

RISKY PLAY IN OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS<sup>1</sup>

## JOGO DE RISCO EM ESPAÇOS EXTERIORES

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Jogo de risco pode ser definido como um modo emocionante e excitante de brincar das crianças que envolve risco de se magoarem. O jogo de risco é natural durante o brincar das crianças e correr riscos é uma parte importante e necessária do brincar em espaços exteriores. Estes espaços oferecem uma excelente oportunidade para as crianças serem fisicamente mais ativas e menos sedentárias, o que é indispensável para o seu desenvolvimento e saúde. Além disso, os espaços exteriores permitem às crianças experienciar situações com algum risco de ferimentos e lesões físicas, e o risco de brincar ao ar livre fornece oportunidades únicas para o desenvolvimento físico, cognitivo e social. Durante o jogo de risco, as crianças experienciam níveis crescentes de desafio e percebem oportunidades de ação para diferentes elementos. Este capítulo explora o conceito de jogo de risco e a sua categorização, as emoções e os sentimentos experimentados pelas crianças quando se envolvem em brincadeiras arriscadas, as possibilidades de ação e a perceção dessas possibilidades de jogo arriscado e, por último, o jogo de risco e a segurança das crianças.

**Palavras chave**

Desafio; segurança; ferimento; possibilidade de ação; desenvolvimento da criança.

**Abstract**

Risky play can be defined as thrilling and exciting forms of children's play that involve a risk of harm. Risky play is natural during children's play, and taking risks is an important and necessary part of outdoor play. Outdoor environments provide an excellent opportunity for children to be more physically active and less sedentary, which is important for their development and health. Additionally, outdoor spaces afford some risk of physical injury, and the risks of playing outdoor provide unique opportunities for physical, cognitive, and social development. During risky play, children experience increasing challenges and perceive opportunities for action or affordances for different elements. This chapter explores the concept of risky play and its categorization, the emotions and feelings experienced by children when engaging in risky play, the affordances and perception of affordances for risky play, and *risky play* and children's safety.

**Key words**

Challenge; safety; injury; affordances; child development.

**INTRODUCTION**

Children enjoy and naturally seek out experiences for engaging in physical risk-taking behaviors (Stephenson, 2003). Risk-taking is an important part of children's play that naturally occurs in outdoor environments (Little & Sweller, 2015). In the outdoors children explore the affordances for risky play (Sandseter, 2009). Depriving children of risk play could negatively impact children's development and has been associated with anxiety and fear (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011).

*Defining and categorizing risky play*

Risky play is defined as *"thrilling and exciting form of play that involves a risk of physical injury"* (Sandseter, 2009a, pp. 439). Risky play is related to the challenge of getting hurt and feeling fear, *"attempting something never done before"*, *"feeling borderline of out of control often because of height or speed"* (Stephenson, 2003, pp. 36). Risky play is perceived by children as frightening, yet exciting, pleasurable, thrilling, and attractive, involving overcoming fear (Sandseter, 2007). According to Sandseter (2009b), there are two categories of risk that define risky play: environmental characteristics (e.g., height and steepness of the object of the play, degree of supervision) and individual characteristics (e.g., focus/concentration, height and speed level, bodily and motor control). Sandseter's observational study (2007) of 4-6-years-old children's play has identified 6 categories of risky play: (1) Play with great heights (danger of injury from falling); (2) Play with high speed (uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something or someone); (3) Play with harmful tools (axe, saw, knife); (4) Play near dangerous elements (fire pits); (5) Rough-and-tumble play (fighting, wrestling), and (6) Play where the children can 'disappear'/get lost. More recently, Kleppe and colleagues (2017) have identified two new categories after observing 1-year-old children: (1) Play with impact (children crashing into something repeatedly just for fun), and (2) Vicarious play (children experiencing thrill by watching other children engaging in risk). During risky play,

children experience different emotions, that they express bodily, facially, and verbally. Children's emotional experiences during risky play (play with great heights, with high speed and rough-and-tumble play) range from pure exhilaration (laughing), through simultaneous exhilaration and fear (exhilaration bordering fear), to pure fear (worried facial expression) (Sandseter, 2009c).

#### *Affordances and perception of affordances for risky play*

Affordance properties are simultaneously determined by the characteristics of the environment and of the individual (Gibson, 1977). The outdoor environments allow children to learn about their bodies' capabilities, test their limits, and try new skills and activities (Little & Sweller, 2015). The outdoor space is challenging for children, and taking risks, testing, and experiencing different motor skills are part of children's development. By taking risks and facing and overcoming challenges, children learn about their abilities and their action boundaries. Sandseter (2007) observed preschoolers in outdoor play activities and found that "if there was anything around that could be climbed, the children would immediately begin climbing it" (pp. 243). In other words, children are continually perceiving and making use of possibilities for action in the environment. The physical features of the outdoor space that afford risk-taking include trees, grass, rocks, uneven ground and slopes, digging patches, flat areas (Little & Sweller, 2015). For example, a log affords sitting, and jumping for an older or more proficient child; a tree affords climbing, hanging, and swinging for a taller or more courageous child. Hence, the same element affords different skills for different children, according to child's body size, abilities, experience, temperament, etc., running or jumping (over, down from) are more predominant in outdoor spaces due to environmental qualities that support certain affordances. Typically developing children and children with neurodevelopmental disorders, have difficulty determining accurately their affordances, displaying a tendency to overestimate their motor skills, which might be a problem in terms of child safety. Previous studies have provided evidence that children's age (Almeida, Luz, Martins, & Cordovil, 2016), experience (Adolph, 1995), temperament (Plumert, & Schwebel, 1997), and motor proficiency level (Almeida, Luz, Martins, & Cordovil, 2017) influence children's perception of affordances. The features of the outdoor spaces influence children's play by affording certain types of play or actions. Heft (1988), based on Gibson's concept of affordance, developed a functional taxonomy of outdoor features affording specific activities. These environment features are flat surface, water, smooth slope, graspable/detached object, attached object, non-rigid attached object, climbable feature, aperture, shelter, and moldable material.

#### *Risky play and children's safety*

Although most parents and educators are informed about the benefits of outdoor play, there is always a barrier - concern of children's safety, especially in environments with more stimulating and challenging characteristics that may put their children at risk of unintended injury. Adults' supervision, different from adults' control, is important in outdoor settings to prevent and reduce unintentional injuries during risky play (Sandseter, 2009a). However, only if children can act freely and explore opportunities for risk-taking, they can know their action boundaries and learn how to manage risk. Hence, it is important to let children actualize risky play affordances. Sandseter (2009a) found that play in great heights and with high speed, were the most common forms of actualized affordances. The balance that needs to be provided between challenge/risk and safety depends on both child's characteristics and affordances of the environment elements of risk and others that present real hazards.

## CONCLUSION

The outdoor environment offers children features that afford risky play with a higher degree of risk than other sceneries. Children's risk perception and risk competence can be improved by increasing the opportunities for risky play activities. Providing such risk-taking opportunities in outdoor play does not mean ignoring safety and adult supervision.

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