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Risky Play

We were going to climb a birch, and my best friend started first up the tree trunk. I waited on the ground, to see which branches he chose to step on, in preparation for my own foray towards the top. Suddenly he lost his grip and fell. When he came to a stop, he let out a high pitch scream. As I drew closer, I could see that the tip of a branch was inside his mouth. He had been pierced right through the cheek by a dry branch sticking out from the trunk. In great pain, he managed to maneuver himself away from the tree, with blood running from the wound in his face.

Most of the narratives in this book are from organizational life and collected through interviews, but this one is personal. During my childhood in a suburb of Norway' capital Oslo in the 1960s and early 70s, it was normal for children to roam our neighborhoods and explore the world from different heights and perspectives. We sought adventure and excitement, and the adults tended to ignore our potentially harmful encounters with trees and branches. I can still vividly remember my friend's scream and the sight of the tip of the branch inside his mouth. That dramatic incident put both him and me in a state of temporary shock, but a few days later, we were making further daring ventures towards the treetops. Researchers have explored whether people who

have had dramatic falls in childhood tend to be more afraid of heights than other adults, and have found no indication that they are. Fallers seem to put the falls behind them, and even express less fear of heights than those who lack experience of falling (Poulton, Davies, Langley, Menzies, & Silva, 1998).

The freedom to climb that I experienced as a child was part of a more general freedom to roam and be away from our parents' gaze for long spells. At the age of seven, I could be away from my home for hours, without my parents knowing where I was, with whom, what we were doing there, and when I would return. Today, seven-year olds in the same area do not have nearly the same opportunity to move beyond the home or the gaze of adults. If a mother and father today had been similarly unaware of their child's whereabouts, it would most likely have been seen as something the local child welfare authorities should look into. The restrictive tendency is present in many cultures (Francis & Lorenzo, 2006). Evolutionary childhood studies suggest that it may inhibit children's mental and physical development (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011).

This chapter explores how the upbringing of children can affect the extent to which they are capable of and prepared to deal with risk, uncertainty, and fallibility in adulthood. More specifically, it discusses how children's engagement in risky play can prepare them for encounters with real and probable adversity as adults, and also the critical quality moments where the next decision they make will crucially impact the outcome of processes at work. The aim of the chapter is to consider possible links from findings in childhood research to theories about people's capabilities to cope with fallibility in work settings. First, it discusses research on beneficial effects of children's engagement in risky play, most notably the anti-phobic effects of such activities (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Second, it draws parallels to three sets of concepts that are relevant with regard to how people prepare for, deal with, and rethink their roles in critical events where mistakes and errors occur. All of them have roots in stoical philosophy, in that they highlight the need to meet adversity with a calm and collected attitude. They are (i) resilience understood as the capacity to bounce back from adversity (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000;

Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990), (ii) the distinction between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset, where the former sees mishaps as opportunities for further learning (Dweck, 2017), and (iii) the distinction between agent and pawn (Nygård, 2007) as possible ways to understand oneself and one's role in the way situations and events unfold.

1 Benefits of Risky Play

Risk is the possibility that something unpleasant or unwelcome will happen. Risk is a situation involving exposure to danger (*Oxford living dictionaries*, 2017). Despite the negative connotations of the concept, risk is attractive in many settings. Children climb trees and engage in others kinds of risky play to gain immediate excitement and thrill. It can be great fun, and often creates ecstatic feelings of mastery and self-control. Childhood research indicates that children also benefit from such activities in long-term and unintentional ways (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi, 2016; Greve, Thomsen, & Dehio, 2014; Lavrysen et al., 2017; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Climbing trees and rocky hills provides the opportunity to develop and enhance different motoric and physical skills, and for developing muscle strength, endurance, and skeletal quality (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2000; Byers & Walker, 1995; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). Play in heights also provides opportunities to develop competencies to perceive depth, form, shape, size, and movement (Rakison, 2005), and general spatial-orientation abilities (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2002). These are significant skills and competencies both for survival in childhood (immediate benefits) and for handling important adaptive tasks in adulthood (deferred benefits).

One of the unintended and deferred benefits of exposure to risky scenarios in childhood can be to create a foundation for understanding and coping with risk at work. Familiarity with risk can be a foundation for becoming constructively involved in innovative processes, for taking chances in situations where you cannot know whether things will turn out well or badly. It can also be a necessary precondition for being at ease and functioning well in professions where things might end up badly, as in healthcare and aviation. A professional must face critical

circumstances at work with a calm attitude, and exposure to dangerous situations in childhood may serve as essential preparation for that kind of work.

In childhood research, risky play has been defined as:

thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury. Risky play primarily takes place outdoors, often as challenging and adventurous physical activities, children attempting something they have never done before, skirting the borderline of the feeling of being out of control (often because of height or speed) and overcoming fear. Rather than the avoidance inducing emotion of fear, a more thrilling emotion is experienced. Most of the time risky play occurs in children's free play as opposed to play organized by adults. (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011, p. 258)

From this theoretical perspective, risky play is a necessary condition for learning to cope with potential danger and harm. Evolutionary childhood research indicates that children learn to judge risks through experience with risky situations. Through risky play, they can develop the cognitive skills needed to make more accurate judgements about the circumstances they face (Plumert, 1995; Plumert & Schwebel, 1997). A greater amount of direct experience with a risky situation itself can explain why some individuals demonstrate lower, and more realistic, risk appraisals in particular situations (DiLillo, Potts, & Himes, 1998). Exposure to risky situations appears to strengthen the ability to manage the risk (Adams, 2001) and to enhance the development of a more sound and reliable sense of the actual risk in the situation (Ball, 2002; Plumert, 1995).

Research on childhood indicates that children's freedom to engage in risky and adventurous activities in uncontrolled settings has decreased in the past decades (Francis & Lorenzo, 2006). In the USA, children's involvement in outdoor play has decreased dramatically (Clements, 2004). In Norway, a country with a tradition for a relaxed attitude towards risky play, more elaborate restrictions are gradually introduced to promote childhood safety (Sandseter & Sando, 2016). In many societies, the physical and social space for children to play in has shrunk considerably. Attitudes to parenthood and protection have changed,

leading to more emphasis on safety and keeping children away from danger. If parents today had given their child the amount of freedom that children had some decades ago, they would most likely come under criticism for negligence and bad, irresponsible parenting. Concerned neighbors may have found a reason to contact child welfare authorities about it. You are not supposed to let your seven-year old out of sight for long periods of time, at least not when there are no other adults present to take over your role as controller and protector.

When Lenore Skenazy in 2008 gave into her nine-year old son's intense wish to travel home alone from the supermarket on the metro in New York, and wrote about it, she caused controversy and was criticized for being an irresponsible parent.

For weeks my boy had been begging for me to please leave him somewhere, anywhere, and let him try to figure out how to get home on his own. So on that sunny Sunday I gave him a subway map, a MetroCard, a \$20 bill, and several quarters, just in case he had to make a call.

No, I did not give him a cell phone. Didn't want to lose it. And no, I didn't trail him, like a mommy private eye. I trusted him to figure out that he should take the Lexington Avenue subway down, and the 34th Street crosstown bus home. If he couldn't do that, I trusted him to ask a stranger. And then I even trusted that stranger not to think, "Gee, I was about to catch my train home, but now I think I'll abduct this adorable child instead."

Long story short: My son got home, ecstatic with independence. (Skenazy, 2008)

The overwhelming response Skenazy received to this initiative—both supportive and critical—motivated her to create a free-range kid project, devoted to giving parents and others ideas about how to create space for children to develop autonomy and self-respect. Similar initiatives have taken place in other countries as well, countering a development where anxious parents and strict authorities limit children's space to roam, in the name of safety and protection.

Childhood researchers are concerned about a tendency among authorities, professionals, and parents to overprotect children. So-called cotton-wool children are kept at arm's length from anything that might hurt them, but these well-meaning measures can severely limit their mental and physical development. Risky play can have an important and positive anti-phobic effect on children, one they cannot reap from other sources (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). By climbing trees, using sharp knives, and going for walks by themselves, children can gradually free themselves from phobias about heights, sharp objects, and being left behind by one's group. These are phobias that serve a purpose for very small children but it is good for their mental and physical health to gradually discard them as they grow older. Overprotection can take away the possibility to experience individual growth and development:

The child may not experience that he or she naturally can cope with the fear-inducing situations. And despite having matured mentally and physically enough to master the previously dangerous situations, one may continue to be anxious. Continued anxiety hijacks the adaptive function of fear and causes non-adaptive avoidance of situations that *were* but no longer *are* dangerous for the individual due to maturation and increased skills. (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011, p. 263)

When we restrict the possibility for risky play, we also take away opportunities to approach adulthood free of the primary anxieties about how things might turn out badly. The research suggests that children need freedom to explore the world on their own, without adult supervision and control, even at the cost of increasing the risk of harm.

Risky play can be placed in six categories (Sandseter, 2007a). They are activities connected to great heights, high speed, dangerous tools, dangerous elements, rough-and-tumble, and disappearance/getting lost. Each of them can have relevance for the development of abilities and skills necessary in adulthood and professional settings, and in coping with fallibility at work. A common feature in all six categories is that there is a real and serious chance that the child can get harmed, and that it is a healthy thing to initially fear the source of this danger. It is the gradual movement out of this state of fearing, through risky play,

that can prepare the individual for an adult life where some of the most thrilling and fruitful activities involve risk of harm. Human flourishing, the development of capabilities to change and improve aspects of the world, depends on a gradual release from phobias that are designed to serve us well in early childhood, in order to take chances and only have limited possibility to assess whether things will go well or badly.

The evolutionary explanation of risky play is that it helps to release children from phobias. It can be helpful to look at the possible anti-phobic effects within one of the six categories to establish a connection to risky work in adulthood. Children enjoy walking off alone to explore their environment away from the supervision of parents or other adults (Sandseter, 2007b). They experience a feeling of being lost and left behind by their group when they do so, but still have an urge to do it. Separation is both thrilling and scary. It would be safer for them to stay with the adults, but even so, they drift off on their own, and crave for the particular sense of excitement that comes from being on the move alone (Sandseter, 2007a). It seems that the anti-phobic effect of play where children can disappear and get lost is that they can gradually learn not to fear separation. Small children have good reasons to fear being left on their own and getting away from their closest, as they depend on the adults to feed, shelter, and support them. As they grow older, they can become more independent and autonomous, through being able to explore their environment on their own, without the adults' gaze following them around. The fear of being left behind by the group can be reduced through risky play initiated by the children themselves. "When having the opportunity to voluntarily plan and carry out a separating from their caretakers by exploring new and unknown areas, experiencing the thrill of the risk of being lost, children seem to "inoculate" themselves from the anxiety of separation" (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011, p. 270).

Overprotective parents can do their children a disfavor by sabotaging these expeditions into the unknown. With technology at hand, parents have ways of keeping track of where their children or teenagers are at any moment. One example is the app Bsafe that allows parents to locate the whereabouts of their children at any time, as long as they keep their mobile phones on. The slogan for this device is "the end of worry"

(“Webpage for Bsafe,”), and the rationale is to give concerned parents a sense of security and control regarding their children. They do not have to worry that their son or daughter will be next headline in the news about abducted or lost children. The app also offers a sense of protection to the children, who know that no matter where they are, their parents have them on the radar, and can come to their rescue, if necessary.

Under such conditions, the children can only gain limited anti-phobic effects from roaming the neighborhood and beyond, since they are aware that the parents can constantly check where they are, and call them back or collect them there at any time. The beneficial inoculation from the anxiety of separation is unlikely to take place. Concerned, loving, and well-meaning parents can thus block their children’s path towards maturity, and restrict their opportunities to learn to cope with being away from their group. As is the pattern with other dimensions of risk, the children who are protected in this way may continue to be afraid of the circumstances they find themselves in, even when they have reached an age where they would normally feel comfortable in them.

In work settings, to suffer from separation anxiety can be a considerable handicap. It is difficult to flourish and do well in an organization if you are constantly afraid of being left alone, and nervous about not being seen or appreciated by your leaders or colleagues. Individuals who have been allowed the thrill of exploring the world on their own in childhood, are more likely to be comfortable with situations at work where they are expected to enter the unknown territory and report back later about what they find there.

Some researchers and commentators that support the initiative to give children more freedom and space for play are unhappy with the concept of “risky play”. They believe that “risky” has negative connotations, and prefer to talk about the adventurous and challenging play:

If something is deemed ‘risky’, the risks are understood to be excessive. *Such activity is best avoided.* Inviting parents to encourage their children to do things that are expressly risky is simply counterintuitive: where children are concerned, the instinct to protect is too profound. (Voce, 2016)

As we attempt to move towards allowing children more freedom to explore their world, the emphasis on the word “risk” shows that we still haven’t let go of the mindset of the helicopter parent who is more aware of danger than adventure, more focused on what could go wrong than how to prepare kids to be both independent and safe in challenging situations.

So, please, can we stop talking about risk? Instead, let’s talk about adventure, preparation, and trust. (Allsup, 2016)

These misgivings about the risk concept are understandable, but they may themselves be examples of an overprotective stance. We can distinguish between what is an adequate description of the phenomenon from a research perspective, where we seek to understand and find explanations to a phenomenon, and what sort of description might move parents to become less stressed and anxious about what might happen to their children if they get more freedom to roam. Critics of the concept of risky play may be right in saying that it is unlikely to sway overprotective parents into being more relaxed, since they already are worried about possible harm and injury to the children. Talk of risky play can have the effect of making them even more protective. However, when children climb trees, play with sharp knives, and go on solitary expeditions in their neighborhood these are in fact risky activities. These parents may be more comfortable with the softer language of adventurous and explorative play, but that may be because those concepts align well with their own need for control. Their children can explore and go on an adventure, but only under the supervising gaze of parents, or other qualified and responsible adults. By retaining the risk component in the language, we do not hide the fact that things might actually end badly. One significant dimension of risky play is that it can prepare children for dangerous and harmful circumstances, and also for failures, disappointments, and breakdowns in expectations. As will be argued later in the book, the real test of a commitment to allow risky play and risky work comes when things do actually end badly. We may theoretically accept that exposure to risk is good, in the upbringing of children as well as in nursing of elderly people, but be tempted to reconsider when a child or old person gets hurt.

2 Stoical Approaches

Stoicism is a philosophical tradition that has promoted the idea that human being can learn to meet hardship and difficulties with calm. It emerged in Cyprus around 300 B.C. and was a dominant feature in Hellenistic and Roman philosophy to around 300 A.C. The stoics taught that the path towards *eudaimonia* and a good life involved treating others with respect and fairness. Their philosophy was very much meant to be applied to everyday living. They argued that we should not let ourselves be controlled by cravings for pleasure or fear of pain, but use our reason to understand the world around us and participate with dignity in social life. At the core of this philosophy is the idea that human beings can train themselves not to be overwhelmed by strong emotions or pacified by previous experiences of failure and despair. Stoicism tells us that we can decide to look upon adversity as a source of learning, and shake off initial disappointments rather than dwell on our misfortune.

Stoicism has influenced philosophical reflections about what constitutes a good life for centuries. The three contemporary theoretical approaches discussed in this section have more or less loose relations to stoicism, in that they all explore ways in which children and adults alike can raise above adversity and learn from their participation in events where things have not gone according to plan. First, resilience addresses how individuals cope with adversity and are capable of bouncing back from negative experiences. An underlying idea is that the extent to which they have had the opportunity to engage in risky play can affect their level of resilience. Second, the distinction between a fixed and a growth mindset is useful for considering whether a person sees failure and lack of success in a particular endeavor as an opportunity for learning or not (Dweck, 2017). A person with a growth mindset will see the letdown as an opportunity to learn and prepare to do better next time, seeing his or her own capabilities as something fluid and formable, rather than fixed. Third, the distinction between understanding oneself primarily as an agent or a pawn, as an active initiator or a passive receiver of other people's instructions (Nygård, 2007), can shed light on the processes where people have to cope with their own and other people's fallibility at work.

Resilience has captured attention both in psychology and in organizational studies, and can shed light on the link between risky play and risky work. The concept has roots in the stoic tradition (Morris, 2004), in its depiction of how inner strength and calm can lead to outer achievements. One study indicates that resilience is different from stoicism in that it is flexible and action-oriented (Richardson & Chew-Graham, 2016), but that interpretation seems to be based on an oversight of the practical dimension of stoicism.

In the psychological research, resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). Implicit within this notion are two critical conditions: (1) exposure to significant threat or severe adversity; and (2) the achievement of positive adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Masten et al., 1990). Resilience depicts the capacity to bounce back from negative experiences, and not be overwhelmed and pacified by setbacks. Individuals, groups, and organizations can be more or less resilient in the face of a struggle and imminent or real defeat. Systematic knowledge about the effects of risky play and the lack of it in childhood gives us reason to believe that building resilience on individual, group, and organizational levels depend on a societal acceptance and encouragement of risk-taking in childhood.

Resilience is often a factor in sports. One of the most memorable matches in the European Championships in football in 2016 provided a vivid example. An English national team consisting of star players from prestigious clubs like Manchester United, Liverpool, and Arsenal, faced an Icelandic team where the players came from much smaller, and lesser known, clubs in Sweden, Norway, and Wales. The match started predictably with an English goal, but the Icelandic team quickly responded by scoring two goals, and from there on controlled the game against the higher ranked and more famous opponents. Iceland looked more composed and alert, and knocked England out of the competition with a 2-1 win. On one interpretation, it was a match between a tough and resilient team, with a stoic ability to face a storm, and a weak group of superstars unprepared for struggle and fight. The English commentator

Jamie Carragher called it a generation problem, connected to upbringing and protection against taking misadventure personally:

I call them the Academy Generation because they have come through in an era when footballers have never had more time being coached. (...) They get ferried to football schools, they work on immaculate pitches, play in pristine training gear every day and everything is done to ensure all they have to do is focus on football. We think we are making them men but actually we are creating babies. Life has been too easy. They have been pampered from a young age, had money thrown at them and, when things have gone wrong, they have been told it is never their fault. (Carragher, 2016)

On Carragher's interpretation, the English players were not ready for the toil of competing with the Icelandic team, because they had never become properly accustomed to hardship. Well-meaning parents and coaches had protected them against struggle, and thus inadvertently made them more or less incapacitated to bounce back and give another try. Their Icelandic opponents were individuals who from childhood had been used to cycle or walk through icy cold wind and rain to football practice, and had learned to look after themselves and take responsibility in stressful circumstances. The English team may have been superior in footballing technique and skills, but lacked the resilience and toughness to cope with the powerful Icelandic onslaught.

The second set of concepts that can help make sense of how risky play can prepare children for risky work is Dweck's distinction between *growth mindset* and *fixed mindset*. She describes her passage into the topic and the first realization that people differ in their approach to hardship in the following manner:

I was obsessed with understanding how people cope with failures, and I decided to study it by watching how students grapple with hard problems. So I brought children one at the time to a room in their school, made them comfortable, and then gave them a series of puzzles to solve. The first ones were fairly easy, but the next ones were hard. As the students grunted, perspired, and toiled, I watched their strategies and probed what they were thinking and feeling.

Confronted with hard puzzles, one ten-year old boy pulled up his chair, rubbed his hands together, smacked his lips, and cried out “I love a challenge!” Another, sweating away on these puzzles, looked up with a pleased expression and said with authority, “You know, I was *hoping* this would be informative.” (Dweck, 2017, p. 3)

These are the first encounters Dweck had with people she would later describe to have a growth mindset, who think that their capacities to solve problems and take on challenges can be cultivated and developed over time. The children she describes above, found thrill in the puzzles that seemed impossible to solve. They are different from people who see their intellectual and practical skills to be given, carved in stone, who have a fixed mindset. The former see failure as an opportunity to improve, while the latter see instances where they are unable to solve a problem or cope with a challenge as evidence of their own shortcomings.

On Dweck’s interpretation, individuals with a fixed mindset believe that their intelligence and practical capabilities as simply inborn traits, and will tend to avoid situations where they may expose their own limitations. They value perceptions of smartness, and will attempt to cover up their weaknesses, since they perceive them to be unchangeable. There is nothing to gain from encountering difficulties at the threshold of their given capacities, since they can end in embarrassment, when it becomes clear that they are not good enough to cope with challenges of that kind.

A person with a fixed mindset may believe that his or her given capacities are at an exceptionally high-level, as we will see in Chap. 5, in a narrative about high-ranking doctors who are reluctant to sit down with colleagues to analyze and discuss patient cases where complications have occurred, and outcomes have been worse than expected. On the initiative from doctors with a growth mindset, colleagues at a hospital unit meet regularly to talk about such cases. Of those who are attending, some believe that there is learning to be gained from carefully analyzing the cases on hindsight, and considering what they as professionals could and should have done differently, while others tend to explain mishaps and unforeseen complications as a result of bad luck, and not

something they could have influenced by doing a better job. In terms of the temporal structure of past, present, and future, the doctors who are willing to scrutinize their contribution at a critical event now, seem to increase their chances of doing a high-quality professional service to their patients later. Those who are not, demonstrate a fixed mindset that can pose a threat to patient safety. This example will be elaborated and discussed more fully in Chap. 5.

In her research, Dweck has found that it is possible to foster and develop growth mindset through feedback strategies. Praise and encouragement for concrete effort and persistence can help children to learn and adopt effective strategies for learning. A range of studies document that growth mindset makes a positive difference in student and adult achievement, both short-term and long-term (Schroder et al., 2017a, 2017b; Yeager et al., 2016).

The third set of concepts that can illuminate the relation between risky play and risky work is the distinction between agent and pawn as alternative modes of self-understanding (Nygård, 2007). During childhood and upbringing, we build up mental resources to face the changing realities of adulthood. One noteworthy dimension of that development is the kind of self-understanding we develop and normalize. To what extent do we see ourselves primarily as active and responsible individuals, with opportunities to influence the directions our lives take, and to what extent do we see ourselves mainly as passive recipients of input from others? Agents and pawns differ in how they view their scope of action and responsibility for taking initiatives in the situations they face (Table 1).

Table 1 Self-understanding

Agent	Pawn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My scope of action is large, and in considerable degree defined by me • I take initiatives and do not await instructions • It is my responsibility to find solutions and decide what to do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My scope of action is small, and in considerable degree defined by others • I do not take initiatives, but await instructions from others • It is other people's responsibility to find solutions and decide what to do

The parenting regimes children grow up under are likely to affect the extent to which they come to understand themselves primarily as agents or pawns. Those who become used to having the freedom to explore and expand their own scope of action are more likely to develop an agent-understanding, while those who experience stricter adult supervision, become used to seeing themselves more as pawns. Similar patterns of self-understanding and behavior have been studied under the heading of locus of control, focusing on the extent to which people perceive that they are in charge of the events in their lives (Hou, Doerr, Johnson, & Chen, 2017).

People apparently do not see themselves consistently as either agents or pawns, but tend to move between these two poles of self-understanding, using agent-language in describing their activities and roles in one setting, and pawn-language in another. Simple and seemingly innocuous statements about our own contribution to a state of affairs can reveal our current self-understanding. “I did not get time” is a typical pawn-statement, indicating that time is a commodity handed out by others, and not something that the person has control over. A parallel agent-statement can be “I did not prioritize it” or “I decided not to spend time on it”. Consider a young man who for a long time has been without a job, and lived on unemployment benefit. He has developed anger towards the employment authorities. “Now they have turned me into a thief”, he says. When asked to explain how, and he claims that the unemployment support had not arrived on the due date, and he had run out of food. His only alternative, as he saw it, had been to go to the local grocery store and steal something to eat. In his account of this turn of events, there had been no real alternatives to stealing food, and he felt genuinely forced by the authorities to become a thief. His scope of action was small and tight, and defined by others. He sees himself to be a pawn, and not an agent. When pressed to take at least some responsibility for his actions in the grocery store, he refuses to do that, and remains in pawn-mode. When we see ourselves as pawns, we interpret events in the world as that which merely happens to us, while in agent-mode, we acknowledge responsibility for our contributions to how things turn out.

Attribution theory sheds further light on how we take responsibility or not for events connected to our own decisions and behavior (Weiner, 1972). It focuses on how we explain outcomes in terms of internal or

external factors, or what has been within or outside our own control. To take another example from football, one Norwegian coach famously claimed after his underdog team had won the cup final that “this was world class coaching”, thus placing himself in the center of attention, as the agents who had made the right decisions to overcome a higher ranked opponent (Rekdal, 2009). The same coach has a tendency, when his team loses, to blame external circumstances like the referee or the lack of commitment from his players, for the outcome. When his team wins, he tends to see himself as an agent, while a loss triggers a pawn mentality.

Outcomes in a range of situations depend crucially on whether people see themselves as agents or pawns. These self-understandings affect decision-making and conduct in critical situations, when something out of the ordinary happens. We can think back on the example in the introduction, involving the driver of the push-back tractor at the airport. His intervention and continued insistence that the dripping from the wing should be checked properly before takeoff is typical agent-behavior. It was not part of his job instruction to be in dialog with the people in the cockpit about that issue. He could have made his observation once, and left the further decision-making to the pilot and co-pilot, but instead continued to voice his concern. In doing so, he took responsibility beyond his formal job description. Similar situations occur in other workplaces, and outcomes often crucially depend on whether people see themselves primarily as agents or pawns. A range of psychological factors can influence self-understanding and personal confidence in such situations, as will be discussed in the coming chapters. The main purpose here has been to highlight the distinction between two polarized ways of seeing one’s own role and responsibilities. It is likely that upbringing and parenting influences whether children primarily develop agent—or pawn-understandings of themselves, and that risky play can be crucial in teaching them to explore actively their own scope of action.

The main line of thinking in this chapter has been that risky play during childhood can prepare individuals for active participation in risky endeavors at work. When children get the freedom to roam and explore their environment below the adults’ radar, they can develop the autonomy and confidence they need to engage in risky work when they grow older. The anti-phobic effects of risky play can make the children more robust and resilient, and prepare them for an adult life where they

Table 2 Adversity time frame

Before	Critical quality moment	After
Risky play can create <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resilience • Growth mindset • Agent understanding of self 	A challenging event that turns into an unwellcome and unpleasant experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will bounce back • I can learn from this • It is up to me to bounce back and learn

are likely to encounter significant adversity in organizational settings. We can place the preparation for, the experience of, and responses to critical events in a threefold temporal frame of what happens before, during, and after it takes place (Table 2).

Childhood research indicates that overprotective parents and authorities pose an obstacle to healthy developments when they put restrictions on the children's scope of action. The intention may be to put the children's safety first, but one unintended outcome appears to be that their mental and physical development suffers. Risky play can crucially make the children aware of their own fallibility, and provides them with opportunities to learn to cope with their own and other people's tendencies to make mistakes. When dramatic slips and blunders happen at work, they may not be overwhelmed and pacified by it, since they are used to such events from childhood. Initiatives to develop free-range kids should be encouraged from organizations, since, in the long-term, those are the people who are likely to be best prepared for the challenges of adult working life, through a growth mindset and through resilience. It is also through this kind of upbringing that children can learn to see themselves primarily as autonomous and responsible agents, and not as pawns that are moved around by forces beyond their own control.

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