An investigation of toddler risky play informed by the voices of parents and teachers of toddlers in one school setting

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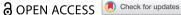Megan Kybartas[a], Mary Jane Moran[b] and Tyler J. Kybartas[c]

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of teachers and parents within the context of toddlerhood risky play at a university laboratory school. Sociocultural and bioecological theories informed the study and the developmental niche framework guided the data analysis. Video-stimulated recall interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Findings include: (1) parents' and teachers' perceptions of risky play are comprised of (a) their psychology as the caregiver, (b) knowing the child, and (c) cultural influences, (2) parent and teacher descriptions of risky play include that it happens outdoors, away from adults, and encompasses developmental benefits, and (3) the development of perceptions of risky play is situated and dynamic. This study contributes important knowledge to the field of early childhood education by offering a new perspective regarding the definition of *risky play* revealing how parents' and teachers' perceptions of risky play are situated in their own past experiences, knowledges, and interactions.

Introduction

The concept of risky play has emerged as a pivotal area of research in the last two decades. While childhood risky play has been studied internationally for nearly 50 years (Aldis, 1975; Quinones, 2023), little is understood about adult *perceptions* of childhood risky play specifically during *toddlerhood*. Presently, research has mostly focused on preschool age (Little & Eager, 2010; E. B. H. Sandseter, 2009a, 2009b; Storli & Sandseter, 2015), toddler risky play behaviors (Kleppe et al., 2017) and environments (Little, 2022), and adults' behaviors during childhood risky play (Kleppe, 2018; Morrongiello et al., 2009; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017).

Current literature has come to a consensus on several characteristics that define risky play. First, risky play most commonly occurs in outdoor spaces, especially natural environments (Little & Wyver, 2010; E. B. H. Sandseter, 2009a; Stephenson, 2003). Next, risky play provides many developmental benefits for young children, including social (Goodyear-Smith & Laidlaw, 1999; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017; Turtle et al., 2015), cognitive (Gill, 2007), and physical benefits (Parsons, 2011; Stephenson, 2003; Taylor & Morris, 1996). Third, risky play involves both a sense of excitement and fear for the child, as well as a potential for injury (E. B. H. Sandseter, 2009b; Stephenson, 2003). A frequently cited definition of risky play is 'thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury' (E. B. H. Sandseter, 2009b, p. 4).

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It has been established that young children naturally seek risky play opportunities (Brussoni et al., 2012; Little & Eager, 2010; E. B. H. Sandseter, 2007, 2009a; E. Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). It is important, then, to allow children opportunities to experience challenges at a young age so that they can develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions necessary for confronting, assessing and engaging in risk as they grow and develop (Stephenson, 2003).

However, the environment in which we live 'invites' us to behave and act in specific ways (Gibson, 1979). Parents and teachers of very young children enrolled in group care are the gatekeepers of the amount of risk offered. Such decisions are influenced by adults' own experiences with risk, as well as their beliefs and values about the benefits and dangers of risk. Many parents and teachers report that they are aware of and acknowledge the benefits of risky play for their children, yet fail to embrace them (Little et al., 2011). This raises questions about what influences adults' understanding of children's risky play.

The present study

This paper describes a qualitative exploration of parent and teacher perceptions of toddler risky play through the voices of parents and teachers. While parent perceptions of toddler risky play have been studied using hypothetical risky play situations (Murray & Williams, 2020), this study relies on video clips of the parents' and teachers' own toddler children and students engaging in potentially risky play behaviors. The video clips were played in video-stimulated recall interviews as a provocation to help expose the deep emotions and raw reactions as parents and teachers observed toddlers engaged in risky play and also recalled their own memories of risky play. Therefore, this study provides insight into the ways parents and teachers perceive toddlerhood risky play and reveals how perceptions of risky play are situated in personal experiences and understandings of risky play.

Literature review

Research in the field of risky play, focused on preschool-aged children (Little & Eager, 2010; E. B. H. Sandseter, 2009a, 2009b; Storli & Sandseter, 2015), has defined and described risky play (Little & Wyver, 2008; E. B. H. Sandseter, 2007, 2009b), identified predominant contexts of risky play (Little & Eager; E. B. H. Sandseter, 2009a; Storli & Sandseter, 2015; Turtle et al., 2015), revealed gender differences (Morrongiello et al., 2010), and explored teacher and parent experiences of supervising risky play (Morrongiello et al., 2009; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017; Storli & Sandseter, 2015). While risky play research has expanded, minimal research has been focused on toddlers through the examination of caregivers' voices. Thus, this literature review will explore what is understood about toddlers' risky play, parents' and teachers' facilitation of risky play, and the intersection of toddler risky play and caregivers' perceptions of risky play.

Toddler risky play

Toddlerhood, typically spanning from 12 to 36 months, is characterized by a sense of wonder and exploration (Veselack et al., 2010) with sensory-motor experiences being particularly valuable (White, 2014, p. 49). Research by Kleppe (2018) suggests that children as young as one-year old engage in risky play, with some differences in play behavior compared to older children. Kleppe et al. (2017) recommends expanding the definition of risky play for one-year-olds to include new categories such as 'playing with impact' and 'vicarious risk,' reflecting their unique expressions of risk-taking. Little (2022) supports Kleppe's recommendation as her observational study found that these new categories of risky play were represented the most in toddler play behaviors. Additionally, Tangen et al. (2022) suggest that toddlers continuously assess and manage risks and demonstrate understanding and respect for challenges. Toddler's engagement in risky play fosters physical, social, and emotional dimensions of belonging among children through shared

activities and emotional support (Little & Stapleton, 2023). Overall, risky play for 1–3-year-olds involves exploration and uncertainty across various dimensions, potentially leading to both negative outcomes like fear and positive outcomes like mastering new experiences (Kleppe, 2018).

Parents and teachers

Both parents and teachers play essential roles in shaping children's experiences with risk. Murray and Williams (2020) found that mothers of toddlers valued risk-taking more than fathers' parental responses varied depending on factors such as play surfaces, age of the child, supervision, and children's emotional reaction. Parents were more likely to mention the potential physical harm over the potential benefits of engaging in risky play activities and were most concerned with play at great heights and least concerned with rough and tumble play which happened to be the most and least frequent activities that children engaged in. Moreover, children who took the most risks had parents who rated hypothetical risky play scenarios as the lowest risk rating.

Teachers' understanding and facilitation of risky play for toddlers is less explored. Quinones (2023) found responsive actions, pedagogical strategies, and supportive relationships from educators encouraged risky play in toddlers, while Kleppe (2018) observed varying levels or interaction and support among early childhood education and care staff. Centers with higher overall quality demonstrated more scaffolding, while centers with lower quality had more instances of no interaction. Little (2022) discovered that educators initially had saftey concerns but eventually welcomed redesigned outdoor spaces, adapting their teaching methods to include risk.

Adult perceptions of toddler risky play

Considering the increasing prevalence of risk-averse values in Western cultures (Brussoni et al., 2012; Gill, 2007), Adams (1995) assertion that individuals construct their reality based on their experience relating to perspectives of risks becomes relevant. Gill (2007) claims that the last 30 years has been characterized by a shrinking amount of childhood freedom and a growing amount of adult control. Fearful perceptions about danger and harm has grown as unintentional injuries have become a leading cause of deaths and hospitalizations for children. Consequently, the creation of safer child environments aimed at preventing injuries has increased (Brussoni et al., 2012).

Because our environments (Gibson, 1979) and perceptions of risky (Adams, 1995) shape and influence our behaviors, young children's play environments must provide opportunities for age-appropriate risk-taking. Caregivers of toddlers play a pivotal role in determining the level of risk exposure for young children. They are the gatekeepers of toddlerhood and make decisions about toddlers' risky play (McFarland & Laird, 2020) that are influenced by their own experiences with risks (Adams, 1995). Therefore, understanding how caregivers perceive risky play during toddlerhood is a necessary step in understanding toddlers' risky play.

Aims of present study

Existing research regarding risky play often focuses on preschool-aged children. Further, the inclusion of toddler parents' and teachers' attitudes and responses to children's risky play is limited to researcher observation and survey usage (Little, 2022; Murray & Williams, 2020). Consequently, little is understood about parent and teacher perceptions of toddler risky play. This study aimed to explore a small group of parents and teachers in one school setting to uncover their perceptions and experiences related to toddler risky play and explore their definitions and the influences on their thinking and practice.

Methodology

Covello and Johnson ([1987](#)) state that, 'Perceptions of risks cannot be explained by individual psychology or by objective reality; instead, risks can only be understood through social and cultural analyses and interpretation' (p. viii). Due to the interpretive and subjective nature of risky play and human perceptions, a qualitative method was deemed most appropriate for this study. Consequently, there was no intent to generalize the findings to the greater field of early childhood education. Rather, the aim was to understand the perceptions of parents and teachers in one specific setting and to add to the current literature on toddlerhood risky play.

The questions that guided this study included:

(1) What are parents' and teachers' perceptions of risky play among toddlers?
(2) How do parents and teachers define/describe risky play?
(3) How did the teachers' and parents' perceptions develop?

Theoretical underpinnings

The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's ([1979](#)) ecological theory and key tenets of sociocultural theory. Bronfenbrenner ([1979](#)) emphasizes the importance of context, stating that 'the environment defined as relevant to developmental processes is not limited to a single, immediate setting but is extended to incorporate interconnections between such settings, as well as to external influences emanating from the larger surroundings' (p. 22). Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, [1978](#)) emphasizes the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which individual development occurs, particularly through participatory appropriation (Rogoff, [1990](#), [2003](#)), wherein individuals become more prepared for subsequent activities. This contribution, alongside Lave and Wenger's ([1991](#)) situated learning theory, underscores how learning and meaning-making are socially situated and distributed across individuals within specific contexts, highlighting the importance of social encounters in the development of new knowledge and understanding. Using these tenets as theoretical anchors, this study recognizes the significance of context and social interactions in shaping the development of risky play perceptions, emphasizing how individuals (and their perceptions) change and evolve through participatory appropriation and situated learning within specific social and cultural contexts.

Data collection

Four sources of data were generated during data collection that included: (1) video-stimulated recall interview audio recordings, (2) transcriptions of interviews, (3) parent and teacher demographics, and (4) research journal entries. Video clips used for video-stimulated recall interviews were obtained from a study, 'Physical Activity and Play Behaviors During Indoor and Outdoor Free Play in Toddlers' (Kybartas et al., [2018](#)). Videos from the 2018 study were chosen by the first and third authors to be used for interviewing purposes. Criteria for the selection of video clips included a play behavior that was categorized according to E. B. H. Sandseter's ([2007](#)) six categories of risky play: (a) play with great heights (danger of injury from falling); b) play with high speed (uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something or someone); c) play with dangerous tools (that can lead to injuries); d) Play near dangerous elements (where you can fall into or from something); e) rough and-tumble play (where the children can harm each other); f) play where the children can disappear/get lost.

Each interview that took place at the laboratory school was face-to-face, lasting about 30–45 minutes. Three video clips of 10–40 seconds were selected for each participant interview and featured a toddler in the teacher's classroom or the toddler of the parent. Video clips were shown throughout the interviews to elicit reactions and responses. All interview recordings were transcribed within two days. See Figure 1 one for sample interview questions.

Participant	Sample Interview Questions
Parents	1. How do you define risky play? 2. What goes through your mind when you see your son/daughter engaged in risky play? 3. How does your children's engagement in risky play compare to your own childhood engagement in play? 4. I heard you say _____. Can you tell me more about that?
Teachers	1. How do you define risky play? 2. How do you respond to your classroom children when they engage in risky play? 3. What role do your colleagues have in how you perceive and facilitate risky play? 4. I heard you say _____. Can you tell me more about that?

Figure 1. Sample interview questions.

Lastly, a research journal was utilized to record three forms of notes: (1) log of day-to-day activities, (2) personal reflections, and (3) a methodological log (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After each participant interview, researcher one recorded their impressions and reflections, evaluated the effectiveness of interview techniques, wrote methodological notes, created diagrams to understand the data collection process, and took notes during meetings with researcher two.

Context

This study took place at a large Southeastern land-grant university early childhood laboratory school that provides care for over 100 children across four age groups including infants, toddlers, pre-schoolers, and kindergarteners. Affiliated with an academic department at the university, the nationally accredited (NAEYC) laboratory school also provides a setting for researchers and students to study children's development and teacher practice.

The laboratory school is situated at two different locations on the campus that incorporate nature-based playgrounds. The video clips used for the video-stimulated recall interviews took place at one of the locations where the toddler classrooms were located. The playground at this location included a stick area, a rock-climbing cave, a one-foot-tall table that toddlers were allowed to climb up and jump off, as well as concrete steps that lead up to a gazebo (see Figure 2).

Participants

Prior to seeking participants, approval for this study was granted by the university's Institutional Review Board. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. All parents of toddlers whose children had participated in the 2017 'Classroom and Playground Physical Activity Levels and Behaviors in Toddlers' study and remained enrolled were invited to participate in this study. Five parents consented from three classrooms. Similarly, teachers from the three classrooms who taught toddlers whose play was previously recorded were also invited to participate. Three teachers across three classrooms consented. Demographic information collected from each participant (see Table 1). Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Researcher position

The first author, who conducted interviews and worked most closely with the data, served as a graduate assistant of the laboratory school during this study. Her role as a second-year graduate assistant included working in the classrooms with toddlers, communicating with parents, and working alongside classroom teachers, on a full-time basis. She had established long-term, unique relationship with the children, teachers, and parents of the school. Many of

Figure 2. Photos of playground areas and structures shown in video clips and referenced in the interviews.

them were aware of her beliefs and subjectivities regarding early childhood education and risky play. It is possible that this awareness may have influenced some of the participants' views.

Data analysis

The constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data, as well as the Developmental Niche framework (Super & Harkness, 1986). Initially, individual interviews were scrutinized for internal consistency and thematic categorization, with conceptual memos and margin notes aiding this process. The first and second authors collaboratively reviewed each interview, enhancing the analysis with critical discussion and additional annotations. Subsequently, intra-group comparisons were conducted by examining and contrasting the content of parent and teacher interviews, identifying patterns and themes within each group. This phase incorporated theoretical constructs from Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and sociocultural theory. Themes and subthemes were placed in a visual display of the appropriate rings of Bronfenbrenner's five systems. This display illuminated the interaction and reciprocal systems that are so influential in the development of perceptions of risky play. The final step involved inter-group comparisons between parent and teacher interviews, leading to the identification of emerging concepts. Throughout the process, reflective passages, diagrams, and tables were created to further analyze and organize data, ensuring triangulation of themes across different data sources.

Table 1. Demographics and information of participants.

Names[1]	Demographics (age, race, gender)	Education	Toddler Name[2] (age in years)
Teachers			
Linda	• 40 years • Caucasian • Female	• B.S • 16 years in ECE	Bentley (2.97)
Jennifer	• 36 years • Caucasian • Female	• B.A. • K-8 & Special Education • 11 years in ECE	Isaac (2.7) Lea (2.1) Julia (2.6)
Rhonda	• 53 years • Caucasian • Female	• A.A. • 26 years in ECE	Isaac (2.7) Lea (2.1) Julia (2.6)
Parents			
Ellen	• Age not provided • Caucasian • Female	M.S.	Julia (2.6)
Jamie	• 37 years • Caucasian • Female	M.S.	Bentley (2.97)
Susan	• 38 years • Caucasian & Hispanic • Female	M.S.	Lea (2.1)
Nancy	• 40 years • Female • Immigrant • Country of origin: Trinidad • Interviewed with spouse, Brandon	Ph. D.	Isaac (2.7)
Brandon	• Male • Country of origin: Trinidad • Interviewed with spouse, Nancy	Not provided	Isaac (2.7)

B.S. = Bachelor's Degree; A.A. = Applied Associates Degree; ECE= Early Childhood Education.

The Developmental Niche framework, created by Super and Harkness (1986), to organize observations and data while conducting anthropological fieldwork in remote regions of the world, aided in the organization and analysis of the data for this study. The three main components of the niche for structuring developmental processes include (a) the influence of the environment, (b) customs of childcare, and (c) the psychology of the caretaker, which were relevant aspects of understanding parent and teacher perceptions in this study.

Findings

Following is a discussion of the three findings that include: (1) parents' and teachers' perceptions of risky play are comprised of (a) their psychology as the caregiver, (b) knowing the child, and (c) cultural influences, (2) parent and teacher descriptions of risky play include that it happens outdoors, away from adults, and encompassed developmental benefits, and (3) the development of perceptions of risky play is situated.

Finding 1. Perceptions of risky play

The psychology of the caregiver: 'the mama bear thing is, like, a real thing'
In the following excerpt, Linda, a demonstration teacher, explained her thought process of how she gauged risky play when she recalled, '. . . in the moment I notice something that could potentially be risky, I start asking myself a series of questions.' Linda's approach to analyzing risks included a clear examination of the risks and benefits of risky play for each child. Her risk-benefit analysis distinguished her from Jamie, a mother, who gasped while watching a clip of her son jumping off the table while holding a stick. Without being prompted, Jamie explained

> ... I have that, you heard that reaction. Like, [gasping noise]. I have that and it's very exaggerated and sometimes, like, not warranted at all, but it's - I can't help it. It's just - I saw him about to fall so I'm like [gasping noise]

Jamie expressed an instinctual, emotional reaction while watching her son engage in what she considered risky play. Her intuitive reaction was guided by a strong emotional response rather than the more pedagogical one that Linda offered. From a pedagogical perspective, the teacher's response seems fitting because she is teaching in a context in which risk is generally viewed as positive and a 'right' of children. Further, the laboratory school is a place that values risk experience, thus Linda was more likely to be tolerant of risk and more astute at analyzing risky play. Yet, Jamie's response was different. Jamie was influenced by her role as a mother. She remarked, 'I think as a parent . . . I am absolutely influenced by what *could* happen.' Later in her interview, she explained the root of her awareness of potential negative outcomes,

> I think it just all goes back to seeing your child hurt and that is sort of the motivator behind feeling like you have to protect them with rules . . . because the times that he has been hurt, it hurts. It hurts your heart as a parent to see tears, to see blood, to see bumps and bruises . . .

This same protective feeling was present among other parents as well. For example, Nancy stated, 'I guess as a parent you are there to protect in some sense . . .' Jamie and Nancy echoed what all the parents noted. When Ellen was asked what had influenced her perceptions of risk as a parent, she noted,

> You don't understand that you can really, just, love a human being that much until you have a child and then you're overwhelmed by the amount of love you have for that child and the responsibility to protect them; the mama bear thing is, like, a real thing.

While Ellen participated in the study as a toddler parent, she had a unique role at the laboratory school because she was also an administrator with an M.S. degree in early childhood education with 15 years of teaching experience with toddlers through kindergarten-aged children. Thus, her interview responses were reflective of these two roles. For example, she explained her emotional reaction as her parent-self and the pedagogical influence that her teacher-self brought to bear related to risky play. While Ellen talked about what went through her mind as she watched her daughter, Julia, engage in risky play, 'I have urges to [pause] move in and prevent [pause] and absolutely, because of my professional work, I stop myself a lot of the time.' The description of her initial nervous and protective reactions was similar to Jamie's gasping reaction to the video clip. For both, there was an obvious concern for potential injury and harm that appeared instinctual and innate. The difference was that Ellen referred to her teacher psychology to assess the risk, or as she put it, 'processing that impulse,' which was like Linda's earlier description.

Pedagogical knowledge strongly influenced teacher practice and beliefs. Embracing risky play was a strong value of the school's philosophy and influenced how teachers defined their reflections, roles, and responsibilities. Parenthood, in and of itself, appeared to be the primary influence among parent participants' perceptions of and responses to risks. There was a distinct thread of emotional and instinctive reactions that permeated their assessments of risky play. Unlike the teachers, the parents tended to act in response to their emotional reactions, whereas teachers recognized some discomfort and relied on their knowledge of the children's development to remain poised for potential intervention. Like the teachers, it was evident that the parents approached risky play with a keen awareness of how they viewed and understood their roles as *protectors* of their children with the 'mama bear' mentality holding weight.

Knowing the child: 'I think it depends on the child'
Through revealing the caregivers' psychology, a significant factor in considering risky play was knowing and understanding the child and his/her capabilities. Participants identified both (a)

being aware of the personality of the child, and (b) and being fully informed of the developmental abilities of the child as key factors in how they came to understand what constitutes risky play.

Parents referenced children's personality traits when explaining their perceptions of risky play more often than teachers, however, both considered these an important factor in assessing risky play. Susan, a parent of two daughters at the school (one toddler and one preschooler) explained how she was more likely to allow one daughter freedom to do things over the other because of their different personalities. Likewise, teachers, Linda and Jennifer also remarked that their decisions to facilitate or intervene in toddler's risky play depended on the personality traits of the children. For example, Linda remarked,

> If they're going to engage in some sort of risky climbing or balancing, I am going to be thinking about how thoughtful that child is as they plan out their motor sequence. Some children are very, very tentative or thoughtful about how they approach a motor task. Some children just dive right in and put themselves at risk for getting hurt.

Like Susan, Linda was also concerned about a child's safety when engaging in risky play. However, she was also guided by her considerations of children's personalities, coupled with their motor development abilities, to determine the degree of risk a child could reasonably handle.

Parents, Jamie, Nancy, and Brandon remarked on their children's personalities in a slightly different way than did the teachers. Rather than referring to the skills and abilities of the children, these parents pointed out what they deemed as an innate propensity toward risks. Jamie noted that 'risk-taking is part of who Bentley is' which influenced her perception of risky play. For example, during her interview, Jamie implied that because Bentley is a risk-taking toddler at heart, risks and even injuries were inevitable; they were going to happen regardless of her implementation of rules.

Husband and wife, Brandon and Nancy, shared similar experiences about their son, Isaac. Nancy and Brandon first brought up personalities when describing the differences between their two sons' risky play behaviors. Compared to Baxter (the older son), Brandon referred to Isaac as 'energetic' and 'a rebel,' and Nancy agreed. Brandon went on to describe Isaac's risky play tendencies when he recalled Isaac's love of jumping. Brandon shared a second example of Isaac's predisposition to take risks when he recalled, 'It's kind of like he has no fear with the pool and all. He'll just walk right [up] and [splash noise].'

Nancy and Brandon's understanding of Isaac's personality relating to risks influenced the way they understood risky play. Similar to Jamie, they knew that Isaac was going to engage in risky play; that it was inevitable. Brandon also declared that he *knew* that Isaac was capable of jumping 'that far.' In addition to knowing Isaac's personality, Brandon referenced Isaac's competencies. Through parenting Isaac, Brandon was learning which skills Isaac had developed, illustrating another way he 'knows' his child.

Brandon's knowledge of his son's capabilities was similar to that of the teacher participants' responses. All three teachers talked about knowing, understanding, and trusting children's developmental abilities as they engaged in risky play. Jennifer expressed this point when asked how she gauged between stepping in to scaffold a child engaged in risky play or waiting it out to see what happens. She stated that it depends on the child's 'competencies in whatever things they're doing.' Rhonda went on to explain how children's capabilities influenced her decisions to remain watchful or intervene, recalling, 'I just kind of know where they're at [developmentally] when I'm watching risky play.' Further, Linda drew a parallel between reading and risky play.

> . . . Just like if you were teaching a child to read, you're going to approach each child in a different way because you know their individual hang-ups so, same goes for this. [risky play]

She also indicated that the history and experience of a child is important in her determination and understanding of each child's capabilities. She explained that a child needs experience with

a situation to develop skills to handle it. Being aware of children's previous experiences is fundamental to her ability to analyze risky play.

In summary, all participants expressed that knowing the child in some capacity is an important factor when analyzing risky play. One distinction between parents and teachers is that knowing a child was more complex for teachers in that all teachers emphasized the importance of knowing children's abilities which included being familiar with children's learning histories as well as their competencies and personalities.

Cultural influences: 'I'd be lying if I said I wasn't influenced by the warning labels'

Uniformly, all participants believed that society's views of risky play have changed over time, especially since they were children, by becoming more risk averse. In some form, four of the participants (3 parents; 1 teacher) were asked how they thought society's perceptions of risk have changed. Jennifer responded, 'Oh, yea! I think we are so overly cautious,' while Ellen exclaimed, 'Oh! Oh, I think we think many more things are risky,' and Jamie reflected, 'I think we're scared of everything.' It seemed that the participants were aware of a bigger, cultural perception of risk and how it has influenced their own lives and practices related to risky play. As Rhonda talked about our societal norms and practices, she began to construct a new realization related to Western culture's warning labels and how she perceives them as a way for the government to micro-manage society, which she clearly noted as a negative phenomenon. Jamie also brought up warning labels when she admitted,

> I mean, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't influenced by the warning labels and the warnings about wearing helmets . . . I feel like that is at the forefront of societies.

Jamie's explanation that warning labels influenced her perceptions of risk because they kept her aware of potential dangers is similar to Jennifer's views. Following, Jennifer laments about how our society's fears of risk sometimes prevents her from facilitating risky play the way she would want to she admitted,

> I'm definitely held back by society's views because I don't want that judgment and I don't want the ramifications. There are licensing things that you have to do. So, I like my job! I don't want to lose it.

Further, Ellen and Linda also expressed they wanted and valued risk tolerance; however, the current societal perceptions of risk made it hard for them to actually practice risk tolerant parenting. Linda used an example from her own childhood and parenting experiences to convey what she meant when she recalled,

> When I was a small child . . . the boundary was the end of your driveway. I know in raising my own children I wanted them to be able to do the same things I did, but it felt strange for me . . . .

Ellen shared a similar experience when she said, 'When I envision it [risky play] as applied to myself as a child, it all feels right. But when I envision it in my current context, the societal lens kicks back in and it's hard for me.' Ellen and Linda both expressed how much the risk perceptions of our Western culture have influenced their personal perceptions of risks. While they desired and valued risky play for their children, it is nevertheless 'strange' and 'hard to imagine'

There was a general agreement across the participants that Western society has created a number of regulations and norms that negatively impact the way teachers and parents view and facilitate young children's risky play. However, the participants also alluded to the smaller and proximal cultural influences, such as their local schools, towns, neighborhoods and city parks. Susan explained the cultural differences in her part of town versus another part of the same town:

> In the summer the girls are very rarely fully clothed and so I laugh because we live in [the North part of the city], but I'm like if we lived in [the West part of the city] somebody would call CPS. (Child Protective Services)

Susan claimed there is an aspect of her local culture that determines what she believes are acceptable parenting practices and which are not. Later, she described another hometown example when she referenced the laboratory school, 'I think that the laboratory school has changed our baseline. So, before the laboratory school, I'd say that we were much less risk tolerant because we weren't exposed to the things we get at the laboratory school.' Jamie shared a similar experience when she first brought her son to the school,

> I remember on the visiting day that we had, I was sort of watching and he couldn't get up and down stairs very gracefully . . . . I was like 'this makes me so nervous because he can't control his body that way.' I was really, really nervous about him getting hurt outside. I clearly know that that's not the case now and this is an awesome place for him.

Throughout the interviews, both parents and teachers shared examples of two cultural phenomena that influenced their perceptions of risky play. The first was related to the broader notion of Western culture. The participants were influenced by the way our society perceives and regulates risk. Even when they expressed a value for risk, they continued to struggle because society seemed so fearful. The second phenomenon was the role of their more immediate cultural contexts that influenced the ways in which they interacted, whether at home, school or in their neighborhoods. Overall, it appears that culture influenced both teachers' and parents' perceptions of risk, on the societal and personal levels. Moreover, at times, these cultural influences were conflicting regarding what participants value and desire.

Finding Two: Descriptions of Risky Play, 'Risk isn't just physical. . . it can be emotional. It can be social. It can be cognitive. . .'

All interviews began with the question, 'When I say risky play, what do you think of?' Within their first responses, six of the eight participants identified risky play as being physical in nature. This perspective included physical actions such as jumping, climbing, or falling; the potential to be physically hurt or injured; or as Linda noted, 'I guess the first thing that comes to mind is just anything physically risky . . . ' Within the first five minutes of each interview, all eight participants defined risky play as containing a characteristic of physicality.

Some of the participants clarified that risky play also contained characteristics beyond physicality. For example, Jennifer stated 'I mean, risk isn't just physical. I mean, it can be emotional. It can be social. It can be cognitive risks, but then, also physical.' Similarly, Ellen explained that risk contains more aspects than just physical characteristics when she noted:

> . . . We think about physical risks but it's not just about physical risks; it's also about, um, emotional risks and social risks and cognitive risks and often, I think all of those are blended together.

Interestingly, the three teachers expanded on the idea of risky play being more than physical and one parent, Ellen, who was also an early childhood educator, remarked that risky play can be more than just physical.

Another common descriptor used by participants to define risky play was that it often lacked adult supervision. Many participants recalled accounts of their childhoods when they were involved in risky play behaviors in which no adults were present. Jamie was asked what type of risky play she engaged in as a child. She recalled, 'We played in the woods all of the time by ourselves.' When Linda was asked to explain the role of the adult in risky play, she said:

> I guess I would think that it usually does occur away from adults for most children. Just reflecting back on my own experiences as a child, the riskier play that I did engage in was usually out of the view of adults.

Likewise, Nancy explained her childhood experiences when she was asked to describe what types of risk she engaged in as a child, 'I can't quite remember the play stuff that we did, but I know that our play was much freer in the sense that I know my parents weren't around.' Ellen remembered several childhood memories of risky play, none involving adult supervision. Most participants recounted that

the risks they took in their childhoods happened because there were no adults around to prevent them from taking risks. Consequently, the lack of supervision has become a part of their perception of risky play.

Risky play was believed by most participants to take place outside and include natural elements. Seven of the eight participants associated risky play with the outdoors and/or natural environments. When Rhonda was asked what she thought about when she considered risky play, she stated, 'I think of outside.' Nancy recalled that her childhood was riskier than children today because 'we got thrown outside to play.' Participants recalled risky play memories from their childhoods and provided environmental descriptors to set the scenes. For example, Ellen remembered her childhood backyard as a 'huge backdrop of her play.' She went on to describe her freedom in a 'wild space' and how it was easily perceived as risky. She contrasted a creek to a play structure, suggesting that there was more potential for risk with a creek setting. Linda shared a similar recollection when she described a childhood memory, 'I just sort of explored and climbed and we had kind of a steep yard that was just covered in all these prickly rose bushes.' The backyard contained many natural elements that allowed her to explore and be challenged. Likewise, Jamie thought back to her childhood using vivid descriptions of 'climbing trees, jumping out of trees, hanging from trees. We played in the woods all of the time by ourselves.'

The participants' recollections vividly illustrate the prevalence of risky play in outdoor environments during their childhoods. For the majority, the outdoors served as the primary backdrop for such activities, with natural elements providing ample opportunities for exploration and challenge.

Overall, a variety of benefits of risky play were identified and described by both parents and teachers, often referencing their own childhood experiences. Jamie and Rhonda explained that engagement in risks helped children learn their potential as they test their limits and figure out what they can do. Nancy added, "So I feel like it's fun, number one 'cause I remember having fun, like, doing stuff [taking risks]." She recognized that risky play has an element of enjoyment that is a benefit to children, in and of itself. Susan also explained the value she saw in risky play when she remarked, 'I think it teaches some perseverance, and it teaches tenacity and strength and problem-solving . . . ' Ellen placed the most value in risky play, concluding 'risk is how we learn. . . . It's not just a side part of learning. It is actually the center of how we learn.'

Ellen shared a similar experience when she said, 'When I envision it [risky play] as applied to myself as a child, it all feels right. But when I envision it in my current context, the societal lens kicks back in and it's hard for me.' Ellen and Linda both expressed how much the risk perceptions of our Western culture have influenced their personal perceptions of risks. While they desired and valued risky play for their children, it is nevertheless 'strange' and 'hard to imagine.'

Finding three: the situated and dynamic nature of the perceptual development of risky play

The third finding of this study is related to how participants' understandings and perceptions of risky play are situated in personal experiences dynamic, changing over time with exposure to new experiences. Though there are several agreeable aspects across the definitions of risky play, each definition is informed by personal experiences and knowledges, and thus, reflecting the way each participant perceived risk. Throughout each participant's explanation of risky play, they continuously drew upon their past experiences to help them formulate their current definitions and understandings. Most recalled their own childhoods and reflected on times when they were engaged in risky play to explain their adult understandings of risky play. As participants were asked to define or describe risky play, several recalled experiences from their childhood. In the instance of characterizing risky play to take place outdoors, the participants' nostalgic reflections highlight the ways that their childhood experiences influenced their adult understandings of risky play. For example, Nancy recalled being 'thrown outside.' Ellen and Linda described the natural elements of their backyards. Jamie reported playing 'in the woods all of the time.' Consequently, risky play was understood to

most likely take place outdoors. Their knowledge relating to risky play reflects the conditions in which they have come to understand risky play.

The characterization of risky play taking place outdoors is just one example of how the participants' perceptions of risky play have been acquired over time through personal experiences. As they went back in time, it became clear that risky play was a multifaceted, contextual phenomenon characterized by risk, freedom, out-of-doors, and unsupervised while offering potential developmental benefits, thus not limited to a single definition. Rather, it was a weaving of emotional, social, spatial and unique experiential and psychological threads of activity and sensibilities.

The participants also demonstrated how their perceptions and understandings of risky play were not fixed or rigid. Rather, they were plastic and dynamic, changing as new experiences challenged their ways of thinking about risky play. For example, Jamie recalled from her childhood that she and her brother 'played in the woods all of the time by ourselves' as her parents were camp counselors. Yet, as Jamie described her role as a mother when thinking about risky play, she expressed worry and hesitation when watching a clip of her own toddler engaging in risky play. Jamie's descriptions of her childhood play- 'climbing trees, jumping out of trees, hanging from trees'- encompassed an ordinary, run-of-the-mill scene, but while watching a clip of Bentley jumping from a table while holding a stick, she let out a gasped and explained that as a parent, her hesitation regarding risky play stems from seeing her child hurt. The difference in the way Jamie talks about risky play in these two time periods demonstrates how her perceptions of risky play have evolved as she has encountered new experiences and roles. The different conditions of these two examples influence her aversion and tolerance of risky play. Later, she references her first visit at the laboratory school, and her hesitancy when considering her toddler's capabilities on the school's challenging playground. She then states that she 'now' knows 'this is an awesome place for him.' The use of the word 'now' illustrates that her perceptions of risky play have changed, implying that time has afforded opportunities for her perceptions to develop. Therefore, her perceptions of risky play were not static.

Similar trends were shown by other participants too. Throughout her interview, Linda talked about risky play in generally positive ways, acknowledging her belief of the benefits of risky play. She referred to a risky childhood when she described the end of her driveway as her boundary and playing near a prickly rose bush. She articulated her approach as a teacher when assessing risky play, making it clear that before interrupting a risky play scenario, she carefully assesses the benefits and potential harms of the behavior. All demonstrated her generally risk-tolerant approach. However, when she brought up her own children, she said it was 'hard to imagine' letting her own children go to the end of the driveway. Through her childhood memories and as a teacher, Linda expressed a tolerance and even appreciation for risks. In contrast, her parent-self expressed a more risk-averse approach, demonstrating the situated and dynamic nature of her risky play perceptions. The different contexts and roles altered the way Linda approached risky play.

As such, perceptions of risky play were found to be subjective and situated, embedded in experiences and influenced by societal practices and norms, local customs of childcare, and one's developing beliefs and values across time. Thus, the definition of risky play is a dynamic, emerging definition that is situated in the ongoing lived experiences of each individual, changing as each of us encounter different novel experiences and gain new knowledges.

Discussion, conclusions, and limitations

Discussion

The findings from this study shed light on the complex interplay between adult perceptions of risky play during toddlerhood and the various, ongiong factors that influence these perceptions. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how adults navigate their understandings of risky play and their facilitation of toddlers' risky play.

One significant finding of this study is that parents' and teachers' perceptions of toddlerhood risky play were influenced by three primary aspects: (1) the role of the caregiver, (2) knowing the child, and (3) cultural influences. Supporting the findings of Quinones (2023), teachers in this study were guided by their pedagogical knowledge and were consequently more supportive of toddler risky play. Whereas parents often reacted instinctually and emotionally, wanting to shield their toddlers from injury and harm. This obligation to protect aligns with Murray and Williams (2020) findings, which suggest that parents are more inclined to mention the potential for physical harm over acknowledging the benefits of risky play. This contrast between parents and teachers highlights the importance of considering the diverse perspectives and motivations of caregivers when designing interventions or policies related to risky play in early childhood settings.

This finding also highlights the significant influence of cultural norms and societal attitudes on risk perception among both parents and teachers. Participants expressed concerns about the prevailing risk-averse culture, which frequently hindered their willingness to embrace opportunities for risky play. Consistent with prior research (Brussoni et al., 2012; Gill, 2007), there is evident resistance to allowing children to engage in risky activities. Societal perceptions of risk, compounded by regulatory pressures and fear of judgment, present substantial obstacles for caregivers endeavoring to cultivate environments that support healthy risk-taking.

The second finding delves into the way parents and teachers describe and define risky play. Previous research has investigated attitudes and practices of parents and teachers regarding toddlerhood risky play (Kleppe, 2018; Little, 2022; Murray & Williams, 2020; Quinones, 2023). To the best of our knowledge, no research has explored how teachers and parents personally define and describe risky play. Rather, risky play literature typically employs Stephenson's (2003) and E. B. H. Sandseter's (2007) definitions of risky play as foundational definitions. These definitions function as operational definitions, yet they fall short of reflecting and representing the unique, personal experiences and perceptions of parents and caregivers and how they define and understand risky play. Adams (1995, pp. 13–14) problematizes objective measures of risk stating that one will 'modify both their levels of vigilance and their exposure to danger in response to their subjective perceptions of risk.' This underscores the importance of considering how subjective definitions of risky play influence how parents and teachers understand and facilitate toddlerhood risky play.

The third finding of this study illuminates the dynamic and context-dependent nature of how participants' perceptions and understandings of risky play develop. It becomes evident that these perceptions are not static but are shaped by personal experiences and situated factors, evolving over time, aligning with Adams (1995) claim that people construct their reality out of their experience with risks. Participants drew upon nostalgic reflections of their own childhoods to formulate their current perceptions of risky play, emphasizing the influence of past experiences. This fluidity in perception is exemplified by Jamie's evolution from freely playing in the woods as a child to expressing hesitation and worry as a parent observing her own child engaging in risky play. Similarly, Linda's generally risk-tolerant approach as a teacher contrasts with her more risk-averse stance as a parent, underscoring the impact of different roles and contexts on perceptions of risky play.

These aspects were governed by personal experiences and exposure to life events, demonstrating Bronfenbrenner's claim that human development involves both a human being and the changing properties of the setting in which the developing person lives and interacts, as well as the larger contexts in which the immediate setting is embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Excerpts from participant interviews illustrated the situated nature of risky play definitions, characterized by personal experiences, memories, and knowledges. Both parents and teachers recalled and described their engagement in risky play during childhood, revealing influences on their present-day understandings of risky play. This finding illustrates the inimitability of individual and subjective experiences that shape how each participant uniquely perceived risky play. The dynamic nature of these perceptions reflects an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation, as individuals encounter new experiences and gain fresh insights over time. Therefore, the development of risky play perceptions

emerges as dynamic, continually shaped by ongoing lived experiences and evolving beliefs and values.

Limitations

The study's limitations include a small, homogeneous sample comprised mainly of well-educated parents and teachers, mostly middle to upper-middle class, with most white participants from university-affiliated families. The sample reflects a typical university laboratory school demographic, providing access to resources uncommon in community or private childcare settings. These resources, along with teachers' sophisticated understanding of risky play, likely influenced parental perceptions. Despite the small sample size, intentionally chosen to explore multifaceted perceptions, the study captured rich insights into parents' and teachers' understanding of toddler risky play, revealing complexity and depth.

Implications for future research

This study has identified the need for more studies of toddler risky play, in diverse contexts with caregivers, teachers, and parents. To address the limitations of this study, future studies should consider replicating the research design with a larger, more diverse population that includes fathers, varying levels of teacher knowledge and expertise, and participant racial and socio-economic diversity. Scholarship on risky play would benefit by replicating this research study in programs with diverse philosophies, purposes, and physical environments.

Implications for future practice

Studies similar to this may serve as a professional development opportunity in which teachers and parents can reflect on and reconsider their thoughts, feelings, understandings, and scaffolding strategies of risky play. For example, during her interview, Jamie expressed, '... I've never really sort of reflected on how I am parenting and policing risky behavior.' Similarly, Rhonda asserted, ' ... You've been thinking about it a lot and I- that's just the first time I thought about it,' referring to a larger context of risky play (i.e. society's tendency to apply warning labels to everything). The video stimulated recall interviews provided the mode, time, and opportunity for parents and teachers to engage in self-reflection. Consequently, they reevaluated their own perceptions and practices. Jamie reflected, 'I feel like I need to be better at this. Maybe I need to encourage it [risky play] more.' It may be beneficial in the fields of child development and early childhood education for adults to be prompted to think about their own experiences of risky play, how they perceive and understand risky play, and how these knowledges transfer to their practice.

Conclusion

The study was designed and implemented in one setting to explore parent and teacher perceptions of toddler risky play; what they think about risky play, how they define risky play and the influences on their thinking and practices using Video Stimulated Recall Interviews. Teachers and parents recollected risky play experiences of toddlers in their care and from their own childhoods, reflected on how they perceived risky play and how their perceptions have developed. In doing so, three over-arching findings emerged, all illuminating the largely influential factors of personal experiences and contexts. Participants revealed that it was impossible to separate their perceptions of risky play from their histories, experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The significance of personal experiences and contexts were so exclusive and dominant that it became clear that risky play must be defined at an individual

level to clearly understand practices regarding scaffolding and supervision of childhood risky play.

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