

**'Tell your mum I saved your life':
the relationship between children's play, uncertainty and risk.**

Two children are balancing along a dry-stone wall, one in front of the other. As they teeter precariously along the wall, the child at the rear grabs the shoulders of the child in front, shakes the child, causing a temporary loss of balance, and says, 'Tell your mum I saved your life'.

(This scenario is taken from the BBC production 'Out to Play', 1994.)

Is this behaviour risky? Imagine you are an adult responsible for these children. How might you react to this? There is a probability that either child might fall, and as the responsible adult you may feel the need to do something about this, to prevent the situation from escalating and to prevent harm. So, you might admonish the child at the rear: 'Stop messing around, that's dangerous. Someone might get hurt'.

We suggest that such a response, understandable though it is, fails to acknowledge what is actually happening. The intention is not to push the child off the wall, far from it. A closer examination of the situation reveals that the child initiating the surprise never actually lets go of the child in front until assured he is not going to fall.

In this article we explore contemporary understandings of risk, childhood and children's play, in which 'risk' is equated with 'danger'; children are 'at risk'; and play is a way to help children learn skills of risk assessment and management. We suggest these understandings do children and their play a disservice. An appreciation of the unique design features of play and the potential benefits that accrue offers an alternative perspective that acknowledges children's competence as players and questions the increasing adult concern with and management of children's play.

Understandings of risk

If we asked you to think about risk, chances are you would think about how things might go wrong, in other words, the probability of harm. Definitions of risk (for example, Holton, 2004) identify two basic aspects: firstly, the existence of risk assumes that people care about the possible outcomes of a situation, there is a personal interest at stake and a chance to lose something of value; secondly, the outcome is uncertain, the degree of loss is not known but probabilities may be calculated about potential losses.

The modern discourse of risk arises out of the belief that all things can be explained, predicted and therefore controlled. Risk is a consequence of human action and therefore calculations can be made in order to avoid it. In earlier times, risk was associated with fate, nature or the will of the gods. This modern understanding has had the effect of eclipsing two interrelated aspects associated with risk. Firstly, risk is a term that relates to the probability of something happening with a prediction of the consequences of certain actions. The identification of consequences allows for a

trade-off of possible gains and benefits against the risk of loss; there may be a good risk in terms of possible consequences. However this process has become abbreviated to a simple formula where risk automatically equates with danger: as Malaby (2002) asserts, there is currently an overriding presumption that risk itself (rather than the loss that may arise) is inherently harmful and undesirable. The second aspect is the disappearance of differentiation between risk and uncertainty, or situations where it is impossible to work out the probabilities of consequences because they are beyond measure, account and rational calculation. The replacement of genuine uncertainty with the term 'risk' has transformed a 'radically indeterminate cosmos into a manageable one through the myth of calculability' (Reddy, 1996:237). Risk assessment and management have become an institutionalised force operating across almost every aspect of life to colonise the future, to respond to something that has not yet occurred (Beck, 1999). A belief in risk assessment and management creates the illusion that we are in control of our destiny.

The emerging critique of this technical-scientific approach to risk management broadly asserts that risk is socially constructed rather than existing as an external, objective reality. Risk is not a fixed entity but is produced and reproduced through everyday relationships and interactions (Douglas 1992). Within this critical discourse, risk is a highly influential concept that governs people's lives, and risk management a powerful expression for the regulation of behaviour.

Understandings of risk and play

It is rather ironic that, in a time when most children 'face far fewer and less grave risks than in the past' (Hocking and Thomas, 2003:20) we have developed such a focus on risk and ways of avoiding it in our work with children. In England, 'staying safe' is one of the five outcomes of the *Every Child Matters* policy agenda, and the recent Staying Safe Action Plan (DCSF, 2008a) lists a number of ways children may come to harm, labelled as 'risks', and identifying the measures the government will take to prevent these risks becoming reality. We point this out not to deny the existence of the potential for harm, but to show three things: firstly, how 'risk' is conflated with 'harm'; secondly, how risks are perceived as calculable and controllable; and thirdly how we are increasingly concerned with the vulnerability of children, making ever greater efforts to protect them from risk through escalating control, vigilance and surveillance. These factors combine to create a lens through which adult-child relationships are perceived and constructed across all aspects of children's lives, including their play. Such a perspective has seen a shift in thinking about play from something children do to something that adults need to govern and manage. What has previously been seen as the private activity of children, carried out away from adult gaze, is now the object of public scrutiny and concern.

In the UK, playworkers have maintained that play is inherently risky, partly in an attempt to challenge the growing restrictions placed on children's opportunity to play (Lester and Maudsley, 2007). Yet this promotion of risk in play has evoked a perception that play must inevitably be dangerous, and so needs to be managed to ensure children come to no harm. The management of risk in play can only be undertaken by those who have the specific knowledge and understanding for this

specialist task. It can no longer be left to the (supposed) incompetent and vulnerable child to take decisions about the initiation and content of their play; rather it falls to the competent mature adult who is best positioned to manage playful risk. In this way play becomes a tool to be used by adults to guide children through the stormy waters of childhood to reach the safe harbour of adulthood. The management of play becomes another means of privileging rational methods technically applied to deliver predetermined outcomes (Moss, 2007). The received wisdom is that properly managed risk-taking in play helps children develop skills of risk assessment and management (DCSF, 2008b). This legitimises technical risk management processes and adult control over what is perceived to be irrational behaviour. Adults often make assessments of children's play based on a literal and risk-focused reading of its content rather than an appreciation of its 'as-if' symbolic nature and its emotional dimension. This reading also perceives the *possibility* of any injury to be undesirable, presenting the potential for harm not only to children but also to adults themselves for failing in their task of keeping children safe. Adults working with children at play find themselves in a position of risk anxiety (an anxiety perceived to be caused by children's play), and to manage their own risks they must reduce or remove the element of risk in the play, creating a vicious cycle that encourages caution and mediocrity for all concerned. It is an expression of fear *for* children and also fear *of* children for what they might do if they are not kept under close control and supervision. The guiding principle becomes one of believing that if we *do* something (anything), we can stop something else from happening (Piper *et al*, 2006).

Paradoxically, counter to this discourse, there is a growing concern that this 'culture of fear' may be having a harmful impact on children's health and well-being (Furedi, 2001; Gill, 2007) and recent initiatives by the UK governments (for example, DCSF, 2008b) acknowledge the need to redress this situation and create more attractive spaces for children to play. However this is couched in ambiguous terms of creating 'safe' spaces in which children can take acceptable risks without hurting themselves, or where their playful risk-taking can be managed by adults. There seems to be a confusing picture on the one hand of promoting risk-taking as beneficial (in instrumental terms of children learning risk assessment and management skills) while on the other promoting strict adherence to risk minimisation processes. Both these positions adopt an understanding of risk as something tangible and objective, something 'out there' that can be both promoted and managed at the same time, giving rise to rather incongruous positions for adults in relation to children's play.

Play and uncertainty: the unique design features of play

This risk perspective perhaps misses some essential features of the design and process of playing, leading to a fundamental misreading of children's play. From the earliest age, children enjoy playing with uncertainty. 'Peek-a-boo' is a wonderful illustration of this. The anticipation of the adult disappearing and reappearing primes children for the enjoyment of unpredictability and surprise in play (Panksepp, 2001).

Think back to the scenario offered at the beginning of this article. A literal reading and a risk perspective would see the shoving as unnecessary and likely to lead to harm, yet the simultaneous surprise, threat and protection behaviours suggest something else is at play.

Spinka *et al* (2001) suggest that the evolutionary origins of play may be found in the ways that young animals deliberately introduce an element of the unexpected into their play. Children's play involves an intimate relationship with and disposition to their immediate environments, looking at what it offers for the creation of uncertainty – running headlong down hills, leaping streams, swinging, engaging in rough and tumble play, manipulating objects to represent symbols beyond their everyday use and so on. These acts of disorientation inevitably increase the chances for harm or failure. Yet, the instigation of uncertainty and unbalance is modulated by the ways in which children can recover balance. For example, when a child senses that they are tipping over into real loss of control as they run down the slope, they make sure they can fall backwards and slide down rather than fall forwards and incur a greater loss of control. In bouts of rough and tumble play, children can establish limits to the levels of uncertainty and loss of control by the explicit statement of rules of engagement and the more implicit on-going assessment of their play relationships, leading to give and take, self-handicapping positions and so on. When role-play situations become uncomfortably out of hand, a sense of balance may be restored with such phrases like 'we're only playing' and a shift of narrative. The sophistication of children's chase games is framed by a series of rules, rites and rituals designed to maintain the excitement and uncertainty of the chase whilst allowing for ways of temporarily withdrawing if it all becomes too much. In all of these forms of play uncertainty is not something to be avoided or reduced, but initiated, embraced and held by beliefs in 'magic' (Malinowski 1948) to maintain the possibility of the unexpected.

This creation of unbalance applies to emotional as well as physical aspects (Spinka *et al*, 2001). Through the introduction of emotional disturbance in play, children become familiar with being surprised and emotionally disorientated (as in 'peek-a-boo'). What is important here is that children *deliberately* place themselves in this position, it is desirable and exists within an overall sense of being in control of losing control. Children's emotions are kept in balance by the inbuilt safety controls of the play. Looked at in this way, the unique design features of play offer relatively low probability of serious consequences and loss but high possibility of novelty, emergence and different ways of being, feeling and moving. The creation of uncertainty offers the opportunity to alter reality temporarily, to escape the ordinary, but it does not involve the complete surrender of control; to do so could lead to real harm, quite different from the intention of play. The emotional richness of the experience is central, contributing to the pleasure and enjoyment associated with play. The introduction of drama, uncertainty and tension requires some resolution, and this is likely to be rewarding. Then, having re-established order, a further injection of uncertainty is required to maintain the experience. So a response to 'tell your mum I saved your life,' may be a return surprise shove accompanied by 'tell your dad I didn't'.

Recent work by Lester and Russell (2008) expands this into considering how the design features of play may work across key interconnected adaptive systems operating on a mind embodied and embedded in the world to enhance resilience, the ability to survive and thrive in uncertain environments. Drawing on a range of

resilience studies, they suggest that play may enhance the development of connections between motor, limbic and cortical brain regions that support emotion regulation and stress response systems. The creation of disequilibrium and the regaining of balance, together with the experiencing of strong primary emotions mediated by the secondary emotions that form the rules of the game (Sutton-Smith, 2003), enable individuals to develop adaptive, flexible and highly attuned emotional responses to unique situations and contexts. The generation of moderate stress in play (in particular stress which is actively desired and within the control of the players) helps prime stress response systems.

Play and disorder

Working with the disorderliness of children's play creates anxiety and concern for many adults, and the guiding principle becomes one of seeking to impose order; being an adult requires adopting a stance that privileges control and rationality. Children, by their immaturity and vulnerability, are seen as 'other', a potential risk to the essential order of things. The challenge for adults is to transform uncertainty into certainty, disorder to order. Thus play that seeks to subvert order through creating uncertainty is inevitably risky. Conversely, those play forms that appear to adult eyes to reproduce order and politeness (playing *nice*ly) are promoted and supported.

Yet, the research review undertaken by Lester and Russell (2008) suggests a different perspective, one that sees the child as competent in creating disturbance and uncertainty. Children actively engage with chance and uncertainty in their play rather than cope, manage or deal with it (Malaby, 2002). From this perspective, and connecting with Masten's (2001) description of resilience as 'ordinary magic', we suggest that play represents a desirable and commonplace state for children that creates the illusion of things being different, a magical position in which the conventions of the real are superseded by nonsense, multiple possibilities and ways of being. Children's playful disturbance offers the potential for innovation and change (or development), enhancing the opportunity to thrive in changing environments where the future is unpredictable and surprise is likely (Folke 2006).

Implications for practice

Children's play inherently values uncertainty and organises itself around this design principle along with the necessary measures to be in control of losing control. Paradoxically, adult attempts to remove unpredictability and the unexpected and impose order may deny children the essential opportunity to create and engage with uncertainty in a way that they can control. Such a response, while guided by principles of caring for children, may in fact have a significant impact on children's ability to look after themselves. A deeper understanding of play may switch focus from one that seeks to calculate the probability of harm to one in which adults accept that the emergent possibilities are beyond measure.

This is not to suggest that the technical application of risk assessment and management have no place in children's play spaces, far from it. What it does mean is that risk assessment and management can be undertaken in the knowledge that children seek out uncertainty and pre-design risk management into their play. The outsider adult can work around the edges of play to maintain the integrity of the

space and support the creation of uncertainty rather than seeking to impose adult order, what Cloke and Jones (2005) refer to as the imaginative disordering of space on behalf of children. Such a stance requires more thought and discussion than space allows here. It requires that adults trust in play, a position that is far from easy in a culture rooted in adult rational thought and the application of calculable and technical methods. The dominant position expects adults to predict, measure and control children's behaviour. Is it possible to resist this and practice a less instrumental approach?

Adopting a position that respects the 'alterity of the other' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) can offer a way forward. Children and their play cannot be reduced to adult determined readings, their play behaviours are not the same as, or rehearsal for, adult behaviour. Adult uncertainty about children's play can be uncomfortable and disturbing, but maybe we should work towards developing an appreciation of this 'not-knowingness', or certain uncertainty, a stance that makes the dominant rational understanding of children and their play 'stutter' (Rose 1999, cited in Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). From this perspective, we can begin to develop an alternative and more humane conception of indeterminacy that counters the legitimacy of technical approaches. Adapting from Reddy (1996:248) we suggest that 'the rehabilitation of the idea of 'uncertainty', of radical, irreducible indeterminacy, not amenable to authoritative or authoritarian expert definition and measurement' is a necessary step to contest the current adult preoccupation with managing children's play and risk. For children it could indeed be life-saving, an 'assertion of courage in the face of fantasied disaster' (Sutton-Smith, 2004:28).

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