

Parents blind to children's risk taking & skilled risk management

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Researchers at the University of Warwick and the Research Unit for General Practice in Copenhagen have found that parents are often totally unaware of just how often their children take risks and just how good they are at managing that risk.

The researchers found children indulge in a great deal of thoughtful and considered risk taking that is invisible to adults. On average the researchers found that while children may make misjudgements, they do not, as is sometimes assumed, 'blindly' throw themselves into risk-taking behaviours.

The study looked at children aged 10-12 in a Copenhagen suburb. They were observed for 8 months to see how they engaged with risk away from their parents in their everyday life at school, at an after-school centre and in their local community.

The researchers found many examples of how children actively engage with risk and daily manage situations that involve chance and risk. They actively decided how much risk to expose themselves to, avoided harmful actions, made assessments of their own bodily capacity and gauged risk in accordance with it; and even successfully negotiated levels of risks with other children by setting and amending the rules and physical limits to their games and activities.

One particular example observed as a popular games called 'Hill' played almost every break-time. The game took place on an asphalted slope

framed by two brick walls in the middle of the playground. Every break time one child would be the ‘catcher’, and would try to catch other children as they ran at high speed across the slope between two safe zones at either end of the slope. This is one typical conversation about the game:

Kim: Who wants to play ‘Hill’?

Chris: I cannot be bothered if you are allowed to push.

Tommy : Yes! You are not allowed to push.

Jan: No, then it’s not fun.

Chris: But, I’m not bothered [joining in the playing] if you are allowed to push so hard, that you get your head down in the asphalt.

Andy: No, you are not allowed to push that hard.

Jan: If you are not allowed to push then there is no real challenge in it.

Kim: Let’s vote about it? Who votes that you are allowed to push?

All the boys except Chris put their hand up.

Michael: OK, you are allowed to push. But shouldn’t we say that you have to hold firmly in the clothes when one pushes so they don’t fall.

Chris: OK, if you hold onto the clothes then I would like to [participate in the game].

Tommy: You are not allowed to push in such a way, that there are two children against one, who pushes.

The boys, still in the classroom, then enthusiastically discussed how hard and in which ways they were allowed to push each other and at the same time ensuring the pleasure of fun they associated with the game:

The researchers' observations suggest that physical risk was less common among the girls studied but that that girls took more "emotional risks" for instance making the first move to form friendships.

In general when boys played with girls they acted more carefully and considerately than they would do in boy-to-boy interactions because they perceived girls as generally more vulnerable than boys. In the girls' accounts, they did not necessarily see themselves as more vulnerable than the boys but would, on the other hand, frequently express their wish not to be involved in rough play. Both when girls played with each other and especially when the girls played with boys, they took great pains to control the level of violence of their own actions and to express their own limits.

University of Warwick Professor Pia Christensen said:

"Many parents would be amazed if they realised just how often their children take risks and just how good they are at managing that risk. This risk taking helps them gain a clear understanding of the strengths and limits of their bodies and prepares them for interaction with the real world beyond the often over protected home"

The research has just been published on line in *Sociology of Health & Illness* Vol. 30 No. 1 2008 and is entitled "Jumping off and being careful: children's strategies of risk management in everyday life" by Professor Pia Christensen from the University of Warwick's Institute of Education y and Miguel Romero Mikkelsen from the Research Unit for General Practice in Copenhagen.

Source: University of Warwick

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