Exploring toddler risky play: Listening to the voices of parents and teachers of toddlers in one school setting

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Exploring toddler risky play: Listening to the voices of parents and teachers
of toddlers in one school setting

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Megan Chaney
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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the understandings, definitions, and influences of three toddler teachers and four toddler parents within the context of risky play in toddlerhood at a Southeastern land-grant university early childhood laboratory school. Sociocultural and bioecological theories informed the study and the developmental niche conceptual framework guided the organization of data analysis. Video stimulated recall interviews were the primary data source. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method to ensure triangulation of data. Findings include: (1) analyzing risky play is comprised of (a) the psychology of the caregiver, (b) knowing the child, and (c) cultural influences, (2) risky play happens outdoors, and (3) risky play is contextual. This study contributes important knowledge to the field of early childhood education by offering a new perspective regarding the definition of risky play and reveals how deeply situated parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of risky play are in their own personal past experiences, knowledges, and interactions. In essence, an attempt to further investigate parents’ and teachers’ personal meanings and understandings of risky play was made. Implications for future research and practice include the investigation of toddler teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of risky play in order to delve more deeply into the individualism of risky play definitions, as well as the use of new methodologies to ensure the incorporation of participants’ histories, experiences, knowledges and confrontations with risky play scenarios to illuminate definitions and the evolution of individuals’ meaning making.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Childhood risky play has been studied by international scholars for close to four decades (Aldis, 1975; Bruner, 1976; Aldis, 1995; Kleppe, Melhuish, & Sandseter, 2017). An overwhelming number of these studies have investigated the preschool years (Sandseter, 2009a; 2009b; Storli & Sandseter, 2015; Little & Eager, 2010), defined and described risky play (Sandseter 2007, 2009b; Little & Wyver, 2008), identified predominant contexts of risky play (Turtle, Convery, & Convery, 2015, Storli & Sandseter; Little & Eager; Sandseter, 2009a), gender differences (Morrongiello, Zdzieborski, Normand, 2010), and teacher and parent perceptions of risky play (Storli & Sandseter; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017; Morrongiello, Howard, Rothman, & Sandomierski, 2008). 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; Sandseter, 2009a; Stephenson, 2003). The second is that risky play provides many developmental benefits for young children, including social (Turtle, Convery, & Convery, 2015; Goodyear-Smith & Laidlaw, 1999; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017), cognitive (Gill, 2007), and physical benefits (Stephenson, 2003; Taylor & Morris, 1996, Parsons, 2011). Third, risky play involves both a sense of excitement and fear for the child, as well as a potential for injury (Sandseter, 2009b; Stephenson, 2003).

Based on a review of the literature on young children’s risky play and caregiver beliefs and practices, only five empirical articles out of 30 were found that focused on toddler risky play (Kleppe, Melhuish, & Sandseter; Veselack, Miller, & Cain-Chang, 2010; Morrongiello, Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt, 2006; Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski, & Normand), with three including caregiver responses and beliefs (Morrongiello,
Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt; Morrongiello & Dawber; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski, & Normand). Further, two additional readings regarding programs and practices for young children that included risky play and caregiver practice were also reviewed (Maynard & Waters, 2014; Smith & Goldhaber, 2015). Due to the apparent scant research on toddler risky play and limited explorations of parents’ and teachers’ perceptions and explorations of risky play more research is needed in this area. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the perceptions of toddler teachers and toddler parents regarding the risky play of toddlers (18-36 months) in one early childhood setting.

Video-stimulated recall interviews were used as a tool to provoke parents’ and teachers’ raw and genuine reactions as they recalled and revisited their behaviors, feelings, and thoughts as their toddler engaged in risky play. The selected video clips served the purpose of triggering reactions, recollecting risky play scenarios, and comparing potential risky circumstances to participants’ childhood life experiences.

This qualitative study is anchored by two theories, sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Rogoff, 2008) and bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Several key tenets from each theory guide the methodologies of this study. Bronfenbrenner emphasized the influence that one’s environment has on human development. He illustrates the environment using a five sublevel diagram in which each sublevel is representative of the closeness of association to the developing person. All levels of the ecological system are integrated and have a rippling,

1 The PI met with the University of Tennessee Child and Family Studies Librarian on three separate occasions to search for literature related specifically to toddlerhood risky play. Searches during these three meetings included utilizing several databases including PsycINFO, ERIC, PubMed, and Scopus. Terms used during these searches included varied assortments of the following key words: toddler, risky play, rough and tumble play, early childhood, young children, free play, toddlerhood, vigorous play, risk-taking, sensation seeking, play, pre-school, adult perceptions, beliefs, teacher perceptions, beliefs, parent perceptions, beliefs.
reciprocal effect that influences one’s development as well as other systems. Bronfenbrenner defines human development as involving a mutual accommodation between the developing person and its immediate environment.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) and neo-Vygotskian scholar Barbara Rogoff (1990) emphasize how one develops knowledge through interactions with others and the environment. Vygotsky calls attention to several means of gaining knowledge. First, he emphasizes the importance of tools to help mediate and internalize new information. He called these tools and symbols “tools of the mind,” that represent information to advance cognition. Intersubjectivity is another important aspect that involves two or more participants coming to a shared understanding in order to gain knowledge and advance cognition. Vygotsky claimed that through social activity individuals are able to internalize learning and knowledge and eventually engage independently in the learned activity. Neo-Vygotskian Barbara Rogoff (1990, 2003) has contributed to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory proposing that individuals change through involvement in an activity which prepares them for succeeding related activities. She calls this process *participatory appropriation* (Rogoff, 2008) which highlights the importance of how we carry forth new knowledge to similar, subsequent situations.

Analysis of data was informed and organized with the guidance of the developmental niche framework (Super and Harkness, 1986). For example, codes from the first stage of the constant comparison method were categorized within a Venn diagram that consisted of the three propositions of the developmental niche: psychology of the caregiver, customs of childcare, and environment. The framework provided an organizational system to evaluate and dissect the content of the Video Stimulated Recall Interviews.
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, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011). This raises questions about what influences adults’ understanding of children’s risky play. Keeping in mind the bioecological and sociocultural theories, a caregiver’s childhood experiences may be a factor in how the caregiver responds to a child’s risk taking. For example, Dewey (1938) stated that every experience is a moving force; every experience has the ability to influence our next experience. Contemporary Vygotskian scholars, Berk and Winsler (1995), note that social experiences and interactions shape the way we view and understand the world, which determines our behaviors. These theoretical considerations support Weinstein’s (1979) claim that perceptions of risk go beyond the individual and are social, situated, and cultural constructs that reflect one’s values, symbolic languages, history, and ideology.

Thus, the over-arching aim of this study is to contribute to the literature by studying a small group of parents and teachers of toddlers in one school setting to uncover their perceptions and experiences related to risky play, exploring their definitions and the influences on their thinking and practices.

**Chapter Summary**

The gap in early childhood risky play literature justifies the purpose and rationale for this study. The methodology is guided by theoretical underpinnings of the bioecological theory and sociocultural theory as well as the conceptual framework of the developmental niche. The key tenets of each of these will be highlighted in chapter two in addition to risky play in a developmental context, and parenting and teaching within risky play episodes as well as reflections, more generally, about risky play. Following the literature review, the study’s purpose and procedures will be described in chapter three. Chapter four will consist of the study’s
findings. Finally, the study’s discussion with limitations and implications for future research and practice will be included in chapter five.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Risky play has been studied since the 1970s (Aldis, 1975; Bruner, 1976). Though there are varying definitions of risky play, the literature indicates several common characteristics of risky play that include, (1) feelings of both excitement and fear, (2) new challenges, (3) potential for injury (Stephenson, 2003), and (4) imitation of real-life risks through play (Alidis; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Sandseter (2009b) uses these characteristics to form an operational definition that many scholars of risky play now cite. She defined risky play as “thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury” (Sandseter, 2009, p.4). From an evolutionary perspective, risky play serves as a functional behavior and is considered to be part of children’s normal development (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). The function of risky play includes fostering all areas of development: cognitive, physical, social, and emotional (Gill, 2007). Studies typically state that risky play most commonly occurs in outdoor settings, especially in natural spaces (Little & Wyver, 2010; Sandseter, 2009a; Stephenson, 2003). Outdoor environments are unpredictable, full of “loose parts” (e.g., stumps, rocks and boulders, fallen branches) (Maynard & Waters, 2014, p. 63), “sensory textures” (Maynard & Waters, p. 44), big spaces, and diverse play opportunities (Parsons, 2011). These characteristics allow children to move, think, and interact in flexible ways that may be more limited and constrained in indoor environments, and subsequently afford more potential for risks (Maynard & Waters).

Risky Play and Children’s Development

Young children naturally seek risky play opportunities (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Little & Eager, 2010; Sandseter, 2007, 2009a; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011), suggesting that a child’s natural propensity to take risks may serve as a purposeful behavior in terms of
development (Sandseter & Kennair). The field of evolutionary psychology deems the function of risky play as a way to provide an anti-phobic effect of fearful situations in our environments (Sandseter & Kennair). Further, risky play serves more immediate functions and benefits in terms of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development during childhood. Though it is important to acknowledge the possible dangers of risky play, risks are unavoidable throughout one’s lifespan. Risks are persistently occurring and increasing the range and frequency of confronting risk across our lifespan as we develop more capabilities. 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).

For example, cognitively, risky play allows children the ability to develop judgement skills and make sense of cause and effect relationships (Gill, 2007). Children learn best through engagement in everyday experiences (Maynard & Waters, 2014). Physically, risky play is associated with decreasing obesity (Gill) and improving motor skills (Stephenson, 2003; Taylor & Morris, 1996, Parsons, 2011). Risky play typically depends on physical movement as children test and improve their physical abilities such as balance, climbing, jumping, throwing, and lifting. In doing so, they are more likely to stay active, decreasing their risk of becoming obese (Tandon, Zhou, & Christakis, 2012). Socially, risky play allows children opportunities to develop an increased awareness of consequences of actions on others and learn to play cooperatively (Gill). Rough and tumble play, constructive play, and fantasy play are common styles of play among children in the out-of-doors (Shin, 1994). During these types of play, children learn how to communicate and solve disagreements, regulate emotions, and read social cues of others. Emotionally, risky play fosters resilience, coping skills, and self-confidence, -
reliance, and -esteem (Turtle, Convery, & Convery, 2015; Goodyear-Smith & Laidlaw, 1999; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017). Mental ‘toughness’ is built through trial and error. By facing adversity, children have a good chance to develop and experience resilience that leads to fostering emotional competency (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013). Through engaging with risk and dealing with periodic failure or the negative consequences of their decisions, children build hardiness and self-reliance by having acquired coping strategies to deal with these situations (Little, Sandseter, & Wyver, 2012). When children conquer new challenges, they are more likely to feel confident about their abilities to seek new, additional challenges.

Providing risky play opportunities for children is not only important in terms of their healthy development but also for safety reasons. For example, when children are not allowed to engage in appropriately challenging opportunities, they may take inappropriate risks in order to add an element of thrill and excitement (Little & Eager, 2010). When a child engages in inappropriate risks, injury may result due to a lack of experience in physical and cognitive trial and error that contributes to children’s understandings of their limits and their abilities. In a study of 28 four and five-year-olds enrolled in five child care centers, it was found that preschool children typically engaged in no/low risk behaviors and rarely engaged in risk avoidance behaviors or moderate-risk behaviors (Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011). Further, only 25% of the children in Little, Wyver, and Gibson’s study participated in behaviors that involved inappropriate use of equipment, which involved little risk of injury. The overall findings from their analysis of children’s play were that children typically engaged in play involving some level of risk. A majority of the time, this risk involved no or low possibility of injury if not completed successfully. This finding attributes to the fact that children seek risks and are able to assess risks appropriately.
Although there are research studies regarding risky play, the focus has typically been on preschool aged children, neglecting investigations of the risky play of toddlers. Further, there are no known studies that have included toddler caregivers’ responses to children’s attempts to take risks. Toddlerhood is the stage of development, typically considered between 12-36 months, that is characterized by an abundant sense of wonder and mystery (Veselack, Miller, & Cain-Chung, 2010). Toddlers have a fresh view of the world and gain an understanding through exploration and experience, important for the development of cognition and affect (Maynard & Waters, 2014). When children have some control over the events they encounter, they are positioned to experience both internal and external feedback, allowing for multisensory information processing. Risky play in toddlerhood also serves as a functional mode for physical development. For example, at about one year, children begin to learn to walk. As they gradually progress throughout the next several months, toddlers improve their coordination, balance, muscle control and dexterity (Caulfield, 1996). The cerebral cortex permits the voluntary control of muscles; therefore, it is important that a toddler engages in new sensory experiences to further develop this control (Caulfield). Linking what the toddler feels in his body to what is going on in the environment helps the toddler make sense of his world; therefore, sensory-motor experiences are particularly valuable during toddlerhood (Maynard & Waters). Allowing toddlers to engage in risk through play is an obvious way for teachers and parents to give toddlers the opportunity to engage in these valuable sensory-motor experiences.

However, according to Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, and Sleet (2012), some Western cultures over the last several years, have moved toward adopting risk averse values. 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. The fear of danger and harm has grown as unintentional
injuries have become a leading cause of deaths and hospitalizations for children. Concomitantly, the creation of “safer” child environments aimed at preventing injuries has increased (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet).

The environment in which we live “invites” us to behave and act in specific ways (Gibson, 1979). As such, it is important that young children’s play environments provide opportunities for some age appropriate risk taking. It is important to note that appropriate risks are determined by the child’s abilities and experiences; therefore, it is possible that risky play can become hazardous play if potential for injury is certain rather than a possibility. Parents and teachers of very young children are the gatekeepers for the amount of risk offered to very young children. These decisions are influenced by adults’ own experiences with risk, as well as their beliefs and values about the benefits and dangers of risk.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

The proposed study is guided Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory and key tenets of sociocultural theory. Bronfenbrenner contends that one’s development is influenced by the multiple environments in which one interacts, whereas, Lev Vygotsky (1978) and neo-Vygotskian scholar Barbara Rogoff (1990) emphasize the internalizations or appropriation of co-constructed knowledge through the use of tools (both symbolic languages and objects) during participation in shared activity.
**Figure 1.** Diagram of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological map.

**Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory.** Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, now referred to as the bioecological theory, explains that human development is dependent upon interactions across five sublevels of one’s environment represented by an ecological map (see Figure 1.). Each sublevel of the ecological map is denoted by rings based on the closeness of association (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to the developing person. These sub-levels include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem involves interactions within one’s immediate surroundings, i.e. teachers, family, health providers. Bronfenbrenner defines the microsystem as “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). Relationships between the microsystems in one’s life make up the mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner notes that “the mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” or, in other words, it is “a system of microsystems” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25).
The exosystem consists of the social influence of an environment that one may not directly interact with but is nevertheless influential. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 25) explains the exosystem as a system that “refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person”, such as government legislation. The macrosystem includes cultural practices, values, and beliefs and can be defined as Referring to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and eco-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief system or ideology underlying such consistencies. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26)

Lastly, the chronosystem is considered as a dimension of time in which change and constancy of one’s environment influences development.

All levels of the bioecological system are integrated and have a rippling, reciprocal effect that influences one’s development. Bronfenbrenner defines human development as involving the scientific study of progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (1979, p. 21)

Bronfenbrenner (1997) further 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). Bronfenbrenner clearly
emphasizes the influence that context has on a developing human, but also points out that the developing human also influences his own environment through a process of “mutual accommodation,” where the “interaction between person and environment is viewed as two-directional, that is, characterized by reciprocity” (p. 22). Bronfenbrenner further notes this dyadic relationship is present with other individuals that are part of the developing individual’s environment.

Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favor of the developing person. (p. 60)

This signifies the complex nature of relationships within development and learning and how a strong attachment with others can foster one’s development.

**Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory.** Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory also includes key tenets that include a reciprocal informing of knowledge construction among individuals and between individuals and their environments. These key tenets provide a foundation from which to explore and understand parent and teacher perceptions of toddler risky play that go hand in hand with Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) proposed that individuals co-construct knowledge and skills through a cognitive process that involves engaging with others by sharing activities and experiences, or *co-constructing* knowledge. Furthermore, he suggested that individuals use knowledge that they have learned from previous generations as a foundation to create and learn new ways of seeing, understanding, and behaving. When knowledge is stored in
the mind, it is called a schema (Berk & Winsler, 1995). According to Quinn (2005), a schema is “a generic version of (some part of) the world built up from experience and stored in memory” that is constructed across time and experiences and becomes “relatively stable, influencing our interpretations of subsequent experiences”. Schemas do not only include words but can also include many other symbolic meanings, such as feelings. Schemas are used as an organizational system to categorize information and memories. We gain new schemas and add to existing schemas through active engagement with one another in cultural practices through the use of tools, including discourse. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of tools in mediating relationships between people and then, eventually, assisting the internalization process of new information (Berk & Winsler). Vygotsky called these tools and symbols “tools of the mind,” which include a variety of symbolic tools. Cognitive development involves increasingly sophisticated forms of representation, or tools, to advance the developing person to more complex cognitive tasks. Intersubjectivity is another important quality of good scaffolding. Intersubjectivity “refers to the process whereby two participants who begin a task with a different understanding arrive at a shared understanding (Berk & Winsler, , p. 27). Participants must work toward the same goal to achieve true collaboration. Intersubjectivity creates a common ground for participants to negotiate and comprise in order to advance cognitive function.

Like the bioecological theory, Vygotsky organizes one’s social context into levels of closeness or proximity to the developing person (Vygotsky, 1962). Vygotsky postulated three levels: (1) the most proximate level at which the individual is participating, (2) what the individual is influencing and is influenced by, and (3) the cultural level. Vygotsky
claimed that through social activity individuals are able to internalize learning and knowledge and eventually engage independently in the learned activity. Tools used by individuals that include language mediate knowledge construction and contribute to the establishment of intersubjectivity or the ability to share knowledge. This concept of “zone of proximal development” is defined by Vygotsky as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). As people move through this iterative process the possibility of learning from one another resulting in new knowledge and the extension and deepening of one’s own learning.

Neo-Vygotskian, Barbara Rogoff (1990, 2003) has contributed to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory by suggesting that individual development is best understood in social, cultural, and historical contexts. She proposes the concept of participatory appropriation, which refers to “how individuals change through their involvement with one or another activity, in the process of becoming more prepared for subsequent involvement in related activities” (Rogoff, 2008, p. 60). The importance of this contribution is undeniable as it is one way to explain how we carry forth new knowledge to similar situations, all along engaging in increasingly more sophisticated understandings across experiences and time. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory reflects the principles of sociocultural theory that are the foundation of learning from which meaning making is situated, social, shared and distributed across individuals within particular contexts (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Through this perspective, different social encounters provide settings for the development of new knowledge construction with others from which new understandings are influenced and arise (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
Parents and teachers in report that they are aware of and acknowledge the benefits of risky play for their children, yet fail to embrace them (Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011). This raises questions about what influences adults’ understanding of children’s risky play. Keeping in mind the bioecological and sociocultural theories, a caregiver’s childhood experiences may be a factor in how the caregiver responds to a child’s risk taking. For example, Dewey (1938) stated that every experience is a moving force; every experience has the ability to influence our next experience. Contemporary Vygotskian scholars Berk and Winsler (1995) note that social experiences and interactions shape the way we view and understand the world, which determines our behaviors. These theoretical considerations support Weinstein’s (1979) claim that perceptions of risk go beyond the individual and are social, situated, and cultural constructs that reflect one’s values, symbolic languages, history, and ideology.

**Parenting and Risky Play**

Personal attributes of both parents and children are predictors of parental perceptions, practices, and responses to child risk engagement. Personal attributes such as parenting styles (Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999; Simons & Conger, 2007; Morrongiello, Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt, 2006), gender (Simons & Conger; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand, 2010; Hagan & Keubli, 2007), and level of perceived risk (Hagan & Keubli) have all been shown to influence parents’ perceptions and supervision of their child’s engagement with risks.

Parenting attitudes and styles determine the way one parents (Crocket, 1995) and are recognized as important influences on the development of children (Schaefer & Bell, 1958). Much of the early work related to parenting research was influenced by Diana Baumrind, a psychologist and parenting scholar. Her seminal work identified three parenting types that include authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive (1967). Her research was later expanded by
Maccoby and Martin (1983) related to what constitutes permissive parenting. In essence, authoritative parents tend to be flexible, reasonable, warm and understanding (Baumrind, 1967). Authoritarian parents lean towards being stricter, more punitive, demanding, manipulatively controlling, and less warm and involved than other parents (Baumrind, 1967). Finally, permissive parents attempt to make few demands on their children; are not controlling, punitive, or strict, and allow children to regulate their own activities without much guidance or encouragement (Baumrind, 1967).

Parenting styles have been found to influence parents’ approaches to risky play. Permissive parenting is associated with increased use of safety explanations and fewer rules regarding risky play (Morrongiello, Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt, 2006). For example, in their study of 890 Turkish parents whose children attended preschool-kindergarten programs, Cevher-Kalburan and Ivrendi (2016) found that permissive parents were more likely to reveal tolerant attitudes and practices relating to risky play. This can be explained by the tendency of permissive parents to often resist setting boundaries. Parents with authoritative parenting styles, on the other hand, tend to exhibit more supportive thoughts about the benefits of risky play while overprotective parenting styles are less supportive (Cevher-Kalburan & Ivrendi). However, parents characterized by an authoritative parenting style often fail to transfer their beliefs about the benefits of risky play to their behaviors. Thus, though parents who practice authoritative parenting see the value in risks, they are more likely to be reluctant to allow them. Educational levels may be one factor that contributes to this outcome as Cevher-Kalburan and Ivrendi found a correlation between parenting styles and educational levels.

Parenting behaviors seem to differ based on gender as well. Mothers and fathers have been shown to demonstrate differences in their parenting styles. Simons and Conger, in a study
consisting of 451 families in Iowa with a child in eighth grade, report that mothers tend to be more supportive and warm, and have closer relationships to their children as compared to fathers (2007). Further, they note that preschool mothers are more likely than fathers to use an authoritarian parenting style while fathers are more likely than mothers to use an authoritative parenting style. Similarly, the gender of the parent has been found to influence responses to risk-taking behaviors (Hagan & Keubli, 2007; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand, 2010). For example, one difference is the way in which they perceive the intent of the child who is engaged in risky behaviors. Fathers, in a study of 52 mother-father pairs of two year olds, have been found to believe that children take risks because of personality characteristics while mothers believe children take risks because they do not know any better (Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand). Hagan and Keubli conducted a study in which 80, three and four year olds partook in a physical obstacle course under their mother or father’s supervision. They found that fathers seemed to monitor their children’s risky behaviors more when the actual risk of the child was higher and when they are female while mothers monitored their children more if they perceived greater risk and if they believed the child to be less of a risk taker. This may suggest that fathers’ perceptions of risks are more accurate than mothers. Responses to risky behaviors after the fact have also been shown to differ between mothers and fathers. Fathers’ responses to safety have been found to be dependent on the child’s ability to follow rules while mothers’ responses to safety were dependent on “surgency” (Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand).

Furthermore, the bio-sex of children has been associated with parenting styles, perceptions, and practices of risky play. Parents generally use authoritarian parenting styles when parenting sons and authoritative behaviors than when parenting daughters (Simons & Conger, 2007). In Hagan and Kuebli’s study, mothers monitored both sons and daughters the same, while
fathers monitored daughters more closely than sons (2007). Parents were more likely to spontaneously assist their daughters in risky behaviors than they were their sons (Hagan & Kuebli). These differences were present regardless of the ability of the child. Sons and daughters also seemed to be socialized differently in regards to risk behaviors. Overall parents talked to daughters more often than sons (Hagan & Kuebli; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand, 2010); however, sons received directions on how to perform risky tasks successfully while daughters tended to receive more safety warnings (Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999) in a study of 48 Canadian families with children between the ages of two and four. These trends infer that parents assume boys are more capable of risk taking than girls.

For example, following a risky behavior incident, parents were more likely to respond disciplinarily to boys and educationally to girls (Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand, 2010). Also, parental responses towards boy’s risk engagement was often expressed with anger while disappointment and surprise are expressed to girls. Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand note that the emotional responses may be attributed to the fact that parents perceive their daughters’ risky behaviors could be corrected while sons’ risky behaviors are innate and mostly permanent.

Safety concerns of parents may also influence the perceptions and practices of parenting during childhood risky play. Because the outdoors allows for more risks, parents may become worried about the safety of their children, and therefore act in more protective ways. One of the most common reasons parents have reported why they remain in close proximity to their children is their heightened concerns for their child’s safety (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; O’Brien & Smith, 2002; Allin, West, & Curry, 2014; Malone, 2007).

Unintentional injuries are a leading cause of deaths and hospitalizations for children across the world (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012). Morrongiello, Howard, and
Sandomierski (2009) found, out of 110 parents, that medically attended injuries are a predictor of parental perceptions and practice regarding child risky behaviors (2008). Morrongiello, Howard, and Sandomierski found that parents whose children had experienced a medically attended injury were more likely to perceive their children as more vulnerable and have increased worry when their children were engaged in risky behaviors. These parents emphasized the importance of teaching rules, closer supervision, and seeking safer playgrounds as preventions when injuries were more severe. On the contrary, parents of uninjured children were more likely to credit injuries to bad luck, regardless of the severity.

In addition to physical injuries, neighborhood safety issues such as traffic accidents and “stranger danger” are common fears of parents who wish to let their children engage in outdoor play but only if they are in close proximity (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; O’Brien & Smith, 2002; Allin, West, & Currry, 2014; Malone, 2007). Kelley, Hood, and Mayall (1998) reported one of their participant’s views when she reflected,

I think it’s much more difficult being a parent now than my mother - in some senses. I think I’m much more protective towards our children than she was towards us - from the safety point of view, just physically because of cars...and, also, I suppose I don’t trust people so much. Whereas I was let to wander around, I would just never allow that.

(p. 18)

The term “back seat generation” is emerging because parents are choosing to drive their children everywhere instead of letting them walk or bike (Karsten, 2005). Malone (2007) studied 50 children, ages four to eight, in Australia. She had them photograph their daily activities and over half took pictures in the back seat of cars. These same inner-city suburban children were asked to describe their neighborhood and many mentioned crimes. A police inspector of the suburb was
asked to verify the claims of these children but no police statistics reflected crime against young people to be a major problem. Santos, Pizacarro, Mota, and Marques (2013), in their study of 354 sixth grade students and their parents, found that parents’ perceptions of the safety of the streets and sidewalks was the strongest predictor of children’s independent mobility. Many parents mentioned forms of adult-supervised activities as a way to protect their children from stranger danger and control who their children were around (Kelley, Hood, & Mayall, 1998).

Parents’ fear of risk for their children has been documented in research, but where does this fear stem from? Because perceptions of risk form largely from sociocultural experiences, it is likely that the media is an influential source of their risk averse perceptions. The news media are routinely full of stories in which judgement is passed on how well or badly authority figures manage risks (Adams, 1995). News sources also bring in an emotional piece that was non-existent decades ago (Wardle, 2006), bringing horrific news stories “closer to home”. Wardle reports that reporters have more access to the details of stories than they did prior to 1990. No longer having to rely on police reports, news reporters are able to arrange press conferences where coverage becomes more personal. Like any business, the news media needs to sell their stories. Viewers and readers buy into the stories when it moves them; this often requires a fear provoking headline. Not only are readers and viewers becoming invested through emotional mechanisms, but they are being told tragic incidents are more than isolated occurrences; that these incidents are a wider societal problem than may be true (Gill, 2007).

While many scholars laud the advantages of certain risks one must always take into account that the perceptions of adults (parents and teachers) matter and contribute to judging when risk is healthy and when risk may be dangerous. Trends and patterns of parent perceptions and practices of preschool and elementary aged children’s engagement in risky play are well
documented. Recent literature shows a consistent theme of increased fear and uncertainty that is likely influenced by many factors. However, this literature while relatively extensive regarding parents of young children is scant when we seek information about the perceptions and practices of parents and teacher whose toddlers engage in risky play.

**Teaching and Risky Play**

In regards to risk, early childhood teachers have the advantage of teacher knowledge which is defined as, “Pre or in-service teachers’ self-reflections; beliefs and knowledge about teaching, students, and content; and awareness of problem-solving strategies endemic to classroom teaching” (Kagan, 1990, p. 419). Teacher knowledge can be broken down into three general categories: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge (Margerum-Leys & Marx, 2004). Content knowledge is the basic knowledge of the subject matter (Shulman, 1986). Pedagogical knowledge is knowledge about the act of teaching (Baxter & Lederman, 1999). Further, Shulman (1986) defines pedagogical content knowledge as “the blending of content and pedagogy into and understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction” (p. 8). Shulman (1987) theorized that these three knowledges are interrelated and form four additional categories that are (a) curriculum knowledge, (b) knowledge of learners and their characteristics, (c) knowledge of educational contexts, and (d) knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values and their philosophical and historical grounds.

Teacher knowledge includes understanding the developmental milestones of children, the health and safety regulations of early education programs, and appropriate practices related to teaching young children, for example. Though teachers, like parents, know risky play has
developmental value, they also have knowledges that influence their tolerance of risk despite the benefits (Rooijen & Newstead, 2017; Sandseter, 2012; Little, Sandseter, & Wyver, 2012).

Teachers’ developmental and pedagogical knowledges influence their attitudes toward risky play. Teacher knowledge affects every aspect of teaching; teacher’ relationships with the children, teachers’ interpretations of subject matter, teachers’ evaluations of child progress, etc. (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997). What teachers know and how they express their knowledge is important as they guide children’s learning. Teacher knowledge is developed through experiences, combining past experiences with present thoughts and future planning (Connelly, Clandinin, & He). Bransford, et al. (2000) agree that teachers obtain teaching knowledge through their own experiences, interactions with others, formal education, teacher enhancement projects, and life experiences.

One’s cultural context inevitably shapes and forms one’s experiences. Cultural context has been identified as a contributing factor to the attitudes of teachers regarding risky play in diverse ways. First, the way a culture values the opportunity for risks in childhood shapes the regulations and policies that directly impact risky play in child care programs. Many teachers identify regulations as a reason they are unable to provide challenging experiences for children (Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017). On the other hand, many European and Scandinavian countries are influenced by the practices associated with the Reggio Emilia Approach that values children’s competence and rights to engage in challenging activities (Little & Wyver, 2008). Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, also place value on the natural environment in which teachers often take young children on hikes, encourage them to climb trees and play in natural water ways, for example (Little & Wyver). Australians see risk taking in play as a survival mechanism where important learning takes place (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, Sleet,
The regulation of each of these geographic regions varies from one to the other due to the particular values placed on risk. From this perspective, adults’ attitudes are influenced by their social class, geographical location in which they live, and everyday experiences. As Bronfenbrenner noted, “environmental events and conditions outside any immediate setting containing the person can have a profound influence on behavior and development within that setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 18).

The influence of the social context on teachers’ perceptions of risky play is apparent, as well as the physical context in which the teacher practices and has practiced. This is most clear in the differences of teaching within indoor and outdoor environments. For example, the mobility license, or the child’s ability to move around freely that is allocated by a teacher, is much less restrictive in outdoor environments than in indoor environments (Storli & Sandseter, 2015). In a study of 138 Norwegian preschool teachers, teachers were found to be less restrictive regarding rough and tumble play in outdoor settings where the environment is more practical for loud noise and big and fast movements (Storli & Sandseter). However, pretend fighting and chase games were the most restricted types of rough and tumble play in both indoor and outdoor environments.

In a narrative review by Rooijen & Newstead (2017), when teachers perceive children as resilient they are more likely to allow those children to engage in increased risk. Children are seen as resilient when they are capable of understanding their competencies and moderating their risky play (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, Sleet, 2012). An understanding, such as viewing a child as resilient, is a unique lens of teachers informed, in part, by their pedagogical training (Baxter & Lederman, 1999). When children are perceived as more vulnerable, teachers are more likely to overcompensate the limits of the children with protective practices. In practice, often the
competence and robustness of children goes unrecognized and they are, overall, viewed as vulnerable (Maynard & Waters, 2014). Nevertheless, resilience and risky opportunity are not mutually exclusive, in that vulnerable children may still be provided the opportunity for risky play so that they can build their resilience (Rooijen & Newstead, 2017).

Teacher constructs of children may begin to touch on teachers’ own personal values and experiences of risk-taking, which are likely brought into their practice. Often, adults who are high sensation seekers are more tolerant of risks for children (Rooijen & Newstead, 2017), yet for teachers who are risk takers, their strong pedagogical knowledge may influence their responses differently from teachers who are not risk-takers. The boundaries and limitations they set for children are guided by their own perceptions of risks, either enabling or limiting children’s risk-taking, though some practitioners override their hesitations to provide beneficial experiences for children through risky play. Comparable to parents, gender can influence teachers’ attitudes regarding risk. For example, male teachers report higher scores of sensation seeking than do female teachers (Rooijen & Newstead).

Parent-teacher relationships have been shown to influence teacher perceptions of childhood risky play. Teachers often report a feeling of responsibility to keep others’ children safe, which leads to closer supervision (Rooijen & Newstead, 2017) and an underestimation of children’s capabilities to judge risks themselves. Collaborative relationships between parents and teachers may be a beneficial process toward the development of collective efforts to include risky play opportunities for young children, including the fact that discernment regarding what is “appropriate risk” is considered.

Teachers and parents of toddlers have constructed perceptions of risky play that have been affected by many social interactions with others and physical attributes of the environment.
Toddler teachers’ and parents’ perceptions are strongly influenced by ecological factors they encounter daily and their understandings of the developmental competencies of young children. Engagement with external events shapes the way adults who care for young children think, and therefore, influences their perceptions of risky play of toddler-aged children.

**Chapter Summary**

Although risky play has been studied for more than four decades, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of risky play. Most commonly risky play is defined by a type of play that involves feelings of excitement and fear with the possibility of a physical injury. However, the literature does agree on many characteristics of risky play, including that risky play contains numerous developmental benefits and that children are naturally drawn to engage in risky play.

Parents are influenced by several factors when parenting risky play including parenting styles, gender, and level of perceived risk. Parents are also influenced by safety concerns such as traffic safety, “stranger danger,” and previous medically attended injuries. Parents’ fear of risky play has increased over the last several decades in many Western societies. This could be because of the large impact media has on society today.

Teacher practices regarding risky play slightly differ from parent practices. Teachers are guided by their pedagogical knowledge which they gain through interactions with others, formal education, teacher enhancement projects, and personal practical knowledge learning, in part, from life experiences. Literature reports that teachers’ facilitation of risky play is influenced by culture, licensing regulations, social and physical context, and perceptions of children’s resiliency.

The literature exemplifies the many environmental and social influences of adults’ perceptions and understandings of risky play, therefore, the study will be anchored by
Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky to encompass the influential components of perceptions of risky play. This review of the literature reveals that there are many influences of risky play perceptions and unveils the gaps that are in the field. Finally, much is left to understand about parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of toddler risky play.
CHAPTER III
PURPOSE AND PROCEDURES

Informed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bioecological theory and Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, the proposed study aimed to investigate the perceptions of toddler teachers and toddler parents regarding the risky play of toddlers (18-36 months) in one school setting. Although a fair amount of research has been conducted on risky play patterns (Turtle, Convery, & Convery, 2015, Storli & Sandseter; Little & Eager, 2010; Sandseter, 2007, 2009b), perceptions and practices of preschool age children, their teachers, and their parents (Storli & Sandseter; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017; Morrongiello, Howard, Rothman, & Sandomierski, 2008), there is limited understanding of what constitutes toddler risky play. Not only are there limited studies focused on the analysis of toddler’s risky play but also on the perceptions of their parents and teachers regarding their risks during play episodes. Consequently, understanding teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of toddler risky play is a useful first step in understanding toddler risky play. For this reason, the current study aims to explore teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of risky play of toddler aged children within the context of outdoor free play in a university laboratory school. The methods and the outcomes of this study are hoped to contribute to current knowledge of risky play by adding to what little we know about adult perceptions of toddler risky play.

The questions that guided this study are:

1. What are teachers’ perceptions of risky play among toddlers?
   a. How do they define/describe risky play?
   b. What are their roles in risky play?

2. What are parents’ perceptions of risky play among toddlers?
   a. How do they define/describe risky play?
b. What are their roles in risky play?

3. How did these perceptions among teachers and parents develop?

**Definition of Perception**

To clearly understand the aim of this study, it is useful to define *perception*. Perception is derived from the Latin word *percipere*, which means “seize” or “understand.” Pylyshyn (1999) refers to the perceptual process as science. He notes that,

it consists in finding partial clues (either from the world or from one’s knowledge and expectations), formulating an hypothesis about what the stimulus is, checking the data for verification, and then either accepting the hypothesis or reformulating it and trying again in a continual cycle of hypothesize-and-test. (p. 341)

Communication studies define *perception* as “the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information” (N.A., 2016). The *Merriam-Webster Online* dictionary defines *perception* as (a) “a result of perceiving, attaining awareness or understanding of,” (b) “a mental image; concept,” and (c) “awareness of the elements of the environment through physical sensation.” *The Free Dictionary Online* defines *perception* as (a) “the process of state of being aware of something,” (b) “insight or knowledge gained by thinking” and (c) “and insight or point of knowledge.” This study defines *perception* as a process of interpreting one’s environmental stimuli and experiences to make sense of everything around us. The development of perception “includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences,” as depicted in Figure 2.
Thus, in the context of toddler risky play, two individuals may or may not perceive a particular behavior by a particular toddler as risky. For example, one adult may have the perception that a child jumping off of a large rock while holding a long stick is risky, while another may have the perception that this behavior is a typical and relatively safe type of play during childhood.

Figure 2. Diagram of the process of perception.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research Methodology**

This research was qualitative in nature for several reasons. Levers (2005) defines qualitative research as “a reflective, interpretive, descriptive, and usually reflexive effort to understand and describe actual instances of human action and experiences from the perspective of the participants’ living situation” (p. 438). The aim of this study was to explore parent and teacher perceptions of risky play and how these perceptions were developed. 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 analysis and interpretation” (p. viii). Due to the interpretive and subjective nature of risky play and human perceptions, a qualitative method was most beneficial for the aim of this study.
Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that qualitative researchers “allow the research design to emerge (flow, cascade, unfold) rather than construct it pre-ordinately (a priori) because it is inconceivable that enough could be known ahead of time about the many multiple realities to devise the design adequately” (p. 41). Due to the complex nature of risky play, one could not easily know the experiences and perceptions of the participants prior to this exploration. Therefore, the approach to this study was an inductive, emergent design to capture the “richness and holism, with strong potential for revealing complexity” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10) of the perceptions of toddler parents and toddler teachers. As Miles and Huberman further note,

Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people’s lived experiences, are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives: their perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them. (p. 10)

There was no intent to generalize the findings to the greater field of early childhood education. Rather, my effort has been to understand the perceptions of parents and teachers in one unique setting. Through participant anecdotes this study focused on naturally occurring events in ordinary settings to illuminate what “real life” was like for these parents and teachers who were confronted with toddler risky play on a regular basis.

**Context**

I conducted this study at a large Southeastern land-grant university’s early childhood laboratory school that provides care for over 100 children across four age groups, including infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarteners. Affiliated with an academic department of the university, the laboratory school provides a setting for researchers and students to study children’s development and teaching practices. The laboratory school functions as a setting for
university students’ practicum placements, interdisciplinary research, and high quality early childhood education programs. Typically, each classroom includes one demonstration (lead) teacher, one assistant teacher, and one student teacher. Divided into two locations, the laboratory school’s toddler classrooms are all located at one location in two adjacent buildings that share one playground consisting of mostly natural elements. The playground includes a stick area, a rock-climbing cave, and concrete steps that lead up to a gazebo depicted in Figure 3. Videos of the children on the outdoor playground, using these elements, were included as an interviewing tool in video-stimulated recall interviews of eight parents and teachers (5 parents and 3 teachers).

My role the year prior to and during the study has been as one of the laboratory school’s graduate assistants and, thus, I have a unique relationship with the children, teachers, and parents, which is important to acknowledge as part of the description of the study context. My role as a second year graduate assistant includes working in the classrooms with the toddlers, communicating with parents, and working alongside teachers in the classrooms. Thus, I have formed relationships with the participants involved in this study prior to conducting the study. Many of the participants are aware of my subjectivities and biases in regards to early childhood education and risky play. This could be an influencing factor of which I have been cognizant throughout the unfolding of the study.
Figure 3. Photos of playground areas and structures shown in video clips and referenced in the interviews.
Institutional Review Board Review Approval

Approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought and gained to amend the 2017 study focused on “Classroom and Playground Physical Activity Levels and Behaviors in Toddlers” (See Appendix A, C and E). I served as a research assistant on this study that was conducted by the PI, Dr. Dawn Coe, in the Department Kinesiology and Recreational Sport Studies. The amendment to her study that encompassed my study included the addition of parent and teacher interviews and the use of selected video clips from the original video recordings of toddler play (that was part of Dr. Coe’s study). Prior to the request of the IRB and following approval I met with the director of the laboratory school to arrange a meeting with the toddler teachers to explain the study and describe participant rights.

Participants

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit toddler parents and toddler teachers for this study. All parents who had toddlers that attended the laboratory school during the summer of 2017, and who continued to be enrolled during the duration of this study were initially invited to participate. Five parents consented from three classrooms. Similarly, teachers who taught the toddlers whose play was recorded in the 2017 study were invited to participate, three teachers out of three classrooms consented. Demographic information is drawn directly from participants’ entries (see Table 1).
Table 1

Demographics and Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Demographics (age, race, gender)</th>
<th>Education/Qualifications</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Toddler Name (age in years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
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<td>• B.S</td>
<td>Infant/toddler Demonstration Teacher</td>
<td>Bentley (2.97)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Caucasian</td>
<td>• 16 years in ECE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>• B.A.</td>
<td>Infant/toddler Demonstration Teacher</td>
<td>Isaac (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 36 years</td>
<td>• Certified in K-8 General Education and K-12 Special Education Modified</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lea (2.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Caucasian</td>
<td>• 11 years in ECE</td>
<td></td>
<td>Julia (2.6)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda</td>
<td>• 53 years</td>
<td>• A.A.</td>
<td>Infant/Toddler Assistant Teacher</td>
<td>Isaac (2.7)</td>
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<td>• 26 years in ECE</td>
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<td>Julia (2.6)</td>
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<td>Parents</td>
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<td>Early Childhood Education/Teacher educator/admin; Prek-4 license</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
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<td>Educator/Administrator</td>
<td>Bentley (2.97)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
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<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Lea (2.1)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Ph. D.</td>
<td>University faculty</td>
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<td>• Country of origin: Trinidad</td>
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<td>• Interviewed with spouse, Nancy</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* B.S. = Bachelor’s Degree; A.A. = Applied Associates Degree; ECE= Early Childhood Education

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2 All names of adults and children are pseudonyms.
As the PI, I assembled parent and teacher packets that included an explanation of the study, a consent form, and an informational form (See Appendices A, B, C, D, and E). The parent consent forms included consenting the use of video clips of their children that were collected during “Classroom and Playground Physical Activity Levels and Behaviors in Toddlers” study for teacher and parent interviewing purposes (see Appendices A). I placed the parent packets in the parents’ mailboxes in each of the respective classrooms and the teacher packets in the teachers’ mailboxes. The participants were instructed to contact time if they would like to have a meeting in order to clarify some information about the study such as the procedures or participants’ rights. No one contacted me.

Data Collection

Four sources of data were generated during data collection and included: (1) parent and teacher information and demographic forms (see Appendices B, and D), (2) video-stimulated recall interview audio recordings, (3) transcriptions of interviews, and (4) regular entries by me in my research journal. Informational forms were distributed in the parent and teacher packets to collect demographic information, family dynamics, parent education levels, etc. (see Appendices B & D). Videos from the 2017 study were chosen by me to be used for interviewing purposes. Criteria for selecting the video clips included: encompassing a child who participated in the 2017 study and was still enrolled at the lab school, a child whose parent consented to video clips of his child being used for Video Stimulated Recall Interviews, a child whose parent and teacher agreed to participate, contained a play behavior that could be categorized according to Sandseter’s (2007) six categories of risky play. These categories include (1) 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.

Semi-structured, video stimulated recall interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analytical purposes. Video-stimulated recall is “an introspective research procedure in which video-taped passages of behavior are replayed to individuals to stimulate recall of their concurrent cognitive activity” (Lyle, 2003, p. 861). The aim of this form of interviewing is to “gather systematic information about a set of central topics, while also allowing some exploration when new issues or topic emerge” (Wilson, 2014, p. 24). The semi-structured, video-stimulated recall interviews included two or three, 10 to 40 second video clips, with each interview including 3 video clips. The chosen videos featured the child of the parent being interviewed and also the student of the teacher being interviewed. All participants were interviewed individually except for one parent couple who was interviewed together. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and included face-to-face conversations guided by open-ended questions, conducted in a private setting on the premises of the laboratory school:

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?

I transcribed all seven interviews within two days of each interview. A research journal was used and included three forms of notes: (1) log of day-to-day activities, (2) a personal reflections, and (3) methodological log (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prior to each interview, I recorded the video clips I expected to show the participants as part of the video-stimulated recall interview technique. After each participant interview, I would record my impressions and reflections of the interviews, including tone, content, and wonderings. I also wrote about what techniques and questions worked well in the interviews as well as techniques I needed to improve on or change in future interviews. I also used the journal to write methodological notes, sketch diagrams to understand the data collection process, and record notes during meetings regarding my thesis work with my advisor.

Data Analysis

The constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data. The constant comparison method consists of three main steps. First, comparisons within single interviews took place in order to examine consistency of the interviews and develop categories of themes within each interview. I analyzed single interviews by writing conceptual memos and making notes (Huberman & Miles, 1994) such as ideas and thoughts in the margins of the interview transcriptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). After I had thoroughly familiarized myself with each interview, my advisor and I went through each interview together, adding comments in the margins (Bogdan & Biklen), making notes (Huberman and Miles), critically challenging each
other’s reflections and thoughts, and discussing interpretations of content. Second, a comparison between interviews within the same group was made. Each parent interview was compared to the three other parent interviews, comparing and contrasting the content (Huberman & Miles) and noting patterns and themes (Huberman & Miles; Wolcott, 1994). Next all four parent interviews were compared to each other simultaneously, from which we continued to further develop concepts and identify themes. The same processes were followed with the three teacher interviews. This step became more closely tied with the theoretical constructs that guided the study (i.e., the concentric and reciprocal systems within Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory model and the social construction of knowledge situated in everyday life of the sociocultural theory). The third step of the constant comparison method included comparing interviews from the two different groups. We compared and contrasted themes and began to identify emerging concepts in parent interviews to themes and ideas uncovered in teacher interviews. We continued to take notes, jot down ideas in the margins, write reflective passages, and note patterns. In this phase, I began creating diagrams and tables to further analyze and organize the data that are described below. These diagrams were developed using either the bioecological theory or the developmental niche as well as constructs from the sociocultural theory. The constant comparison method was used alongside my research journal and informational forms. Triangulation of data occurred within the three-step process of constantly comparing themes, as well as comparing themes from the three sources of data. Refer to figure 4 for an illustration of the constant comparison method.
Figure 4. Diagram of the constant comparison method. The method begins with open coding in on single interview. Open coding continues to compare single interviews of the same group (i.e., teachers or parents) to each other and then across groups. Categories are developed and then refined by continuously recycling through the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
Developmental Niche Framework

The Developmental Niche framework (Super & Harkness, 1986) was originally created to organize observations and data while conducting anthropological field work in remote regions of the world. Super and Harkness discuss three main components for structuring developmental processes. The first component of the developmental niche is the influence of the environment on individual learning and development because it is the context in which children and adult social and physically engage. The second component of the developmental niche is customs of child care because all aspects of the physical setting are mediated by adaptations in childcare practices. The third and final component of the developmental niche is the psychology of the caretaker because child-rearing customs are often accompanied by specific beliefs concerning their significance and in turn, regulate child development. This framework will aid in the organization of the data for this study.

Data Reduction

“Data Reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). The analytic choices I made during data reductions have helped “sharpen, sort, focus, discard, and organize” (Miles & Huberman, p. 11) my data so that I was able to draw conclusions.

After familiarizing myself with every interview transcription and writing notes and thoughts in the margins, I began creating open codes. “Open coding is the initial data work that builds from the ground up, by identifying essential concepts and patterns that emerge in vivo from an initial, yet rigorous open reading and reflection upon raw data” (Price, 2012, p. 2). My list of open codes included 38 words or phrases (see Appendix H) that encapsulated the themes
and ideas I saw emerging in the data. I then moved to axial coding, “the process of relating categories to the outcomes of open coding” (Wicks, p. 3) (see Appendix I). “Axial coding is a process of reassembling or disaggregating data in a way that draws attention to the relationships between and within categories” (Wicks, p. 3). Axial coding resulted in four categories that include: parent beliefs, teacher beliefs, defining risky play, and determining the degree of risky play.

Next, I begin to create data displays, or a “visual format that presents information systematically” (Miles and Huberman, p. 91). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that extended writing is not optimal for a single means of analysis because humans have a tendency to oversimplify, potentially overlooking essential information. Thus, I created three graphs and diagrams in order to assemble my data into an “immediately accessible, compact form” (Miles & Huberman, p. 11) to clearly visualize the data and determine conclusions. I used the bioecological map and the developmental niche framework as guides for my displays of data (see Appendix J) as well as a chart that organized my research questions visually.

For my first display, the intersection of two participant groups and three research questions divided the graph into six quadrants. These six quadrants were used to organize and categorize themes and subthemes. In addition, sometimes exact phrases of participants were organized into a quadrant. I continued to add to this graph during the rest of the analysis process as a way to organize the findings that answered the research questions. The second display of data used the three components of the developmental niche framework to create a Venn diagram by which themes and subthemes could be categorized (see Appendix J). Each component was represented by one circle of the Venn diagram. As themes were placed into appropriate locations, the interrelatedness of individual experiences and environmental influences were illustrated. The
last display was a model of the bioecological systems. I placed themes and subthemes in 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. These three displays provided a platform that propelled data analysis of the study so that the three main findings of my study became clear.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, the research questions, purpose and procedures have been described. The primary purpose of this study and the chosen methodology that is congruent with the intended purpose have been described. The aim of this study was to explore parent and teacher perceptions of risky play and how these perceptions developed. To capture the complexity of risky play through the emergence of the authentic parent and teacher voices, a qualitative inquiry method was selected that included video stimulated recall interviews as a way to bring participants into play episodes of children parented and taught by the participants. The data analysis approach involved the constant comparative method and was guided by Super and Harkness’ developmental niche framework (1986) to provide structure, informed by key tenets of the foundational theories of the study.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

The analysis of data revealed three over-arching findings that include: (1) analyzing risky play, comprised of (a) the psychology of the caregiver, (b) knowing the child, and (c) cultural influences, (2) risky play happens outdoors, and (3) risky play is contextual. Following, parents and teachers recall instances related to risky play to describe what they know about risky play, their responses to risky play, and how they have come to understand risky play. While there are some differences between the teacher and parent participants, the format of the findings includes a weaving together of their voices as a way to more clearly (a) draw contrasts, (b) remain focused on discreet aspects of risky play, and (c) situate participants’ experiences, reactions and reflections.

Finding 1. Analyzing Risky Play

The psychology of the caregiver: “The mama bear thing is, like, a real thing.” In the following excerpt, Linda, a demonstration teacher, explains her thought process of how she gauges risky play when she recalls,

So I guess in the moment I notice something that could potentially be risky, I start asking myself a series of questions. How does this moment of risky play benefit the child developmentally? Is this action helping them, you know, work on gross motor development? Is this action bringing them closer to peers and helping them be a part of this social landscape of, um, the peer groups? Is this action necessary for something else? You know, is this a part of a play scenario or, um, some other engaging game on the playground and so I’m going to ask myself what is the significance of this risk action? And usually, it falls into some category like that. It’s going to satisfy some sort of developmental need, um, for the child and often
times, you know, your gut response when seeing a risky action might be a little bit of fear but if you commit to taking a breath and thinking about those things, you can see the developmental need but I think that, that process takes a lot of practice.

Linda’s approach to analyzing risks includes a clear examination of the developmental and social benefits of risky play for the child, coupling these with the intentions and significance of the risky play behavior of the child. Her explanation illustrates how her pedagogical practices influence her analyses of toddler risky play behaviors. She weighs the “risk-benefit” of risky play that has clearly taken time for her to develop and is not free of uncertainty. Later in the interview, Linda describes her analytic process in detail by referencing a specific instance in a video clip shown to her during the interview. The video clip consists of a child, Bentley, in her toddler class jumping off a 12 inch high table onto rubber mulch while holding a thick, sharp stick that was about a foot long. Bentley was joined by two other children as they took turns jumping and climbing up onto the table top, as described by Linda,

I was watching him use the stick. Um, and use of sticks is something that I’ve had to think about a lot in my practice as a teacher and so, you know, I think I was watching at first just to ascertain, ‘how is he playing with the stick?’ Is he using it around other people’s bodies in a way that, um, led me to believe he would injure someone and as I watched him? It seemed to be just like a prop for whatever persona he had adopted and it’s really not clear what this persona is in this play scenario, but as I watched the first couple seconds it was like, ‘Oh he’s not really wagging it at anyone. He’s not trying to touch anyone with the stick. It’s just a prop for his hand.’
Linda’s analysis distinguishes herself apart from Jamie, Bentley’s mother. While showing Jamie the same clip of Bentley jumping off of the table while holding a stick, she gasped as Bentley’s foot slipped on the table. Without being prompted, Jamie offered an explanation, … I have that, you heard that reaction. Like, [she makes a 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 [she makes a gasping noise].

Jamie expressed an instinctual, emotional reaction while watching Bentley 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 theoretical perspective, the teacher’s response makes sense 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 and so Linda is more likely to be tolerant of risk and more astute at analyzing risky play because she believes that there are developmental benefits for children. Yet, Jamie’s psychology is a bit different. Jamie is also influenced by her role as Bentley’s mother. She remarks, “I think as a parent, despite my background [taking risks earlier in her life] and sort of how I embody risky behavior, I think that I am absolutely influenced by like what could happen.” She makes a point of acknowledging the potential, negative outcomes of risky play and how it is a concern when attempting to assess risky play behaviors of her toddler-aged child. Later in her interview, she explained the root of the awareness of potential negative outcomes when she said,

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, with ‘we do
this’ or ‘we don’t do this’. Um, because, you know, the times that he has been hurt, while not gravely hurt, um, it hurts. Like it hurts your heart as a parent to see tears, to see blood, to see bumps and bruises and, um... Yea, so I think that’s sort of the internal motivator of why I, as a mother, when I give him rules, why I give him rules.

This same protective factor was present among other parents as well. Nancy, Isaac’s mom, simply stated, “I guess as a parent you are there to protect in some sense....” Ellen, Julia’s mother, adds to the goal of protecting your child when she explains, “Um, and I mean, risk management from a broader perspective, just in general, in life, you are trying to keep them from, um, getting hurt, from getting sick, from making bad choices, from getting bad grades, from being dumb…” Susan, Lea’s mom, reflected on the parenting of she and her partner when she noted, “…we catch ourselves saying, ‘Don’t stand on chairs,’ or ‘Don’t jump on the sofa because we don’t want you to break something,’ or, whatever.” This protective response was present across all parent participants. When Ellen was asked what had influenced her perceptions of risk as a parent, she proclaimed that the “mama bear” phenomenon was one of four influential factors:

Um, and then I guess a fourth factor is probably the experience of parenthood that, like, when you have a kid, you just don’t even - and people say this to you and it sounds all teddy bear ridiculous rainbow stuff, but it really is true - that you don’t understand that you can really just love a human being that much until you have a child and then you’re, like, overwhelmed by the amount of love you have for that child and the, um, need, and responsibility to protect them… I think
that’s often a driving factor for parents... It’s present. You know, the mama bear thing is, like, a real thing.

Ellen participated in the study as a toddler parent. However, she had a unique role at the laboratory school because she was also an administrator with a M.S. degree in prek-3 early childhood education and 15 years of teaching experience with toddlers through kindergarten-aged children. Thus, her interview responses are undoubtedly reflective of both her teacher and parent roles. In one specific response, she was able to articulate both her emotional reaction and thinking of her parent-self as well as the pedagogical influence that her teacher-self brought to bear regarding her responses to risky play. Following, Ellen talks about what goes through her mind as she watches her daughter, Julia, engage in risky play,

[I] move through cycles where I do have that ‘eh-hmm,’ like, nervous, ‘Oh gosh.’ That’s - there’s the moment of the wobbling or whatever. The, ‘I hope this goes well for her,’ moment. …I think that the part that’s more parent, less professional is the, ‘Oh, I hope this goes well’, you know? [That] the big disaster doesn’t happen… And I have urges to, like, move in and support or move in and prevent or move in and whatever and absolutely, because of my professional work, I stop myself a lot of the time. So, like, I stifle the impulse, um, or maybe not stifle it, but I think I process that impulse rather than acting on the impulse. Um, I question the impulse. And then my goal, if I’m being mindful and intentional about this, is to only stop when it’s, like, the actual big, giant disaster and not the smaller disasters. Like, no big deal if she falls down three steps, but I’m going to try to catch her if she’s at the top of a flight of steps if it seems like she’s going to fall down them.
Ellen’s description of her initial nervous and protective reactions was similar to Jamie’s gasping reaction to the video clip of Bentley slipping on the table. There was an obvious concern for potential injury and harm that is instinctual and innate as these moms observed, witnessed, and assessed risky play behaviors of their toddler-aged children. Still, Ellen was able to deconstruct a strategic act of “processing that impulse” and being intentional about analyzing the risks and benefits of a risky play episode in a similar way as Linda demonstrated, earlier. In fact, all of the teacher participants referenced specific examples of analyzing risky play.

During 2016-2017, Jennifer and Rhonda co-taught in the same classroom and conducted a year- long exploration of toddler risky play. During Rhonda’s interview, she viewed a clip of three children playing on the playground holding onto a three foot rubber water hose extension with a metal tip on one end. Rhonda was also in the video clip observing the children as they were holding onto the hose and walking around the garden area, linked together. Eventually a dispute broke out when the children decided they no longer wanted to share the hose. Throughout the entire clip, one could see Rhonda closely observing the children’s interactions and keeping in close physical proximity. At the point of the dispute, she quickly moved in to physically intervene.

Her reaction differed from a second video clip she had been shown of Lea climbing a rock-climbing cave as depicted in Figure 3. The cave is about three and a half feet high and Lea climbed, she paused for a brief moment half way up. Rhonda, again, was closely observing, however, this time she showed no intention of moving in to assist or scaffold Lea. I asked Rhonda to explain what the difference was between the two scenarios that resulted in her different responses. As Rhonda reflected, her analytic process began to unfold,
Yea, well there are a lot of thoughts about that for me because, um, a few years ago…we had fabric in our classroom and it was an older toddler year and, um, the children, um, would get the fabric and, um, do the same type of play; pulling each other around and, uh, I didn’t like it and I didn’t - they were potentially pulling each other into the table and into the shelves. Um, and then, um, Jennifer [Rhonda’s teaching partner] found more value in it than I did and talked me into letting them continue to play with that fabric. In fact, she did documentation about it called ‘The Fabric Problem.’ And um, um, they were working things out with each other. They were learning how their tug and pull could affect someone else; they were engaged in pretend play. Um, so I, um, was forced to think about the value of it several years ago. Um, still, it wasn’t my choice to have that [hose extension] out there and I wasn’t, um, prepared for that to be there and so I was - I’m sure - I don’t remember thinking specifically about it - but I’m sure that I was torn between ‘Is there value in this and who left this out there? Where did this come from? Um, what do I do?’ Um, there was some danger but they’re still doing the things that caused the benefits in the same way as did the fabric.

In her response, Rhonda exemplified all three teachers’ practices regarding their thoughtful and intentional approaches to risky play episodes. First, the video clip prompted Rhonda to recall a similar experience in her teaching practice that was comparable to the hose scenario. It is clear that Rhonda had an immediate response of being uncomfortable or dubious from the first moment she spotted the hose extension in the garden area. However, instead of acting on her impulse, she stood back to observe, reflecting on her prior experience of children’s encounters with fabrics in her classroom, remembering the developmental benefits of their
experiences with similar materials. Second, she referenced her co-teacher, Jennifer’s
documentation of the fabric scenario, which is reflective of the pedagogical knowledge that is
coop-constructed among teachers in this school setting. The teachers’ documentation, itself, is a
visual reminder of the ongoing analysis they engage in at the laboratory school that is part of
their process of deconstructing and reconstructing classroom experiences as they think more
depth about young children’s learning. Lastly, Rhonda briefly explained her cognitive inquiries
that guided her analysis of the risky play scenario with the hose as well as her process of
weighing the benefits and consequences of allowing the children to continue with their play,
even at a time when she was not wholly comfortable. At the same time, she recognized the value
of their shared experience.

Likewise, Jennifer seemed to approach risky play scenarios with a similar stance as Linda
and Rhonda. In Jennifer’s interview, she used the example of sticks on the playground to explain
her pedagogical analysis of determining risk:

Some teachers are like, ‘Oh, sticks have to stay in the stick area; it’s too
big of a stick to carry.’ Um, but I have said, ‘Oh, but you know, if they’re
able to do it and they are actually doing meaningful things with these
sticks, is it - why are we hard and fast [that] sticks have to stay in the stick
area?’

Instead, she challenged the hard and fast rule of “sticks stay in the stick area” by
considering the intentions and abilities of children’s use of the sticks. This
analysis is similar to Linda’s when Bentley was using the stick as a prop as he
jumped off the table top onto the mulched ground.
The teachers’ intentional thoughtfulness in analyzing risky play was apparent across all them. Pedagogical knowledge had a strong influence on their processes of analyzing risk, which is expected given the context of the laboratory school in which their practice is situated. Embracing risky play was a strong value of the school’s philosophy and, therefore, influenced the ways teachers defined their reflections, roles and responsibilities. Further, teachers, and to a lesser degree parents, took into account the developmental capabilities of the children as part of their process of determining risky play.

Parenthood, in and of itself, influenced 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 as well as used their knowledge of the children’s competencies and similar past experiences to remain poised for potential intervention. Like the teachers, it is 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) knowing the personality of the child and (b) knowing 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 did teachers, however, both considered it an important factor in assessing risky play. Susan, a parent of two daughters (one a toddler and one a preschooler) who attended
the laboratory school explains how she was more likely to allow one daughter to do things over the other because of their different personalities,

But from a risk perspective, like when you asked about how do you re-evaluate and how do you judge, I think it’s just important that you know your child. I am more apt to allow Lea [her younger child] to do things than I am to let Jill [her older child] and that’s just because I know Lea has a higher physical tolerance than Jill has and I know that if Lea hurts herself, she’s going to tell you right away. Jill has a higher pain tolerance so she may not tell you or she may not tell you at all or she may not tell you until way later that she has hurt herself or she has, like, skinned her knee.

Here, Susan reveals her understanding and knowledge about her daughters as she explains her rationale for how she assesses potential risk and strives to anticipate and avoid immanent risk. This transactional influence between Susan’s perception and her children’s demeanor is reflective of Rogoff’s view of participatory appropriation in which value is given to the way in which children participate and contribute to the patterns of interactions.

Teachers, Linda and Jennifer, also remarked that their decisions to facilitate or intervene in toddler risky play depended on the personality traits of the children. Following, Linda shares what factors influenced her analysis when she recalled,

If they’re going to engage in some sort of risky climbing or balancing, you know, I am going to be thinking about what is my perception of how thoughtful that child is as they plan out their motor sequence. Some children are very, very tentative or thoughtful about what they- how they approach a motor task. Some children, um, just dive right in and you know, put themselves at risk for getting
hurt so, um, I think that’s sort of the first thing that I think about when it comes to
how fast do I go into facilitation mode.

Like Susan, Linda is concerned about the child’s safety when engaging in risky play. However,
Linda is guided by pedagogical knowledge when considering the child’s personality to determine
how much risk a child should engage in. She acknowledges that motor sequencing plays a factor
as well as how a child’s personality might play into that. She points out that some children are
more cautious while attempting challenging motor work while others are more reckless. Linda
acknowledges that a child who is cautious and a child who is reckless will have different
potential for risk if they were to approach the same task.

In comparison, Jennifer suggested that gauging when to intervene while supervising risky
play depends on knowing the child, when she considered,

Um, I think it depends on the child because I think you have to have that
relationship to know that child and to know how much frustration that child can,
um, work through and what’s going to set him over the edge.

Jennifer goes on to explain that it is important to know the child well enough to know when a
task becomes too frustrating for a child to accomplish the task. In other words, if Jennifer
perceives the risky play scenario is too mentally challenging for a child, based on what she
knows the child can handle, she might decide to intervene.

Parents, Jamie, Nancy, and Brandon, brought up their children’s personalities related to
risky play in a slightly different way as did the teachers. These parents suggested that their
children are more likely to look for and be involved in risky play based on their personality traits.
For example, Jamie noted, “There’s only so much that I’m going to say ‘no’ to. I mean, I say no
to Bentley jumping off of the couch and he still does it. He looks right at me and he waits for me
to look and then he jumps.” Here, Jamie seems to imply that risk-taking is part of who Bentley is, mentioning twice that Bentley “wants to” engage in activities that Jamie perceives as risky. Later in the interview, Jamie proclaimed, “He’s going to get hurt. I’m waiting for him to [pause]; I’m waiting for the first broken bone. It’s coming at some point.” During Jamie’s interview, she implied that because Bentley is a risk taking toddler at heart, risks and even injuries are inevitable; they are going to happen regardless of her rules. To some extent, the inevitability of risky play seemed to force Jamie toward perceiving risky play differently for her son.

Brandon and Nancy shared similar experiences about their son, Isaac. Brandon and Nancy are parenting partners who moved to Tennessee from Trinidad before their sons were born. Their older son, Baxter, was six during the time of the interview. Nancy and Brandon first brought up personalities when describing the differences between their sons’ risky play behaviors. Compared to Baxter, Brandon referred to Isaac as “energetic” and “a rebel” and Nancy agrees. Brandon goes on to describe Isaac’s risky play tendencies when he recalled Isaac’s love of jumping,

That’s how he is! You know, he’ll jump! ... Like, he’s the first to jump, you know that … Baxter sort of [pause]; Baxter sort of analyzes where he’ll jump from.

Isaac has no concept of ‘you cannot jump from that high’. [He] just goes.

Brandon gave a second example of Isaac’s predisposition to take risks without seeming to give it much thought, when he recalled, “Isaac is just like; it’s kind of like he has no fear with the pool and all. He’ll just walk right [up] and [makes a splash noise]; jump right down just like… [trails off]. Nancy chimes in, in agreement, “Yea, he will jump in.” Both parents agreed that Isaac is likely to take a risk if he is presented with one. Then Nancy explained Isaac’s behavior when he is about to engage in risk, “Most of the times when he’s doing something that’s truly risky, he
does it too fast for us to actually notice or for us to actually say something.” Likewise, Brandon expressed, “But sometimes I feel like he knows he's going to do it. He doesn’t look for us. He just goes quick before we could say something.”

Nancy and Brandon’s understandings of Isaac’s personality and how it shapes his risky behavior influences the way they parent risky play. Similar to Jamie, they know that Isaac is going to engage in risky play; that it is inevitable. They also know Isaac well enough to understand that they typically have a brief opportunity to intervene if they try to stop Isaac from engaging in a risky play activity. When I suggested to Nancy and Brandon that they seem to embrace risky play, Brandon responded:

I don’t know if I’m holding him back because I don’t know how far he could go. Let me put it this way. Because let’s say I only wanted him to do two stairs but he could do three stairs, and it’s kind of like you’re just holding him back from what he can fully do, I guess. So, then, you know, if he’s not hurting himself and if it’s something that, you know, recovery wise, it’s, like, you know it’s not that harmful.

In explaining Isaac’s inclination to “just go,” Brandon continued,

Well, I sort of know that he can jump far. I won’t lie about that part but it’s mostly the jumping that is the risky part. But he’ll just go wild with jumping sometimes. And um, you’ll see him go. Three steps is cool, but you’ll see him go four and then he’ll try for five sometimes….

Brandon declared that he knew that Isaac is capable of jumping “that far.” Through parenting Isaac, Brandon has learned what skills Isaac has developed, illustrating a second way he ‘knows’ his child. In addition to knowing Isaac’s personality, Brandon references Isaac’s
competencies, which are a factor in the way Brandon perceives the degree to which Isaac engages in risky play. Brandon went on to explain,

I think it’s a combination of his, where his, like, all his motor skills and everything else with the risk… You know he can balance, you know, if he hops from log to log. That kind of stuff. Even how tall it is - you know what he can handle.

Brandon’s knowledge of Isaac’s capabilities is similar to that of the teacher participants’ examples. All three teachers talked about knowing, understanding, and trusting children’s developmental abilities as they engage in risky play. Jennifer expressed this point when I asked her how she gauges between stepping in to scaffold a child engaged in risky play or waiting it out to see what happens. She answered that it depends on the child’s “competencies in whatever things they’re doing.” Rhonda goes on to explain how children’s capabilities influence her decisions to remain watchful or intervene,

I just kind of know where they’re at [developmentally] when I’m watching risky play. So, um, somebody that I know is going to be more competent [pause], I mean I just know. I just feel like it’s just all in my head so I just watch and if, if - it just seems like it’s my judgment. But all those thoughts don’t go through my head at once, you know? It’s like, ‘This looks like she’s gonna’ get hurt so I better walk this way’, or, ‘Oh, he’s got that. He’s done that before’, or, ‘He’s, um, physically capable of doing that’, or, ‘He will, um, I just know that he’s probably going to not think about it before he jumps or whatever’ or ‘he might hurt somebody else in the process, accidentally’.
Rhonda describes how she “judges” risky play situations based on what she knows about the competencies of each child. Linda illustrated this idea by drawing a parallel between reading and risky play.

…I see that as very much like individualized assessment. 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, um, so, same goes for this [risky play].

Linda went on to explain,

Um, I think too, another part of the individualized assessment piece for risky play is just knowing the child’s background. You know, just like any other subject matter, you need to know the background knowledge and the background experience, you know? How much experience does this child have with navigating a risky situation? Maybe the risk situation involves motor risks.

Sometimes the risk situation might involve experience with animals, you know? Can this child pick up a classroom pet and, you know, I’m confident that they know how to handle this animal properly. You know, you gotta’ know their background with animals in that regard.

Linda indicates that the history and experience of a child is important in her determining and understanding the child’s capabilities. She explains that a child needs experience with a situation in order to be skilled at said experience. Being aware of children’s previous experiences is fundamental in her being able to analyze risky play.

Jennifer gave a specific example of this same perspective after watching a video clip of a toddler in her classroom climb and maneuver in the stick area, depicted in Figure 3. In this video
clip, a long, flat board was rested on top of a round, thick log to resemble a teeter-totter.

However, the board was not centered on the log, and as the toddler took a step onto the board, the board rapidly slips off of the side of the log. Consequently, the toddler falls, clearly shocked and confused about what had happened. Jennifer explained what she thought about the video in terms of risky play,

I think that’s, again, typical and fine. Uh, they have so much experience with those planks and the logs. So, again, that wasn’t his first time doing that. Um, and it, like, the history of that, like, I know that he’s been scaffold through that. I know that’s something he’s done a hundred times and he’s competent in doing it.

Jennifer was aware that the child had played and practiced in the stick area before; he had experience with the boards and logs. Because Jennifer knew this, she felt confident that this type of play was not risky for this child. She knew his prior experiences made him competent to manage the type of play shown in the video clip. Therefore, she determined the type of play in the video clip to be “typical and fine” rather than risky for this child. However, it is likely that if the scene included a child who had no experience with boards, logs, and sticks, she would have considered it risky due to the fact that the child may potentially lack the capability and knowledge of playing with those materials without risk of injury.

In summary, parents and teachers all expressed that knowing the child is an important factor when analyzing risky play. While both parents and teachers acknowledged knowing the child’s personality, only one parent mentioned knowing the child’s competencies in engaging in potential risky play. In addition to this parent, every teacher emphasized the importance of knowing children’s abilities that included being familiar with children’s learning histories as well as their competencies and personalities.
Cultural influences: “When I was a small child … the boundary was the end of your driveway.” Uniformly, every participant believed that our society’s views of risky play have changed over time, especially since they were children, by becoming more risk averse. In some form, several of the participants 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.” Susan goes on to explain,

I think that we’ve gotten more cognizant to there needs to be risky play but it almost needs to be manufactured ... So, I think we’ve kind of had this pendulum shift where it was like nothing was risky, you know, maybe in the late 90’s and early 2000’s and we’re coming back to a ‘we need risky play but we need it manufactured - controlled’, you know, how risky we let it be.

It seems clear that the participants are aware of a bigger, cultural perception of risk and how it is influencing their own lives and practices. Throughout the interviews, all participants suggested that culture influenced their perceptions and actions related to risky play at some level. As Rhonda talked about our societal norms and practices, she began to construct a new realization,

This, this was the first time I ever thought that; about how there’s warnings and there’s people suing and things like that. And when you brought it up here, it’s the first time I ever thought about, uh, I think I used the word [pause]; what did I say? Micro-managing? Which is, like, my thoughts of warning labels or, uh, government issued … [trails off].
Rhonda expanded on Western culture’s warning labels and how she perceives them as a way for government to micro-manage society, which she clearly comprehends 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, like, the warning labels and the warnings about wearing helmets. I keep going back to that because I feel like that is at the forefront of, like, societies.

Jamie’s explanation that the warning labels influence her perceptions of risk because they keep her aware of potential dangers is similar to Jennifer’s views when she noted,

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

Here, Jennifer, laments how our society’s fear of risks sometimes prevents her from facilitating risky play the way she would normally choose. She referenced licensing and regulations in childcare programs and how she could potentially lose her job if she did not follow the rules that are in place.

Ellen and Linda both expressed that they want and value risk tolerance; however, the current societal perceptions of risk make it hard for them to actually practice risk tolerance parenting. Linda used an example from her own childhood and parenting experiences to convey what she means when she recalls,

When I was a small child, the perception was that, for a toddler, someone you know, anywhere from two years old to maybe, you know, four or five, the boundary was the end of your driveway. You know, and that was considered just the safe space that you could be outside alone, um, and that was okay and that was
not weird. Everyone else was doing it, you know? I know in raising my own children, you know, I wanted them to be able to do the same things I did but it felt strange for me to let, you know, my two year old outside by herself. You know? And it’s not something that I really did. I always accompanied her outside but that’s the perception. You know? Someone two to four and two to five is not safe without adult supervision. It becomes sort of a societal norm I suppose.

She uses the word “strange” to describe how it feels to allow her children the same amount of risk that she was allowed as a child. Ellen explains the same experience when she said,

When I envision it [risky play] as applied to myself as a child, it all feels right, right? But when I envision it in my current context, it all still - I think then the societal lens kicks back in and it’s hard for me, which is just kind of an interesting thing. But, like, on its own, I would say all of these things; I would say I value these things [tolerance of risk] and I want to do this and I wouldn’t want life to look like this [risk resistant] but then, when I actually try to apply that, it’s hard to imagine because I think of the societal 2018 view of things.

Ellen and Linda expressed how much the risk perceptions of our Western culture have influenced their personal perceptions of risks. They desire and value risky play for their children, but yet it’s “strange” and “hard to imagine” when they do try to “apply it”.

There was a general agreement among the participants that Western society has created a number of regulations that impact the way teachers and parents view and facilitate young children’s risky play. However; the participants also alluded to the smaller, more intimate cultural influences, such as their local schools, town, neighborhoods and city parks. For example, both Susan and Nancy talked about the areas they live in and how these affect the way they see
risks. Nancy made a comparison to her childhood as she explained her discomfort in letting her children roam their neighborhood,

> We live in a subdivision. We don’t necessarily know, like, you know the people [neighbors] but you don’t *know* [italics added] them. So like, I think when I was younger, like, I knew who the guy was, right? Like, the kids a couple houses down and so, you know, like, my neighbor and I would ride our bike and we’d go walk to that house, or you know, go walk to another street, but that’s because, like, we knew where everyone was and my parents knew, like, ‘okay this is where [so and so] lives. This is where this one lives.’ And, so I feel like, at least us right now, like, I don’t trust them because I don’t know any of the parents. Like know them, know them in any kind of way, so I feel like that’s also a factor.

Nancy is from Trinidad and she expressed throughout her interview that her community in Trinidad was characterized by a more collective and personal mores and customs of child care. Due to the lack of familiarity, Nancy reported that she does not trust her sons to roam the neighborhood the way she did as a child,

> My neighbor and I would ride our bike and we’d go walk to that house, or you know, go walk to another street, but that’s because, like, we knew where everyone was and my parents knew, like, ‘Okay, this is where [name of neighbor] lives. This is where this one lives. And, so I feel like, at least us, right now, like, I don’t trust them because I don’t know any of the parents.

Susan offered an explanation of the cultural differences in her part of town verses another part of the same town:
…There is a cultural piece or this piece about what is culturally acceptable in your area. Like Ryan [Susan’s husband] subscribes to the idea of ‘free range children’. Um, and I chuckle with that but 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 like, ‘They never put clothes on their kids’ because we’re always in the back yard and the kids are always half dressed. So yea, I think it’s just a cultural thing.

Susan claims there is an aspect of culture that determines what she believed is acceptable parenting practice and what is not, illustrating her awareness of cultural influences within her own particular living environment. Later, she describes another local context when she references 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 …. But I would have said that if they had been at a typical daycare and we hadn’t been exposed to the risks that we are exposed to at the laboratory school, that I’d probably be more risk adverse, like I’d probably be like ‘Oh! That’s dangerous! Let’s not climb that’ or either discouraging of it or I would have the assumption that they weren’t interested in it or didn’t want to do it.

Susan goes on to share how the values of the laboratory school changed her perceptions of risky play toward increased acceptance and tolerance of risk. Jamie communicated a similar experience when she recalled,
What’s super funny is the first day when we brought Bentley to the laboratory school, um, we came from a - we were at another daycare facility and there wasn’t this outdoor space and there wasn’t this- as much opportunity …. He was 18 months old, I think, when he came here, but I remember sort of on that visiting day that we had, I was sort of watching and I was - he couldn’t get up and down stairs very, um, gracefully, I guess, and so I was watching and I was like ‘this makes me so nervous because he can’t control his body that way. He, he wants to,’ so 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 is related to the big, broader notion of Western culture. The participants are influenced by the way our society perceives and regulates risk. Even when they expressed a value for risk, they continued to struggle to do so because society as a whole seems so to be so fearful. The second phenomenon is the role of their more immediate culture that influences the ways they interact daily, whether at home, school or their neighborhoods. Overall, it appears that culture has had an influence on the way both teachers and parents perceive risk. These cultural influences can be conflicting at times to what the participants value and desire.

**Finding Two: Risky Play Happens Outdoors, “We got thrown outside to play.”**

The second finding is that risky play is perceived to most commonly take place outside and includes natural elements. Seven of the eight participants associated risky play with the outdoors and/or the natural environment. When Rhonda was asked what she thinks about when
she thinks of risky play, she stated simply, “I think of outside.” Nancy recalled that her childhood was more risky than children today because “we got thrown outside to play.” Both Rhonda and Nancy suggested that there are more risks available outside. Participants were able to recall risky play memories from childhood and provide environmental descriptors to set the scenes. For example, Ellen described her childhood backyard as a “huge backdrop of her play” when she recalls,

I had a creek behind my house and I was an only child and I played in that creek a whole lot, ‘cause, I mean, I remember doing everything from like imaginary play to you know, science stuff. I did everything back there. And um, it felt kind of risky. I don’t actually know if it was actually risky, but it felt- I had the perception that it was risky. Um, because it’s like the wild space, like, you know? That, like, it’s not my yard; it’s not inside the boundaries of the fence and it’s not like a playground structure. Um, and so, you know, I can remember, like making decisions to, like, hop to a rock that was slippery and then being like, ‘Whoa, that was like a little bit far for it to also be slippery,’ and, you know, stuff like that.

She goes on to describe her potential manipulation and freedom in this “wild space” and how it was easily perceived as risky. She contrasted the creek to a play structure, suggesting that there is more potential for risk with the creek setting, in that she could use the creek in whatever ways she desired. Linda added a similar recollection when she described a memory from her childhood.

I guess, the first thing that pops into mind is really - and I don’t know if this counts or not - but I do remember being a toddler and we had this really great yard where we had a strawberry patch and I would just go wander outside and eat
strawberries right out of the garden. And that’s not necessarily risky, per say, and that did not feel risky to me but I think the perception nowadays would be a toddler eating things by themselves, outdoors, without an adult knowing would be considered, um, kind of risky. And you know, I just sort of explored and climbed and we had kind of a steep yard that was, um - the backside of the yard was just covered in all these prickly rose bushes so I would typically just climb up there and wander amongst all those things, like, as a toddler, just by myself.

Here, Linda describes similar concepts that Ellen shared. The back yard contained many natural elements such as the garden, the prickly rose bushes, and the steepness of the ground that allowed Linda to explore and be challenged. Linda also explains that the outdoor experience was often alone, without adult presence.

Jamie had a similar experience during her childhood. She said her childhood consisted of a lot of outdoor time because her parents owned an outdoor camp. When she recalled her risky play experiences, her childhood was characterized by “climbing trees, jumping out of trees, hanging from trees. Um, we played in the woods all of the time by ourselves.” Again, Jamie’s childhood environment was full of natural elements, such as trees and was absent of adult supervision.

The participants’ childhoods were full of risky play scenarios within the physical setting of the outdoors. They were surrounded by natural elements that allowed for exploration, manipulation, and challenge. The physical environments of the prickly bushes and slippery rocks combined with the social environments of children playing alone or with other children with little to no adult supervision, enabled opportunities for risky play. Without the physical setting of these outdoor spaces, the participants may not
have had as much exposure to risk as children, and, thus, developed different perceptions of risk as adults.

**Finding Three: The Definition of Risky Play is Contextual**

The third finding of this study is that the definition of risky play is personal and situated. Though there are several agreeable aspects across the definitions of risky play, each definition is informed by personal experience and knowledge, and thus, reflects the way each participant perceives risk. Each interview 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 participants consideration of risky play that includes physical actions such as jumping, climbing, or falling; the potential to be physically hurt or injured; or participants, like Linda, simply answering, “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.

Rhonda and Brandon both stated that they think of children “taking chances” when they think of risky play. Though they seemed to imply taking physical chances, other participants clarified that risky play also contains characteristics beyond physicality. Jennifer elucidated, “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.” In the same way, and Ellen explained that risk contains more aspects than just physical and how they are intertwined:

…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. So, like, when you are taking a physical risk,
you’re also taking a cognitive risk, and an emotional risk and you know, all of them.

Though not as discrete, Linda also illustrated how she sees risky play as having physical characteristics as well as a cognitive component when she states,

So risky play allows children to be able to engage in cognitive thought processes where they have to map out what they want to do, you know, and then they have to then make a subsequent set of decisions. ... So we’ll take the example of, um, climbing up a steep set of rocks that we have on our playground that are wet and you’ve got those [rain] boots on and you notice that you’re slipping. So for the toddler, that presents a really great motor challenge but it also presents a really great problem solving and, uh, personal management challenge for the child so that they have to get that feedback. ‘Okay I slipped on the first rock going up this steep hill, but I really, really, really want to climb this rock, so now I have to plan out how I’m going to climb up this rock in shoes that maybe I’m unaccustomed to climbing in. So, I’ve got to slow down my body. I’ve got to plant my foot maybe in a different way’ and that allows them to, um, channel a lot of good cognitive energy into their gross motor work.

This detailed description exemplifies how a risky play situation can include both a cognitive risk such as problem solving how to effectively climb a slick slope, as well as a physical risk such as using motor skills to move one’s body up a slope. Similarly, Rhonda described the same idea using a different example. After watching the video clip of Lea climbing the rock cave and pausing half way up, Rhonda began to chronicle Lea’s actions:
…I believe that she was, um, in a process of deciding if she could get up there and how she would get back down and how she was able to, um, experiment physically while she thought about it and um, she, um, took her time. I don’t know, like I said, if she was resting or [trails off]. She, I guess she - at the one point there, she has - there’s not another foot hole so she has to either crawl up or pull with her hands more so she was trying to figure that out.

Rhonda describes her perceptions of Lea’s thoughts while she climbed the cave, illustrating that Rhonda believes risky play encompasses both physical and cognitive challenges.

Interestingly, all three teachers expanded on the idea of risky play being more than physical. Only one parent, Ellen, specified that risky play can be more than just physical. This reflects the belief that experience guides development. All three teachers, and Ellen, are teachers at the laboratory school and have studied early childhood development and education. Thus they have learned about risky play and understand it’s value and variations. It is not surprising that they were able to think about risky play in a more complex, nuanced way than did the parents.

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 which often no adults were present. Jamie was asked what type of risky play she engaged in as a child and she recalled, “climbing trees, jumping out of trees, hanging from trees. Um, 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 but I think that it can
occur with adults, provided that that adult sort of has the mind set and, um, sort of openness to allow for that play.

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 like 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. The schools that we went to - the teachers – like… here the teachers go outside with the kids. Like, the teachers aren’t actually around. Like, they stayed inside during like break time. So you were as a child, I think in most schools, at least in Trinidad where we’re from, like, you’re outside on your own, so you kind of did different stuff.

Finally, Ellen recalled a number of childhood memories when she was engaged in risky play, all of them involving no adult supervision. She was then asked what could have made those experiences less risky, and she answered, “Absolutely adult presence slash micro-management or higher level of supervision or whatever would have changed those things and made them less risky. But I also think I learned from them, so, you know, whatever.”

Most participants recounted that the risks they took in their childhood happened because there were no adults around to prevent them from taking risks. This lack of supervision has become part of their perception of risky play. When explaining the impact of adults’ lack of presence in risky play, Ellen ended with, “But I also think I learned from them [risky experiences], so, you know, whatever.” Here, she seems to have determined that it’s not a bad thing that her childhood was freer with less supervision because the risky play situations in
which she participated provided her rich learning opportunities and Rhonda agreed when she noted, “I think there are a ton of benefits to risky play in general…”

Overall, a variety of benefits were identified and described by both parents and teachers, often referencing their childhood experiences. Jamie and Rhonda explained that engagement in risks help children learn their potentials as they test their limits and figure out what they are capable of doing. 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 sees in risky play when she remarked, I think it teaches some perseverance, and it teaches tenacity and strength and problem solving and again, you want something. … So, I feel like engaging in structured risky play allows for them to really, kind of set these goals to do something that they want to do! Um, and kind of work towards them.

Linda goes on to add, “So risky play allows children to be able to engage in cognitive thought processes where they have to map out what they want to do, you know, and then they have to then make a subsequent set of decisions.” She describes how risky play provides the opportunity to problem solve, agreeing with Susan. As children are engaged in these physical challenges, they are also gaining cognitive skills in deciding how to move their bodies without getting hurt. From this perspective, Ellen places the most value in risky play, summarizing the cognitive aspect of risks as,

I think that we always - like risk is how we learn. Not just - it’s not just a side part of learning. It is actually the center of how we learn. Taking cognitive risks, like all of it, that is how we learn because otherwise we are not stretching ourselves….
Overall, participants included developmental benefits in their descriptions of risky play. Throughout each participant’s explanation of how risky play is defined, they continuously drew upon their past experiences to help them formulate their definitions. Most recalled their own childhoods and reflected on times when they were engaged in risky play as part of their analysis of risk taking, today. As they went back in time, it became clear that risky play cannot be limited to one, objective definition. Rather, the definition of risky play is subjective and situated, embedded in experiences and influenced by societal practices and norms, local cultural customs of child care, and one’s developing beliefs and values. Thus, the definition of risky play is a kind of “living definition” particular to the ongoing lived experiences of each individual, changing as each of us encounter new experiences and gain new knowledges.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, interview excerpts were used to fully illustrate the dominant themes of the data that formulated the three main findings. The three findings consisted of (1) analyzing risky play is conflictual, (2) risky play occurs outdoors, (3) defining risky play is contextually bound. Participants constructed their understandings of risky play through their own childhood experiences with risk, societal claims about what constitutes risky play, and their role as a caregiver. Each individual definition of risky play is transformative and influenced by cultural and environmental contexts. The responses by the couple, X and Y revealed some differences between the mother and father and differences in their early life experiences from those of US born parents. Theory and interview explanations and context were intertwined among the findings to situate the interview excerpts. These findings are further discussed in chapter five, as well as the limitations and further implications of the study.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This study adds new knowledge to the field of early childhood risky play by exposing the largely influential factor of personal experiences and histories that shape one’s understanding and perceptions of risky play. This study aimed to explore three main questions: (1) What are teachers’ perceptions of risky play among toddlers? (2) What are parents’ perceptions of risky play among toddlers?, and (3) How did these perceptions among teachers and parents develop? Findings suggest that parents and teachers analyze risky play based on three main aspects: (a) their psychology of their role, (b) knowing the child, and (c) cultural influences. Moreover, parents and teachers have perceptions that risky play happens outdoors. Lastly, findings suggest that parents and teachers form individual definitions of risky play that are shaped by their own personal histories and experiences.

Based on the literature review, less than twenty percent of the 30 articles reviewed focused on toddler risky play (Kleppe, Melhuish, & Sandseter; Veselack, Miller, & Cain-Chang, 2010; Morrongiello, Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt, 2006; Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski, & Normand), while the rest explored experiences of the preschool years through adolescence. Of the five studies focused on toddler risky play, only three included caregivers’ responses and beliefs (Morrongiello, Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt; Morrongiello & Dawber; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski, & Normand). Thus, this study has attempted to investigate caregiver perceptions to better understand how toddler parents and teachers define risky play, what they perceive their role to be, and how these perceptions are formed.
This study intended to provoke parents and teachers through the use of 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. The remainder of this chapter includes the study’s discussion, limitations, and implications for future research and practice.

Discussion

The aim of this study was 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. Findings from this study hold the promise of making new contributions to the scholarship on toddler risky play in two ways. First, the findings suggest that risky play cannot be defined with a single definition. Second, influences on adult perceptions of risky play are situated within life experiences from childhood to adulthood. The discussion focuses on the nuances that emerged during the analysis of the interviews. The findings include (1) analyzing risky play is conflictual, (2) risky play is perceived to most often occur in the outdoors, and (3) defining risky play is context bound and personal. This discussion begins with the contribution of how risky play was defined, followed by the influences on parents’ and teachers’ analyses of risky play, and ends with the perceived physical context of risky play.

Through parent and teacher interviews, several definitions of risky play were exposed, each reflective of personal experiences, memories, and knowledges. Both parents and teachers recalled and described their engagement in risky play during childhood, which proved to have a strong influence on their present day definitions of risky play. This finding clearly illustrates the inimitability of individual and subjective experiences that shape how each participant uniquely defined risky play.
Previous research has attempted to investigate perceptions and practices of parents and teachers regarding risky play, indicating differences between mothers and fathers as well as differences between parents and teachers, (Morrongiello & Dawber, 1999; Simons & Conger, 2007; Morrongiello, Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt, 2006; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand, 2010; Hagan & Keubli, 2007; Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017); however, has not explored how teachers and parents personally define risky play. Instead, risky play literature often employs Stephenson’s (2003) and Sandseter’s (2007) definitions of risky play as foundational definitions in the field. These subjective definitions are functional as operational definitions; however, fail to reflect and represent the unique and personal experiences and perceptions of each individual who characterize the way they define risky play.

Several excerpts of participant interviews illustrated the participants situated definitions. For example, Ellen recollected numerous memories of risky play during her childhood that provided her with elements of her definition of risky play. Many of her childhood memories involved little to no supervision, as did the experiences of five teachers and parents. She now perceives risky play as something that happens in the absence of supervision. She also reflected back on her many childhood instances of risky play, noting that those instances were significant learning moments for her and worth the risk. This is also insightful of Ellen’s current definition of risky play, in that she believes risky play is the “center of learning.” Unlike the literature reported in chapter two, we see how Ellen’s experiences, as far back as childhood, have influenced the way she perceives and defines risky play now, as a parent. In examples described in this study, personal definitions of risky play are formed by the many experiences the participants were exposed to throughout their lives.
The influence of past experiences continued to be an apparent theme in the responses to almost every prompt and exchange with participants during the interviews. As participants expanded on their thoughts and practices regarding risky play, we begin to see, again, that individual experiences are significant determinants of how a teacher or parent analyzes risky play behaviors of their toddlers. Previous literature reports that experiences such as prior medically attended injuries (Morrongiello, Rothman, & Sandomierski, 2009) or exposure to media sources (Gill, 2007) affect the way parents view or intervene in risky play. Still, the current literature falls short in exploring adults’ perceptions at such an intimate level that uncover how deeply rooted context is in forming perceptions of risky play.

In this study, parents and teachers analyzed the degree of risky play based on three main aspects: (1) the role of the caregiver, (2) knowing the child, and (3) cultural influences. Each of these is 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). Through video stimulated recall interviews, teachers and parents considered the factors that guide their analysis of risky play, often encompassing experiences from their past.

The first and most prominent principle of analyzing risky play was how parents and teachers defined their roles, influenced by their caregiver psychology. As the developmental niche framework explains, caregiver psychology is “regulated by culture” and includes “commonly learned affective orientations that parents bring to their experience of parenting” (Super & Harkness, 1986, p. 556). For example, many parents proclaimed that it is their job to protect their children from getting hurt. We see that an emotional root of this protective factor
when Jamie said that “it hurts your heart to see your child get hurt”, or when Ellen referenced the “mama bear thing.” This perspective is similar to Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand’s (2010) findings that mothers’ responses to safety were dependent on “surgency”, or emotional reactivity. Still, Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand’s study does not present the voices and the deep expressions of parents who are tasked to confront analyzing risky play. In this study, it was important to illuminate the emotional conflicts that parents encountered when they acknowledged the benefit of risky play, while at the same time, having to contend with their “mama bear” sentiments. Similarly, it was found that teachers’ analyses of risky play are largely influenced by their pedagogical education and understanding of child development. They too, like parents, often felt conflicted during their analysis when benefits were present, yet they foresaw a possible injury. For example, Linda expressed this conflict during her interview by explaining that there is sometimes an initial reaction of fear, but it can be overcome by taking a breath and considering the intentions, purpose, and benefits of a toddler engaged in risky play. Without the pedagogical guidance to support her analysis, Linda’s ability, and that of all the teachers, to analytically evaluate the situation would have been obstructed by her initial reaction of fear and uncertainty. Likewise, Rooijen & Newstead (2017) reported that preschool teachers expressed that they allow risky play despite the deterrents because they are knowledgeable of the many benefits of risky play. This single study, though, is the only case that illustrates the influence of pedagogical knowledge on teacher analysis of risky play. In it, we are not able to see the many ways teacher pedagogical knowledge develops and influences teacher practice related to risky play (i.e., when to intervene, conflicting information on the needs, interests and abilities of young children). However, in this current study, the voices of the participants’ bring forth their memories and experiences to form a holistic perspective of their perceptions and
understandings of risky play. For instance, Rhonda was able to describe how her collaborations with Jennifer allowed her to become aware of the benefits of children playing with elongated materials that she previously felt uncomfortable allowing because of her fear of injury. In this example and others we begin to see exactly how Rhonda and the other teachers have come to analyze the cost-benefits of risky play.

Furthermore, it was discovered that both parents’ and teachers’ analyses of risky play are influenced by what they know about the child, including both personality and competencies. These perceptions and knowledge contributes to the current literature by acknowledging the influence of child qualities beyond gender on risky play (Hagan & Kuebli; Morrongiello, Zdzieborski & Normand, 2010). Rooijen and Newstead (2017) have reported that teachers are more likely to allow increased risk when they perceive a child as more resilient; however, this study delves into a deeper understanding of what “knowing the child” truly means for these participants. For example, parents and teachers explained that they considered the child’s personality and past experience to determine whether a child is capable of engaging in the risky play at hand. This study illustrates the many considerations of the parents and teachers regarding what they know about each individual child and the ways this knowledge informs their practice. However, unlike Simons and Conger (2007), Hagan and Kuebli (2007), Morrongiello, Zdzieborski and Normand (2010), and Morrongiello and Dawber (1999), the gender of the child did not seem to influence teachers’ or parents’ perceptions in this study. Participants claimed that they did not think about or analyze risky play differently depending on whether a female toddler or male toddler was engaged in risky play behaviors.

The third guiding principle of analyzing risky play for both parents and teachers was cultural influence. It was found that parents and teachers judge Western culture as becoming
more risk averse since their childhoods and that this is an influential factor as they analyze risk today as parents and teachers. The parents in this study recalled riding their bikes around town without adults, but that they do not let their children do the same. This is reflective of the current literature that has found that parents are afraid of both traffic and stranger dangers and therefore keep their children close and indoors (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; O’Brien & Smith, 2002; Allin, West, & Currry, 2014; Malone, 2007). The teacher participants reported that they felt the pressure of our risk averse society in their practices due to general perceptions as well as licensing regulations. This is also similar to several studies that have found that teachers identify regulations as a reason they feel unable to provide risky experiences for children (Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011; Rooijen & Newstead, 2017).

Still, the findings of this study begin to make visible a multi-dimensional influence of culture regarding risky play. In addition to the larger influence of Western culture, teacher and parent participants revealed that they have also been influenced by the smaller, more intimate culture of the laboratory school. The laboratory school embraces some of the values and practices of European and Scandinavian countries that regard risk as a right of children and, therefore, embrace risky play. Parents indicated that their baseline of risky play has changed to be more risk tolerant since attending the laboratory school. Teachers demonstrated the pedagogical understanding that has been inspired through their collaborations, curriculum explorations, and teacher trainings that the laboratory school values and ensures, illuminating the two components of the developmental niche in this particular context: cultural influences of childcare customs and psychologies. As Rogoff has explained through her concept of participatory appropriation, the educators of the laboratory school are likely to have changed their perceptions of risky play through their involvement with one another (Rogoff, 2008).
Current literature includes the bigger influence of our risk averse Western culture; however, this study begins to expose cultural influences, including the immediate cultural influences such as those of a childcare program.

Lastly, the participants perceived risky play to most commonly take place outside where more opportunities for risk are provided. This aligns with the risky play literature that reports risky play is more likely to take place outdoors, in natural environments (Stephenson, 2003). However, while the current literature explains how the manipulation factor of the outdoors allows for many risky play opportunities, this study explored the multi-layered influence of how childhood experiences have shaped parent and teacher perceptions of risk play. Many of the participants, for example, recalled childhood risky play scenarios while describing environments of natural elements (i.e. by the creek, in the garden, in the woods, and on neighborhood streets). Throughout all three findings, this study has exposed the importance and influence of participants’ past experiences in shaping their current day perceptions and understandings of risky play that has been limited in the research on young children’s risky play. Key concepts found in Brofenbrenner’s ecological systems and Rogoff’s participatory appropriation help to explain the multifaceted phenomenon of past and present contextual influences within this specific sample by revealing the interweaving of knowledges and experience that each participant brought forth from his/her own unique context to shape the way risky play in toddlerhood is perceived. Here, the voices of the parents and teachers were illuminated as explorations of the origin of how they came to define, analyze, and understand risky play emerged. In this sense, it contributes to the current literature by framing a new approach toward defining risky play that is situated in individual experiences informed by the histories, experiences, and knowledges that each person used to understand risky play.
Limitations

The limitations of this study include a homogeneous sample. The population of this study consisted of well-educated parents and teachers, including six participants obtaining a bachelor’s degree or higher, one teacher participant obtaining an associate’s degree, and the father participant did not indicate his education level. Due to the overall high education level of this participant population, it can be assumed that most participants were middle to upper class social-economical status. In addition, the sample included all white participants with the exception of one parent couple who immigrated to the United States from Trinidad prior to having children. The sample for this study is very typical of a university laboratory school that serves mostly university faculty and staff. Furthermore, all parent participants where from two-family households and consisted mostly of mothers; only one father participated. In analyzing the data and indicating findings, there was no distinct discovery regarding the single father participant compared to mother participants. It is important to note that the one father participant was, at times, difficult to hear and understand. His strong dialect and reserved demeanor created inaudible fragments of the audio recordings that may have altered data analysis in regards to distinguishable differences between fathers and mothers.

In being associated with the university, the laboratory school has access to many resources that may not be typical of other childcare and preschool settings. For example, the laboratory school faculty has recently participated in an international study tour where teachers and administrators were able to observe and study world renowned childcare practices. As the findings demonstrate, teacher knowledge influences one’s perceptions of risky play. The teachers of the laboratory school had more sophisticated understandings and unique appreciation for risky play than is typical in other community-based preschool settings. The teachers’ education and
mindsets regarding risky play were likely transferred by teachers to parents as they jointly participated in discussions and observations of children’s risky play. Therefore, this study’s population is overall more knowledgeable and familiar with risky play and consequently, is not representative of parent and teacher perceptions, more generally.

Finally, researchers may view the small sample size as a limitation; however, this study by design intended to target a small population in order to thoroughly explore and capture participants’ multifaceted perceptions. The small sample sized fulfilled the aim of the study by allowing time to delve into parents’ and teachers’ responses, reactions, and reflections of toddler risky play. Overall, the findings from this study captured the “richness and holism, with strong potential for revealing complexity” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10) of the perceptions of toddler parents and toddler teachers and serves as a catalyst for future research and practice.

**Future Implications for Research and Practice**

**Implications for future research.** This study has identified the need for more studies of toddler risky play, in general, as well as the inclusion of parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of toddler risky play. To address the limitations of this study, future studies should consider replicating the research design with a more diverse population that includes fathers, varying levels of teacher knowledge and expertise, and racial and socio-economic diversity. Scholarship on risky play would benefit by replicating this research studies in communities other than university settings as well as including more father participants in order to investigated potential differences and/or similarities between mothers’ and fathers’ personal histories and experiences that may influence their perceptions. In addition, using a static or universal definition of risky play may not serve the meanings of risky play well; in order to design and consider the concept
of parents’ and teachers’ perception, future research may have to include the context-based and subject-specific definitions and meanings of risky play.

A small percentage of participants in this study indicated their awareness and consideration of other children’s presence in a risky play scenario while analyzing risky play behaviors. Though the data of the current study could not support an entire finding regarding other’s presence, it seems that this may be a preliminary trend that should be further explored in future research studies. Future research may benefit by investigating parents’ and teachers’ perceptions and analysis of toddler risky play while bearing in mind the presence of other toddlers in risky play scenarios.

**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. During her interview, Jamie expresses, “…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 even reflects, “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 caregivers to be prompted to think about their experiences of risky play, how they perceive and understand risky play, and how these knowledges transfer to their practice.
Chapter Summary

The study was designed 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 from their childhood and reflected on how they perceived risky play and how their perceptions have developed. In doing so, three over-arching findings were prominent, 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 really understand practices regarding scaffolding and supervision of childhood risky play.

Though the methodologies of this study allowed for deep exploration of genuine and raw reactions and reflections, the sample was small and homogeneous. Still, the study fulfilled its purpose and contributed to the limited literature related to parent and teacher perceptions of toddler risky play.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX
Appendix A

Teacher Consent Form

Title: Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Toddler Risky Play in an Outdoor Setting

INTRODUCTION
You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do. The aim of this descriptive study is to explore what toddler teachers and parents think about risky play, how they define it, and their reflections about their responses to toddlers engaged in risky play.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
In a previous study titled Classroom and Playground Physical Activity Levels and Behaviors in Toddlers, play and activity behaviors of children of your classroom have been video recorded. The original purpose of the video recordings were to determine how children’s play and activity behaviors are shaped by their environment. The study activities took place in your child’s classroom and on the playground to determine what role the classroom, playground, and associated characteristics contributed to the manner in which children play and are active.

I am asking you to (1) complete the demographical form included in this packet, and (2) consent to participate in one interview that will include selected video clips of your classroom child’s playground play from last summer. I will choose three short clips (~1-2 minutes each) of a child from your classroom from his/her original video recordings to present to you during your individual interview. Selected clips of children from these recordings will be used to stimulate your memories, feelings and/or perceptions of what you consider is risky play. Your interview will include one face-to-face conversation guided by open-ended questions in a private setting of your choice (e.g., your home, my advisor’s research lab on campus, the ELC, or a private room on campus such as a reserved library room, or office). I will audio record and take field notes during the interviews. None of your personal information will be revealed outside of the interviews. Your participation will take approximately one hour.

Data from this study will be presented at professional meetings and included in professional writings published in journals and/or books. Data from this study will be destroyed three years after the close of this study.

INCENTIVE
You will receive a $20 gift card for your participation. Should you end the interview before it is completed, you will still receive your gift card.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks other than those encountered in everyday life. If you experience any discomfort (e.g., feel stressed or anxious) during the interview, you can stop the interview.

BENEFITS
It is expected that this study may enhance the knowledge of adults’ perceptions about toddler risky play, which is lacking in the literature, subsequently enriching our understanding of child development, teacher practice, and parenting.

CONFIDENTIALITY
In order to protect your identity and privacy rights as a participant, systems to protect confidentiality will be followed. You will be provided sealed envelopes along with the cover letter, consent form, and demographic form. Forms will be turned into the ELC front desk upon completion inside the sealed envelope. Each day, I will collect completed forms in their sealed envelopes to store in a locked cabinet on campus.

In addition, pseudonyms will be used. Each packet containing a cover letter, consent form, and demographic information will be assigned a number. For each participant, a pseudonym will be assigned and included on all transcriptions and included in any professional presentations or publications. Likewise, should you use the real name of the child in your video clip, a pseudonym will be assigned to that child. The chart that includes real names with pseudonyms will be stored in a locked compartment, separate from all data.

All collected data will be secured on a password-protected computer and external hard drive and stored in a locked cabinet on campus as well as on a secure server managed by UTK. The findings from this study and related data will be used in professional publications and presentations.

The completion of the collaborative institutional training initiative (CITI) as well as a Pledge of Confidentiality will be signed by myself and all faculty advisors.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you would like to have a meeting in order to clarify some information about the study such as the procedures or participants’ rights, then I will organize an informal meeting in order to answer your questions. If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Megan Chaney, at mchaney2@vols.utk.edu, and 419-953-4747.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at utkirb@utk.edu or (865) 974-7697.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be kept for analysis. However, if you request that I delete your data records, I will respect your decision and delete the data, without penalty. All data will be destroyed within 3 years from the close of the study.

CONSENT
I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

__________________________________________________________________________  _______________________________________________________________________
(Signature)                                                                                                          (Date)

__________________________________________________________________________
(Printed Name)
Appendix B

Teacher Participant Demographics Form

Name: _________________________________________________________________
Age: ____________________________

Identify your Cultural Status (Please check all categories that best describe you):
  _____ Black/African American
  _____ European American
  _____ Hispanic/Latino American
  _____ Native American/Indian
  _____ Asian/Pacific Islander
  _____ Biracial/Multiracial/Multiheritage
  _____ Immigrant/Immigrant Heritage
  _____ OTHER (Explain): _________________________________________________

Highest level of education you have obtained: _________________________________
Teaching degree/certification/licensing: _________________________________
Years of experience in ECE__________________________________________
Appendix C

Parent Consent

Title: Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Toddler Risky Play in an Outdoor Setting

INTRODUCTION
You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do. The aim of this descriptive study is to explore what toddler teachers and parents think about risky play, how they define it, and their reflections about their responses to toddlers engaged in risky play.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
In a previous study titled Classroom and Playground Physical Activity Levels and Behaviors in Toddlers, you have given consent to video record your child’s play behaviors. The original purpose of the video recordings were to determine how children’s play and activity behaviors are shaped by their environment. The study activities took place in your child’s classroom and on the playground to determine what role the classroom, playground, and associated characteristics contribute to the manner in which children play and are active.

I am asking you to (1) give consent for me to use these video recordings for interview purposes with you and your child’s teacher(s), (2) complete the demographical form included in this packet, and (3) consent to participate in one interview that will include selected video clips of your child’s playground play from last summer. I will choose three short clips (~1-2 minutes each) of your child from his/her original video recordings to present to you and your child’s Summer 2017 teacher, should she consent to participate in her own interview. Selected clips of your child from these recordings will be used to stimulate your memories, feelings and perceptions of what you consider risky play. Your interviews will include one face-to-face conversation guided by open-ended questions in a private setting of your choice (e.g., your home, my advisor’s research lab on campus, the ELC, or a private room on campus such as a reserved library room, or office). I will audio record and take field notes during the interview. None of your personal information will be revealed outside of the interviews. Your participation will take approximately one hour.

Data from this study will be presented at professional meetings and included in professional writings published in journals and or/books. Data from this study will be destroyed three years after the close of this study.

INCENTIVE
Each parent will receive a $20 gift card for participating. Should you end the interview before it is completed, you will still receive your gift card.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks other than those encountered in everyday life. If you experience any discomfort (e.g., feel stressed or anxious) during the interview, you can stop the interview.
**BENEFITS**

It is expected that this study may enhance the knowledge of adults’ perceptions about toddler risky play, which is lacking in the literature, subsequently enriching our understanding of child development, teacher practice, and parenting.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

In order to protect your identity and privacy rights as a participant, systems to protect confidentiality will be followed. You will be provided sealed envelopes along with the cover letter, consent form, and demographic form. Forms will be turned into the ELC front desk upon completion inside the sealed envelope. Each day, I will collect completed forms in their sealed envelopes to store in a locked cabinet on campus.

In addition, pseudonyms will be used. Each packet containing a cover letter, consent form, and demographic information will be assigned a number. For each participant, a pseudonym will be assigned and included on all transcriptions and included in any professional presentations or publications. Likewise, should you use the real name of the child in your video clip, a pseudonym will be assigned to that child. The chart that includes real names with pseudonyms will be stored in a locked compartment, separate from all data.

All collected data will be secured on a password-protected computer and external hard drive and stored in a locked cabinet on campus as well as on a secure server managed by UTK. The findings from this study and related data will be used in professional publications and presentations, however, no video recordings of your child will be used without your explicit, written consent.

The completion of the collaborative institutional training initiative (CITI) as well as a Pledge of Confidentiality will be signed by myself and all faculty advisors.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you would like to have a meeting in order to clarify some information about the study such as the procedures or participants’ rights, then I will organize an informal meeting in order to answer your questions. If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Megan Chaney, at mchaney2@vols.utk.edu, and 419-953-4747.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at utkirb@utk.edu or (865) 974-7697.

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be kept for analysis. However, if you request that I delete your data records, I will respect your decision and delete the data, without penalty. All data will be destroyed within 3 years from the close of the study.
CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

___________________________________  ___________________________________
(Signature)  (Date)  (Signature)  (Date)

___________________________________
(Printed Name)  (Printed Name)
Appendix D

Parent Participant Demographics Form

Name: _______________________________________________________________

Gender: _____ Female    _____ Male    Age:____________________________

Ethnicity/Race:
   _____ Black/African American
   _____ European American
   _____ Hispanic/Latino American
   _____ Native American/Indian
   _____ Asian/Pacific Islander
   _____ Biracial/Multiracial/Multiheritage
   _____ Immigrant/Immigrant Heritage
   _____ OTHER (Explain): _____________________________________________

Highest level of education you have obtained: ____________________________

Occupation: ____________________________

Marital status: _______________________

Number of children living in your home: ___________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Sex of child</th>
<th>Age of child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Living Community:
   _____ Rural
   _____ Suburban
   _____ Urban
Appendix E

Explanation Letter

Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Toddler Risky Play in an Outdoor Setting

Megan Chaney
419-953-4747
mchaney2@vols.utk.edu

February 21, 2018

Dear Parents and Teachers:

If we have not already met, you have probably seen me around the ELC. My name is Megan Chaney and I am one of the ELC’s graduate assistants. I am currently a second year Master’s student in the Child and Family Studies program. As a graduation requirement, I will be completing a thesis that will explore the perceptions of teachers and parents regarding the risky play of toddlers. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a research study entitled: *Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Toddler Risky Play in an Outdoor Setting*. The specific details of the study are provided in the attached consent form. Please contact me with any questions concerning this study. Thank you for your consideration.

Warmly,

Megan Chaney
## Appendix F

**BOP-IT Video Clips Chart for VSRI**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Clip Name</th>
<th>Clip Duration</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Video Clip shown to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| BOPIT 01-P1     | 3:45-5:17     | Lea begins to climb bear cave independently. A teacher observes as Lea engages with the bear cave. As Lea reaches the half-way-up point, she pauses, looks around, and stares at the cave. During the pause, the teacher verbally encourages Lea then guides her foot to the next rock for her to continue her way up. When she reaches the top, she stands up, looks over the edges, then finds her way back down the other side, lowering her body down using the rocks. | Susan  
Rhonda  
Jennifer |
| BOPIT 01-P1     | 15:38-16:04   | Lea is playing with a measuring cup in a mud puddle. She fills the cup with muddy water and proceeds to drink the muddy water from the cup. The videographer attempts to stop Lea from drinking the water. Lea immediately drops the cup. | Susan |
| BOPIT 11-P2     | 1:45-1:55     | Bentley takes off running, up the uneven steps that lead to the gazebo. He is wearing clunky rain boots that catch corner of one of the last steps. He stumbles slightly but never falls and | Linda  
Jamie |
Bentley and two friends are standing and stomping on a table that is about 12 inches high, outside on rubber mulch. Bentley is wearing clunky rubber boots and he is carrying a thick, foot-long stick that comes to a point at the end. His friends begin to jump off of the table and Bentley joins in, still carrying his stick. As he climbs back onto the table, his boot slips and he falls to his knees but gets back up and continues to jump.

A long, flat board was rested on top of two round, thick logs. As Isaac took a step onto the board, the board quickly slips off of the side of one of the logs. Isaac falls, his hand close to being pinched between the plank and the long, shocked and confused about what had happened. He stands back for a couple seconds, now looking at the board and single log that resemble a teeter-totter. He approaches the ‘teeter-totter’ and begins to walk up the slope, across the middle of the log, and back down the other side. He maintains his balance as the board shifts to the other side. He repeats the actions a second time, this time falling as the board shifts.
| BOPIT 19-P1 | 17:17-18:05 | Julia and a Reece each hold a four foot hose extension on opposite ends as they run around the garden area. A third and fourth friend follow, wanting to join in. The fourth friend, Logan, cries “mine” as he grabs ahold of the hose on Julia’s end. He attempts to tug the hose away from Julia and pry her fingers off of the hose. She screams in protest. The three continue to run in circles with the hose as they fight over who gets to hold it. As Julia and Logan fight over the one end, Rhonda, who has been thoughtfully observing, begins to approach the situation. As she is approaching, Reece begins swinging the hose near Julia and Logan’s faces. Rhonda quickly runs in to grab the end of the hose. Logan and Julia continue to fight about who gets to hold the hose and Rhonda takes the hose from Logan’s hand, declaring, “Julia was holding that.” Julia and Ryan continue to run around the playground each hold and end of the hose extension. | Ellen, Rhonda, Jennifer |
Appendix G

Interview Guide

1. Thank
2. Explain Purpose
3. Explain interview-layout, VSR videos, no right or wrong answers

History
1. What comes to mind when you think about risky play, in general?
2. Can you tell me about a time in your own child when a play situation could have been considered risky?
3. What would you have changed in that situation so that it was no longer risky?
4. How do you think societal perceptions of risky play changed since you were a child?
5. How have your ideas of risky play changed?

Present Parenting/Teaching
1. What goes on in your mind as your child/children is/are about to or is/are partaking in risky play?
2. In what ways would you consider risky play to have benefits? Can you give an example?
3. What has/does influenced your perceptions of risky play the most?
   **Bring in influencing factors- gender, age, # of children, etc.

Additional
1. Is there anything you would like to add about risky play or to anything we have talked about?

Notes:

Videos:
- These are a tool!
- Transitioning between history and present is a good time to use video clips

Other:
- Chronological flow
- Restate things- do not narrow down questions
- Become more of a listener than a questioner

Probing phrases:
- “Tell me more about that”
- “I heard you say…. Tell me more about that”
Appendix H

Open Coding

- Conflict- What is risky? It depends.
- Concern for “other” contributes to risk
- Modeling/peer influence
- Respecting others’ perception and culture of risk
- Risk play is fun
- Push-pull (emotional)
- No risky might be riskier
- Long term developmental advantages
- Society has become more fearful, cautious
- Strength of anticipation of injury
- Parents set rules to protect
- In some ways playgrounds are riskier
- Other ways playgrounds are safer
- Risky play goes beyond just physical
- Risky play is physical
- Risky play is an essential part of development
- Children deserve risky play; it is their right
- Technology prevents risky play but is also risky in its own way
- Teacher’s education
- Parental emotional piece
- Happens outside
- Degree of risky depends
- Adult intervention
- Controlled, micro-managed
- Assessing risky play requires….
- Personal life experiences and histories
- Birth order
- Parents want their children to have the same experiences they had as children
- Freedom
- Lack of supervision
- Child’s personality
- Child’s abilities and competencies
- Gender differences
- Social influences
- Trust/relationship component
- Involves injury, harm, crying
- Risk-benefit analytical assessment
- Risky play is common/inevitable
### Appendix I

#### Axial Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Codes</th>
<th>Axial Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Conflict- What is risky? It depends.</td>
<td>Determining the degree of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Concern for “other” contributes to risk</td>
<td>risky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Modeling/peer influence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respecting others’ perception and culture of risk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Risk play is fun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Push-pull (emotional)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• No risky might be riskier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Long term developmental advantages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Society has become more fearful, cautious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strength of anticipation of injury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents set rules to protect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In some ways playgrounds are riskier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other ways playgrounds are safer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Risky play goes beyond just physical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Risky play is physical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Risky play is an essential part of development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children deserve risky play; it is their right</td>
<td>Risky Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children are capable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technology prevents risky play but is also risky in its own way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher’s education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parental emotional piece</td>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Happens outside</td>
<td>Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Degree of risky depends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adult intervention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Controlled, micro-managed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assessing risky play requires….</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal life experiences and histories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Birth order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents want their children to have the same experiences they had as</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children</td>
<td>Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Freedom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of supervision</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J

Data Displays

Conflict!

Psychology of Caregiver
- Values risky play
- Protect, provide opportunity
- Children have a right to risk
- Assessment take thought and practice
- Happens outside
- Risk-benefit
- Injuries
- Beneficial
- Its fun
- Happens all the time
- Freedom
- Center of learning
- ZPD
- Lack of risky is riskier observations

Customs
- Lab School values risky
- Home cultures impact school community
- Provide place for risky play
- Teacher development

Environment
- Teacher collaboration and communication
  (fabric example)
  - Heights
  - Props, elements, materials, tools
  - Natural elements
  - Lack of supervision
  - Presence of others (Bentley with stick)
  - The physical setting cannot be judged as risky on its own. Its judged as risky when an individual enters and does not have the ability to handle the environment

School philosophies
- values natural spaces
- Parents want children to have same outside experiences

Supervision decreases risks. Teachers prefer to stand back, supervise less. Regulations require supervision
- Trusting child
- Teacher education
Megan Chaney was born in Fort Loramie, Ohio to the parents of Dave and Teresa Chaney. She is the oldest of five children. She attended Fort Loramie Elementary, Middle, and High School in Fort Loramie, Ohio. Megan completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology in 2015 at Ball State University in Muncie, IN. During her time at Ball State University, Megan was involved in Sport Psychology research and worked with infants and toddlers at a local daycare. These two activities served as a catalyst of Megan’s interest in child development; specifically physical and motor development which later developed into a more specific interest of risky play. She accepted a graduate assistantship at the University Tennessee in Knoxville in the department of Child and Family Studies at UT to attain her Master of Science degree in 2018. While at the University of Tennessee, Megan focused her studies on forest schools, early childhood education, and risky play. Megan will put her knowledge of this field to use while serving as the Assistant Director of Wauhatchie School, a forest school in Chattanooga, TN.