

Childhood and risk

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Abstract: This paper explores a brief personal history of risk in childhood and considers whether our cultural assessment of risk for children has changed for the better in recent years, as it considers the potential impact of risk taking on the physical health, as well as the mental health, of the adults we become. Drawing on Elisabeth Young-Breuhl's concept of Childism (2012), the paper will question whether the ways in which we prevent and protect children from risk are affected by society's prejudice towards children and childhood.

A Somerset childhood

It is the summer of 1970 and I am cycling across the moors with my friend. Long roman roads bordered on each side by streams and ditches. A clear view for miles, from the Bristol Channel to the Tickenham hills; from the Mendips to our village. We have some cold toast in a bag, hanging from the handlebars, and the sun is shining. The noise precedes the vision, but is enough for us to stop our bikes and look up and see Concorde, a huge beautiful bird in flight. This was not an uncommon sight in my childhood, but that particular day stands out, perhaps because of the contrast between the earth and the sky; the vastness of the blue sky with the impact of the white underbelly of the plane; the ancient land and the culmination of aviation technology. I remain nostalgia bound in that happy memory, trailing a sense of loss for this moment to which I can never return. As a parent, I think about this recollection, which captures some of the freedoms of my childhood, conscious that I couldn't, or wouldn't, allow my own children so many lost hours without parental contact.

Anyone born before the 1970s might share those recollections of long hours out of sight or sound. But as children we still carried the words of adults in our heads. For example, stacking hay bales and clambering in barns was not allowed, but frequently undertaken. However, rules that prohibited us from going near the quarry edge were more likely heeded; we weren't reckless after all. We didn't know it, but we were learning to assess risk, sometimes learning from our mistakes and sometimes discovering the thrills of too far, too high or too long; logging those experiences in our memories and being surprised when an emotion, or action, in our adult lives could swoop us back to those early sensations.

Those who grew up in the city may have created their own playgrounds from bomb sites without a care, or played on equipment built from adult imaginations in their local rec, climbing higher and jumping further than perhaps they should, but a child could always invoke their parent's voice if a stranger approached.

Mature adults will be able to picture themselves clambering over rocks barefoot, then lying flat against the cool face of an overhang, positioned just right, so they could view the sheer drop to the waves below. Sit on a beach now and you would be surprised to see a child playing out of sight of her parents. Listen for a while and you are more likely to hear 'Don't' than 'do', as children strain on the invisible reins that replaced the real ones we only wore until the top of our heads reached the hips of those who bore us. Salt-washed tykes gambolling free-footed across rock pools have been replaced by cautious children overseen by adults with well-intentioned involvement in their child's play, missing the point of independent risk taking. These halcyon days of our childhoods should have been the production ground for secure and stable adults and yet this seemingly fertile land led to our current generations of anxious parents. Did we feel abandoned in retrospect? Did we lay all our faults in our childhood play and determine not to make the same 'mistakes' for our own progeny? Did the excitement of playing as 'Lost Boys' in our childhood jungles, develop into an assumption that we had indeed been lost? Memory is an inconstant partner in answering these questions.

My father was an agricultural engineer, keen to adapt pieces of metal and bits of machinery into some new invention to entertain his daughters. I have happy memories of driving our go cart across the field beyond the bungalows; the acrid fumes from the Flymo-engine filling my head. My dad running up each time I stalled, impatiently caring, turning and tweaking, until his command to 'Start 'er up again!' resulted in us hurtling eastwards, the bumps in the field causing our little bodies to momentarily defy gravity. No injuries sustained. Although, I do have the smallest of scars from scraping my face along the tarmac of the road, when only half of me fell from my neighbour's less sophisticated cart, at speed. I remember I carried my younger sister home, feeling responsible for her shock, unaware of the blood streaking down my face.

She and I would spend hours swirling and whirling on our rotating seesaw, made of scaffolding pipes and the metal base of tractor seats. I was always the heavier one, able to extend some cruelty in leaving her suspended in the air for long periods of time, whilst I leaned back, the back of my head touching the grass, forever tempted to roll off my seat and send her crashing, like baby as the bough breaks.

Then there were the building sites. Within an easy commute of Bristol, the village was ideal for housing developments that would attract more

workers and their families to swap urban sprawl for the hope of rural tranquillity. Families, from the Midlands and the North, were moving into our village. They had strange accents and alien habits, such as dropping into each other's houses without invitation and leaving their back doors open. One long line of cottages, church, shops and chapels, quickly developed into three parallel roads from east to west, densely populated with modern materials and large lounge windows. I don't recall any fencing around construction sites. Many plots were bought by local builders who worked on a house at a time, whilst premature street names such as 'Mendip Close', or 'Burnham Gardens' tantalised us with the promise of what was to come.

We played our games in the mud of the foundations and climbed ladders to reach the suggestion of a 'master bedroom with ensuite', which we had no experience to envisage. Occasionally, the builder would take the ladder away to deter children from playing there, but it only took one of our party to be a little bolder than the rest, to find where the ladder had been lain down and place it back in position. I can still feel the wood of the rungs, both on my hands and that soft insole of my feet. Occasionally, a child would step outside the social rules of our games, pushing boundaries we didn't even realise we had agreed. That would be unsettling and we would look at that child with slightly different eyes. Now, with adult understanding, I can add a possible explanation for some of the aberrant behaviours, but even at the time we knew that child had gone too far.

In our teenage years some of our group were drawn back to the building sites for different reasons, when lustful builders would take advantage of young girls' naïve willingness to play grownups in the dirt of the home to be; the conclusion of their fumbling becoming evident in the burgeoning bellies of dark eyed girls a few months later, bringing an end to their schooling and a dramatic change in their hopes for the future.

Perhaps we imagine that our parents didn't worry about us in those years, but their worries were of a different kind, framed by their morality. In the late 1960s and early 1970s perhaps the fear of shame was greater than the fear of death, for a generation who had lived through World Wars and with limited medical provision. A death of a child would still have brought grief and horror for a family, but there was a known process for managing it. Everyone knew someone who had lost a child or a loved one and someone would always reach out and support. The fear of shame, however, may have been more tangible, as shame could leave you isolated from family and community, threatening poverty and loneliness. Dolezal and Lyons (2012) recognised the 'threat to social bonds' and the threat to one's feelings of belonging and acceptance, (p.258). Piers (1953), identified that it was 'not fear of active punishment by superiors which is implied in shame anxiety, but social expulsion, like ostracism', (p.16).

Fear of the worst

Looking back, it seems our childhood was often governed by fear of the worst, conjured up by a cocktail of superstition, religion, tradition and control, poured into our minds by our parents and elders, whose suggestions were drafted in through old fashioned rhymes, ditties and mistruths. I was fearful of boys, of animals, of strangers and germs to name a few and if our imaginations weren't good enough then there was always a faded ancient copy of *Struwelpeter* to help us. Reading the words as an adult still creates vivid images in my head. The illustrations gave us fright, but the tales of consequence for misdeeds stay in the memory and I can still see those little kittens crying for their lost mistress: reduced to ashes after playing with matches. And yet, ironically, from a young age I was expected to light the fire (the only source of heating in the house) and would regularly draw it up with a broadsheet of newspaper across the hearth. I loved the sound of the air being sucked up the chimney behind the *Daily Express* and the feel of the paper being pulled by an invisible force. More frequently than was safe, the paper would suddenly catch alight and I would have to quickly wrap up the flames and throw it on the fire, before it could burn me and the carpet.

We would be delighted if we got home from school, on the rare occasions my mother was out, as we could scale the scullery wall, climbing onto a rickety wooden shed, balance on the uncovered water butt and then clamber in through the tiny open bathroom window. And yet, doors were always locked and bolted at all opportunities in case of burglars, who must have had better places to go.

We were taught to be wary of strangers and their lure of sweets and open car doors and yet had to endure endless uncles with their moustaches and strong arms kissing us inappropriately on the lips, in plain sight. This constant juxtaposition of speaking security and providing lax safeguarding was a steady hypocrisy in our homes.

'Children, beware of strangers!' is an easy message to give. We carelessly aid children to conjure pictures of slowing cars and men in macs. In truth, the reality of abuse by someone unknown to the child is rare and so we can scare ourselves and our children. Perhaps in the way that we watch thrillers or horror movies; an edge of possibility but an unlikely one. Safe thrills. What we don't tell our children is 'Don't sit too close to your uncle', or 'Make sure you are never alone with daddy's best friend!' The words are harsh and unsettling, but the reality much greater. If we confront the possibility that our children might be abused by someone they know, then we have to be honest with ourselves that we may know someone who could be abusive. The worst part of this truth is that children understand that adults can't cope with this, which adds to the silence that ensues.

Speaking with my adult children about the risks they took when they were younger, I realise I had no more knowledge of their lives beyond our

boundaries than my own parents did. My children recognise that their adult perceptions of the events have already shaped the telling of the stories; maturity promoting their heroic status in taking on such odds. Contemporaneously, it is far more likely that peer collaboration, optimistic foresight and limited experience of the potential for things to go wrong, all played a part. Cutting through the University campus each day to go to and from school, my elder son recounts the time they found a shopping trolley on the housing estate as they headed home, and as they approached the thirty steps from the drama block towards psychology, the possibilities of excitement far outweighed the potential realities. As he describes the event, I laugh along with him, delighted by his enthusiasm for the telling. However, as I write, the thought of him getting in the trolley, already too long limbed to be anything other than contorted in his cage, causes me some anxiety. I can hear the shouts of encouragement from his friends and recognise the moment when thrill meets fear as he grips the top of the trolley. I can feel the jolt in his bones, as each concrete step is met by the wheels, whilst his tousled hair catches the wind. I know that his head would have been above the top of the basket; I can see into a future past and see his skull hitting the concrete before any other part of his body, had the trolley overturned.

As I look down on the scene in my mind's eye, I can feel my son's heart beating, forever connected to my arterial byways. Interesting that his father (connected to me by love, not blood) can relate many, more outrageous, acts of childhood daring, which do not elicit the same visceral shock from me. Escaping from his own feelings, then and now, his narrative includes endless feats of brazen defiance. He describes a summer's day when a group of friends are on Peartree Green, looking for something to pass their time. Twenty-five years previously, children may have stood on the same spot and seen sparks flying up from the construction of Spitfires in the Supermarine below, but these boys had to make their own amusement. A large oak marked the edge of the green, protecting itself from sliding down the steep hillside through deep root systems: the taproot anchoring it, like the vessels on the river. Perhaps no other tree would have had the strength to balance so precariously all those years. A large branch had earlier invited a rope to be fastened tightly, (strange, that endless trees have rope swings and no one ever knows their provenance). The boys took it in turns to hold the rope and swing, but sensation seeking is in this boy's veins, either from happenstance or biology, and he wants to thrill himself and those he is leaving behind. He grabs the rope and runs with it northwards, swinging out over the drop, towards the river, high above the ground. The trajectory of the rope and the disappearance of the earth creating a vast space of possibilities, 80 feet wide and a sky full of promise. It could have meant broken limbs, or even death. That still haunts him.

And yet, in later years, he did leave all those other boys behind, he did realise many of the possibilities, against stacked odds and loaded dice. McKay et al's study into whether risk takers show more resilience indicated that:

...sensation seekers tend to appraise stressors as challenges and opportunities for growth and positive affect payoffs rather than perceiving them as risks for harm or loss of wellbeing. Through this process, sensation seekers have more resilience indicated by increased positive affect and less stress in relation to adversity. (McKay, Skues and Williams, 2018, p.104).

They recognised that sensation seeking can help to manage stress and adversity, which in turn can build psychological resources to support 'long term positive functioning and resilience.'

I recognise this. As a teenager, I felt the need to be in control. I saw myself as the refinery of my elder siblings' overt sensation seeking and the emotional flux this often caused. I felt safer this way: I know this now. My risk taking became quieter, more personal perhaps, less for attention and more for gratification: climbing into small spaces, with a fear of enclosure; playing with fire, afraid of dying in a conflagration; pushing the patience of teenage boys, in fear of my own release.

Constrained by my fears, I sought out sensory experience in my imagination and my mind. Never brave enough to harm myself, I could calm any rising tide of unwanted emotion by visualising the opening of a vein and purging myself of thought. I frequently looked inwards for further ways to self-regulate. When I had outgrown the comforting verse of my illustrated book of nursery rhymes, I was drawn back to the meter of the words; 'Hark, Hark! The dogs do bark! The beggars are coming to town'. The version I remember varied slightly from the standard version. It finished; 'Some in jags and some in rags and one in a satin gown'. I don't know why those words thrill me. There is an immediate excitement in the arrival of these strangers, a sense of swarthy types and the threat of danger. These were the types that Blyton had warned me of in the *Famous Five*. Any trepidation I felt however, was attenuated by the glamour of the 'one in her satin gown'. In my mind, she was alluring and rose above the grime around her; like Carmen in her den of smugglers. I look at the picture now, in my childish book, and I realise that I had embellished her to suit my own need to re-image this picture of poverty; to control and minimise the risk the rhyme was intended to illustrate.

Sensation seeking

Lasenby-Lessard et al (2011) found that children high in sensation seeking were especially likely to react with increased risk taking behaviours,

once they had gained some experience of an activity. The findings aligned with Marvin Zuckerman's work in concluding that this unique high risk group of more extreme sensation seekers 'needed very little prompting to increase their level of risk taking, presumably because doing so increases their level of arousal' and 'satisfies a need for novel and intense stimulation'. Zuckerman sees arousal as being epiphenomenal; that the arousal is a side effect of a search for novel sensation. He proposed that sensation seekers are 'open to new experiences and sensations (but not ideas) if they are novel, intense, and exciting, but...they are mostly distinguished by their lack of conscientiousness. This does not mean that they are antisocial but that they are impulsive and nonconforming, (Zuckerman, 2007, p.48).

These conclusions offer a different insight into the prevailing concerns about the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) on children and the consequent, accumulative effect on their mental health as adults. The term Adverse Childhood Experiences was originally developed as part of the CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACE study in the United States between 1995 and 1997; a large and comprehensive investigation into 'intra-familial events or conditions causing chronic stress responses in the child's immediate environment', including 'notions of maltreatment and deviation from societal norms', (Couper, Mackie, 2016, p.6).

The research shows that the more adverse events a child experiences in childhood, the more likely they will be to experience poor mental health as an adult. The report recognises that some children are more emotionally resilient than others and suggests that this may be those who retain a strong bond with at least one parent during their childhood.

We attribute many poor behaviours now as mental ill-health, so it is possible that an adolescent who has witnessed domestic abuse, homelessness, or a substance abusing parent, for example, is likely to 'go off the rails' as a teenager. In our current age, such behaviours as drinking alcohol underage, or engaging in unplanned sexual activity, shoplifting or self-harming could be seen as a sign of poor mental health. The work of McKay et al, offer a possibility that this sensation seeking behaviour could include a positive attribute and enable more resilience for the adolescent when re-framing past adversity. So much risk taking, by its nature, is hidden until a time when it is appropriate to talk to others about it. Developing strategies for garnering forms of capital from risk may be more useful to young people than pathologising the risk and castigating the risk takers.

In responding to childhood risk, it can be difficult to understand from whence our views are derived; from our innate and unconscious fears or from external influence, both overt and sublime. There is also a sometimes murky difference between the risk taking children initiate and the risks adults can present them with. In protecting the child, we can sometimes confuse the two, concluding that a parent must be neglectful if a child has

been ‘allowed’ to risk take. Nonetheless, it is concerning that this judgement is invariably made of parents who are already vulnerable from the effects of poverty and deprivation.

Childism

I am still unclear as to why my parents thought it was safe to photograph



their family only yards away from a herd of giraffes, in the newly opened Longleat safari park in 1967. Was it their blind trust in the authority that implied it was safe by having no fencing? Was it a deference to a peer of the realm, who had opened his home to the public and instilled trust through his title? Or, did they know that they were right not to be afraid?

Other than occasional reports of giraffes kicking people with their powerful legs, I can find no evidence of life threatening incidents from giraffes. Fifty years on, it seems surprising that families were allowed such close proximity to these wild animals. And yet, day in, day out, children are allowed free reign in the risk filled safari park of the internet. It would be interesting to ask parents which they believe to be the greater risk to their child: placed in a field next to a giraffe, or ten minutes on YouTube. But, in setting this parameter, I am conscious of falling into the trap of ‘moral panic’ (Clapton et al, 2013), viewing the internet with a lens that has been coloured by public fear, newspaper headlines and indeterminate data.

Elizabeth Young-Breuhl’s (2012), posthumously published work, *‘Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children’*, offers a compelling paradigm for considering adult responses to the risks that children face as a result of the actions of others. Breuhl argues that children are a target group who are subject to childism, which has the same impact as other ‘isms’ in isolating, demeaning and disempowering the group. She recognises that prejudice is a rationalization of actions, meaning that prejudiced people think that their actions against a target group are ‘acceptable, normal and natural’. She argues further that in society’s prejudice of children we have unknowingly structured our ‘protective’ systems for children around actions, not intentions, exacerbating reactive childist approaches to social work, instead of responsive, child led support. In an interview released as a blog by her publishers, shortly before her death, Breuhl added;

The field of Child Abuse and Neglect was, from its inception in the 1960s, set up in such a way, I believe, that it could not hear the

experiences of abused and neglected children. It was focused on the types of acts they suffered – physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse – and children were classified by these types of acts. Treatment and prevention strategies are organized around these types of acts to this day. This has been very harmful to children.’ (YUP, 2012)

In the book, Breuhl proposes that children are born ‘dependant and relatively helpless’. ‘The child’ is seen as being owned by adults, ‘who use it to serve their own needs and fantasies’. She writes,

On a continuum, children are valued and loved at one extreme or they are not valued and not loved at the other. They are wanted or not wanted, adored or rejected, protected and provisioned or forced to fend for themselves. They are treated violently or wrapped in cotton wool. They are provided with the finest education available or allowed, even encouraged to become truants. Overall the continuum runs from love and nurturing all the way to negligence, hostility, and what has become classified as child abuse and neglect. Prejudice overtly rationalizes or justifies the behaviors at the negative end of the continuum, but it can subtly suffuse the positive behaviors as well, revealing their ambivalence or making them ambivalent. (p.20)

All too often, I have seen the consequences of abuse in children compounded by the further risk of harm from those who are trying to restore the ‘natural order’. Social workers, police, teachers; each wanting the child to return to being compliant and happy, with the parents (now cognisant of their faults) in dominium once more. Particularly in times of stretched resources, there is a danger in putting people back together again, without addressing the causes of the original harm. It is akin to completing a single face of a Rubik’s cube.

I have observed children, who have experienced loss or trauma in their young lives, demonstrating an amazing ability to cope with further traumatic events in their life, whilst, at other times, allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by seemingly, smaller upsets. There is an adage that warns against making mountains out of molehills. This may work for most people; meaning that we should be able to step on, or over, the molehills, (the small difficulties that need to be overcome). The inference is that we can then store up our resilience for the mountains, or the biggest difficulties that will confront us. But if you have already had to wrap a mountain in your arms, to enable you to confront your own mortality in some form and stay alive - stay living, then it is unsurprising that the

strategy you develop inures you to pain. But like a body in shock, sending all the blood to the vital organs, there is little physical or emotional resistance left for when you stub your toe, or fall out with a friend.

When we cease to feel anything at all, we lose track of what causes us pain and why. Sometimes it is only therapeutic support that can reacquaint a soul with the person she wants to be, sometimes it is the love of a significant other which can pull us from a deep and dark well. With recovery or resilience, the worst consequences of risks taken, or risks imposed, are often not remembered, but remain unforgotten.

It is a common perception that children are more at risk now than in the last fifty years, but the 20th Century Mortality files 1901-2000, (National Archives, 2016), do not necessarily confirm this view. Although it is hard to compare the data, as the coroner's descriptions and the age boundaries by which the deaths are grouped are different, there were 48 children between the ages of 1 and 14 who died as a result of non-accidental poisoning, or various forms of assault, in 1967.¹ In 2017, the deaths of 43 children between the ages of 1 and 15 were recorded as homicide. Over the last ten years there has been a mean figure of 54 murders of children under 16, (including those under one year of age) of which an average of 5 each year were known to have been committed by a stranger. Of course, five is still too many, but the risk is far greater from someone close or known to a child. The highest risk of being murdered in childhood being within the first year of life and being killed by a parent or known person. Not a thought we want to confront.

The huge stranger danger campaign that many of us may remember from the 1960s was a public response to high profile cases such as the Moors Murders - the horror of this case sending life-long shivers down our collective spine. Global and twenty-four-hour news mean that the murder of a child by an unknown adult stays in our consciousness beyond a proportionate timescale – their names easy to recall. Children who die at the hands of their parent are rarely remembered beyond the family circle. Childhood disappearance is equally threatening to our sense of security, but all too often children from notorious cases are found close to home, knowledge of their disappearance, or even death, held tightly by someone close to the family.

As a society we court our demons and rarely confront ourselves. Adults have closed down the avenues in which children could take risks and modelled their version of how to stay safe by staying indoors and viewing the world through a screen. It is important to remind parents and carers that children taking risks is important in helping them to learn and also enriches their physical and emotional development. This is different to putting yourself at risk. Adults and childhood peers need to teach children the essential difference inferred in the word 'risk': not teach them to avoid all risk.

When individuals and communities are not only risk averse, but averse to the processes of assessing risk, then we are storing up trouble for the future. The creation of ‘anxieties and alarmism’ becomes the seedbed for ‘moral panics’, which in turn further embeds ‘a culture of surveillance and control and the growth of systems and processes that have little or no effect on the welfare and lives of children and families.’ (Clapton et al, 2012, p.213).

We do not love our children more than previous generations, but we do control them more, in the name of love. As an alternative, we need to offer boundaries that are proportionate and hopeful, whilst encouraging our future generations to assess risks relative to the likelihood of hurt, not in the assumption of harm.

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Notes

- 1 Codes 9800, 9810, 9820 and 9830 – 20th Century Mortality Files, icd7_3

Biographical note

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