



## 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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