

## Introduction

**H**ave you been with a child on the playground? I don't just mean, have you taken a child to the playground? But have you really been with a child, taking note of what he or she does on a playground? Have you followed a child as he or she explores the different activities afforded by the playground? And in following this child, have you stopped to consider the nature of this playground activity, and whether the child feels secure, or whether he or she should exercise more care, or perhaps if the child appears overly anxious, whether he or she should not be a bit more adventurous, be a little more of a risk-taker on this apparatus of the playground?

I think of taking my daughter to the playground at a local school-yard. No sooner do we arrive than she leaves me behind in her eagerness to explore the slippery slides, climbing frames, platforms and beams

that comprise this playground. I watch as she races off to a slide where only moments earlier some older children could be seen playing. For now my child has the slide all to herself. "Can you manage all by yourself?" I ask as she begins to climb the ladder. My question falls on deaf ears. But halfway up, she glances in my direction. A frown creases her brow. She grasps the rungs more tightly, pulls herself closer to the ladder, and cautiously ventures a little higher up. Now two-thirds of the way up, she does not seem to want to go any higher. She calls for me to come over to her, to come and bring her down from this precarious place. So I do as she requests, wondering at the same time how the slide can lose its appeal so quickly, wondering if lifting her down is the best thing to do, and wondering if perhaps the slide would seem less risky were I to follow her up to the top of the ladder and then to come down with her. Should I not respond in a way that is consistent with the enthusiasm she first showed for this activity? Should I not respond in a way that is respectful of the risks of this activity yet mindful of the child's initial inclination to take the risk of going down the slide? What is the best thing to do for this child when a sense of risk impinges upon her enjoyment of the playground?

The situation involving my child on the playground raises questions that have to do with how we should treat children in general. It raises questions regarding a child's experience of the playground, further questions regarding our understanding of a child's experience, and practical questions pertaining to what we ought to do in order to stay in touch with and yet give direction to a child's activity. In particular, it raises questions regarding the riskiness of children's lives: questions that have to do with a child's sense of risk, our understanding of such risk, and of what we might do so that risks can be taken in a prevailing atmosphere of security.

The study upon which we are now embarking is an attempt to grasp the meaning of these questions that arise primarily out of our interactions with children on playgrounds. It begins with a formulation of "risk" which will guide our reflections on these playground interactions with children and help define those encounters which are of most interest.

First and foremost, risk is a term of our pedagogical relation to children. This study aims to show that risk signifies a relation that holds for children on the playground and for the precarious world which children find beyond the playground. For adults, risk is a term for remembering children's activity on the playground and for seeing themselves capable at some point in their lives of engaging in similar activity. Risk suggests the capacity of adults to identify with the very nature of children's playground activity. More fundamentally, it is a reflective term of maturity whereby adults can follow children's activities as they attempt to

influence them in ways the child is only beginning to understand. Risk acknowledges positively the difference that maturity creates between an adult's and a child's understanding of playground activity and of the learning which such activity represents. For, as we shall see, children and adults do experience playground events differently; and though adults may at times be indifferent to the riskiness that children feel, there is always the possibility of their becoming involved in what children are doing and of taking pains to do something about the risks of which children might not otherwise be aware. Adults are in a position to lend a sense of security to children's experiences of playground activity because of their much greater experience of the playground and, indeed, the larger world's riskiness. This possibility of bringing adult maturity to bear upon the playground activity of children is what is implied in the statement that risk is, first and foremost, a term of our pedagogical relation to children.

The "playground" is the immediate and obvious reference point for these reflections on the significance of risk. We want to base our reflections on everyday interactions with children, and so we ought to observe children where they are likely to be found. Of course, children are likely to be found elsewhere and mostly everywhere, especially in schools, homes, nurseries, backyards, parks, kindergartens, daycare settings, and elementary schools, and they probably spend more time in these settings than on playgrounds. Yet these are not places that children typically seek out themselves, nor are they places where they freely spend their time. The playground stands out in this regard as an important focus, being not only a place set aside for children but also a place for viewing activities which have a particularly child-like quality. But the playground holds a greater significance than the mere fact of its accessibility and the opportunities it provides for appreciating the unfettered experiences of children. It is at times a risky place and a place where children are often seen to be taking risks. It is where children are encouraged to take risks by their peers and, at times, by the adults who take them there. The playground is a place where risk tends to thematize our interactions with children as well as their responses to one another. Hence the playground serves not only as a focus for our reflections on risk but also as a commonplace reference in our attempts to describe a responsible pedagogy of risk.

By way of introduction, I will attempt to show how such a formulation of risk begins to make sense of the interactions that invariably occur on the playground.

## Venturing Onto the Playground

The school doors open and children come streaming outside. Some run toward the school gates to where their parents stand beside opened car doors. Others head to bicycle racks to join the growing confusion of children already there, each trying to steer his or her way through cluttered exits. Still others join up with friends or with an older brother or sister, and disappear from view along the sidewalks. A number of children, however, seem much less concerned to get away so quickly. In dribs and drabs they cross the playing field to an adjoining playground. Here they climb ladders, chains, platforms, and beams. They swing on tires and bars. They jump down from various heights or from one piece of equipment to another, and slide down poles and slides or off plastic casings. They sit in the sand, sculpture the sand, throw the sand. They chase each other over the playground, stopping every now and then to discuss what's fair and what's not. All sorts of activities take place on this playground. And after a while this playground is where most of the remaining children are to be found.

Some children are on the playground waiting for their parents to collect them. A car pulls up the asphalt driveway skirting the field that adjoins this playground. A car horn signals the arrival of one of the parents. The passenger-side door is thrust open. "I gotta go, Justine. See you tomorrow," says one young girl as she heads off in the direction of the waiting adult. The scene is repeated many times over. A few adults get out of their cars and walk towards the playground before they are spotted. Some even take a cursory look at what their children are doing on the playground before leading them away. One woman arrives in a flurry. She searches anxiously for her child. "Melissa," she says, "I've been looking everywhere for you. Your music lesson is in five minutes. Oh. Hi, Jillian, how are you? How's your mother? Tell her I'll give her a ring tomorrow. . . . Melissa, I told you to come straight home. Get your things and let's go!" And so it goes on this playground. Parents have important things to do. They must pick up children. And children have important things to do. They have homes to go to and lessons to attend.

But what if we were to ask the children themselves; what order of priorities would they give us? "What did you do at school today?" I ask my child. "Nothing," he replies in a rather disinterested manner. "You mean you just stood around all day doing nothing?" "No, we did things," he says matter-of-factly. This line of questioning is not proving very helpful, so I ask: "And what do you like doing at school?" His expression softens. "I like recess. I like playing with Dorian and Michael. I like climbing things, and I like going down the slide, except when the big

kids push us down. We don't like the big kids. They say, 'Don't come on the slide! You can't come on the slide, kid!' Do you know Dorian got pushed off the slide? Like, we were on the slide first, and then a big kid was climbing up the slide. He said, 'Don't touch me or I'll push you off.' And he pushed Dorian off and hurt his mouth. Like, he was laughing and Dorian was crying." He pauses for a moment. "So you like going to the playground," I say, hoping to hear more about what happens there (and becoming a little concerned about the safety of the children there). "Yes," he replies, "but the teacher always makes us sit and eat our lunch first. It takes too long. We just want to play."

The playground is an important place. It is a place for children who are waiting for their parents to collect them. It is a place of recess. And it is a place to take the children when there is nothing more pressing to do. But the playground is even more than this. Although ignored by those for whom children are of little consequence or by those who are too pre-occupied with adult concerns to be much bothered with things that matter to children, although taken for granted by those who take children for granted and prefer to see their effective removal from the adult world, the playground is also a place for understanding what is happening to children. It is a child's place, a place for being able to act like a child, and a place for seeing what matters to children.

Of course, this does not mean that an interest in playgrounds is synonymous with an interest in understanding children. Throughout the summer months pictures of children on swings, slides, teeter-totters, and other playground items appear regularly in local newspapers. A child is caught frozen in the arc of a swing, her body parallel to the ground, a teasing smile on her face. Two children sit giggling together on a tire swing. Another child is photographed reclining on a metal slide, her arms extended, eyebrows raised, mouth agape, making sounds we can only imagine. Do these pictures tell us anything about these children? They certainly tell us something about ourselves. Such activity representations express a more playful mood that exists at this time of year, a holiday spirit, an *esprit de jeu*, an adult longing for the summer idyll. The playground interest evoked in these portrayals of children is at the level of sentimentality and nostalgia. Nevertheless, because the playground is reserved for children, by looking at what children do in this context it is more likely that questions related to understanding them on their own terms will be raised than by looking at them in some other domain where they may be expected to be something other than just children.<sup>1</sup>

Still, it must be acknowledged from the outset that not all children relish the thought of going to the playground. It loses its appeal for the older child, for example, the child who has entered a fraternity of

skateboarders and is now allowed to travel farther afield than the local park or school ground. This child's access to the streets takes him or her far beyond the domain of the playground. And though such children may return to the playground once in a while, it is now clear the playground holds a different meaning for them than it does for the younger child. They are like adults who, when at the playground, will try some maneuver on, say, a set of parallel bars, or perhaps will try to pull themselves up a vertical pole to a platform above, just to see if they can still do it. The actions of these older people show that the playground holds few fears for them. They are now too big for what the playground allows. They have outgrown the playground. There are children, however, who are not quite so old, yet they stay clear of the playground as well. At recess they loiter near the buildings, while after school they skirt around the playground on their way home. These children have not outgrown the playground; on the contrary, they seem to see the playground as an intimidating place to be avoided at all costs. So what can we say about such children? How shall we consider them? Perhaps the answer lies in looking more closely at the nature of playground activity, not only to determine the meaning of what children enjoy and then eventually outgrow, but also to come to an understanding of that which is potentially so intimidating to some children. By looking at the normal course of playground activity something might be said even for the sake of children who choose to stay out of sight.

To take an interest in playground activity means to see children doing things many of us have done ourselves: swinging on tires, climbing metal frames, or playing in a sandpit. We see ourselves in the activities of children on a playground, and we follow what they are doing on the basis of our own recollections of childhood. But this is not all there is to understanding playground activity. Beyond the amusement of watching children at play, we are at times concerned for what particular children can and cannot do, and this concern springs from a maturity which enables us to make sense of their activity. We see children, for instance, as they develop physical skills, acquire problem-solving and other cognitive strategies, gain in self-esteem or lose self-confidence, acquire the ability to interact with others, and so on. We see children from the vantage point of our own sense of maturity, and this provides the basis for our coming to terms with their playground activity. And yet, the really practical and responsible task of maturity remains: to try to understand playground activity through our reflective participation as adults who see and formulate the meaning of this activity for the sake of children's own reflective growth towards maturity, or in other words, by engaging and interacting with children in ways that help them become increasingly confident and competent in their actions.

What pedagogical sense do we make of the riskiness of the playground? And how do we act on our pedagogical understanding of risk? A sense of risk arises when, on the basis of our own experiences, we become concerned about children's fears and difficulties and the danger and challenge of their playground activity. We ask: To what extent is the playground a place of risk? Such a question is important historically and sociologically for the way in which playgrounds have developed as "safe" places set aside for children (and places which serve to keep adult places "safe" from children), but it is also important pedagogically for the way it draws us onto the playground and leads us to consider the significance of our adult place in a child's life. What does risk-taking mean to a child? How do children respond to risk? And how should we, as adults, respond to their taking risks? These are specific questions to consider as we look at children on the playground. A sensitive consideration of such questions helps us to realize that to expect all children to feel comfortable on swings, climbing frames and slides, without our being there at times, may be to expect too much of children and too little of ourselves. Such questions enable us to appreciate the inherent riskiness of children's playground activity, and at the same time, they help us to avoid the sort of adult indifference that makes the world seem all the more dangerous to children. From a position of responsiveness to such questions of risk we can try to adopt a child's perspective, which is to say, we can try to remember the child in the activities we are able to share and to cast these remembrances within a terminology of risk that might give direction to our everyday relations with children.

### **Redefining Risk**

Risk is a term which brings to mind our responsibility for the direction of children's activity. It is a pedagogically significant term to the extent that it defines some essential feature of adult conduct aimed at guiding young children towards a position of being responsible themselves for the consequences of their activity. This is not to say that risk is simply an adult formulation of children's activity. There is indeed a visibility of risk in playground activity—in its difficulty, danger, and challenge, in the observable fears it arouses, and especially in the obviously daring and audacious ways children respond to it. Nevertheless, it is only by being with the child as if returning to the landscape of our own childhood that the riskiness of children's activity becomes a disclosure of a shared and remembered world and a disclosure of our place in relation to the child. Only by being with the child in this interactive and self-reflective way do we appreciate the full meaning of the term risk.



There is an openness to the formulation of "risk as an aspect of the pedagogical relation" that defies more conventional notions of risk. It would appear to be at odds with the common assumption that risk is something like pain which we try to reduce and hopefully avoid rather than value for its significance for children's growth and development. It also distances us from those who deal in a calculus of risk avoidance and who seek to analyze, assess, manage, and communicate the extent of the threats and hazards posed by modernization. Such exposure to "risk factors," or being publically "at-risk," is of a different order of human significance to the taking of risks that are personally meaningful. The actuarial definition of risk upon which insurance tables, government legislations, and business practices are based precludes looking at risk "from the point of view of the person assessing the danger or potential loss" (Siegelman, 1983, p. 4). "Ordinary people, that is the vast bulk of humanity, probably use different criteria by which to assess their vulnerability to risks," being "influenced, not necessarily by the 'reality' of a risk, but by what they *perceive* that risk to be" (Plant and Plant, 1992, p. 114).

By the same token, risk is not simply a matter of individual perception. The fact that some unusual risks of living can be so magnified out of all proportion, distorting the actual probabilities of injury from these and more ordinary risks (cf. Laudan, 1994; Kluger, 1996), indicates a media construction of risk that influences individual perception. Indeed, certain authors have questioned defining risk solely in terms of individual perception, not only dismissing the idea of personalities disposed towards or averse to taking risks but also the assumption that individuals freely respond to risk without being influenced strongly by cultural biases with respect to a more generalized trust and confidence, or lack thereof, in social institutions (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983; Wildavsky and Dake, 1990). Kirby (1990) maintains that the responses made to any quantifiable risk are not so much individually chosen as they are determined by "intervening social variables" (p. 284). Beck (1992), who has coined the notion of "risk society" to refer to the result of modernization where there exists a prevailing quest for safety, defines risks as the consequences of this modernization, which makes them distinguishable from other dangers. Individual perception is conditioned by the "new prominence" accorded the notion of risk in our highly technological societies (Douglas, 1990, p. 1). Risk replaces, to some extent, the older, socially constraining notions of danger, sin and taboo which served in past times to create moral community (p. 5).

But if risk is not simply a matter of individual perception, neither is it simply a matter of social definition. Though we live in a risk society where issues of public safety and individual responsibility determine



our daily living, and though we also live in a society that glorifies risk of a certain kind and that venerates the publicly dramatic risk-taker (Adams, 1995, p. 17; Keyes, 1985, pp. 154, 255), individuals still remain free to *take* risks. Some element of choice is always involved, for risk is not some thing, either threatening or alluring, that determines action from the outside. Influenced from without, it is a consideration within the action itself, even if it is inaction in the face of overwhelming odds. Determinist notions, whether it be a perception of risk ascribed to the individual or the objective rendition of a risk society, begin to blur when we consider the intentionality of risk-taking.<sup>2</sup> Here we discover latitudes of freedom and choice in taking risks of different kinds and of differing degrees of private and public responsibility.

Risks taken may be *physical*, as in being exposed to injury in sports and adventurous recreations, jeopardizing your life in occupations like firefighting, policework, military service, and mining, or engaging in voluntary, public service, rescue work. They may be *emotional*, as in admitting fear or hurt, expressing anger, trusting another, falling in love, or being intimate with your partner. They may be more *social* in kind, as in the risks that go with being honest, trying your best, saying no, defending your rights, and being open to the ways of other people. They may be *intellectual*, as in the trepidations of asking questions, admitting error, or exploring new ideas. And they may be ostensibly *financial*, as, for example, when starting a business, playing the stockmarket, or loaning money (cf. Keyes, 1985; Siegelman, 1983; Viscott, 1977).

Any particular risk taken is not categorically physical, emotional, social, intellectual or financial. Risk-taking activity carries a mixture of different valencies; in fact, "it appears that there is considerable overlap between one kind of risk-taking and others. Risks are often interconnected" (Plant and Plant, 1992, p. 120). Recognizing this interconnectedness can direct our attention to a theoretical "risk construct" (Yates and Stone, 1992) that is common across a very wide range of behavioral contexts.

Such a construct is one that suggests a kind of risk-taking that is most physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, and possibly even financially, worthwhile. In order to grasp such a construct, however, we need to deconstruct some commonly-held assumptions about the worth of different kinds of risk-taking. More important, we shall need to reconceptualize risk-taking along ethical lines by considering the intentionality of risk-taking in terms of levels of attentiveness to others. In the process we may begin to unravel the "inextricable tangle" of our involvement with others in a world of potential risks (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 454) and begin to see how risk is tied inextricably to a pedagogical responsibility for the lives of children.

## **An Ethical Register**

Keyes (1985) distinguishes between two levels of risk-taking. At the first level are the audacious, adventurous, fearless, thrill-seeking individuals we find in motor racing, mountain climbing, hang gliding, cliff and bungee jumping, downhill mountain bike and ski racing, along with the high rollers at the casino blackjack and baccarat tables, and the commodity and stock market traders whose fortunes are made and lost in a day. These are the risk-takers who seem to have developed a "protective psychological frame" that instills a sense of safety even as they approach the "dangerous edge" of their respective pursuits (Apter, 1992). These are the risk "seekers" and "chasers" who seem more inclined than most to face danger, and who seem to crave that "incredibly exciting and vertiginous sensation" that Shapiro (1992) describes so well in considering the physical exploits of mogul and aerial snow skiers.

Level-two risks are far less noticeable and far more common. These are the risks that appear less physical and financial and much more emotional, social and intellectual, risks such as "creating ties to others. Building careers. Developing self-knowledge. Tolerating silence. Doing nothing. Not trying to control all outcomes. Being bored. Being boring" (Keyes, 1985, p. 154). While these risks may not seem like much when compared with the high excitement, level-one risks, they accentuate a different order of responsibility. Taking level-two risks brings a longer lasting calm, a deeper sense of oneself and a greater commitment to community (p. 156).

These levels of risk-taking point in the direction of what is perhaps "the hardest risk of all to take—the risk of letting your children take chances" (Keyes, 1985, p. 232). For, if genuine risk-taking implies change, growth, and the increasing acceptance of who we are (Anderson, 1988), then the most responsible thing we can do is to allow and encourage another person to take risks. In the case of our own children and the children entrusted to us, this responsibility becomes quite taxing as we struggle to let go, stand back, observe, listen, appreciate, and respond to their forays into the world. Our greatest fear, of losing the child, is one we must countenance as we learn to risk trusting the child to make his or her way in the world.

Our formulation of "risk as an aspect of the pedagogical relation" ascribes to risk something inclusive of, yet beyond, the first level macho, entertainment and escapist values of the risks we freely choose to take, and something inclusive of yet transcending the second level personal growth and maturation values of the risks we individually chose to take. It ascribes an ethic of responsibility for discerning the

risks that children ought to take, which is an ethic that evolves out of an individual perception of risk tempered by social definitions of appropriate risk-taking, and that is expressed in one's concern for the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and even financial well-being of one's children. Too often our talk of risk-taking falls short of this third level of responsibility. Too often the question of what makes a situation seem risky, especially situations involving children, is put aside for the sake of managing our fears (eg., Serafino, 1986) and instilling a "safety consciousness" in children (*Canada Safety Council*, 1984; Wishon and Oreskovich, 1986).

I am suggesting, in alluding to a third level of risk-taking, that we can derive a sense of pedagogical responsibility, a pedagogy of risk-taking, from our most common ways of experiencing risk. In order to do so we need, first of all, to be skeptical of those explanations which diminish the personal and relational significance of risk-taking behavior. Such explanations pertain to the physiology of enzyme production (Morell, 1986), the genetics of brain chemical stimulation (Benjamin et al., 1996; Dold, 1996; Ebstein et al., 1996), the psychologies of personality typing (Begley, 1986), risk tolerance (Sewell, 1986), "positive addition" (Glasser, 1976), "sensation seeking" (Zuckerman, 1979) and "flow" attainment (Cziksizentmihalyi, 1990), and to the sociology of job placement and economic aspiration (MacCrimmon and Wehrung, 1986, p. 36).<sup>3</sup>

Second, we need to look closely at various definitions of risk and the many interpretations of risk-taking behavior (Fishoff et al., 1984) in order to define that which is experientially significant. To take a risk, we are told, means to be open to danger, loss or hurt—"to navigate among cliffs" (Weekley, 1924, p. xii). A more recent interpretation goes: "To take a risk is to take a chance or a gamble; it implies a degree of uncertainty and inability to control fully the outcomes or consequences of such an action" (Moore, 1983, p. 1). Similarly, Roche (1980) notes that "Gambling as a movement represents an affirmation not of outcomes, per se, but rather their unpredictability; it thus represents the notion of taking a risk" (p. 79). But risk is experienced as more than navigating amongst cliffs, taking a chance or gambling; it is experienced in the uncertainty of a chosen task, in the responses made to a dare or a challenge, in seeking out adventure, and in the responsibilities of daily living. The complexity of the experience of risk depends upon the various ways it enters our lives and the significance of the risk depends very much upon not only the response that is called forth but also the meaning we make of that response in the conduct of our lives.

To take a risk is not simply "to face" a danger, nor to find ourselves without warning or conscious effort to be "at risk," nor "to run a risk" by

acting in an oblivious way to inherent dangers (cf. Rescher, 1983, p. 6). To take a risk requires much more of us than this. It requires that the unknown be encountered, that we do indeed experience uncertainty. We are required to do more than that which feels comfortable, more than simply display those capabilities we possess. We must even at times dig deep within ourselves and test the limits of our resources. Taking a risk is the project of encountering the unknown wherein self-understanding occurs. "Risk-taking situations are occasions in which what kind of people we are is literally held open to question, indeed, in which we find out who we are in the midst of becoming who we are" (Hyland, 1984, p. 130).

The third thing we need to do in deriving a pedagogy of risk-taking is to determine that which in the experience of risk is relationally significant. Risks presented mainly as physical challenges carry some degree of social engagement and even if they are risks taken alone the experience still only has meaning to the extent that it bears upon one's sense of being part of a community (whether it be a fraternity of climbers, skateboarders, or extreme sports enthusiasts). While some risks to the soul, mind, and body have a noticeable relational focus insofar as they are risks that directly influence one's sense of being with other people, particularly significant are the risks that present themselves in the actions of children because these are not risks we take, seek, or chase, but rather risks taken by another for whom we are responsible and whose otherness we must risk facing. Such risks are not experienced vicariously; they are experienced bodily, empathetically, intersubjectively, and relationally. They call upon our ability to respond in ways that are helpful. Such risks essentially define our everyday relations with children and our pedagogical ways of being with them.

Bollnow (1971) helps articulate this pedagogical redefinition of risk by making clear distinctions between ordinary, self-referenced notions of risk, such as experimentation and gambling, and "true risk" that is referenced to the actions of another person. He says, "real risk always occurs because of genuine ethical responsibility." Real risk-taking has possible consequences which hit a person in his or her "innermost core" (p. 525). Real risk-taking occurs in the context of one's receptivity, commitment, and responsiveness to the actions of children. It strikes an ethical register, not only in the concern shown for the well-being of the child and the quality of the child's relations with others, but also in the underlying concern for the manner in which the child comes to be at home in a world that is worth living in.

## Educational Relevance

A possible consequence of becoming receptive to this ethical register of risk-taking is that we begin to appreciate how an “ethic of risk” (Welch, 1990) redefines what is ordinarily understood as “responsible action,” “grounding in community,” and “strategic risk-taking” (p. 20). Our basic task becomes one of caring for children and the world they live in without any guarantees that we can ultimately make a difference. “Such action requires immense daring and enables deep joy. It is an ethos in sharp contrast to the ethos of cynicism that often accompanies the recognition of the depth and persistence of evil” (p. 68).

This response-ability for the risk-taking of children, drawing upon our own socially-determined experiences of risk, brings into focus two practical educational considerations. First, no matter what particular view of risk and risk-taking we adopt, from an educational perspective we must be mindful of the fact that for the most part ours is an adult view of risk and one which the child has yet to learn. For example, when we say a child is taking a risk, it may be one which the child cannot see. The child may need to learn about the hazards, difficulties, and dangers of an activity before we can actually say that a risk is being taken. And even when a child does appear to sense something of the riskiness of a situation, the question remains as to how much we can presume to know of the child’s experience and how much of what we presume to understand of the child’s experience is due to our adult interpretation of risk-taking. What constitutes a child’s sense of risk other than that which we can understand from an adult point of view?

Which leads to the second educational consideration. As soon as the child comes into the picture then it would seem that we must consider most favorably that view of risk which is good for the child. There is an obligation placed upon us to consider risk in light of the child’s growth towards maturity. For instance, in a business text on taking risks, the authors document a range of risks—financial, health-related, social, career, and so forth. They give the example of John deLorean who in the mid-seventies resigned from his executive position at General Motors in order to start up his own car production company. The financial risks to such a venture were enormous not only because of the size of the investment needed but also because of the volatility of market conditions. Even with the backing of the British Government, deLorean soon found himself in major difficulties. Facing bankruptcy, deLorean apparently orchestrated a major drug deal to bail out his company. The actual transaction was recorded through videotaped surveillance, however deLorean was acquitted of all charges by reason of FBI

entrapment. What is most interesting in this example, aside from the actual details of the case, is the authors' concluding comment that "John deLorean clearly fits our image of the entrepreneurial risk taker" (MacCrimmon and Wehrung, 1986, p. 7.) This individual may be considered an "entrepreneurial risk taker," however, this image of risk-taking appears hideously corrupt if it is to stand as an image guiding children's experiences of risk. Even if entrepreneurial risk does in fact lie within the paradigm of laudable risk-taking to which children are exposed, our task as adults in the presence of children is to see through our adult notions of risk in order to see the child more clearly.

This thinking about risk turns in an even more practical, pedagogical direction as we look at the playground and consider why it is problematic and why it calls for thought. We come to appreciate that, although an adult view of risk takes us far beyond the playground and seemingly beyond the sorts of physical risks to which children are exposed on the playground, the here and now concerns we have for what is good for children serve to bring our experiences of risk to bear upon the playground. In effect, to watch children take risks means our own experiences of risk already impinge upon the situation at hand. To then help children take risks means we should be critically aware of how our experiences influence our actions and how our experiences can inform right actions. Seeing the riskiness of the playground means holding open the question of what a sense of risk actually implies with respect to our ethical responsibility for the nurturance of the young. In playground situations of risk-taking it is our responsibility for seeing the risks children ought to take that is at issue.

Yet this ethical responsibility can very easily be regarded as an abstract principle of risk-taking, as an educational slogan that supplants concern for the exigencies of the playground, and as a pious remedy for chronic adult indifference to children, rather than as a way of pointing to an essential quality of risk-taking. In order to keep our feet on the playground it is necessary to see how this sense of responsibility might characterize our everyday dealings with children and how it might enjoin our experience with theirs. We need to see how this redefined notion of risk points to the primacy of an adult-child relation, which is not merely a relation that holds for the playground, but a relation which contextualizes an abiding interest in situations involving children on playgrounds and places farther afield.

## The Structure of the Study

If risk is indeed a term of our pedagogical relation to children, how shall we describe it beyond simply pointing to selected instances of



playground activity? What language of risk shall we appeal to in describing this term of our relation to children? The answer lies in bringing a "pedagogical consciousness" (Hildebrandt, 1987) to bear upon selected instances of playground activity where risk is present, which in theoretical terms means, organizing our reflections on risk around such terms as the "place," "silence," "atmosphere," "challenge," "encounter," "practice" and "possibility" of risk, which already have pedagogical significance. These terms come from a tradition of pedagogical theorizing called the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* tradition (Danner, 1979) which is represented in this study in references to the work of Bollnow, the German pedagogue of the University of Tübingen (cf. Bollnow, 1966/1987), and that of Beets, Buytendijk, Langeveld, Van den Berg and more recently, Beekman, of the "Utrecht School" (van Manen, 1979). The task of this present series of reflections is to show that risk is implicated in these dimensions of "pedagogical consciousness" and to use this terminology of "place," "atmosphere," "silence," etc., in order to give a textual rendering of the relational view of risk which is our starting point.

Concerns regarding the structure of this study may arise as we think about this terminology. Will the playground stand up to such scrutiny? Will it be possible to stay within the confines of the playground as we think about the "place," "silence," "atmosphere," "challenge," "encounter," "practice" and "possibility" of risk? Such concerns over focus are not unfounded, however they do tend to be somewhat misleading. The playground is not so much an object of study (as would be the case in more positivistic forms of research), as it is the point of referral for our deliberations on the meaning of risk. The playground provides a reference point for what might be said about risk. Consequently there will be reference to events and situations outside the playground, although not to suggest that the playground is a limited and not so central example of the phenomenon, but rather to establish a context for making sense of the riskiness of playground activity. Examples of risk drawn from outside the playground will serve to contextualize this study, to situate its findings, and ultimately, to show the significance of a pedagogy of risk and the playground for bringing up children who inevitably leave the playground and its risks behind.

The divisions of this study have been made in keeping with this way of exploring the relational term risk. Chapter 2, *The Place of Risk*, explores a space for thinking about the meaning of risk. Through a review of pertinent literature, my intention is to show that the space called the playground derives from a concern for the safety of children and for their proper supervision, and that this concern points to a certain awareness of risk in children's lives. Chapter 3, *The Silence of Risk*, shows how we might become increasingly aware of this risk in children's

lives and, in so doing, develops an interest in the meaning of risk into a methodology of educational inquiry. Taken together, these two chapters are a prologue to the next part of the study where a practical interest in children's risk-taking is explored in greater depth. Here the dimensions of risk, as they are disclosed through the adult's involvement with the child on the playground, are shown to characterize an interest that moves towards becoming pedagogically responsive. Chapter 4, *The Atmosphere of Risk*, considers the dynamics of the adult-child relation as a reflection of the texture of risk in everyday life. More particularly, it shows the mediation of this texture, or atmosphere, of risk to be a function of how children can be helped to meet the demands of playground activity. Chapter 5, *The Challenge of Risk*, presents the view that, although children respond to taunts and provocations, the response which brings the adult firmly into the situation has more to do with encouragement. Needless to say, there are limits to the encouragement of risk-taking. Fears arise and a sense of danger impinges upon playground activity. The concern for risk must therefore come to terms with how it is that the adult can lead the child in his or her risk-taking. This dimension of being responsive to risk is the subject of Chapter 6, *The Encounter with Risk*. The terms of a pedagogy of risk-taking are then developed in a more educationally obvious direction in the last part of the study. Chapter 7, entitled *The Practice of Risk*, gives evidence of a pattern to children's risk-taking, or rather, a logic that can be followed and even planned for. Chapter 8, *The Possibility of Risk*, then poses the question of how an awareness of this logic of risk-taking enables us to understand the nature of children's activity beyond the playground. Although somewhat explanatory, this last section of the study serves to show the importance of looking more closely at the quality of risks of the playground for education writ large.

Let us now consider very briefly how the fundamental questions underlying the above chapters are interpreted and pursued.

### **The Place of Risk**

We begin with the question: how does the playground define risk in a child's life? Certainly the playground is not the only risky place for children. The home, too, is full of dangers; the street that borders the home is fraught with hazard; the shopping mall is a place where we must constantly keep a watchful eye on the young child. What distinguishes the playground is that it is a place designed for letting children take risks. It is a place where the adult need not see risk as danger or hazard, but more positively as challenge and adventure to which children can

actively respond. Here risk can serve to highlight something that is being accomplished by the child, some intended activity that expands the child's sense of the world. To the extent that the playground is a circumscribed space, it is not just one arena for risk-taking among many equally significant arenas; it potentially represents the primary arena, the fundamental ground for understanding what risk-taking means.

Through a sociology of knowledge of the playground we can see how risk has become so essential to our appreciation of what happens there. We can account for the need to mark off a special place for children, as if they did not already have their own special places; and we can understand that the design of playgrounds has to do with a certain conception of childhood and the need to preserve its fragility. But we can see also that the separation of children from the mainstream of daily life had an effect which cannot be accounted for through a sociology of knowledge about the playground. Such an analysis cannot account for the lived experience of being caught up in the playground activity of children. In other words, an understanding of the social relations that led to the design of playgrounds makes sense of what happens there in general, but it does not necessarily account for the human significance of our involvements with particular children on particular playgrounds. More specifically, a concern for the safety of children and their proper supervision has led to the design of places where risk can become a theme of a lived relation to children.

This riskiness of the playground, this place designed for seeing risk positively, enables us to question our relation to children and to consider how through this relation we might enable children to take risks in relative safety. What makes the playground an important place of risk has much to do with how we might attend to the activity that takes place there. We have an ongoing role to play in securing this place, in making it safe, in creating the conditions whereby the child can test the confidence of what he or she knows. Our task is thus to see within playground situations, especially those situations that appear risky, a direction for the child's explorations and growth.

The playground is in this regard an exemplary place of risk. Through design and daily use, the playground exemplifies the relationality that makes risk a term of human significance. So, if risk can be defined as that which in part structures our relation to children, and if it can be shown that the playground reveals an underlying, deep-seated interest in risk-taking, then even playgrounds as we presently conceive them might evoke a sense of the domain in which pedagogical relatedness unfolds most clearly.

## The Silence of Risk

Since what is good for one child may not be good for another, what is the value of an analysis which ends up generalizing a situation-specific pedagogy of risk-taking? What is the good of an analysis that glosses over the tentativeness of decisions that are to be made in practice? The answer requires that we look more closely at playground situations where our responses to what we see taking place are problematic, and where we must question on what grounds we can even know how to respond at all. So when a child brings our attention to the riskiness of his or her activity, we ought to consider carefully what is the best thing to do for this particular child. What help should we give? What specific actions should we take? Our response will depend upon the particularities of the situation and upon our knowledge of the particular child. Even then, how can we be sure we have done the right thing? Of course, this is not to deny those general principles to which we can subscribe and by which we gain confidence in our dealings with children; however, the point of the present analysis is not just to define educational principles of being with children, but to show how these principles become meaningful in concrete pedagogical situations. In so doing we might come to see risk as both the topic of our inquiry and its orienting principle. We may come to see how any intervention on our part in risky playground situations is, at another level, a risk we must take.

So, as we try to talk about this relationality of risk we find that our engagement with children carries certain silences. We approach their activity with a questioning silence and often we must remain silent through our failure to see what is at stake in their activity. Such silences are the result of an inevitable distance between children and us, however this is not so much a lack as a means of redefining the nature of our relation. The silences of our approach lead to a deeper silence, a comprehending silence where we try to find our common ground. We remember taking risks ourselves in much the same way as the children before us do; and on the basis of these recollections we try to work out how to be in a position to help these children take the risks we see in their activity. These silences of our approach to children's playground activity thus serve to open us more deeply to the relational nature of risk. The silences of risk show the provisional status of any observational analysis. They show that our words make sense only when they serve to place us within the fluctuations, ambiguities, and uncertainties of playground life.

## The Atmosphere of Risk

If risk is a term of our relation to children and if we can see in the risks of the playground a positive account of this relation, then what are its constitutive features? What is the texture of risk we see manifested especially in playground situations? Perhaps the texture of risk is reflective of a generalized atmosphere of risk that is evident even in the normal course of everyday life. After all, children are often minded by people they hardly know; they are placed in the care of strangers; they are left on their own when adult activity makes their presence inconvenient. In the course of everyday life what we do with children and what constitutes the texture of our relation to them makes children aware of a certain atmosphere of risk. If left completely to themselves or if our actions are evidence of a complete disregard for them then we find children exposed unprotected in this atmosphere of risk—children who are at-risk. On the other hand, the playground, being a place that carries an adult regard for the child, is a place where this atmosphere, this texture, can be influenced in ways that bring a security to the child's explorations. Here we can see that risk comes down to how we might be present to the activities of children, that children can be helped to take risks in relative safety through the encouragements we are able to give them and through the way we encounter playground challenges with them. From this general atmosphere of risk might develop a pedagogical atmosphere in which risk signifies a way of staying in touch with the course of children's playground activity.

How can we be mindful of this texture of risk and so influence the direction of children's activity most positively? In response to this question we can be guided by the visibility of risk, or rather, by our observations of what children are already able to do. Their stepping onto the playground, their responding to the challenges of the things they find there, is evidence of their desire to see the world around them in an active way. The playground appeals to children because it allows them to step away from adult protectiveness and thus to feel somewhat responsible for what they do. To influence the direction of children's activity most positively requires, therefore, our looking at what children care to show us and our responding in ways that not only enhance their movement repertoire but also help them gain confidence in doing things for themselves. The visibility of this texture of risk thus enables us to see that atmosphere is determined in large part by the responses we care to make to children's activity. Through examples of risky playground situations we can even differentiate between these various responses and show that the texture of risk is disclosed in differing

modes of adult presence, a classification of which might show how we can best instill confidence in children.

### **The Challenge of Risk**

As an adult, a parent, a teacher, how does this attunement to risk guide the responses we might make to playground activity? And how can we find within these responses certain embodied principles of pedagogical action? Our task is to work through these silences that seem so much a part of knowing how we should respond to the riskiness of children's activity. The task is to abide by these silences and yet still say something of consequence about the pedagogical significance of risk and how we might help children learn to take risks. This is our challenge to become reacquainted with the children we see on playgrounds as they are involved in their pursuits.

Taking up this subject, we begin to see the challenges that inhere in playground activity and that make risk visible. Just being with other children creates situations of daring, of children daring one another, taunting each other to try some activity that will test their mettle publicly. These are direct social challenges. There are also indirect, social challenges that arise from watching other children or from simply seeing the possibilities of movement that some piece of equipment allows. What is important for our understanding of risk, however, is not so much the social structure of challenge as the manner in which this particular visibility of risk allows us to construe a pedagogy. More important than an analysis of the general social challenges of the playground is the distinction that might be made between positive and negative challenges. For instance, when is challenge to be considered a positive encouragement of children's risk-taking? What form should such encouragement take? And what are the limits of this pedagogical response to challenge? Alternatively, when do our words and actions place undue pressure on the child? When do they ensnare the child in a situation where the risks seem much too great?

Our encouragements should enhance the child's independence of movement, especially since we are ultimately concerned with the child's growth and maturity. So we ask ourselves: what are the limits of a pedagogical response to risky playground situations? What is the point at which a child's independence of movement should be recognized? Perhaps we should look at how children find out for themselves how to meet a challenge and how our actions can be consistent with their learning to find their own way. Accordingly, we may then be attentive to the moment when a child no longer requests our help or even