



Risky Play as an Educational Tool to Enhance Safety Awareness in Early Childhood

Sakinah Siregar¹

¹UIN Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidempuan, Indonesia

 sakinahsiregar@uinsyahada.ac.id*

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Abstract

Play is a highly important activity for children's growth and development, contributing to nearly every aspect of development physical-motor, language, cognitive, socio-emotional, and religious values. This study explores the benefits of risky play in safety knowledge education for early childhood, drawing on Piaget's cognitive development theory, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, and Bandura's social learning theory. Using a qualitative case study approach, the findings show that risky play such as climbing, jumping from heights, and playing in open areas with minimal supervision enhances children's understanding of their own capability limits and potential hazards in their surrounding environment. Through these experiences, children demonstrated an improved ability to independently assess risk (for example, judging a safe height for climbing or a safe speed for running), initiative in protecting themselves and alerting peers during risky situations, and the ability to transfer this safety knowledge to everyday contexts beyond play. Social interaction among children and the presence of positive role models both adults and peers further supported the internalization of this safety knowledge, indicating that risky play contributes not only to cognitive development but also to the formation of more autonomous safety behavior in early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Risk-taking play has become an important topic in the context of early childhood education (Ningsih, 2023)(Melyanti et al., 2022)(A. Wardani et al., 2024). This is particularly true in relation to safety education. This concept refers to play activities that involve controlled elements of risk. This allows children to explore the limits of their physical and cognitive abilities (Sari & Nadia Aliyatuz Zulfa, 2024)(Haryanto & Twiningsih, 2024). In the context of early childhood education, an understanding of safety is a crucial aspect that needs to be developed from an early age (Muhammad Akhlis Rizza et al., 2021)(Salsabila Rantika et al., 2024)(Wahyu H. & Rukiyati, 2022). Risky play offers children the opportunity to learn through direct experience (Aguspriyanti et al., 2024)(Hidayah & Khadijah, 2023) (Ismawati & Patilima, 2024). This is crucial for the formation of new cognitive schemas related to safety(Nadlifah et al., 2022)(Anggi Cahaya Asari et al., 2023)(Nurmawaty Hasugian et al., 2023) (Baitur Rohmah & Thorik Aziz, 2024).

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Social interactions that occur during risky play whether with facilitators or peers can enrich children's learning processes. Teachers are the primary contributors to the overall growth and understanding of science concepts in early childhood during their developmental years (Maraisane et al., 2024)(Sakinah Siregar, 2021).

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development will be used to understand how young children learn and develop an understanding of safety through risky play(Anggi Cahaya Asari et al., 2023) (A. Wardani et al., 2024). According to Piaget, children learn through active interaction with their environment(Parinussa et al., 2024)(Wijaya & Nuraini, 2023)(H. K. Wardani, 2022). Adjusting to kindergarten can be a stressful time for children, teachers, and parents. However, if teachers can facilitate greater involvement and collaboration between parents and kindergarten teachers, the process will go more smoothly(Badri et al., 2014). Risky play provides children with opportunities to explore the limits of their physical and cognitive abilities. Through the processes of assimilation and accommodation, children can construct new schemas regarding safety and risk, which are crucial for their cognitive development(Muhammad Akhlis Rizza et al., 2021) (Wahyu H. & Rukiyati, 2022). This theory helps explain how direct experiences in risky play can enhance children's understanding of the concept of safety (Anggi Cahaya Asari et al., 2023). In line with this, a journey takes us toward the unknown and can ultimately transform us (Santana & de Oliveira, 2022).

In addition, Lev Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is also relevant in this context. The ZPD refers to the gap between what children can do on their own and what they can achieve with guidance or collaboration (Ningrum, 2024)(Rusuli, 2024)(Putu et al., 2024). In risky play, children are often accompanied by adults or more experienced peers who can provide support and guidance. Through these interactions, children can learn more complex safety strategies and internalize new knowledge(Baitur Rohmah & Thorik Aziz, 2024) (Nadlifah et al., 2022)(Putri et al., 2024). Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning, which is relevant in the context of risky play as a vehicle for safety education. A deeper understanding of the facilitators and barriers to free outdoor play can provide important data to guide policies, as well as interventions at the community or family level to increase opportunities for free outdoor play(Ramsden et al., 2024) . Teachers play a crucial role in fostering children's socio-emotional development; however, when the classroom climate deteriorates due to disruptive behavior, meeting children's emotional and learning needs becomes more difficult(Rivas et al., 2023)(Siregar & M 'Tuah Lubis, 2023)(Sakinah Siregar, 2021).

Albert Bandura's social learning theory states that children imitate the behavior of those around them(Putri et al., 2024)(Kala et al., 2022) (Fitri & Nailul, 2021). In this context, children will imitate the safety behaviors they observe in others during risky play(Kala et al., 2022)(Nadlifah et al., 2022). According to Bandura, learning occurs through observation and imitation(Firmansyah, 2023) (Nurma & Purnama, 2022) (Dariyo, 2021) (Nova Supriyedi Patty et al., 2024). Children can learn about safety by observing how others handle risky situations. Role models, such as parents or educators, can demonstrate safe and responsible behavior, which children then internalize(Siregar & Nabila, 2022). This theory highlights the importance of positive

role models in teaching safety concepts to children through risky play. A quality assessment system not only provides quality indicators (stars; numbers; letters), but must also provide useful and meaningful feedback to early childhood education centers, teachers, and families (M' Tuah Lubis & Siregar, 2024) (Ishimine et al., 2010). This is in line with educational programs, content, and teaching methods which relate to the natural, social, and cultural environments as well as regional development needs that are taught to students (Siregar et al., 2026) (Indriani & Siregar, 2024) (Purwakanita Hasan & Suwarni Eny, 2012).

Despite this growing body of literature, most existing studies have approached risky play primarily from a conceptual or theoretical standpoint explaining *why* risky play should matter for children's development in general (Ningsih, 2023) (Melyanti et al., 2022) (A. Wardani et al., 2024) or examining its contribution to broader cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) (Nadlifah et al., 2022) (Muhammad Akhlis Rizza et al., 2021) (Anggi Cahaya Asari et al., 2023) rather than empirically investigating how such play specifically translates into children's safety knowledge and safety behavior in practice. Few studies have examined, through direct observation of children's actual play behavior, how risky play concretely fosters safety understanding, self-protective initiative, and the transfer of safety-related learning into everyday situations beyond the play setting itself. Moreover, although Piaget's, Vygotsky's, and Bandura's theories are frequently cited separately to explain isolated aspects of children's learning during play (cognitive construction, social scaffolding, and behavioral modeling, respectively), few studies have integrated these three theoretical lenses within a single empirical case study to capture the multidimensional process through which safety knowledge is actually formed during risky play. This gap is particularly significant given that safety education in early childhood settings, as commonly practiced by teachers years (Maraisane et al., 2024); (Sakinah Siregar, 2021) still tends to rely on verbal instruction or rule-based guidance rather than experiential, risk-based learning approaches. Understanding how risky play functions as a lived, observable mechanism for safety learning is therefore essential, both to strengthen the theoretical basis for incorporating risk-taking activities into early childhood curricula and to provide practical guidance for teachers and caregivers who remain hesitant about allowing children to engage in physically challenging play.

This study aims to explore the benefits of risky play in enhancing children's understanding of safety, using Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, and Bandura's social learning theory as an integrated theoretical framework. Through a qualitative case study approach, this research seeks to provide in-depth, empirically grounded insights into how risky play can serve as an effective tool for safety education addressing the gap between conceptual claims about risky play's benefits and concrete evidence of how such benefits actually manifest in children's safety-related understanding and behavior.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore the role of risky play in improving safety awareness among early childhood children. The research was conducted at RA Al-Quran Dina and involved 30 children aged 4–6 years selected through purposive sampling based on age, ability to

participate in group activities, and parental consent. Parents and teachers were also involved as participants to provide additional information regarding children's safety-related behaviors. Data collection was conducted over a three-month period.

The children participated in risky play activities in groups of five to six, with each group guided by a facilitator experienced in early childhood education. The facilitator observed children's interactions and provided guidance only when necessary to ensure a safe learning environment. Data were collected through three techniques: observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Observation sheets were used to record children's ability to recognize potential hazards, respond to safety instructions, make decisions, and demonstrate initiative in protecting themselves and their peers during risky play. Semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers explored their perceptions of changes in children's safety awareness after participating in the activities. Field notes were used to document contextual information, group dynamics, and nonverbal interactions that supported data interpretation.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from observations, interviews, and field notes. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis through four stages: data reduction, data coding, theme identification, and drawing conclusions. The identified themes were then interpreted using Piaget's cognitive development theory, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and Bandura's social learning theory to explain how risky play contributes to children's safety awareness.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Improving Children's Understanding of Safety Concepts

The study findings indicate that risky play significantly enhances young children's understanding of safety concepts. Observations show that children are better able to recognize potential hazards and respond more effectively to safety instructions after participating in risky play sessions. Children demonstrated an increase in their initiative to ensure their own safety and that of their peers, indicating a deeper understanding of the importance of safety. These findings are consistent with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which emphasizes the importance of direct experience in children's learning. Discussions with parents and educators revealed that children demonstrated positive changes in safety-related behavior outside of the play sessions. Parents reported that children were more cautious and more aware of their surroundings, indicating a transfer of learning from the games to everyday situations. Interviews also highlighted that children were discussing safety with adults more frequently, indicating increased interest in and understanding of the topic. This supports the view that risky play can serve as an effective educational tool for teaching safety concepts.

Data analysis shows that improvements in children's understanding of safety are also influenced by their interactions with facilitators and peers during play. Facilitators who provide timely guidance help children internalize more complex safety strategies. Interactions with peers also encourage children to remind one another of the importance of safety, reinforcing learning through collaboration. These findings support Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development, in which social interaction plays a crucial role in children's learning. This finding reinforces earlier conceptual work suggesting that risky play allows children to explore the limits of their physical and cognitive abilities (Sari & Nadia Aliyatuz

Zulfa, 2024)(Haryanto & Twiningsih, 2024), by providing empirical, observation-based evidence of this process in action. Whereas prior studies have largely argued, at a theoretical level, that risky play is crucial for the formation of new cognitive schemas related to safety (Nadlifah et al., 2022) (Muhammad Akhlis Rizza et al., 2021) (Anggi Cahaya Asari et al., 2023), the present study extends this line of argument by documenting a concrete behavioral outcome the transfer of safety awareness from play sessions into everyday parental- and educator-reported behavior. This suggests that the schema-formation process proposed conceptually in earlier literature does indeed manifest as observable, transferable safety behavior, representing a more applied contribution than the largely theoretical framing found in previous studies.

The Role of Social Interaction in Safety Learning

The research findings indicate that social interaction plays a crucial role in early childhood safety learning during risky play. Observations show that children who interact more frequently with their peers and facilitators tend to understand and apply safety strategies more quickly. These interactions allow children to share experiences and knowledge with one another, which enriches their understanding of how to handle risky situations. These findings support Vygotsky's theory regarding the importance of social interaction in learning. Interviews with parents and educators revealed that children who participated in group discussions during the game demonstrated increased safety awareness. These children more frequently reminded their peers of potential hazards and how to avoid them, indicating that social interaction fosters collaborative learning. Parents reported that children discussed safety more often at home, suggesting that the learning that takes place during risky play can be transferred to other contexts.

Data analysis also shows that the facilitator's role in supporting social interaction is crucial. Facilitators who actively provide guidance and encouragement during the game help children develop the communication and collaboration skills necessary to understand safety concepts. By providing constructive feedback, facilitators help children internalize new knowledge and apply it in real-life situations. This suggests that guided social interaction can enhance the effectiveness of risk-taking games as a safety education tool.

The Influence of Role Models on Children's Safety Behavior

The results of the study show that role models have a significant influence on the safety behaviors of young children. Observations during risky play sessions revealed that children who have positive role models, such as facilitators or more experienced peers, tend to adopt appropriate safety behaviors more quickly. These children more frequently imitate the safety actions they observe, such as checking their surroundings before playing or using protective gear correctly. These findings support Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of observation in learning. Interviews with parents and educators reinforced the finding that role models play a crucial role in shaping children's safety behaviors. Parents reported that children exposed to positive role models during play more often demonstrated responsible behavior at home, such as reminding family members about safety. Educators also noted that these children were more proactive in ensuring their own safety and that of their peers in the school environment. This suggests that role models can facilitate the transfer of learning from play to everyday situations.

Data analysis shows that the effectiveness of role models in influencing children's safety behavior is influenced by the quality of the interaction between the child and the role model. Facilitators who actively demonstrate safe behavior and provide constructive feedback help children better internalize safety concepts.

Positive and supportive interactions between children and role models also encourage children to be more confident in applying the safety strategies they have learned. These findings highlight the importance of facilitators and peers as role models in safety education through risky play. These findings align with earlier claims that children imitate the safety behaviors they observe in others during risky play (Kala et al., 2022); (Nadlifah et al., 2022), and that role models such as parents or educators can demonstrate safe and responsible behavior which children then internalize (Siregar & Nabila, 2022). However, much of this prior literature discusses imitation and role modeling in relatively general terms, without specifying which concrete safety behaviors are imitated or how this imitation later manifests at home or in other settings. The present study adds specificity to this claim by identifying particular imitated behaviors and by tracing their transfer into home and school contexts, as reported by parents and educators. This provides a more behaviorally grounded account of Bandura's social learning theory within the risky play context than has previously been offered in the studies cited.

Children's Strategies for Coping with Risky Situations

The research findings show that children develop various strategies for dealing with risky situations during play sessions. Observations reveal that children tend to adopt a cautious approach, such as observing their surroundings before taking action. They also demonstrate the ability to make quick decisions in challenging situations, for example, by choosing a safer path when climbing or balancing. These strategies reflect a better understanding of risk and safety, gained through direct experience in risky play. Interactions with peers and facilitators also influence the strategies children use. During the game, children often discuss and share ideas about the best ways to tackle challenges, which encourages collaboration and shared learning. Facilitators provide guidance that helps children develop more effective strategies, such as recognizing danger signs or using protective gear correctly. These interactions not only deepen children's understanding of safety but also enhance their social skills in working with others.

Interviews with parents and educators revealed that the strategies children learned during risky play are often applied in everyday situations. Parents reported that children more frequently demonstrated proactive behavior in ensuring their own safety, such as checking their surroundings before playing outside. Educators noted that children were more independent in making safety-related decisions within the school environment. These findings suggest that risky play not only enhances children's understanding of safety but also equips them with practical strategies they can apply in their daily lives.

The Impact of Risky Play on Children's Cognitive Development

Research findings indicate that risky play has a positive impact on the cognitive development of young children. Observations reveal that children engaged in risky play demonstrate improved problem-solving and decision-making skills. They are better able to assess situations and choose appropriate actions when facing challenges. This aligns with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which states that direct experiences and interactions with the environment can enrich a child's cognitive schemas. In addition, interviews with parents and educators indicate that children who participate in risky play more frequently demonstrate creativity in their thinking and imagination. They tend to be more open to new ideas and more flexible in adjusting their strategies when faced with changing situations. These improvements suggest that risky play not only helps children understand risk and safety but also stimulates broader cognitive development.

Data analysis also shows that social interactions during play contribute to children's cognitive development. Children who collaborate with peers and facilitators to solve

challenges demonstrate improvements in critical and analytical thinking skills. Discussing and sharing ideas with others encourages children to consider various perspectives and develop more effective solutions. These findings support the view that social interaction is a key element in children's cognitive learning

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that risky play significantly improves young children's understanding of safety. Children who participated demonstrated greater ability to recognize potential hazards, respond to safety instructions, and proactively ensure their own safety and that of their peers. These findings support Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction, and Bandura's social learning theory, as children exposed to positive role models adopted appropriate safety behaviors more quickly through collaborative, socially mediated learning.

The main contribution of this study is showing that risky play integrates cognitive, social, and behavioral learning mechanisms simultaneously to build children's safety competence, and that this understanding transfers beyond the play setting into children's everyday behavior at home and school—an integration rarely demonstrated empirically in prior literature. Practically, these findings suggest that teachers and parents should support, rather than restrict, well-supervised risky play as a deliberate safety education tool, with adults acting as active role models. Future research should employ larger and longitudinal samples to verify the durability and generalizability of these effects, and compare risky play with other safety education approaches

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