

Risk Competence

Towards a Pedagogic Conceptualisation of Risk

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Introduction

"One should teach children to dance on a tightrope without a safety net, to sleep at night alone under the sky, to row a boat out on the open sea. One should teach them to imagine castles in the sky instead of houses on the ground, to be nowhere at home but in life itself and to find security within themselves."

H. H. Dreiske, German poet and social worker



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Feeling secure comes from within, if we believe Dreiske, from being nowhere at home but in life itself, from knowing how to enjoy life and growing through challenges. The life Dreiske envisions for children seems full of dangers and risks, yet reminds of literary characters like Huckleberry Finn or Pippi Longstocking and their imaginative, colourful and adventurous lives. Their ways of exploring the world were often connected with risks, with daring stunts that took them to the limits of their physical abilities. But what also emerges from their stories is the growth from taking these risks, their growth in self-esteem, in knowledge, and in competence. And, as the German paediatrician and child psychologist Eckhard Schiffer (1993) argues, their ability to live their dreams, to fill their lives with fantasy, pleasure and excitement is fundamental to

their well-being and health. In his book *'Why Huckleberry Finn did not become addicted'*, Schiffer describes how taking risks and experiencing adventures that enable children to extend their competence is a health-sustaining process rather than health-endangering: it empowers children to create a rich inner world, alive with their fantasies and experiences.

The Importance of Risk Competence

*"During the first period of a man's life
the greatest danger is not to take the risk,"*

Søren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher

Risk competence explained

Taking risks is important to children's well-being in many aspects: It helps them keep healthy and enhances their resilience, enables them to develop and learn, influences their perception of themselves and their self-esteem, and provides excitement and pleasure. For this, children need to have free space and opportunities to be active; they need to be allowed to take risks in order to develop 'risk competence'. What we mean by this is the process of becoming knowledgeable and skilled in assessing risks and therefore acquiring the competence to take risks more safely. Children who have had opportunities to develop their physical abilities and motor skills, a good sense of balance and rhythm, and to experience their bodily limits will be more 'risk competent' in things like climbing a tree than children who have little or no sense of coordination, of gravity, of how much weight their arms will hold. This makes it not only unsafe to climb a tree, it affects the entire everyday life – accidents are more likely to have serious consequences for those children who are not used to taking risks and develop 'risk competence' than for those who have learned how to run without losing control, how to land when jumping, how to fall without hurting themselves.

Risk competent children have fewer accidents

This line of argumentation is supported by a statistical analysis of causes of death in the UK, conducted by Baillie (2005). His findings suggest that 'most fatal accidents to children result from them not having learned, or not being allowed to learn, how to look after themselves'. He calls this the 'Hatfield Effect'¹: by avoiding dangers we expose ourselves to greater dangers. Avoiding hazardous activities has the effect that we do not acquire skills to manage risks, and consequently every activity becomes more dangerous. So rather than dying from taking too high risks, children are more likely to die as a consequence of having taken too few risks.

Baillie (2005) also suggests that encouraging children to engage in risky activities would actually save lives in the main death causes: heart attacks, cancers, smoking, obesity and unfitness, and alcohol. This leads to the conclusion that allowing children to take risks with pedagogic intentions is actually a way of safeguarding and, as we will argue throughout this article, a more self-determined, knowledge-based, and empowering way of doing so.

¹ As he explains, 'the term was coined following the tragic rail crash when 4 people died. However as a result of both the enforced and the fear-driven voluntary reduction in rail travel for many of the following months an unknown number of hundreds of people died on the roads. Road travel being massively more dangerous than rail travel we tried to make what was already very safe even safer but inadvertently exposed ourselves to risks which were much greater.'

Risk Competence - Underpinning Principles

"You cannot teach a man anything. You can only help him discover it within himself."

Galileo Galilei, Italian astronomer

The 'rich child'

The pedagogic notion of 'risk competence' is based on fundamental beliefs about children and their rights but is also grounded in theory and research. Central to pedagogy is the concept of the 'rich child' (Malaguzzi, 1993), of seeing children as competent, resourceful and active agents who possess a richness of abilities, knowledge and skills. They have the potential to become 'risk competent', if we give them opportunities and trust their expertise and self understanding.

In an ethnographic study on risk-taking with 35 Danish children aged 10 to 12, Christensen and Mikkelsen (2008) found evidence that children carefully assess risks based on their self perception of their own physical abilities, health and past experiences. They concluded that 'risk engagement is an important resource through which children also learn from their own mistakes. This is a necessary learning process when children engage with their personal health and safety' (Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008). And even small children show 'risk competence', taking on challenges with determination and an eagerness to master them, as a study by Stephenson (2003) found. Her observations of children aged below two show that from a very young age children's engagement in 'risky' activities is 'an integral part of their drive to extend their physical prowess and so their independence' (Stephensons, 2003). These findings demonstrate that 'children have a greater understanding of and ability to manage risk than they are given credit for', as Gleaver (2008) concludes in her literature review. And those who may have a limited understanding of how to assess risks can only learn it by being given opportunities to take risks.

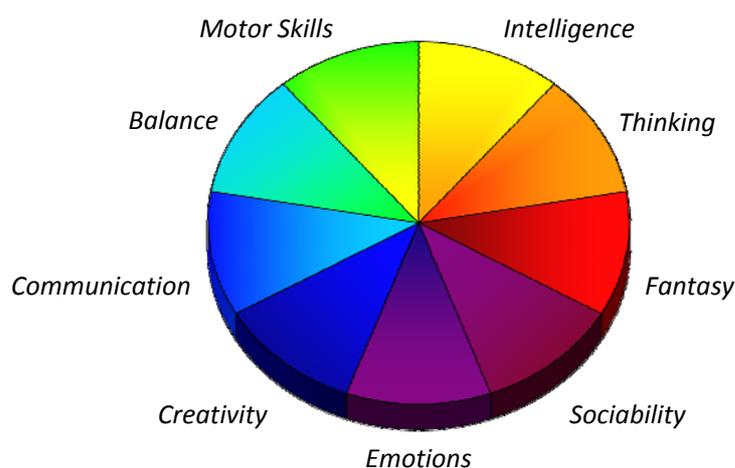
Acquiring 'risk competence' – the Learning Zone Model

Becoming 'risk competent' is like a journey – it happens step by step. Children who have never climbed a tree before will generally not decide to climb to the top of the highest tree, but start to build up their climbing skills gradually. This is illustrated by the Learning Zone Model (Senninger, 2000): Learning is about leaving our comfort zone, where everything around us is familiar and already known, and entering our learning zone but without overstepping into our panic zone, where fear hinders any learning from taking place. This is an innate process of gradually extending our comfort zone and our learning zone, and is why we naturally intend to avoid situations which we feel we cannot master. In this sense, risk competence develops organically where children are able to explore their learning zone, and it develops in a way that does not unnecessarily put children at risk of serious harm or death.

The Learning Zone Model also shows that risk is directly linked to development: where the environment does not facilitate learning situations, which require a certain amount of trust in the unknown, the further personal development of an individual is very limited. Being trusted to master risks and being successful in doing this encourages a person to approach the next level of challenge in a positive way, which helps increase their self-esteem and self-awareness.

Children's play – playgrounds for acquiring 'risk competence'

Children's inherent way of exploring and experiencing is through active engagement with their environment, through play. The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1955) describes play as 'a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious" but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.' As a vital characteristic, play is purpose-free rather than a means to an end, and it is important to value play for its own sake. At the same time play is fundamental for children's well-being and learning. It is therefore impossible to value the importance of risk-taking without understanding the benefits of play. Schulth (2001) suggests that play improves children's holistic development which she divides into 9 areas, which are interlinked:



Area of development	Description
Intelligence	There is ample evidence that play helps develop our intelligence, in fact it can be linked to Gardner's model of multiple intelligences. Play activities such as romping are proven to support brain development, and exploratory play leads to children becoming more knowledgeable through experiencing the world around them with head, heart and hands.
Thinking	Play requires active thinking: creative solutions are needed, rules are adapted, or new games are made up. Importantly, the motivation for thinking is intrinsic, meaning that it happens because of the child's initiative rather than due to external pressures.
Fantasy	Play worlds are created through children's rich fantasy. Especially children's play in nature and with natural material sparks their imagination and creativity. Fantasy has been shown to be hugely important for developing a rich inner world.
Emotions	Success and failure, thrill and boredom, pleasure and anxiety are part of the range of emotions experienced through play, thus helping children cope with a variety of different emotions and better understand their feelings.

Sensory Perception	Experiencing the world with all senses is fundamental to holistic learning, and play offers lots of opportunities for children to develop their senses and thus grasp what is around them. There is evidence for how important perception involving all our senses is for our ability to create a rich inner world.
Sociability	Play is a social activity and enables children to develop relationships with peers, negotiate and solve conflicts that may arise. Playing gives them the chance to experience the effect they have on others, thus acquiring vital interpersonal skills as well as balancing their self-perception with the perception of them by others.
Communication	In play children communicate with each other: they don't even have to share the same language in order to enjoy playing together. They become more experienced in detecting non-verbal communication signs as well, interpreting facial expressions and body language of play mates. Also, play is linked to linguistic development.
Balance	Developing a good sense of balance is crucial for becoming risk competent and for our health, and especially active physical play provides lots of valuable opportunities for children to develop their sense of balance.
Motor Skills	As play generally requires both mental and physical activity, there are many opportunities for children to explore and develop their physical abilities and motor skills. This helps them to test their limits and become competent in taking risks that do not exceed their actual physical abilities.

Creating learning opportunities through risk in play

Schulth's model demonstrates why play is central to children's holistic development. Unless we are clear on the fundamental importance of active play for children's learning and well-being, we are prone to see it as just a way of spending time: if we are conscious of the benefits of horseback riding, for example – how beneficial it can be in developing a sense of balance, of correct posture, in learning about gentle, assertive forms of exercising power and control, in developing a caring relationship with the horse, and so many other things – it becomes more than just a pastime activity that is a little bit more dangerous than going to the movies. As a result, a pedagogic approach to risk must essentially replace risk as a defining category for an activity and instead see learning and well-being as the defining categories.

This does not mean discarding risk altogether, but rather distinguishing between risks that enhance children's learning and well-being and those that don't. The Play Safety Forum (2002) introduced the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable risks. Acceptable risks are those that offer benefits and can be perceived as risks by the children themselves, for instance that fire is hot and wants to be treated with caution. Unacceptable risks fall into the category of requiring an understanding that children may not yet have, for instance that setting fire to a few dry leaves on the forest ground might cause a wildfire. From a pedagogic point of view, this distinction is helpful for two reasons: first, it demands that we think of the individual rather than of the risk as such – does he or she have the understanding needed to take a given risk without a genuine threat to their safety? Second, as

developing risk competence is a long process of experiencing and reflecting, it is the pedagogue's task to provide children as early as possible with learning situations wherein they can experience how risk can be overcome. This means that we need to think about how to turn an unacceptable into an acceptable risk – how could he or she arrive at the understanding required to assess risk competently?

If we value this significance, the question for professionals is how we can create play spaces, or learning situations, for children. There is no doubt that children need to feel safe in their play world, otherwise they enter into their panic zone. But we need to acknowledge that *feeling safe* is subjective and cannot simply be equated with *being safe*. We might feel safe swimming in the sea, and unless we *feel* safe we will not *be* safe in that situation. In fact, our feeling safe comes from us having developed a sense that we can cope with the challenges surrounding us, that we can master them. If we don't develop this feeling, we are becoming anxious in such situations, thus making them actually unsafe. What we need to develop in order to avoid this is 'risk competence'.



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Risk in Pedagogic Practice – Experiences from a Danish Children’s Home

One of the key components of Danish pedagogy is called the ‘Common Third’. Its notion is that by being engaged in an activity together, which both the pedagogue and the child share an interest in, something third develops between pedagogue and child, something that connects them and allows them to develop their relationship at a personal and equal level. Therefore the Common Third is often used to integrate children into the wider group and to give them enduring learning experiences together with the pedagogue.

In practice the Common Third can be many different things, and one children’s home near Århus owns several horses which have become the Common Third. The pedagogic and therapeutic considerations behind keeping them are that children who are able to take care of another living being and develop an understanding of what taking care of someone actually means will be more able to take care of themselves too. Therefore the children are encouraged to feed the horses, clean out the stables, brush them regularly, or take them out for a ride. The risks of being around horses are carefully considered and pedagogically justified.

Importantly, the pedagogues focus on the process, on the development of a relationship between the horse and the child. So a new child might start by simply watching the horses before gradually approaching them more closely, then feeding them an apple and petting their neck if the child wants to. As the child becomes more comfortable around the horse (and vice versa), develops ‘risk competence’ and an understanding of the horse, the child is gradually permitted to perhaps stay in the stable with the horse on their own, or lie next to the horse to feel its body rhythm (a crucial tactile way of developing a sense of one’s own rhythm), lead the horse around, or maybe even go horseback riding.

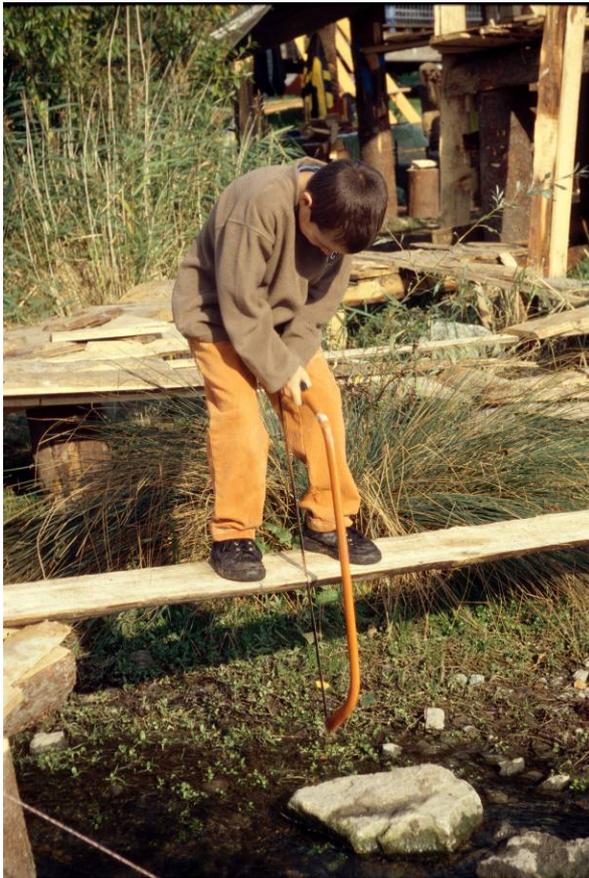
Lotte Harbo, pedagogic supervisor of the children’s home, explains the benefits of using the horses with the children: ‘Using horses as a pedagogical tool gives the children a chance to experience themselves as needed: the horses will call for them in the morning if they don’t come to feed them. Also, the horses mirror the children’s behaviour, and the children will soon learn that when they are calm and gentle the horses are calm. This is an excellent way for the children to learn about their own behaviour. Down the line it is also a major achievement for the children when they are trusted to be around the horses on their own.’

Pedagogic Risk-Taking

*"Tell me, and I forget.
Show me, and I remember.
Let me do it, and I understand."*

Confucius, Chinese philosopher

A pedagogic conceptualization of risk has to start from the child's perspective, not the adult's. This will determine the pedagogic action. The scene pictured here could lead to a range of responses dependent on our relationship with the young boy and what we know about him. If he is usually



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rather clumsy and tends to act without thinking, the right thing to do would be to intervene because he doesn't have the necessary 'risk competence'. If we know that he is rather inexperienced in using a bow saw, the pond might not be the best place to practice either, and we could still provide him with a valuable learning experience by moving the scene somewhere more appropriate. On the other hand, the boy might be competent in sawing and just wants to know how far he can saw before he starts feeling anxious and will give up. In this situation we might just quietly observe him. If we feel that our presence could lead him to expect that we will tell him when to stop, it might be better to leave him on his own so that he will know that he is responsible for how far he wants to take this. The type of response requires an ability to reflect in the situation and carefully weigh up the benefits and risks, based on the relationship between pedagogue and child. Awareness and constant reflection thus form the baseline for pedagogic actions.

Designing the process for risk competence

This is especially important as learning is a process, and so learning through risk-taking must be seen as a process too. In order for this process to be successful, the challenge or risk must be proportionate to the child's abilities, his or her expectation to be able to master it. This means creating supportive and nurturing situations that allow for the right amount of risk. For instance if a child wants to learn how to inline-skate down a steep hill, we might start learning inline-skating in the driveway, learn how to fall properly, how to brake, skate backwards, etc. As the child becomes more competent in inline-skating, and we get a sense of their increasing competence to judge the related risks – how fast they can go, how early they need to brake – we can gradually take the next steps towards the ultimate aim of safely skating down the steep hill. It should also be noted that the

child must be involved in designing this process, so that together we can constantly evaluate the progress and growing 'risk competence', which also means that the child is aware of their competence and the pedagogue gets a sense of how the child perceives their own abilities.

Recording the process of the child's development of 'risk competence' is important as it provides a framework to reflect on the progress as well as demonstrate the pedagogic considerations and steps taken in empowering the child to understand the risks involved. In case of an accident this record can show that a supportive and 'safe' risk-taking environment was created and that no unacceptable risks beyond the child's grasp were allowed. Situations in which things did not go as smoothly as planned, have significance too from a pedagogic point of view, as they bear a great potential for learning. They mirror real life, in the sense that they show the child that not everything in life can be planned to the last detail and that it is equally important to be competent to manage if a plan has to change. The key lies in the reflection and in utilising the learning of such dynamic situations for the future.

In order to construct a positive learning culture and well-being around risk, it is essential for professionals to reflect their personal perceptions and responses to risk. Danish pedagogy offers the 3Ps as a model which enables practitioners to be conscious of their own self at three different levels. Possible questions could be:

Professional: What level of risk do I consider conducive to learning and well-being?

Personal: What do I perceive as a risk? What are my reactions to this?

Private: Where are my boundaries when it comes to risk and how do I communicate these?

Challenging risk conceptions

As outlined above, various research findings show that children are competent, resourceful and active agents who are usually very capable of judging the physical and social risks surrounding them (for an overview see Gleave, 2008). This is in contradiction with a prevalent concept of children as immature, needy, and dependent, and unless this concept changes we risk turning it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. As pedagogues we must therefore not only work with children and support them in becoming 'risk competent', but we must also address societal preconceptions about children and their ability to keep themselves safe.

Milligan and Stevens (2006) remind us that we have the duty to provide children with 'appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity', as Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states. The researchers from the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care found that the health and safety culture amongst professionals working with children, especially those in public care, is 'impinging on the rights of children and young people to experience a full range of activities which might otherwise contribute positively to their development' (Milligan & Stevens, 2006). This serves to show that besides logical and ethical reasons, there are also legal arguments in favour of allowing children to take risks.

The most compelling reason is certainly that we want what is best for children. And while children's risk-taking may cause adults' anxieties about their safety, these will hopefully diminish with children's growing 'risk competence'. The alternative is more concerning. If we avoid motor activities and the ensuing risks in childhood, the most sensitive time of growth, we are neglecting an elementary factor of healthy development – and thus failing to create the physical basis that humans feed upon throughout their entire lives (Zimmer, 2002).

For children's holistic development and well-being it seems that the consequences of not taking risks are more severe than the potential dangers in risk-taking. After all, as Zimmer (2002) concludes, romping makes children cleverer: learning is more successful when the entire body is challenged to be in motion, not just the brain.

*The young person needs the likes of him -
that is animals, contact with the elements, water, mud and scrubs.
You can also let him grow up without all this, with carpet, stuffed animals, or on
concrete roads and backyards. He survives, but you should not be surprised
if he will never learn certain social firm capacities,
for instance the sense of belonging to a place, and initiative.*

Alexander Mitscherlich, German psychologist



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