Risk:

Risky to Take or Risky to Ignore?

Amy Nicol
amy.nicol@gmail.com

Abstract: While the importance of risk-taking in the outdoors has been researched and recognised, we are also living in a society plagued by risk anxiety. The research set out to find out whether, given this anxiety, the recognised importance of risk-taking is being translated into practice in our early childhood centres. Specifically, the research asked: "Are we supporting children's risk-taking in the outdoors, and how are we doing this?"This case study, conducted in a room of an early childhood centre in AoteoroaNew Zealand which caters for children aged between 4½ and 5 years, looked into what ways parents and teachers support children's risk-taking in the outdoors.Eight parents, two teachers and eightchildren participated in the study. The action research methodology used questionnaires and face-to-face interviews.

The main findings of theresearch are that parents and teachers do support children's risk-taking in the outdoors. Adults support children's risk-taking by using strategies such as supervision, support and encouragement, and through providing a variety of risks in areas of height, speed, water, impact and body mastery. The research also identified that most of the adult participants' views paralleled thestatement "Acceptable risk is where a child learns and develops from taking a risk, but not getting hurt in any way, i.e. physically, mentally or emotionally".Implications for practice are that there needs to be more education surrounding the benefits of free exploration in risk-taking, the different forms risk-taking can take, especially "smaller" risks such as building a tall sandcastle, and lastly the role nature can play in providing for risk-taking.

Key Words:risk-taking, risk, outdoors, case study

Introduction

> There is always a certain risk to being alive and if you are more alive there is more risk. (Ibsen)

We are living in a society plagued by *risk anxiety* (Beck, 1993, as cited in Tovey, 2007).While the importance of *risk-taking* in the outdoors has been recognised,the question still remains: "Are we supporting young children's risk-taking in the outdoors, and how are we doing this?" The importance of this question lies within the overwhelming evidence linking risk-taking to key areas of development, including physical, emotional, social and spiritual development (Greenfield, 2003, 2004; Tovey, 2007).Stephenson's (2003) research highlights this question because she found that it is often the adult's reactions and attitudes that satisfy children's desires for risky play more than the actual experience. Therefore, the practical importance of collating this information comes from the recognition that adults' viewpoints and interests play a large part in the development of children's safe risk-taking, and also influence the sort of risks the children take.

This paper will first review the substantial debate within the literature as to what amounts to a risk, and subsequently what a risk looks like, why children should engage in risk-taking, and what parents' and teachers' roles should be. It will then describe and discuss research conducted in an early childhood centre in Aoteoroa New Zealand. The ultimate goal of the research was to develop recommendations for change and improvement to centre practices, so that parents and teachers can provide more opportunities for safe risk-taking.

A Review of Past Research

What is risk-taking and what does it look like?

The perceptions of risk-taking are varied; it is seen differently across different cultures, socio-economic groups, stages in one's life span, and gender (Greenfield, 2004; Little &Wyver, 2010). Because of this, risk-taking should be regarded as a subjective phenomenon (Gill, 2007). Although this is true, many researchers agree that risk-taking is about being on the borderline of safe and unsafe, which occurs through attempting something that has an uncertain outcome (Little, 2006; Stephenson, 2003; Tovey, 2007). Stephenson (2003) also adds a third element to what she believes makes an experience risky: overcoming fear.

> The perceptions of risk taking are varied; it is seen differently across cultures, socio-economic groups, stages in one's life span, and gender. (Greenfield, 2004; Little &Wyver, 2010)

It is important to distinguish between a *hazard* and a *risk*. Stephenson (2003) defined a hazard as any situation where there is an inherent danger of death or serious injury, whereas a risk is a situation where there is a balance between safety and challenge and the children are in no danger of serious injury. This is in clear counterpoint to Lindon (1999, as cited in Tovey, 2007), who states that a hazard is a physical situation that could offer harm and a risk as being the possibility that the hazard will be realised and injury will result. These two views match in their definition of a hazard but vary wildly when considering risk-taking: oneportrays risk as a stand-alone concept, while the other defines it as an extension of a hazard.

> A risk is a situation where there is a balance between safety and challenge and the children are in no danger of serious injury (Stephenson, 2003).

If Stephenson's (2003) distinction between a risk and a hazard is taken to be correct, then her definitions raise another point; namely, due to the differing abilities of children, which are affected by a range of factors including age and prior experiences, then what for one child may be a risk, for another may be a hazard (Stine, 1997, as cited in Stephenson, 2003). This is why it is important for teachers and parents to have a firm grasp of children's development and to plan accordingly so that risk-taking stays just that – a risk, not a hazard. This may not be that hard to do, as Little and Wyver (2010) argue that although children actively seek out activities that offer them a sense of challenge, they are still conscious of their abilities and show caution when approaching activities they feel are above their ability range.

Why should children engage in risk-taking in the outdoors?

Risk-taking in the outdoors, or the absence of risk-taking by children, can have both short-term and long-term effects. Moss and Petrie (2002, as cited in Tovey, 2007) state that risk-taking is an innate human desire; it is something we all engage in as we strive to find the balance between the positive and negative outcomes of our actions. A short-term effect of risk-taking for children is that an action provides instant feedback in the form of consequences, both from success and failure. This instant feedback allows for adjustments of techniques to be made (Tovey, 2007). Long-term effects of the absence of risk-taking are that children who grow up not experiencing negative consequences from their risk-takingwill show poorer risk judgement in the future (Little &Wyver, 2010). There is also a short-term effect because children will seek out and create their own risks and challenges if they are not provided with them. This is dangerous because children do not consider safety, leaving them exposed to greater risks and opportunities for injury (Gill, 2007; Greenfield, 2004; Walsh, 1993, as cited in Stephenson, 2003). It is these risks with too many negative outcomes that can lead to children feeling insecure, unhappy, threatened and endangered (Greenfield, 2003, 2004).

> Risk-taking is an innate human desire. (Moss & Petrie, 2002)

Children should engage in outdoor experiences in risk-taking because as well as its links to many key areas of development, risk-taking provides self-esteem as children build an image of themselves as courageous, exploratory, confident and successful (Stephenson, 2003). Risk-taking in the outdoors has the potential to produce positive outcomes for children's development because it allows for personal growth through allowing children to show their capability. This is because risk-taking requires them to make instant judgements about the danger and safety involved, and also requires forethought and planning. Because all decisions and therefore the outcome is reliant on the child's decision and judgement skills, success can only be attributed to them (Dickson, 2005; Tovey, 2007). This opportunity for control is provided by the outdoors because, by its unique nature, the outdoorsis never the same and is always unpredictable, and so it is hard to plan for (Dickson, 2005; Greenfield, 2010).

Teachers'and parents' roles.

Gill (2007) stated that in the past 30 years there has been an increase in adult supervision and control in children's lives as adults view children at risk from a variety of societal factors. This is at odds with the statistics, which show we are safer now than at any other point in human history. Instead of this increased supervision, Dickson (2005) advocates for *risk-management*. This is when significant adults in children's lives work proactively to engage children in safe risks, and work towards increasing the probability of positive outcomes. For example, adults can provide acceptable challenges that support children's safety while allowing for risk byproviding a range of heavy loose materials, ropes, differing swing attachments, a digging area, differing terrain, bikes and materials for a range of obstacle courses as well as open spaces for children to run (Greenfield, 2004; Stephenson, 2003). Providing access to both equipment and open spaces can easily be attained by visiting the local park. Although Dickson (2005) argues for a proactive approach to risk-taking, research by Stephenson (2003) has resulted in an alternate view, which states that it is the teacher's reactions and attitudes that satisfy children's desire for physical and risky play in the outdoors more so than the experiences the teacher may provide.

> In the past 30 years there has been in increase in adult supervision and control in children's lives.(Gill, 2007)

In conclusion, risk-taking is a highly subjective phenomenon, but research has highlighted that it is fundamental to children's holistic development. In order to teach children to be able to accurately assess risks, significant adults in their lives need to actively use strategies to provide children with clear information on what the consequences are for risk-taking. And, although there are sometimes negative consequences of risk-taking, activities that involve some risk should still be supported and desired. It is especially important to provide activities that raise children's *risk-awareness* in the early years because some research shows the children's risk-awareness lessens as they grow older (Little &Wyver, 2010).

Methodology

The current research employed a case study methodology. A case study is a study of a social phenomenon, that is carried out within the social system or setting in which it is observed (Lambert, 2006; Swanborn, 2010). For the research, the case study was looking at the social phenomenon of risk-taking in the social setting of an early childhood centre in AoteoroaNew Zealand. A case study is used when the aim is to gather a range of opinions, attitudes and values and seeks to gain an overview of the contrasting views held by those affected or involved in the phenomenon. This justifies thechosen research methodology because my aim was to generate insights into the differing perspectives on risk-taking. My research question was "Are we supporting children's risk-taking in the outdoors, and how are we doing this?", and the goal of the research was togroup data and identify any trends so that I could develop recommendations for future practice (Lambert, 2006; Swanborn, 2010).

Research setting.

This research was carried out within an all-day childcare and learning centre in Auckland, New Zealand. The centre is located in a relatively high socio-economic area with predominantly European, Indian and Asian ethnic children attending.

The centre is split into six rooms. Theresearch was conducted in the room catering for children aged four-and-a-half to five years old. This room has a roll of 18 children (with 31 parents) andtwo teachers. A special feature of this room is that it has an outdoor area of its own. This area consists of a non-movable playground, a sand pit, a flying fox, small movable boxes and planks, and a medium-sized turf area.

Research methods.

The research employed two research tools: surveying of parents and teachers, and face-to-face interviews with children. The questionnaire asked for both quantitative and qualitative information, with a mixture of open-ended, yes/no and listing questions. The questionnaire was designed to cater for those parents with limited English, but also to allow for participants to express themselves using their own words. Questionnaires allow for the gathering of a range of information including a deeper understanding of people's perspectives (Anderson, 1998). Because the aim of the research was to understand parents' and teachers' viewpoints on risk-taking, questionnaires were an appropriate methodology.The short time frame of the research and sometimes limited willingness of participants, however, meant that pilot questionnaires could not be used and the data collected only represented a small sample of viewpoints.These constraints have imposed some limitations on the research findings.

The aim of the face-to-face interviews with the children was to find out what they considered to be their favourite risk to take in the outdoors.This method was suitable as it could be conducted in a safe place in the context of the children's everyday play, and answering was optional.

Participants.

Invited to participate were the teachers and parents of the four-and-a-half to five year old class. From there participants were self-selected; i.e. those who returned completed consent forms confirming their participation became part of the research. Eleven parents and two teachers gave consent and so were given the questionnaire. Both of the teachers returned their completed questionnaires, but only eight of the 11 parents did so. In conjunction with their own participation, those 11 parents who returned consent forms agreed for their child to be interviewed.

Data analysis strategies and reporting.

All the data from the returned questionnaires and completed interviews was entered into a computer and organised into tables. The quantitative data was made into bar graphs and the face-to-face interview answers were displayed as a mind map using direct quotes. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis in which themes emerge from within the data and are then placed into categories using the steps of perceiving, comparing, analysing, aggregating, ordering and establishing links (Mutch, 2005).

Ethical considerations.

This research was conducted following the ManukauInstitute of Technology (MIT) guidelines. These requirements were met through providing information and consent forms that detailed participants' rights to all likely participants.The guidelines also require that the interpretations of the research reflect the actual findings and are portrayed in a way that is understandable to participants.The research included adult and child participants. The children were given the same rights as the adults involved (Cullen, Hedges, & Bone, 2009), but their involvement also required some special considerations: specifically, the well-being and needs of the child participants were respected as a top priority and the information gained from their involvement was presented in a way that ensured empowerment.

Findings

The research's findings have been organised into four sections. Within each section are the questions asked and a summary of the data.

Parents and teachers.

Question One: Do you feel that risk-taking is important for children's development?
Seven out of the eight parents and both of the two teachers believe that yes,risk-taking is important for children's development (see Figure 1).

Do you feel that risk-taking is important for children's development?

Figure 1: The participants' perceptions of whether risk-taking is important for children's development.
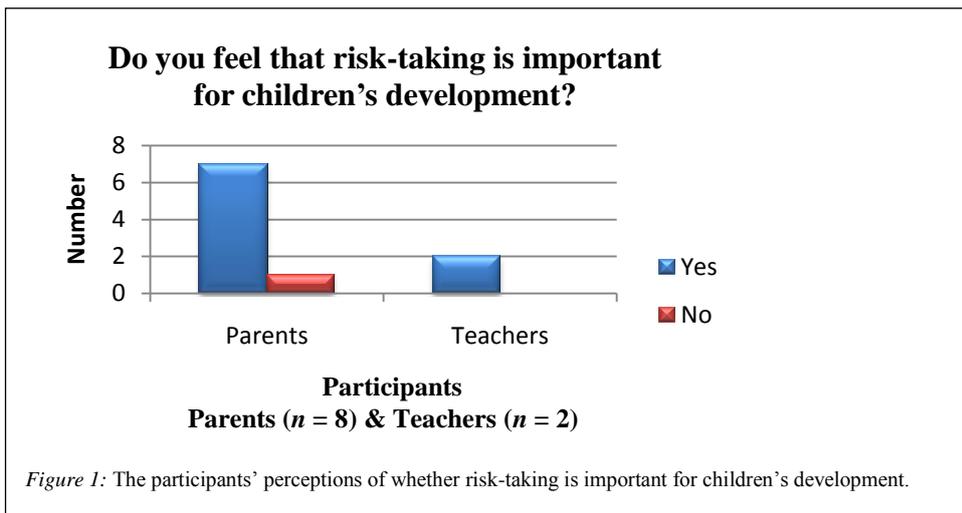
Question Two: Do you feel you support children's risk-taking in the outdoors?
Seven out of the eight parents and both the teachers feel they do support risk-taking in the outdoors, while one parent feels they do not.

Question Three: What opportunities do you provide for risk-taking in the outdoors?
Answers to this question show that parents and teachers provide for risk-taking in areas of speed, height, skill and water play. Risk-taking with speed means activities such as bike riding, which was mentioned by two participants. Risking-taking with height includes activities such as climbing, which was mentioned 13 times with some participants mentioning it more than once in different forms, including playgrounds, trees, rocks and climbing walls. Risking-taking in the area of skill covers all movements used by children to gain proficiency over their body; this includes spinning, rolling and climbing. Water play includes water-bomb fights and water in a trough – activities only mentioned by two participants. Six parents gave additional information, notingstrategies they used when providing for risk-taking; these included ensuring facilities had safety matting in place, supervision or watching, education of the children about the risks, encouraging and giving support, free choice of equipment, increasing difficulty (e.g. pushing swings higher) and free exploration.

Parents.
Question Four: What opportunities for risk-taking does your outdoor setting provide?
Analysis of the parents' answers show that they perceive that their outdoor settings provide for risk-taking in different ways, with sevendifferent opportunities being listed. Trees for climbing and trampolines were both identified by four participants, while two parents identified messy play such as mud or dirt, sand, water balloons and waterslides. Climbing frames (stairs, slide, rock wall), gardening tools, and rope swings were identified by oneparenteach. Two parents stated their outdoor setting provided for "not much". Strategies identified as being used were encouraging, safety checks of the equipment and the area, and engaging children in helping with adult chores (using a wheelbarrow to move firewood); these were mentioned by oneparent each.

Question Five: Do you take your child to places where there are opportunities for risk-taking?
All eightparent participants answered yes.

Question Six: If your answer is yes to question five, then how often and what types of places do you take your children?

Table 1 shows that the eight parents all take their children to places that provide opportunities for risk-taking. Playgrounds were the most frequently mentioned place, being named by seven of the eight parents. Built opportunities such as climbing frames were mentioned 13 times, while natural opportunities such as climbing trees were mentioned eight times. One parent did not specify where they took their child.

Table 1

Frequency and destination of places that parents visit for risk-taking

Parents (P)	How often	Where
Q6: "How often and what types of places do you take your children?"		
P1	weekly	-mix of playground, bike track, gardening work
P2	once every week	-the local outdoor playground
	once every two weeks	-Rainbow's End or Chipmunks
P3	once a week	-playground
P4	most weekends	-playgrounds -beach -pushing shopping trolley down ramp to car park at speed
P5	once a week	-parks -playgrounds -beach -pools, etc.
P6	at least once a week	-beach -rock climbing/water play -tree climbing
	2–3 times a week	-playgrounds -bush walks
	once every couple of weeks	-family kayaking (in the summer) -bike riding
P7	often (weekly?)	-parks but not all of them, test them
	once a month	-a park with high climbing frame
P8	once a week	(blank)

Teachers.

Question Four: What in the outdoors of the four-and-a-half to five year oldplayground do you feel supports risk-taking?

Both teachers listed the jungle gym or climbing frame and the obstacle course (boxes and planks) as outdoor structures that support risk-taking. T1 also stated trees while T2 added ladders and the flying fox.

Question Five: What teaching strategies do you use to support children's risk-taking in the outdoors?

Strategies listed by both teachers were supervision and careful observation, encouragement, and physical support. One teacher also noted planning the physical environment as a strategy.

Question Six: What do you think is acceptable risk (in terms of safety versus gain)?

Table 2 shows the two differing perspectives of the two teachers involved. T1 looks at acceptable risks in terms of safety versus gain to the children in a holistic manner, while T2 sees acceptable risk in terms of what are acceptable physical opportunities that the children can engage in to broaden their physical skills.

Table 2

Teachers' perceptions of "acceptable" risk

Teachers (T)	Answer
Q6: "What do you think is acceptable risk (in terms of safety versus gain)?"	
T1	Acceptable risk is where a child learns and develops from taking a risk, but not getting hurt in any way i.e. physically, mentally or emotionally
T2	-climbing up and down the pole, slide, climbing wall, ladders, etc. -heights -hanging upside down- view of the world from different angles -swinging across a space of the ground -sliding down the slide in every possible position

Children.

Question Seven: Tell me about your favourite risk to take outside.

Out of the eleven children with permission to participate, only eight wanted to contributewhen asked.Contributing children's answers are shown in raw format in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Children's favourite outdoor risk.

Discussion

How do parents and teachers of young children support their risk-taking in the outdoors?

Supervision of children when risk-taking

The two strategies mentioned the most by parents and teachers were supervision or watching, and supporting. This was interesting in itself because parents were not specifically asked about supervision. Nevertheless, the fact that supervision came out woven through their answers highlights its importance. This focus on supervision was also noted in answers such as educating children as to the risks of their play equipment, conducting safety checks of the equipment and area, and ensuring that equipment used had safety matting. This finding supports the research within theliterature review that states we are living in a society plagued by risk anxiety, as parent and teachers place a high emphasis on supervising their children's risk-taking so they can step in and "support" them when they deem it is necessary (Gill, 2007; Tovey, 2007). Only one parent mentioned giving their child opportunities for free exploration, with another alluding to this concept by stating they allow their child to run ahead and choose their own direction. The relevance of these findings is that the whole point of risk-taking and the reason it is essential for development is that it provides opportunities for children to take

control and learn from the consequences of their decisions regarding risk-taking (Dickson, 2005; Tovey, 2007). This begs the question: Are we actually letting children take risks?

Providing opportunities for risk-taking – natural and built

Themes that emerged from within this data were that parents and teachers support children's risk-taking in the outdoors by either setting up an environment, or taking them to an environment, where either opportunities are already set up or can be catered for. Opportunities mentioned can be categorised into areas, these being speed, height, water, impact and body mastery (e.g. rolling, spinning). These can be divided again into natural or built opportunities. Noted from this division was that the majority of opportunities recognised as providing for risk-taking were man-made, such as climbing frames and bikes, while their natural counterparts, such as climbing trees and running, were mentioned infrequently or only once. This preference may be due to the safety requirements built structures must meet, although Gill (2007) states such safety requirements arenear useless. The relevance of these findings is that there needs to be more education into the beauty and changing dynamics of the outdoor environment, and how it can spark curiosity, encourage problem solving and tempt children to physically challenge themselves (Greenfield, 2007; Ministry of Education, 1996).

Avoiding injury in risk-taking

As Greenfield (2004) and Little and Wyver (2010) state,people's perceptions of risk-taking vary. Nevertheless, I feel the comment by Teacher 1 encompasses a view that through my findings I can see many of the adults hold, namely that an *"acceptable risk is where a child learns and develops from taking a risk, but not getting hurt in any way, i.e. physically, mentally or emotionally"*.This view can be seen coming through in the strategies the adults employ, including encouragement, physical support, supervision and careful planning and checks of the environment. This view is both affirmative and harmful; affirmative in that it links in to the benefits of risk-taking in providing for holistic development, but harmful in that it sidelines all injury, even minor, which often in risk-taking plays a positive role in providing children with feedback so that they can adjust their techniques (Tovey, 2007).

Also evident is that a majority of the adult participants see risk-taking as a gross motor endeavour. Only some mentioned opportunities with smaller or emotional risks, such as organised sport, gardening and water play (water balloons). Furthermore, no adults mentioned the sandpit even though this was identified by two children as their favourite risk. This is relevant because when children enjoy an activity then they will be more likely to try the challenges the opportunity provides and to develop persistence (Dweck, 2000).

Conclusion

The results of research to date have provided overwhelming evidence that risk-taking in the outdoors is a vital part of children's development. Children develop physical skills and build positive images of themselves as capable and confident when they take risks in the outdoors. Research has also identified that adults play a significant role in providing these opportunities, although it is not necessarily the opportunities they provide but their attitudes and reactions that satisfy the children's innate desire for risky play (Stephenson, 2003; Tovey, 2007).

This begs the question: What do parents and teachers do to support children's risk-taking in the outdoors? The research I have undertaken has revealed that parents and teachers support risk-

taking mainly bysupervising or watching over their children and by encouraging them. Recommendations for future practice and education would be to highlight alternative views, such as practising risk-management instead of the current predominant strategy of supervision. Risk-management is when significant adults in children's lives support them in taking safe risks, and proactively work towards increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes (Dickson, 2005). Both parents and teachers recognise the potential for risk-taking in a variety of areas, and this recognition is to be celebrated. Nevertheless, this recognition of outdoor opportunities had its limitations, with most of the parents in the study preferring built opportunities over opportunities provided by the natural environment. This finding leads me to recommendthat parents and teachers are provided with examples of the joys of the natural environment and how it encourages children to physically challenge themselves (Greenfield, 2007); maybe these examples could be given through photographic stories. Future research that couldcome from this is a look into the view of significant adults in children's lives and whether they feel there is value to be placed in the natural outdoor environment in relation to learning.Another suggestion for future research is to ask the same question but of parents and teachers of children with a wider variety of ages – maybe a child's age influences how parents and teachers perceive risk-taking.

Parents and teachers all recognise risk in different ways due to a variety of factors including age, gender and culture (Greenfield, 2004; Little &Wyver, 2010). Nevertheless, the analysed data from the questionnaires revealed a common perception that risk-taking is largely about gross motor endeavour. Teachers could change this view by also emphasising the smaller riskschildren engage in, such as building a high sandcastle; these experiences could then be shared with parents using learning stories.

I started out the research with the question: "Are we supporting young children's risk-taking in the outdoors, and how are we doing this?"The findings from the case study havesuccessfully provided some answers to this question, although the small sample of participants means these answers and the themes and trends identified from the research may vary in a different setting.

To conclude, I leave with this idea: As risk-taking is an innate desire that all children hold and an activity that has been shown to have significant developmental benefits, can we, as educators, risk ignoring risk-taking?

References

Anderson, G. (1998). *Fundamentals of educational research* (2nded.). New York, NY: The Falmer Press.

Cullen, J., Hedges, H., & Bone, J. (2009). Planning, undertaking and disseminating research in early childhood settings: An ethical framework. *NZRECE Journal, 12,* 109–118.

Dickson, T.J. (2005). Risk management: An introduction. In T.J. Dickson, T. Gray, & B.Hayllar (Eds.).*Outdoor and experimental learning: Views from the top* (pp.97–100). Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press.

Dweck, C.S. (2000). *Self-theories: Their roles in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.

Gill, T. (2007). *No fear: Growing up in a risk adverse society*. London, United
Kingdom:CalousteGulbenkian Foundation.

Greenfield, C.F. (2003). Outdoor play – the case for risks and challenges in children's learning
and development.*Safekids News,21*(June),5.

Greenfield, C.F. (2004). 'Can run, play on bikes, jump the zoom slide, and play on the swings':
Exploring the value of outdoor play. (Transcript).*Australian Journal of Early
Childhood*, *29*(2), 1.Retrieved from earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au.

Greenfield, C.F. (2007). Why go outside: Review of New Zealand research on outdoor play in
early childhood education. *Early Education,* (Autumn/Winter), 24–29.

Greenfield, C.F. (2010). *Characteristics of optimal early childhood education outdoor
environments.*Auckland, New Zealand: Manukau Institute of Technology.

Lambert, E.B. (2006).*Introducing research to early childhood students*. Melbourne, Australia:
Thomson Learning.

Little, H. (2006). Children's risk-taking behaviours: Implications for early childhood policy and
practice.*International Journal of Early Years Education, 14*(2), 141–154.

Little, H., &Wyver, S. (2010). Individual differences in children's risk perception and
appraisals in outdoor play environments.*International Journal of Early Years
Education*, *18*(4), 297–313. doi:10.1080/09669760.2010.531600

Ministry of Education. (1996). TeWhāriki: Hewhārikimātaurangamōngāmokopuna o Aotearoa:
Early childhood curriculum. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.

Mutch, C. (2005). Doing educational research: A practitioner's guide to getting started.
Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.

Stephenson, A. (2003). Physical risk-taking: dangerous or endangered? *Early Years: Journal of
International Research & Development*, *23*(1), 35. Retrieved from
http://www.tactyc.org.uk/.

Swanborn, P. (2010). *Case study research: What, why and how?* London, United Kingdom:
SAGE Publications.

Tovey, H. (2007). *Playing outdoors: Spaces and places, risk and challenge.* Berkshire, United
Kingdom: Open University Press.