University of Sunderland

Mothers, Children, Risk and Play

Introduction

Managing the risks to which children are exposed in contemporary Britain is complex requiring parents to balance opportunities for a child's development with an appropriate concern for risk. Managing risk is particularly an issue for mothers, who, despite societal changes, tend to retain overall responsibility for the care of children (Craig, 2006; Gregory and Milner, 2008). In the United Kingdom the high profile deaths of several young children (The Guardian, 2003) has potentially heightened mothers' associations of risk with negative outcomes. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that children's freedom to play away from adult supervision has declined (O'Brien and Smith, 2002). A Play England survey further reports that almost one third of parents in the UK do not let their children play outdoors due to fears of accident or injury and one half due to fears of 'stranger danger' (BBC News, 2012)

Yet there is a body of literature which explores adult engagement in risky outdoor activities through outdoor 'extreme sports' 'lifestyle sports', and adventures (Lyng 2005; Wheaton, 2010; West & Allin, 2010), suggesting that it is possible to view risk in more positive terms. Moreover, there is increasing recognition that children's engagement in risky play activities, particularly outdoors, provides opportunities for them to develop intellectually and socially (Little and Wyver, 2008). Staemfli (2009), for example, argues that outdoor unstructured play spaces can enable children to explore their limits and develop creativity, while Ball (2002) identifies engaging in positive risk-taking as important for children's healthy development.

In this study we seek to explore the meanings mothers attach to risk and how this influences their children's outdoor play. We also extend the scope of much existing literature which considers adults perspectives on risk by including children's own perspectives on risk in outdoor play.

Conceptualising Risk in Contemporary Society

A perceived need to manage the risks posed to children in outdoor play reflects wider societal concern with risk first described by Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991). Theorists such as Beck (1992) propose that the world has become increasingly uncertain and vulnerable to incalculable risks and large scale hazards, such as AIDS, natural and technological disasters. In this 'risk society', Beck suggests that individuals, more than in previous times, are becoming aware of how global problems are caught up with their own personal biographies, and are becoming increasingly pre-occupied with risk and risk management. In this 'risk society', risk is viewed as largely synonymous with danger, with risk associated with negative consequences, rather than positive outcomes.

Beck (1992) highlights that more and more of our energy is thus devoted to avoiding risks rather than accepting them; whilst definitions and perceptions of risk become personalised and related to lifestyles and social relations. Although Beck notes that many of the large scale risks such as natural disasters are unavoidable, Gard and Wright (2001: 538) suggest that 'naming the risk increases the likelihood of it being reduced or managed.' As such, strategies for risk typically involve the identification and naming of risks, their likelihood and the ways in which they are to be reduced. Giddens (1990) further identifies the importance of trust in relation to risk, suggesting that 'what is seen as 'acceptable' risk – the minimising of danger – varies in different contexts, but is usually central in sustaining trust' (p.35). Trust, for Giddens, is a mechanism through which individuals maintain a sense of ontological security in an uncertain world; having trust or faith in individuals, organisations or systems, enables people to deal psychologically with the risks that are associated with every decision or life choice. One problem is that large scale crises such as BSE (mad cow disease) or the controversy over the MMR vaccine in the UK, have led to a loss of trust in government organisations, with a greater individualisation of risk and risk perception.

Lash (2000) has adopted the terminology of risk cultures. He sees the recognition of risk cultures as a way of reflecting a more fluid, less institutionalised account of risk. Lash argues that risk cultures actually provide a security culture by focusing on values rather than norms and on symbolic practices rather than 'rational calculation or normative subsumption' (Lash, 2000, p. 60). The location for such cultures is in what Lash describes as a third space which is neither located in private nor public sphere. This is significant for understanding parents' anxiety about children's play because as we show, whereas child-rearing was once a private matter, evidence suggests it has leaked into the public sphere. For example, there is increasing public interest in mothering practices that impact on the health or safety of their child, such as breastfeeding or sleeping (Knaak, 2010). Public interest has also extended to children's free time and parents' role in securing the right kind of leisure opportunities for their child to promote health, wellbeing or social skills (Furedi, 2008; Gill, 2007; Shaw and Dawson, 2001).

Risk, Parenting and Mothering Ideologies

The pressure on parents to make the 'right' decisions in relation to child-rearing is challenging at best and impossible at worst. In the face of expert opinion about children's welfare, the often conflicting nature of the advice makes it all the more difficult. Furedi (2008) provides a substantial critique of the advice offered by experts to parents in *Paranoid Parenting*. He argues that parents are faced with the task of deciphering the hundreds of claims and counter claims about how to rear children. Faced with conflicting advice, Furedi's argues that parents should trust their own judgement. For mothers, this advice may be hard to follow, as Valentine (2004) documents how contemporary expectations about motherhood encourage a belief that professional or expert opinion is essential for successful child rearing.

Both discursive and material practices play a crucial role in constructing notions of what it is to be a 'good mother' and 'bad mother' (Knaak, 2010; Valentine, 1997). Drawing on Douglas's (1992) work about risk and blame, Lee (2008) shows how 'good' mothers are seen as those who recognise and respond appropriately to medico-scientific pronouncements about their children's health. In contrast, 'bad' mothers pay little attention to the advice of experts, allow their children too much freedom and spend too little time with them (Furedi, 2008; Johnston and Swanson, 2006; Knaak, 2010; Valentine, 2004). Johnston and Swanson (2006) further refer to the ideology of intensive mothering, drawn from Hays (1996), as the dominant mothering ideology in contemporary culture, at least in North America. Intensive mothering, Hays (1996) explains, is 'child centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, financially expensive ideology in which mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture and development of the sacred child and which children's needs take precedence over the individual needs of the mothers' (Hays, 1996, p.46).

Yet precisely because the discursive practices that construct an idealised notion of motherhood, are just that – ideal - they are impossible to realise. In negotiating conflicting discourses about risk, and what constitutes 'good mothering', Valentine (2004) suggests that mothers essentially engage in self-surveillance and self-monitoring, drawing on the opinions of professionals as well as those of close family members or friends. However, Knaak (2010) explains that this process constructs a socially amplified framework of risk within which mothers are expected to make judgements about the risks posed to their children. Moreover, Knaak argues that decision-making surrounding risk is often more related to emotion and the meaning associated with particular risks than the actuality of the risk itself. This can be seen in relation to the increased risk associated with child abduction where media hype and publicity, along with associated horror of the potential consequences leads to

potential over-protective behaviour by parents (Furedi,2008).   Given sensationalist reporting by some elements of the media, it is unsurprising that the material practices of mothering often reflect a desire to avoid all risk to their children (Knaak, 2010).

Children, Outdoor Play and Risk

Despite societal concerns, there is increasing recognition that children want and need to engage in play that involves risk (Sandseter, 2009). Gill (2007) emphasises the importance of exploration and experimentation and risk-taking through play that is part of a child's development, with Greenfield (2004, p.1) suggesting 'the risks and challenges of being outdoors provide rich opportunities for learning, problem-solving and developing social competence'. Tovey (2010) further argues that risk-taking in outdoor play for young children enables them to broaden and enrich their range of experiences, going beyond what is familiar and facilitating innovative thinking.

Sandseter (2007) highlights the ways in which children as young as pre-school create and engage in different types of 'risky play'. Sandseter (2009) further explored the emotional consequences for children engaging in risky play, illustrating the mixture of fear, fearful joy and exhilaration experienced by pre-school children in their engagement and mastery of play at height or high speed. Sandseter's study (2009) is one of the few that have begun to systematically unravel the motivations and positive emotional and developmental consequences of children's experiences of risk in outdoor play. Sandseter (2007) talks of such risky play as that involving 'physically and emotionally stimulating and challenging environments' (p.237). This re-conceptualisation of risk as 'challenge' is a more positive approach to risk that has underpinned the development in the UK of 3,500 new or improved play spaces and 30 new 'adventure' playgrounds/play parks (Rogers and Pelletier, 2009).

While studies have begun to explore children's risky play (Sandseter 2007, 2009)

and parental reactions to such play (Little, 2010), only a few post 2000 studies have included the children's views from a qualitative perspective (Valentine, 2004; Harden, Backett-Milburn and Jackson, 2000) or the views of both parents and children (Valentine, 2004; Backett-Milburn and Harden, 2004). Harden et al (2000) suggest this is because public discourses construct children as lacking in competence about making risk judgements. Given the recent attention to both the value of outdoor play experiences for children, and the complexities of discourses surrounding risk and risk management for mothers in relation to their child-rearing practices, this paper explores both mother and child constructions of risk and outdoor play.

Method

The study is grounded in an understanding that the social world is formed through interpretations of social actors, and that social phenomena are not separable from those who construct them, but are outcomes of interactions between individuals (Bryman, 2004). As such it is a qualitative study (Patton, 2005), which focused on understanding the social meanings of risk and outdoor play, as constructed and interpreted by mothers and their children.

The study focused on those who had children aged between 9 and 11 years, as this represents the 'transitional stage between childhood and adolescence' and, as much of the childhood and outdoor play literature focuses on pre-school years, is an age group that has historically been 'somewhat neglected' (Harden et al., 2000, p.13). It also closely matches that used by Valentine (2004) and nears the watershed of primary/secondary education where children are usually beginning to be more independent and going beyond their own home area.

Initial contact for the sample was made with a local primary school in the North-east of England, which according to its OFSTED report had a mix of relatively affluent and deprived population, and a lower than average number of children with free school

meals. Participant information letters were sent out to parents who had children in year 5/6 classes. In the letter, parents were asked to contact the researcher if they were willing to be interviewed in relation to the study, and/or if they were also willing for their child/children to be interviewed in a separate focus group. Twelve mothers and their children (3 boys, 9 girls between 9 and 11 years) were recruited through this process. That it was mothers, rather than fathers (all mothers were married), who responded to this initial request, reflected the literature that it is predominantly mothers who take responsibility for matters relating to the children (Craig, 2006). Some of the mothers also had younger children, but were asked in the interview to focus their responses on the older child.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the mothers, providing both structure and flexibility to probe responses in relation to the study (Bryman, 2004). Questions in the interview probed meanings and perceptions of risk; risky play; and outdoor play. Two focus groups were also held, each with six children. This was a decision based on reducing any intimidation felt by the children in being interviewed alone, or with their mothers, but also that interactions between children might help bring out any similarities or differences in views. Heary and Hennessy (2000) highlight that removing the emphasis on the adult-child relations, may help overcome the issue of children responding in ways they perceive are desired, and removes the pressure for any one individual child to respond to a question he/she does not understand. The interviews were conducted on the school premises, in a small office and were recorded using a Dictaphone.

The interviews were coded, initially using an open coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), with constant comparison and ongoing interpretations of the data to uncover patterns and repetitions of themes. Each interview was read several times with axial coding used to identify more conceptual themes and relationships between them, such as those around risky spaces, supervision, control or risk management.

Themes were developed and re-organised allowing the researcher to consider previous literature when structuring key ideas in relation to mothering and risk. The findings resulted in three main focal headings used to guide the results and discussion. These were: constructions of risk in outdoor play; mothers as risk managers; and negotiating mothering choices.

Results and Discussion

Mother and Child Constructions of Risk in Outdoor play

Risk for mothers in this study was predominantly interpreted in relation to 'something that is going to put him in danger', 'weighing up potentially what could happen' or 'an evaluation of safety'. Most mothers used words such as 'danger', 'unsafe', 'harmful' and 'accident', reflecting societal negative connotations and outcomes attached to risk (Beck, 1992). Risks were harmful, hurtful and a source of danger but preventable. However, risks were not only physical but emotional and social too. For example, mothers mentioned the risk to their child of a loss of confidence from a fall or a limited network of friends. As such, these mothers seemed aware of their role as protector and 'risk manager' (Knaak, 2010) not only of physical health, but also of the emotional and social wellbeing of their children. This role of 'risk manager' is also seen in research on purposive family leisure, and the way in which mothers focus on the experiences and benefits of particular leisure activities for their children's development (Shaw and Dawson, 2001). The mothers in our study described specific risks associated with outdoor play as traffic, drugs, or teenage gangs as well as risks of 'falling off' play equipment, 'being alone', 'dark nights', 'cycling without a helmet' or even 'being sucked in with the older boys'.

The most frequently raised concern for mothers was the risk of paedophiles or 'stranger danger' and this created the most anxiety. Mothers used words such as

'worry', 'fear' and 'panic' in describing these risks, exemplifying the emotion and concerning images they conjured and supporting Knaak's (2010) argument that decision-making surrounding risk is often more related to emotion and the meaning associated with particular risks than the actual risk itself.

> The worst scenario is that there is some horrible person there wanting to pick up alone kids type of thing, so either being bullied by older people or someone would steal her (mother 2)

> I do worry about stranger danger… (mother 5)

> if she was approached by a stranger, paedophile...obviously it's a children's park you don't know who's hanging around (mother 6).

Three children in the focus group also identified their fears about strangers and someone being able to 'jump out and get us' (child 10, female, 10yrs). Another explained 'playing in a big area is 'not exactly safe because people can still get you' (child 8, female, 9 yrs). Children were also influenced by the media, with one child exclaiming 'like that on the news?.. did you hear that on the news? (child 10, female, 10 yrs). It was evident that media impact goes beyond parental paranoia, but also serves to fuel children's anxieties which may be reinforced by parents' comments. Harden et al., (2000) found that the children in their study absorbed the 'stranger danger' messages quite unreflectively, with little depth in relation to what they actually thought would happen if someone did abduct them. In this study, the children's perceptions of the risk also went no further that someone would 'get you', though children's perceptions of any further consequences were not probed.

The notion of 'others' as a risk was also highlighted in this study by mother and children in relation to teenagers. Indeed, many mothers perceived their local adventure park as a 'risky' place to be due to the way in which it was used by the town's young people.

> 'There's been a lot of litter, there's been a lot of what I would call sort of rough behaviour, a lot of unmanaged children... ...erm it means that its quite a, what I would call quite a risk place for a 10 year old boy (mother 1)

Valentine (2004) highlights the social construction of teenagers as a 'problem' and their use of public space as 'contested terrain' (p.63). She also identified the way in which teenagers use public space to create their own identities away from adults or the family environment. The mothers in this study perceived that the local adventure park had become a popular space and increasingly used by older children above the intended age range for the park who were attracted 'with it being new and exciting' as well as somewhere to go. The presence of teenagers was perceived as intimidating for younger children, and therefore they avoided it for their children or would not allow their children to go 'after a certain time'.

Children also reinforced the view of teenagers as intimidating or a negative presence. Indeed, when asked what they would change about the park space, one child answered 'I would get rid of the teenagers' (child 1, male, 10 yrs). The extent to which the child's view simply reflects his mother's perception (which was similar) is not clear, but it would be likely that such perceptions may be transferred. Children in Harden's (2000) study also highlighted teenagers drinking or hanging about in parks as a source of risk, suggesting that little has changed over the last decade.

In addition to acknowledging different types of risk, these mothers also recognised the positive characteristics of risk which describing its association with fun, thrills and excitement. The interviewees mentioned the importance of their children challenging themselves and learning from their mistakes. In this sense, risk was perceived as integral to a child's development. Most mothers were aware of the physical risks relating to outdoor play, such as falling off play equipment or children hurting

themselves, but made judgements about these risks in terms of 'acceptable risk rather than risk to be avoided:

> I suppose it's all risky….but nothing that's not acceptable risk
>
> (mother 10)

The children in the study, however, defined risk more in terms of 'chance' and their own behaviour than the outcome of risk itself.

> Doing something you know you might not be able to do…..I mean it like something you don't know if you could do but you take the chance of doing it (child 10, female, 11 yrs)
>
> like in your head there is a chance out of 10 that this thing was going to happen... (child 5, female, 11 yrs)

As such, for many of the children in this study, risk was more of a neutral concept or associated with uncertainty and challenge. Indeed, they approached risk as integral to their participation in different activities. This suggests that more work is warranted about the way children approach potentially risky activities and the way they negotiate risk-taking.

Being in control was also a significant element in children's enjoyment of risky play. Some spoke of instances when they were pushed on play equipment by older children and pushed 'too fast' for their comfort or feelings of safety. Some children reported feelings such as 'comfortable' when they remained in control of the element of challenge in their play and feeling both scared and excited when experiencing risk. As one child explained in relation to playing on a swing roundabout in the local adventure park 'you feel ok, but still scared because you might fall off and yeah, you can change your speed' (child 4, female, 11 yrs). Similar to the younger children in Sandseter's (2009) work, the children's words reflected the mixture of fear and exhilaration involved in exploring and controlling the boundaries of risky play. In

some way, these feelings may be quite similar to those articulated by adults when discussing their emotions around the 'edge' in more extreme risky sports (Lyng, 1990)

Mothers and Children as Risk Managers

It was clear that mothers in this study were active as 'risk managers' for their children (Furedi, 2002), conforming to the ideology that as good mothers, they have a 'moral and social responsibility to be risk conscious' on their children's behalf (Knaak, 2010, p.345). They did this in different ways such as restricting or limiting their child's practices, supervising activities, keeping them in sight and/or maintaining contact, or controlling the environment.

This responsibility of managing risk was evident in mothers' decisions around where to allow their children to play. Several mothers and children lived on cul-de-sacs or away from busy roads, where play was viewed by mothers as 'safe'; other mothers felt more restricted in what they allowed if they did not have a garden or their homes were nearer a busy road or more exposed:

> I am not usually keen on letting them play outside, we don't have a garden we have a back yard, erm but I tend not to let them play outside just because it is next to the road (mother 1)

> Like we live in a cul-de-sac, so its quite safe (mother 9)

Children were also aware of the dangers of traffic or passing cars when playing, and identified personal strategies for managing the risk involved, including 'we just shout 'car' and go on to the path'. The children in this study also identified activities or locations as 'off limits' without a parent. For example, playing on the street for one child was allowed only when a parent was in the garden. Another child reported that an activity was more risky when a parent did not know where they were. Overall, these children accepted the presence of an adult in the context of outdoor play and

furthermore gleaned emotional support and an enhanced sense of security from their presence. This was similar to Harden et al., (2000) where children of a similar age in their study described how they felt being with parents as a key form of risk management. This aspect of supervision in risky play was echoed by mothers.

she is always with me or another adult (mother 7).

We are out in the woods quite a lot and she is allowed to trudge through the water. So she is allowed to take the risks but I would say she is supervised most of the time she is doing it (mother 1)

I do feel that I have to, probably, I will like go and watch the potatoes and come back again and go back and forwards, but I would say monitored about 75% of the time (mother 2).....

Whilst children in this study did engage in informal outdoor play, therefore, and indeed some mothers referred to their children 'taking risks', it was evident that most of this was under the gaze of adults. None of the mothers interviewed allowed their children to go to their local adventure park on their own, and only some allowed them to go with friends. As such, the mothers were actively involved in their children's risk management (Knaak, 2010). It is not clear how their outdoor play or risk-taking would differ without such adult supervision, or the extent to which this increased supervision from previous generations in itself impacts on children's activities or development. Sandseter (2007), highlights how even pre-school children find venturing out of sight or playing out of sight of adults as 'fun' or 'thrilling'. Certainly, mothers highlighted the change from their own childhoods or indicated 'It's not the same as years ago when they could just go out and be out all day'. There was, therefore a real perception of a change across the generations, reflecting research suggesting that children's freedom to roam has significantly declined (Valentine, 2004).

Mothers also referred to managing risk in terms of boundaries and controls, such as keeping regular contact or by knowledge of the other families' children were visiting, or also ensuring their children were back by dark, when the perceived risk was greater. Interestingly, there was no differences put forward by mothers in relation to the dark as a risk for their sons or daughters, despite research that suggest that constructions of risk, particularly around fear of crime and walking on lone streets at night, is gendered (Chan and Rigakos, 2002). Technologies such as mobile phones were also used by some mothers as a form of risk management, though there was awareness that these also had limitations.

> I like to know where he is and if he changes where he is I have sort of got him in a routine of trying to get in touch with me and saying 'I'm not going to be there am going to be there' (mother 3)

> She didn't have her mobile on her if anything had of happened (mother 6)

One of the dangers of reliance on mobile phone technology is that whilst contact is potentially easier, a lack of contact (for example if a battery fails or the phone is switched off) can heighten anxiety and perceived risk. Arguably, the use of a mobile phone, whilst reassuring for parents for older children, can also restrict the child's perception of 'being alone' and thus their freedom in decision-making and play. Moreover, for some children, the phone was a source of anxiety; they expressed concern about losing it or about revealing it to older children who might steal it. These children's feelings reflect statistical data on mobile phone theft in the UK which identifies that young people between the ages of 10 and 17 are most likely victims of phone theft (Hoare, 2007).

It was significant that for mothers, their child 'being alone' was also identified as 'risky'. Comments from parents suggested that having contact was a reassurance for

them or that their presence gave them some sort of control, whether real or illusory, over a child's risky play:

> I like to be in control or be there and I feel like I am in control
>
> but maybe I am not. But by being there I feel I am (mother 7)…

> I don't like her out of sight, I like to know where she is. As long
>
> as I can see her or I am near by I am fine (mother 8)

Additionally, mothers' perceptions of their children's maturity seemed to influence their perception of risk. For example, mothers accorded children deemed 'sensible', 'responsible', aware, skilled or competent more freedom as they perceived them more trustworthy and correspondingly at less risk than children described as 'daredevil', 'unaware', silly or stupid. A mother's decision to extend a child's freedom to roam was made with reference to the child's 'sensibility', 'awareness' and capacity to demonstrate 'responsibility'. Such characteristics in a child increased the mother's trust in the child and his/her competence to manage risk and hence, as Giddens (1991) alludes, enabled mothers to reconcile their fear of letting their child play unsupervised. Other comments in the data also supported this, with mothers referring to trusting either their child or their child's group of friends in explaining decisions around what they allowed their children to do and where they could go.

Negotiating mothering choices about risk and outdoor play

In terms of risk and their children's outdoor play, mothers made reference to what their children were allowed to do in relation to other parents. Significantly perhaps, the majority of mothers in this study indicated that they were more restrictive than other parents, with only one, below, giving any hint that they allowed more freedom. It seems mothers make decisions and give meaning to risk within a local cultural context of mothering. In this specific instance, they fear that allowing their children to roam more than other parents might be considered 'bad mothering' (Murphy, 2004).

well in comparison to some parents I know yeah, but I can't

help it so that's the way I am so I can't help it… …they are

probably limited, probably less, yeah probably limited,

because she could probably play out more if was I bit

more....(mother 2).

This finding is similar to that of Valentine (2004), where mothers in her study tried to

fit into local cultural norms about being a 'good mother' in relation to their childcare

practices. When mothers did not fit into such norms, they risked marginalisation and

exclusion by other mothers (p.44).

The current study highlights the dilemmas experienced by these mothers in trying to

conform to constructions of mothering which emphasise protecting the safety of their

children in a contemporary society where they perceived a heightened risk of

abduction or child abuse and a very real increased risk in road traffic: aspects which

mothers feel they have to protect their children against. At the same time mothers

were acutely aware that they 'cannot wrap [their children] in cotton wool' and were

generally supportive of their children engaging in outdoor play. Similar to the

narratives produced by mothers in Knaak's (2010) study, mothers here drew on local

parenting cultures whilst internalising broader discourses of good mothering which

dictates that a mother does not allow her children to roam freely. Yet such

discourses conflict with public health ideologies that emphasise both the benefits of

outdoor play and the health dangers associated with lack of activity. The following

quote articulated well one mother's awareness of the conflicting pressures on her

mothering choices, and how she managed her own feelings about risk to prioritise

the needs of her child.

I probably worry a bit too much but I try to pull myself back and,

because I think that he does have to have safe risks. If he is just

told to stay indoors all the time and play on the computer all the

time and then I feel calm because he is there, but it isn't going to

do him any good, he needs to be out he need to get further and

further on his own and I have got to manage my feelings as a

parent, and let him do it and yes if something happens to him,

hopefully not too horrendous to learn something from it..(mother

3)

This mother located her decisions in what she perceived as 'good for the child'; drawing on a key aspect of 'intensive mothering' that is compatible across different expert subject domains; notably that good mothering is child-centred and mothers do what is best for their children (Hays, 1996), however difficult this may be. Several comments reflected mothers' recognition of their child at being at a 'watershed' (Valentine, 2004), described in terms of going to high school, or wanting greater freedom:

they are getting a little bit older especially the eleven year old,

she wants her own independence now. She wants go out and

play on her own and its hard just doing that letting go thing.

(mother 5)

and she's ten and a half and she's going to start secondary

school so I know I have got to let her go (mother 6)

For this age group of children, then, these mothers' comments highlighted their internalisation of their role as manager of their children's personal and development needs as well as their personal safety. In doing so, they drew on notions of a good mother as one that was not over-protective, was able to 'let go' without giving their child too much freedom to put them 'at risk'.

Although the mothers identified risks associated with outdoor play and sought to mitigate those risks for their children, most of their statements reflected uncertainty and contradiction, and at times concern or anxiety about the quality of their

judgement. Did they offer their children too much freedom or too little? Did they worry too much or too little? Did they over-react to real or imagined risks? Were they over-protective? Did they allow their heart (worry about 'imagined' risk) to rule their head ('real' risk)? Had they delayed allowing their children freedom too long? Were their children safe or had they missed out and finally were their practices consistent with those of a 'good' mother? Two mothers talked specifically about having to 'be logical about it' and 'weigh up my own personal thoughts' rather than 'let 'the panic effect [their decision]' (mother 10). As such, they engaged in much reflective practice and ongoing self-monitoring of their practices (Giddens, 1991; Valentine, 2004). This anxiety about being a 'good mother' and the perceived need to justify mothering choices was exemplified by one mother when at the end of comments around the restrictions placed on her daughter (aged 9), the mother finished almost apologetically by saying...*'she does have a good life you know.. (laughing)'* (mother 8).

Conclusion

This study has provided an insight into mother and child constructions of risk in relation to outdoor play. The findings support research that suggests children's outdoor play is being restricted, and to some extent supports the existence of Furedi's (2008) 'paranoid parenting' and the notion of a 'risk society'. However, it is more complex in that it reveals more about how mothers make decisions around risk within the context of discourses around 'good mothering' as well as the contradicting public and societal discourses associated with risk and engaging in outdoor play. Similar to Valentine's (2004) study, mothers' decisions were located within a local context of what was acceptable within their local parenting circle and this area would benefit from further exploration. Media reporting of child abductions and paedophiles influenced risk perceptions of both children and mothers, with evidence of a

perceived heightened concern with risk and risk management required in relation to 'stranger danger'. This amplified and emotional dimension to the meaning of risk leads to more restrictive mothering practices because of the emotive consequences of failure in their protective role, despite mothers acknowledging their awareness that their fears may be disproportional. The study further highlights the dilemmas mothers face in terms of their mothering choices - whether they allow too much or too little freedom, too much or too little supervision - and begins to highlight the way in which such decisions are negotiated and justified in terms of what is 'good for the child'.

The study also indicated that children seem to be more optimistic about risk and *are* able to perceive and take account of risks in their outdoor play. The notion of young children's almost constant supervision in their outdoor play also raises questions as to when children are allowed to experience the 'thrill' of making their own risk decisions and learn to take responsibility for risk, away from adult presence. With dominant constructions of good mothering involving presence, rather than absence from their children, and working mothers very aware of their limited time with their children (Johnston and Swan, 2006), this area around mothering and parental supervision in play is ripe for future research. More research exploring children's perceptions of risk and challenge in relation to the outdoors, and the contexts and consequences of their risk-taking decisions, may also provide key insights into how children actively negotiate and manage their risky play.

References

Backett-Milburn, K. and Harden, J. (2004). How children and their families construct and negotiate risk, safety and danger. *Childhood*, *11*(4), 429-447.

Ball, D. (2004). Policy issues and risk-benefit trade-offs of safer surfacing for children's playgrounds. *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, *36*(4), 661-670.

Ball, D.J. Gill, T. and Siegal, B. (2008). Managing risk in play provision: implementation guide. http://www.playengland.co.uk/resources/managing-play-provision.pdf (Retrieved 19 January 2011).

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: towards a new modernity.* London: Sage.

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BBC News (2012). Safety hinders 'outdoor play' says survey, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-19065224 (Retrieved 15 April 2013).

Chan, W and Rigakos, G. (2002). Risk, crime and gender. *British Journal of Criminology 42*(4), 743-761.

Craig, L. (2006) Does Father Care Mean Fathers Share? A Comparison of How Mothers and Fathers in Intact Families Spend Time with Children, *Gender and Society, 20*(2), 259 – 281.

Douglas, M. (1992). *Risk and blame: Essays in cultural theory.* London: Routledge.

Fotel, T. and Thomsen, T. 2004. The surveillance of children's mobility. *Surveillance and Society. 1*(4), 535-554.

Furedi, F. (2008). *Paranoid parenting. Why ignoring the experts may be best for your child.* London: Continuum.

Furedi, F. (2002). Culture of fear: risk-taking and the morality of low expectation. London: Continuum.

Gard, M. and Wright, J. (2001). Managing uncertainty: obesity discourses and physical education in a risk society. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 20(*6*), 535-549.*

Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity.* Cambridge: Polity.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity.* Cambridge: Polity.

Gill, T. (2007). *No fear growing up in a risk averse Society.* London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Great Britain. Department of Children, Schools and Families (2009). *Play and Outcomes for Children and Young People: Literature Review to Inform the National Evaluation of Play Pathfinders and Play builders Summary.* [Online] Available at: http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk (Retrieved 9 January 2010).

Greenfield, C. (2004). 'Can Run, Play on Bikes, Jump the Zoom Slide, and Play on the Swings': Exploring the Value of Outdoor Play'. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 29*(2): Gale Cengage Learning [Online]. Available at: http://find.galegroup.com (Retrieved 8 January 2010).

Gregory, A., and Milner, G. (2008). Fatherhood regimes and father involvement in France and UK. *Community, Work and Family, 11*(1), 61-84*.*

Gerrard, N. (2003) Holly and Jessica we'll never know. *The Observer,* Sunday 21 December.

Harden, J., Scott, S., Backett-Milburn, K. and Jackson, S. (2000). Can't talk, won't talk?: methodological issues in researching children. Sociological Research Online, 5(2), http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/2/harden.html (Retrieved 15 April 2013).

Hays, S. 1996. *The cultural contradictions of motherhood.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Heary, C.M. and Hennessy, E. 2000. The use of focus group interviews in pediatric health care research. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, 27*(1), 47-57.

Hoare, J. Mobile phones: ownership and theft. In Flatley, J. (2007). Mobile phone theft, plastic card and identity fraud: Findings from the 2005/06 British Crime Survey (Supplementary Volume 2 to Crime in England and Wales 2005/06). Home Office Statistical Bulletin 10/07. London: Home Office. http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/hosb1007.pdf (Retrieved 15 April 2013).

Johnston, D. and Swanson, D. (2006). Constructing the "good mother": the experience of mothering ideologies by work status. *Sex Roles*, 54(7/8), 509-519.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing.* London: Sage.

Knaak, S.J. (2010). Contextualising risk, constructing choice: breastfeeding and good mothering in risk society. *Health, Risk & Society*, *12*(4), 345-355.

Lash, S. (2000). Risk culture. in Adam, B., Beck, U. & Van Loon, J. (eds) *The risk society and beyond. Critical issues for social theory*, 47-62. London: Sage.

Lee, E. J. (2008). Living with risk in the age of 'intensive motherhood, Maternal identity and infant feeding, *Health, Risk & Society*, *10* (5), 467-477.

Lyng, S. (2005). Sociology at the edge: social theory and voluntary risk-taking. in Lyng, S. (ed) *Edgework: The sociology of risk-taking*, 17-49. New York: Routledge.

Little, H., and Wyver, S. (2008). Outdoor Play: Does Avoiding the Risks Reduce the Benefits? *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 33*(2), 33-40.

Little, H. (2009). Risk, challenge and safety in outdoor play: pedagogical and regulatory tensions*. Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education. 4*(1), 3-24.

Little, H. (2010). Relationship between parents' beliefs and their responses to children's risk-taking behaviour during outdoor play. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *8*(3), 315-330.

Norton, C., Nixon, J. and Sibert, J. (2004). Playground injuries in children. *Archives of Disease in Childhood, 89*(2): 103-8.

O'Brien, J., and Smith, J. (2002). Childhood transformed? Risk perceptions and the decline of free play. *The British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *65*(3), 123-128.

Patton, M. Q. (2005). *Qualitative research.* London: Wiley.

Rogers, S., and Pelletier, C. (2009). *Play and outcomes for children and young people: literature review to inform the national evaluation of play pathfinders and play builders.* London: Department of Children Schools and Families.

Sandseter, E. (2007). Characteristics of Risky Play*. Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, 1*(9): 3-21.

Sandseter, E. (2009). Children's expressions of fear and exhilaration in risky play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *10*(2), 92-106.

Schwebel, D. (2006). Safety on the playground: mechanisms through which supervision might prevent childhood playground injuries. *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings, 13*(2),141-149.

Shaw, S. M. and Dawson, D. (2001). Purposive Leisure: Examining Parental Discourses on Family Activities. *Leisure Studies*, *23*(4), 217-231.

Staemfli, M. B. (2009) Reintroducing Adventure Into Children's Outdoor Play Environments. *Environment and Behaviour*, *41*(2), 268-280.

Tovey, H. (2010). *Playing outdoors: Spaces and places risk and challenge (debating play)*. London: McGraw-Hill and OUP.

Valentine, G. and J. McKendrick. (1997). Children's outdoor play: exploring parental concerns about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood. *Geoforum, 28*(2), 219-235.

Valentine, G. (2004). *Public space and the culture of childhood.* Hants. Ashgate Publishing Company.

Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. London: Sage.

West, A., and Allin, L. (2010). Chancing your arm, the meaning of risk in rock climbing. *Sport in Society, 13*(7/8), 1234-1248.

Wheaton, B. (2004). *Understanding lifestyle sports: consumption, identity and difference*. London: Routledge.

Wilkinson, I. (2010)*. Risk, vulnerability and everyday life.* London: Routledge.