the value of risky play in children's upbringing and development. We have presented research-based knowledge about the connection between children's scope for risky play and their opportunities for healthy mental and physical development. We have also highlighted how risky play creates ethical challenges for adults who have an influence on the boundaries for children's activities. There will always be dilemmas when we have to balance the positive and negative consequences of expanding or reducing the scope for exciting activities.

We hope that the knowledge we have presented can relieve some of the anxiety and caution that drives the initiatives from overprotective parents and caregivers. Risky play gives children crucial opportunities to master their surroundings and develop the skills they need to flourish and do well in life. In exceptional cases, things go wrong. The child falls down from

the tree. Was it reasonable and right to let her climb there? The answer may be yes, even if it ended in injury. We would like to repeat our warning against letting the actual, negative outcome colour the moral judgement of the adult's decision to let the child climb. The fear of being left alone with the moral responsibility if things go wrong can create an excessive caution among parents in the neighbourhood and teachers and other employees in kindergartens and schools. Therefore, it is important that parents and others who may be upset about the injury are aware of the phenomenon of moral bad luck. They should learn to look beyond the drama of the accident and calmly consider whether it was initially acceptable to let the child engage in that activity, despite the injury. In many cases, the answer is yes.

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