



**The Pedagogy of Risk and the Playground** by  
Stephen Smith, Unpublished Doctoral  
Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1989

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I take the view that pedagogy will be most compellingly real if we speak of children directly.... The children of this study are Carson, Chris, Clay, Danny, Diego, Dorian, Gerrard, James, Jamie, Jonathan, Kyler, Lisa, Mark, Michael, another Michael, Rodrigo, Shayle, Simon, Sophie, Stephen and Tyler. In some places I have changed their names, especially where blame might be laid, but for the most part these are real children with real names. They are children I know, children I see on playgrounds. They are not subjects, and certainly not a random sample, but children I have followed for nigh on three years. (p. 25)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Smith's writing on children and risk is the sense one gets of his personal involvement with this work. *Risk and the Playground* is an unusual piece of research—contemplative, thought provoking, controversial. It is self-conscious without being self-indulgent. There is a certain methodological transparency about this work that is borne not of a lack of method, but rather, in the best tradition of qualitative research, of a systematic integration of method with intent, an evolution of method from within the phenomenon itself: "My task ... is to show that any gap between the methodology of understanding the riskiness of the playground and a pedagogic interest in the value of children's risk-taking is simply untenable" (p. 58).

This is research of the highest ethical order. Further, it is useful, insightful research capable of sustaining several readings for anyone interested in understanding the life world of the child. On first reading, one is not left wondering whether its insights are valid—they virtually resonate with sensitive and sensible understanding—but rather how exactly it was that Smith unearthed all of this.

On a practical level the answer is simple. He spent a lot of time on playgrounds with children—going to and from the playground, watching other adults in the playground, talking to

children, pushing them on swings, standing at the bottom of the slide. He probably spent even more time thinking about it all—careful, reflective thought; thought prompted by the need to act in a responsible manner toward children. From an academic standpoint there is considerable intricacy and scholarly depth in Smith's approach to the phenomenon of risk and the playground. It is a pedagogic stance to which he consistently and conscientiously returns, both in the process of observing and interacting with children on the playground and in his reflections on those observations.

Smith is motivated to investigate the meaning of risk in the lives of children from the perspective of real life dilemmas that have confronted him as a parent and as a physical education teacher. "We need to raise questions," he says, "about what we should or should not do for children when a sense of risk pervades their activity" (p. 54). And this work raises penetrating, provocative questions about the nature of our responsibility for children. Its pages are filled with experiential anecdote, with familiar stories and believable situations. Much of the writing is vivid, the description rich with detail.

"First and foremost," Smith says, "risk is a term of our pedagogic relation to children" (p. 2). Smith develops this notion of risk as a "positive term" in the pedagogic relationship, rather than "something like pain which we try to reduce and hopefully avoid" (p. 8). He argues further that there is something intrinsically pedagogical about the phenomenon of risk in the lives of children. This work challenges us as adults and pedagogues to reorient ourselves, to learn to "value [risk] for its significance for children's growth and development" (p. 8).

At first glance this might seem to compromise our primary role as protectors of children; however, as Smith describes it, there is a broader concern:

Of course, it would be unreasonable to argue against the safety of children; nevertheless, this does not mean that concern for the safety of children need be accepted unquestioningly. It may be that this concern, and the adult view from which it draws, places unnecessary limitations upon the child's experience of the world. It may be that the concern for the safety of children ... actually makes us increasingly insensitive to the child's place in a risky world. (p. 41)

What does it really mean to keep children safe? We are not only responsible for making sure that they do not fall off the slide when we are with them at the playground; more importantly, we are responsible for ensuring that they acquire the know-

ledge, the experience, the wisdom and the confidence to keep themselves safe from harm when we are not so immediately present to their activity. This is work which strikes at the very heart of parenting. What Smith has hit upon is that growing up is inherently risky—with every step toward independence the child takes the risk of falling. The task before us is to articulate a “responsible pedagogy of risk” (p. 3), one that assists us in “helping the child to take risks in relative safety” (p. 44).

In the first chapter of the study, Smith introduces us to the academic tradition that orients him so solidly toward the life world of the playground. His objective is to bring “a pedagogical consciousness to bear upon selected instances of playground activity where risk is present” (p. 12). These “dimensions of pedagogic consciousness” (p. 13) as articulated in the European tradition of pedagogical theorizing form the philosophical and methodological foundation of the work.

Smith’s dissertation is organized in three sections. The first two chapters—“The Place of Risk” and “The Silence of Risk”—are part of a section entitled “An Awareness of Risk.” Here Smith endeavors to tune us in to the significance of risk as a fundamental aspect of our pedagogic relationship to children, particularly as we interact with them on playgrounds. The next three chapters—“The Atmosphere of Risk,” “The Challenge of Risk,” and “The Encounter with Risk”—describe dimensions of “A Responsiveness to Risk.” In this section Smith describes in detail the kinds of situations that confront the adult interacting with the child on the playground, posing questions about the possibilities for action. In the third and final section Smith considers “The Educational Significance of Risk” and how, as pedagogues, we might put our new insights and understandings of risk in the lives of children to use in a broader educational context. His thematic concerns in this section are with “The Practice of Risk,” and “The Possibility of Risk.”

Our awareness of risk in the lives of children, particularly our own children, is acute. Smith wants us to become more conscious of this awareness in order to understand how it affects our interactions with children. To do this we need a place to observe children in risky situations. In “The Place of Risk” Smith tells us why he chose the playground as the locus for his research. We see that risk is an integral part of playground life and, as well, that the notion of *risk* captures the “potentially pedagogic notion of playground activity” (p. 36) in a way the notion of *play* cannot. This, he says, is because risky situations tend to compel the engagement of adults with children in a way that is often denied in play situations. By focusing on the phe-

nomenon of risk rather than that of play, the *play ground* becomes for Smith “an opening, a topos, a multidimensional space where seemingly disparate events can be gathered together to connote a network of interaction between adults and children” (p. 36). It is

a unique place for addressing the meaning of risk in a child’s life ... The designated playground allows for some control over the risks a child might otherwise take when left to his or her own devices ... We can see that risky situations are occasions for interacting with children and for helping them gain confidence in their range of movement. (p. 55)

The playground, then, provides us with a place where we can focus on the meaning of risk in children’s lives by observing them. “Observing,” says Smith, “means looking with care” (p. 48) which is more than detached observation: It implies some kind of engagement in the activity of children. Smith ponders the place and role of the adult on the playground. He questions what adult *supervision* of children is all about. “Supervision,” he says, “is a defining of children’s activity, a bounded way of observing children, a framing of one’s thoughts about them ... a measure of the safety of the playground” (p. 43). But is the supervisor who chooses simply to “manage” risk or who tries to eliminate it altogether really *looking with care* on the activity of the children?

In a delightful discussion, Smith goes on to consider the “meaning of the park bench” as that which defines the place of the adult on the playground. The park bench, he says, is like a seat in the theater. Depending on its location in relationship to the children playing, it offers a variety of vantage points, each of which represents a different relationship or *presence* with respect to the players. The nature of this presence or *posture* of the adult in relationship to the child taking the risk is a repeated theme in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

In “The Silence of Risk” Smith develops the notion that silence and silencing are a part of a pedagogic methodology, a procedure of inquiry for understanding children’s playground activity.

The task is to silence the ready interpretation, and then within this silencing, encounter playground things with children in mind. The matter of silence in understanding playground activity is not, therefore, simply the inaccessibility of the child’s experience, but rather the meaning of that which matters both to children and to us as observers of children, or participants with them, on the playground. (p. 66)

Smith reminds us over and over again of the pedagogic significance of the difference between the child's understanding of the risk and the adult's understanding of the same situation. This difference in understanding creates a tension between adult and child. Understanding the risk as the child sees it is the phenomenological project. The pedagogic opportunity rests on the adult's capacity to synthesize the child's understanding of a risky situation with his or her own and to act in a way that is both responsive and responsible:

in the case of the child on the playground our being brought to silence is not just of epistemological interest but fundamentally of pedagogical significance. Silence signifies the recognition of that difference which underlies a pedagogic sensibility—a sensitivity to the child and a response-ability for his or her actions. (p. 65)

There is something quite lovely, I think, about the notion of silence as a method of inquiry. This is not a detached or uninvolved silence. Smith likens it to the "comprehending silence," the "well-intentioned" silence described by Bollnow. It is a caring and mindful silence—a silence of trust between adult and child. Smith argues that adults must be prepared to encounter risk alongside the child. He uses personal reminiscence and recollection of his own childhood playground experiences as a way of getting in touch with what is happening to children in the present. However, he rejects the total immersion approach of those who argue that one must become like a child in order to understand the lived experience of the child. Instead, his engagement is always mediated and defined by a pedagogic stance:

Methodology, in the present context, expresses a standpoint in relation to the playground, a decision to stand in a particular relation to those situations where risk is apparent, a desire to make one's presence felt by helping the child take risks in an atmosphere of security. (p. 58)

According to Smith, this requires of the adult observer "an attunement to the field, a committed stance to the research, a certain moral sensitivity" (p. 57) and perhaps most importantly, although somewhat ironically, an "ability to stand in the midst of playground activity, to take a risk ourselves, even to risk the ground upon which we stand" (p. 67). Here we have method "inextricably bound up with the very notion of risk" (p. 67).

But what happens when the child falls off the slide as we stand attentively but silently by? The question of what to do, of how to

respond to the risky situations that we see children in is the subject of the next section. Here again, it is the pedagogical question that takes precedence over all others:

The question we take up is thus in part a question of how the risky texture of life in general can be softened by what we do with children on the playground; but it is in greater part a question of how what we do with children on the playground can actually create a clearing in this grey atmosphere of risk. It is a question of how our responses to the riskiness of children's playground activity can constitute a more fundamental, pedagogical atmosphere of security. (p. 81)

The atmosphere of risk in which children exist to some degree is mediated by the presence of the adult. It is the responsibility of the trusted adult to confront the risky situation with the child, to help the child feel secure in the risk, and to apprehend the danger without being robbed of independence:

might I suggest that being present pedagogically has to do with *challenging* the child with a mindfulness of how the child encounters the world. It has to do with seeing risk as the child may come to see it. (p. 95)

The notion of the *challenge of risk* is a part of what Smith describes as the social construction of risk in the playground. Children dare one another all the time. Sometimes it is just such a challenge that children want and need to overcome their fear and feel secure enough to approach a potentially risky endeavor. At other times, a challenge from a trusted adult would be nothing short of foolhardy.

What is remarkable about this section of the dissertation is the breadth of individual difference that Smith is able to account for. He articulates a wide range of possible responses which an adult might want to consider, responses that change to suit different children with differing needs in differing situations. Our response to the daredevil at the top of the slide will likely not be the same as our response to the cautious or fearful child. We must come to know the child and how the child is seeing the risk. Smith speaks here of the adult giving "heart" to the challenge, literally being "moved" by the child before him or her. His anecdotes describe a repertoire of *modes of presence*—there must be encouragement for some, graceful ways out for others, and always a respect for the options that children create for themselves, all stemming from an awareness of how the world is appearing to them. Ultimately, of course, the adult must be willing to let go, to embrace a posture of silent trust in the child's ability to find his or her own way.

An example of the richness and sensitivity of the experiential anecdotes we are treated to throughout this section is a description of Sophie and the swing:

Picture a little girl of about four years of age. And picture her in a make-shift playground, a vacant lot which the neighbourhood children have converted into a play area. I am walking through this lot and approach Sophie. As I come close I see Sophie reaching for the knot on a long rope attached to a tree that the older children have been using as a swing. I pick Sophie up and sit her on the knot. That's all I do. Then she says, "Push me." I haven't seen her on the swing before, so I cautiously push her just out of hand's reach. She had been quite calmly sitting on the knot, but now she is screwed into a tight ball, her face set rigid in terror. I am a little terrified as well, because I don't really want to frighten the little girl and she is obviously not enjoying herself, so I stop her. Relaxing slightly, she says again "Push me." I wonder what is going on because I cannot match her words with her terror. This time as the swing slows, the terror abates and she looks a little happier, her lips turned up in a slight smile. The third time as the swing slows, Sophie relaxes and even eases back on the rope before again saying, "Push me." Before too long I cannot push her high enough (adapted from Jago, 1970).

Sophie sees a challenge and looks for encouragement. She wants to be lifted onto the rope and pushed, not simply because it is impossible for her to do it alone but because the challenge requires our complicity. She needs us there to give her the courage to extend herself until she can find her own way; then when she knows her way, there is indeed no way we can push her high enough. Hence our task is not just to push Sophie but rather to become attuned to the way in which our pushing may eventually become unnecessary. (p. 121)

Even though this is not an experience that Smith himself had, it is nonetheless a wonderfully sensitive interpretation of a very commonplace occurrence between children and adults on the playground. Parents push children on swings all the time, but how often do we stop to consider what is really happening for the child? Normally we assume that this is just a simple sensual experience. However, in story after story, Smith convinces us that there is a much deeper level of meaning for children in everyday playground activity.

The encounter with risk offers the adult opportunities to help the child overcome fear, develop self-confidence, and gain independence, as well as to test the limits of his or her trust in himself or herself and others. These are important lessons for

life. This is the unconscious stuff of enlightened parenting. Even a glimpse of the depth and complexity of meaning in playground activity offers the adult a richer pedagogical opportunity as well as a clearer choice of possible responses.

In the final section Smith turns his attention from the playground to more formal educational settings. What implications does an understanding of the meaning of risk in children's lives have for formal educational curricula? What does it mean that children like to be seen, to be watched when they take risks? Can their penchant for endless repetition translate into an educational principle? How do we draw out the promise of the child's activity? What kind and degree of assistance should be offered to the child in a risky situation to maximize the relevance of the learning opportunity for the child? These are the questions that Smith addresses in "The Practice of Risk." He concludes that:

We can choose to sit on the park bench and feel somewhat responsible for mishaps on the playground ... we can observe children at closer range and attempt to support them, guide their actions, instruct them, even evaluate what they are attempting to do ... but it is only through our reflective engagement in the playground activities of children that we encounter the riskiness of the playground with the child, and become aware of our responsibility for what the child does. This reflective engagement is what the experience of risk calls for.... And this relational quality of risk is what makes physical practices, such as those exemplified on the playground, educationally worthwhile. (p. 162)

In "The Possibility of Risk," Smith attempts to take his pedagogy of risk beyond the confines of the playground. It seems entirely logical to apply these insights to physical educational curricula, to movement and outdoor education programs. However, Smith's work has convinced me that in addition to building confidence and competence in movement, we are dealing with learning of an entirely different order as we encounter the risks of the playground with children in a sensitively pedagogical way.

From this work we learn that the presence of risk makes possible the pedagogical involvement of adults with children. And we also come to understand that the adult who stands patiently at the bottom of the slide, *looking with care* as the child comes down time after time, is present for more than the development of the child's physical coordination and competence. Self-confidence, trust, independence—these are some of the lessons we learn from taking risks in the security of the playground.

These learnings open possibilities far beyond the traditional curricular areas. For every child who can take a risk is another child who can reach for the stars. Such a lofty ideal is also part of the possibility of a responsible pedagogy of risk.

This is a work of enormous practical import to educators, to recreation professionals, and to parents. As Smith points out, we are living through a time when there is a heightened concern for the safety of children, particularly in public places. One of the most common responses to this concern has been to equate *risk* with *danger* and thereby to try to eliminate risk from children's lives. As Smith so clearly demonstrates, in so doing we rob children and their guiding adults of potentially rewarding and productive pedagogic encounters. Curiously enough, we also run the *risk* of taking the *play* out of the playground altogether and returning it to the street with all its attendant dangers.

Ultimately, the challenge with research of this order is to make its insights available and accessible to those who need to be aware of them, to those who spend time with children on playgrounds—schoolyard recess supervisors, day care and recreation workers, teachers, and parents. The challenge for us all is to keep it from gathering dust on a shelf.