



Benefit-Risk Assessments with Children

Kate Stone & Christina Lipitkas
Kindergarten Teachers
Gowrie SA, Thebarton

At Gowrie SA Thebarton, the children in our kindergarten have been exploring benefit-risk assessments through their play experiences, both formally and informally. Exploration of risk in play has unfolded alongside children's and educators' growing appreciation for loose parts and nature play (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015).

Educators value children's right to a rich learning environment where they can express their preferences, voice their ideas and be heard. Children are viewed as *"active participants and decision makers"* in their learning (EYLF, 2009, p.9), and as such, they are supported to engage in the use of benefit-risk assessments when engaging in risky play. This partnership between educators and children allows for educators *"to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn"* (EYLF, 2009, p.9) as they watch, wait and give children the space needed to explore their own capabilities and engage in the risk assessment process.

Educators highly value the need and right children have to learn in natural environments. We are committed to establishing environments which provide children with the opportunity

to become the best learners that they can be. The importance of children's engagement in nature moved to the forefront of our thinking after many of our educators viewed 'Project Wild Thing', a UK initiative working towards getting children and their families back into nature. Considering this, and our commitment to sustainability, we incorporated the use of natural and reused materials, such as collections of branches, bricks, recycled tyres and lengths of timber for building and climbing, into our program. At the same time, benefit-risk assessments support our community to make informed decisions around these types of materials and learning environments.

Informal Benefit Risk Assessments through Play

Our value for natural environments exposes children to risks involved in the natural world. As we observe children's learning we pose questions to them to provoke and challenge their thinking and understanding of the risks they are confronted with or may face. This supports the development of children's ability to identify potential risks, hazards and benefits associated with their explorations, and make informed decisions taking these factors into consideration. In doing this, as they weigh up the benefits and risks involved in their actions and ideas, children practise hypothesizing, predicting, experimenting and investigating.



In our programs, opportunities for these discussions occur daily, whether it is in the moment, when risk becomes visible, when children are actually doing risky things, or during group times when risks are discussed.

Key words that are used in conversations with children include 'benefit', 'dangerous', 'safe', 'hazard', 'risk', 'manage', 'plan', 'explore', 'safety' and 'strategies'.

As children's understanding of risk becomes stronger through these informal conversations, they progress into exploring formal benefit-risk assessments to further strengthen their understanding of assessing risk in collaboration with peers and educators. Educators model and pose questions to provoke the children's thinking as they explore risks and challenges in their play, asking questions such as, 'Have you assessed the risks?', 'Do you feel safe?', 'What things could you check for to keep yourself safe?', 'How will you keep yourself safe as you...?', 'How do you know the people around you will be safe?'. Educators collaborate with small groups of children to collate their thinking into formally written benefit-risk assessments about common risky play explorations such as tree climbing and building with bricks. In recent play, children were encouraged to contribute to and engage in this process, in their own capable way.

As we continue to engage children in formal and informal benefit-risk assessments, we believe that exploring and

extending children's learning about risk supports them to become capable learners throughout the whole of their lives. It builds on their skills and capacity to assess risk, problem solve, collaborate with others, document their thinking, challenge their own ideas, as well as those of others, recognize risk in other aspects of their lives, and make informed choices and decisions.

“Children are viewed as competent learners – their natural curiosity and plasticity, their desire to communicate and relate with other people and their desire to grow all offer a rich potential for strong and powerful development”

(Ebbeck, Ebbeck, & Wan Kam, 2010, p.10).

References:

- Council of Australian Governments, 2009, *Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework*, Canberra ACT: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- Daly, L and Beloglovsky, M, 2015, *Loose parts. Inspiring play in young children*, St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Ebbeck, F, Ebbeck, M & Kam, S, 2010, *Reggio Emilia in Practice: An approach to Creativity in Early Childhood Education*, Hong Kong: Kandy Publishing Co.