



FOSTERING SELF-RELIANCE AND INDEPENDENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: HOW EXPOSURE TO RISKY ACTIVITIES HELPS THERE

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the roles of exposure to risky activities in developing independence and self-reliance in preschool years. Based on the discussion, the paper makes necessary recommendations to early childhood educators. The paper concludes that by providing children with the opportunities to take risks, make choices and live with the results of their choices, adults can help children become independent, responsible, autonomous, and self-reliant.

Keywords: early childhood, self-reliance, risk-taking opportunities, choice offering

1. Introduction

Learning self-reliance and development of a sense of autonomy and independence comes early in one's life. But it doesn't happen without adults, who provide choices and risk-taking opportunities. Risk is generally associated with something negative. If you mention the term "risk", most people associate risk only with negative thoughts and consequences. What a lot of people fail to realise is that risk can have both positive and negative consequences. Adults depend on their ability to adapt to new situations and problems and conquer challenges. Such abilities and skills are obtained in risk-taking behaviour and given opportunities during preschool years.

If a child never took a risk, he/she would never have learned to walk, to climb stairs, swim, ride a bicycle, boil an egg, ask someone out on a date, drive a car, go to university, and many more far „riskier“ activities. Yet caregivers often want to protect little children under their care from anything that might harm them. Parents do children's chores for them so that children can enjoy a few more moments of play. But such attitudes carry consequences. When adults do what children can do for themselves, the children

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become overly dependent; worse, they don't challenge themselves or develop self-reliance and autonomy.

2. Psychology of Risk

Little & Stapleton (2023) defined risk as the effect of uncertainty on objectives. Risk is not always about being reckless but rather about engaging with uncertainty in order to achieve a particular goal. Risk events require weighing up our likelihood of success or failure based on relevant knowledge or information related to each particular situation. It is only through facing challenges such as these that we learned to appraise risks and make appropriate judgments about our likelihood of success or failure. Adults learn to appraise and manage risks through their childhood experiences. They made decisions based on the ability and judgement to assess each situation and then determine whether it would have a negative or positive effect on their lives. They gained and honed these skills as children and then applied them in adulthood.

Contemporary studies of children recognise their capacity to initiate and lead their own learning. However, adults have a duty to ensure that children have safe and secure environments as a context for their learning and development. So, children need exposure to risk to develop into competent and self-reliant adults. However, as discussed earlier, this risk must be managed and it needs to have a positive outcome.

Gill (2017) outlines four main arguments for a child's exposure to risk:

- 1) Certain risks allow children to learn how to manage them, such as practical skills that promote self-reliance, independence, and self-protection (swimming, cycling, and road safety).
- 2) Children have an appetite for risk-taking. If it is not satisfied then they will seek situations in which a greater risk might exist.
- 3) Children gain other benefits as a side-effect of being exposed to risk; the benefits of outdoor play far outweigh the risks
- 4) Children build their character and personality when facing adverse circumstances where there is a possibility of injury or loss.

For several decades the education sector was driven by the constant threat of litigation and an overzealous need to remove all risk from children's environment. However, it is obvious that learning, perception, and judgement will be impeded if the child is not exposed to situations that involve an element of risk (Gill, 2017). For the child, the exploration and taking of managed risk is critically important for healthy childhood development. Research studies on children's experience of risk in their everyday play activities highlight that children are naturally drawn to activities that involve height, speed, balancing precariously, and G-forces such as sliding, rocking, swinging, and spinning (Little, 2020). Activities such as these allow children to learn about themselves, and their capabilities about the environment, task demands, and their changing abilities.

Conversely, nobody wants to expose children to unnecessary risks. The argument is not black or white. Children need both safeguards and opportunities at the same time.

Fortunately, there is a growing understanding that children do need to be exposed to risk-taking activities and challenges as part of healthy childhood development. Children need to be given frequent opportunities to engage in activities where they will be able to learn from their mistakes. Consequently, the childcare environment should be designed and maintained so that it is as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible thus allowing children to engage in experiences that offer challenge and excitement.

3. Implications for a Child Growing up Without Exposure to Risk

A risk-deprived child would be one who has not been exposed to risk, and as a consequence is unable to challenge him- or her- self to a level that allows continual development. This risk deficit is being driven by a culture of fear about the safety of children even though they are statistically safer than at any point in human history (Gill, 2017).

Denying children this opportunity could result in a society of risk-averse and dependent citizens, unable to cope with everyday situations and make autonomous decisions; or in children simply finding more dangerous locations to carry out their risk-taking behaviour.

4. Importance of Choice Opportunities

It is important to have a choice. It is especially important to have a choice in the early childhood period of life for any individual when there are many “you may nots.” You may not: stay home alone, eat when you want, cross the street by yourself, lock the bathroom door, turn on the water, stay inside while the other children go outside, go to bed when you are ready, skip wearing boots, get yourself an aspirin, buy a guinea pig, or open the refrigerator. Because there are so many things a little child may not be permitted to do simply because of safety or health precautions. But this is exactly the time that a child needs to develop a sense of autonomy, a sense that he is an independent and competent individual in his own right.

One of the best ways to develop a sense of autonomy is to make choices. When we make our own choices, we feel a sense of control (Awopetu & Omoteso, 2014; Miller, Cowan P., Cowan C, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1993). With repeated opportunities to make our own decisions, we begin to think of ourselves as in control of at least parts of our lives. According to Erik Erikson (1963), two year olds (or “twos”) need to feel a sense of control in order to develop healthy personalities. Because “twos” are particularly into control issues, we commonly hear stories about the “terrible twos” and children who love to say “no;” twos who fear loss of control (particularly of bathroom habits); and twos who have learned how to manipulate parents and run the show at home. It is all a matter of control.

Elkind (1994) suggested that the two-year-old who appears to be strong-willed is actually striving to establish himself as an independent person different from his parents and others. As the child asserts himself, he is building a healthy identity. The child is

seeking independence, and the frequently heard, “I want to do it myself!” is evidence of the child’s growing need to define himself as a separate and unique person. Twos naturally want to choose for themselves. As they choose, they begin to walk the long road toward behavioural autonomy, which Sessa & Steinberg (2021) believe is important in learning to regulate one’s own behaviour.

“Would you like an apple or a banana?” Taiwo’s teacher asks. It is important to have a choice. It is especially important for Taiwo to have a choice because Taiwo is a two year old child. Why is it so important for a two year old to choose her snack? It is not particularly important whether Taiwo chooses the apple or the banana. What is important is that she is given a real choice. Taiwo’s teacher knows that it is important for Taiwo to make choices in her life so that she will feel some sense of control, which contributes to healthy personality development by building up a sense of autonomy. This teacher realises that by giving Taiwo authentic, limited choices, she is building Taiwo’s confidence in herself. She is also eliminating much of the negativity often associated with age. Taiwo feels in control by making choices like what type of snack she’ll have. That growing sense of control reduces child’s need to try to gain control in negative ways. But those choices must be authentic.

5. What are Authentic Choices?

Choice can be authentic or false. An authentic choice is real. The child’s choice matters. If the child chooses the apple, we don’t serve them the banana instead. False choices are no choices at all. False choices happen when the teacher asks the children if they want to do an art project or sing a song when, in fact, she expects everyone to participate. When offering a child a choice, the adult needs to respect the child’s decision. Don’t ask, “Do you want to...” unless you are prepared for a “No” answer.

Playtime is a perfect opportunity to offer preschool children choices about what they will do, for how long, and with whom. Teachers who offer children the options of working in blocks, paint, puzzles, or dramatic play are taking advantage of using developmentally appropriate curriculum to build emotional competence. When teachers do not set limits on which centres children must visit or how long they must work in any given centre, they feel the freedom to decide for themselves. The child experiences the satisfaction of making a decision that has real consequences for his life.

Caregivers should also remember that preschoolers and toddlers especially, can become overwhelmed by too many options. Choices need to be limited. For example, the child may decide whether he wants to read a story before his nap or after his nap. He may decide which of the three stories he would like to read. He may select four toys to sleep with. He may decide which of two blankets he prefers and may select which of two CDs he’d like to listen to as he drifts off to sleep.

Reasonable parameters need to be set. When the adult makes two or three suggestions from which the child may choose, we know that the child’s choice can be honoured. For example, the teacher may outlaw rowdy play while describing three or

four acceptable alternatives from which children may choose. Sometimes adults need to tell children that there is no choice. When safety or health is at risk, it is important for the adult to say, "Now it is my turn to choose for all of us." Adults can also help children learn to live and work in harmony by defining for them which actions are not choices. Throwing sand, for example, is not a choice. Children may choose to play in the sand without throwing it or they may choose something else to do. In addition, hitting and name-calling are not acceptable choices.

6. How do Teachers and Parents Offer Choices to Preschoolers?

While it may be easier for the adult to make a choice for the child, it is well worth the effort it takes to provide children with the opportunity to take pride in their ability to make independent choices. Look for opportunities in all of the everyday aspects of life. Can the child choose which pair of socks or shirt to wear when given a few options? Could the children decide which songs to sing today? Could there be two options for a snack? Could there be several colours of play dough or paint available? Could two teachers each offer a story choice? Would you like one cracker or two crackers? Could the children decide which way we'll take our walk today?

Children can also be offered options about when or in which order they prefer to do activities. This is particularly helpful when there is no option about what to do, but there is a choice about when to do it. For example, children may choose whether they would like to play outdoors before or after rest time. The best way to learn to ride a bicycle is to ride one. The best way to learn to play a musical instrument is to practice. The best way to learn how to make good choices is to make lots of choices and learn what it means to live with the consequences of one's decisions.

Our lives are defined by the choices we make. Our choices drive us forward, stall us, or hold us back. We need to learn how to make good choices that will give our lives impetus that will be positive and productive. We need to learn how to make choices that will benefit and build up. The best way to help children learn to make wise choices is to start early when the choices are inconsequential. It does not matter much if we choose the apple or the banana. However, the opportunity to make that choice brings with it a most important life lesson. If we have the apple, we are stuck with the apple. We can't change our minds and exchange it for a banana. Our decisions have consequences. Children need to live with the consequences of their choices. That is how they will learn to think independently, make decisions and be prepared to live with their choices.

If children learn to live with their decisions when they are small, and if they are given many opportunities to make choices as they are growing up, then it is more likely that they will be able to make wise decisions when they are older, when the consequences can bring repercussions much more serious than apple or banana. Practice can improve decision-making ability just as it can improve reading ability.

7. Do Choices Undermine Adult Authority?

Certainly, children need the assurance that adults can be trusted to make decisions that will keep them safe and secure. It is the adult who determines which choices are safe and wise to offer the child. The adult maintains the ultimate responsibility but relinquishes some of the decision-making power to children at appropriate times. Adults need to be aware that when they offer children authentic, appropriate choices they are contributing to the child's positive personality development.

Unfortunately, opportunities for children of today to be exposed to choices and risk-taking are restricted. According to Little (2020), children's exposure to risk has lowered in society. In 1971, eight out of ten children aged 7 or 8 years went to school on their own, by 1990 this figure had dropped to less than one in ten. In contemporary society, the perceived dangers of child violence, kidnapping, bullying, molesting, and other fears have given more reason to impose greater control on a child's daily life than there was before. However, some of the recent studies found that parents expressed concern for their children's safety (Little, 2010; Tovey, 2017). They related it to factors such as increased traffic and „stranger danger“. They also recognised that opportunities for children to engage in challenging activities with an element of risk were important for skill development, confidence building, and for learning about risk and how to develop independence, autonomy, and self-reliance.

8. Conclusion

As teachers and caregivers interact with children in their charge, they are impacting the child's developing sense of autonomy. Children need to be given frequent opportunities to engage in activities where they will be able to learn from their mistakes. By providing children with the opportunities to make choices and take risks, adults can help children to become wise and self-reliant decision-makers.

8.1 Suggestions

It is therefore suggested that:

- 1) Early childhood educators and caregivers should be enlightened on the practice and implications that accrue from risk-giving opportunities and choice offering on preschoolers' outcomes in terms of a sense of autonomy, self-reliance, and independence.
- 2) Parents and early childhood practitioners should always remember that a child's choices must be honoured and adults should provide as many opportunities as possible for choices because practice can improve decision-making ability.
- 3) Children should be exposed to reasonable risk because, for the child, the exploration and taking of managed risk is critically important for healthy childhood development.
- 4) The childcare environment should be designed and maintained so that it is as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible.

- 5) Pre-school teachers must recognise that opportunities for children to engage in challenging activities with an element of risk are important for skill development, confidence building, and learning about risk and how to develop independence, autonomy, and self-reliance.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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