

# **Better than Bubble Wrap: Do We “Over Regulate and Over Protect” Children at the Expense of Them Learning How to “Take Risks”?**

**Susie O'Neill<sup>1)</sup>**

**Marilyn Fleer**

Monash University

## **Abstract**

Throughout the World more children die and are disabled from injury than illness and disease, despite the fact that we are living in a society that is perceived to be safer than it has ever been. Environment and product modification means we have safer cars, homes, workplaces and play areas. Legislation and policy approaches have been introduced to regulate and enforce safe practices. However, in some cases this has brought about an over regulated and over protective societal change. Experiences and tasks once enjoyed by children are now often regarded as dangerous and irresponsible. The freedom of children to experience life in a way that allows them to develop competencies they need to become competent risk managers can be hampered by over regulation of governing bodies and over protective practices of parents and caregivers, creating a bubble-wrapped generation in some communities. This paper captures an approach where child safety is reconceptualised by introducing a cultural-historical informed *safety risk assessment model* pushing against the current trend towards bubble-wrapped solutions to childhood injury prevention.

**Keywords** : safety, preschool, education, injury risk, early childhood, bubble wrap

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Corresponding author, <sup>1)</sup>[susie@kidsfoundation.org.au](mailto:susie@kidsfoundation.org.au)

## Introduction

Balancing safety and the opportunity for children to develop, enjoy, contribute and achieve is a contested issue. New thinking on safe practices has brought about change in parenting, education and child policy in many nations (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet, 2012). Concern for children's safety are often fueled by myths around perceived societal dangers has encouraged some neighborhoods to become quite risk averse. Understanding that whilst children need safeguards, it is important to ensure that measures intended to protect children are not counterproductive. But most models of practice follow a developmental approach, limiting what children might be "allowed to experience" (Flear, 2010). What is needed is a new way of framing risk in early childhood education, so that practices support rather than undermine children's growing competencies. In this paper we draw upon an Australian context to foreground a new way of thinking about children's safety risk learning. A reconceptualisation of how safety can be understood is presented. In drawing upon cultural-historical theory we introduce the concept of *shared learning for safety risk assessment*, and present a *model of practice* for preschool aged children. Specifically, we argue that children learn about safety by actively engaging in risk assessments of their environment.

In this paper the term "preschool" refers to preschool settings or kindergarten centres, and preschool children refers to children aged 3 to 6 years who attend these facilities. The term "Risk" is used in this paper to foreground the concept of chance associated to injury. The word is often perceived as a negative connotation, however it can also be positive and negative. Subjective by nature, the term risk is variably understood as perceptions are based on individual experiences and characteristics which may influence its meaning. In most cases risk involves a degree of loss and is often associated to exposure to danger and physical risk (Breivik, 1999). It can be argued that healthy risk-taking is required for a child's optimal growth. As noted by Ungar (2007, p.3), "Too much risk and we endanger a child. Too little risk and we fail to provide a child with healthy opportunities for growth and psychological development".

Whilst many factors influence children's injury risk taking, we believe understanding what is dangerous is a personal perception where emotions play an important role in decision-making and consequently in influencing safety related behaviour. For a child to recognise an

injury risk and make a conscious decision not to engage in a dangerous situation is a form of safety reasoning within itself. The term "bubble-wrap" inspired in this paper by the work of Malone (2009), conceptualises the counter-productive practices applied as solutions to deal injury risk situations.

## Re-conceptualising Injury Risk and Prevention Using Cultural-Historical Concepts

The complexities of addressing the childhood injury problem through education is challenging and evident in the Australian context, but is clearly also an international priority (NPHP 2004; WHO 2008). What is needed is a new way of conceptualising safety, not as something within the child or within the environment, but rather as a relationship between the child and the environment through social mediation. To conceptualise how safety can be better understood within the injury risk landscape, we draw upon cultural-historical theory to introduce the concept of a shared learning *safety risk assessment model* for preschool children growing up in Western communities.

Examples of childhood safety concerns that do not reflect the real level of risk, fueled by misleading perceptions of childhood dangers, are highlighted in the following section of the paper. We view safety and risk reasoning at a personal level where conceptualisation is associated with the individual's capabilities, knowledge and experiences. Ungar (2007) argues that what is a risk to one child may be considered safe to another due their social situation of development (Bozhovich, 2009). For instance, Vygotsky (1994) draws attention to how the same situation may be experienced differently by different children. He illustrates through his own empirical research, the example of a single parent family with young children, where the mother was engaged in substance abuse, and where each child related to this same environment differently because of their particular social situation of development. The youngest child could not understand that the mother was ill, and was angry that his needs were not met. The eldest child at ten years of age understood and took on the role of being the parent, caring for the other children. Each child was in the same situation, but each child was experiencing this same situation differently due to what they brought to the situation.

Cultural-historical theory signifies the importance of both the environment and the social situation of development of the child (Bozhovich, 2009; Vygotsky 1994).

We argue that safety cannot be understood as a statistic of injury or as a process of simply reducing injury through changing the environment. But rather, safety should be conceptualised as a special relation between the child and the environment. It is our belief that children learn about safety by actively engaging in experiences and risk assessments of their environment as both a social and personal process. According to Vygotsky (1987), human learning transpires from the internalisation of social relationships. His theory include a wholeness approach to understanding the child's development through the complexities of the child's social situation (Flear, 2010). Central to a cultural-historical view of child development is the child's social and material environment and the dialectical relation between the ideal and the real circumstances present within it. Here the ideal means the real world conditions that children could potentially experience during their life-time. The real represents their current competencies to risk assess. It is the relations between the ideal world experience and the real child competence that are mediated by more competent others, such as educators and parents. According to Vygotsky (1994) it is through the child's relationship with their social and material world that they understand and make meaning of situations. The social situation of development as a special relationship between the child and the environment (Vygotsky, 1934), is a new way of conceptualising safety risk assessment. Here the adult plays an important role in mediation, as noted by Ungar (2007, p. 20), "a concerned parent provides scaffolding for growth, not just a life jacket for safety".

In this conceptualisation of the relationship between the child and the environment, support is in advance of the child's competence. Building competencies independent of over protectiveness is important because the support from adults includes expectations of the child being able to collectively read risky situations or being able to engage in activities with higher levels of risk. In a cultural-historical reading of risk assessment, the experiences the child engages in should always become more complex because the child needs to be equipped to deal with them with support from adults or independently over time. The relations between the child's capabilities and the risk situations in the social and material environment, play a key role in children becoming good safety risk assessors. This aligns with Bodrova and Leong's (2007) view of the social relations adapting as the child builds new skills and

competencies, and where a new way of relating to the child becomes necessary. It is argued that when the child manages challenges safely, a new level of trust is gained by the parent, which in turn advances an increased level of independence on the part of the child. The child is perceived to be more responsible because of the way he or she is experiencing and attending to assumed knowledge of safety. The social situation of development of the child has changed and the way of interacting with their social and material world has also changed. It is the style of interaction that will play fundamental role in contributing to a child's holistic development and formulating positive life safety skills. In contrast, bubble-wrapping is a term which represents the situation where children are restricted from activities that lead to healthy risk taking and optimum growth (Malone, 2009). In this reading adult-child interactions could best be described as a collaborative process where parents and teachers provide a supportive structure and learning process that advances the child's ability to develop understandings of risk. A model that captures the nature of shared learning (see O'Neill, 2014, under review) came out of the research on risk assessment (O'Neill, Fler, Agbenyega, Ozanne-Smith & Urlichs, 2013). This model of practice is briefly illustrated below. The overall study examined the pre and post results of 350 children who were aged between 3 and 6 years, from 11 different preschools, and who participated in a program titled "SeeMore Safety". SeeMore Safety is an early learning intervention program that combines a home support approach to programs delivered in preschools through children's literature and real-life experiences. The program's aim is to improve children's ability to conceptualise safety. SeeMore Safety was used in the studies as a primary resource to examine the effect on children's behaviour and understanding of safe and risk situations as a consequence of participation in an early learning injury prevention program. The studies combined quantitative and qualitative methods which included focus groups, interviews, surveys and pre- and post-intervention tests engaging children, parents and teachers. Results indicated positive outcomes with children demonstrating a significant increase in safety knowledge and reasoning post intervention. What was also evident in the findings was the important role children play in influencing safe behaviours in their parents. Both parents and teachers reported on a consistent pattern of knowledge transfer and safety related behaviour change that occurred in both the children and their parents. What was found was that the program changed the conditions for children's collective learning of risk assessment. The model of shared learning

shows the interactive and dialectical process of co-constructing and developing the new safety learning. This shared learning approach can best be illustrated in Figure 1.

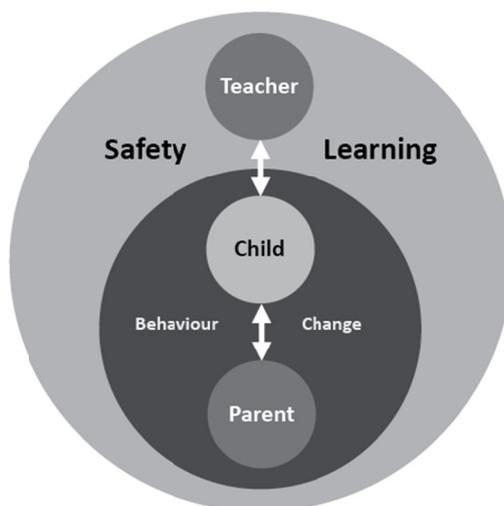


Figure 1. Safety Risk Assessment Model

Here ideal safety learning environment is represented through the outer circle and the inner circle captures the child's real development and understanding of safety as evidenced by her or his behavior. At this point the relations between real (inner circle) development is always conceptualised in the context of the ideal form of development that the teacher is striving to achieve.

The model shows the interrelationship between the children, their parents and teachers and transfer of safety knowledge, where understanding is gained and behavior change occurs at all levels. The child is at the nucleus of the new safety learning process, a foundation for the conceptualisation of "self" as an important agentic dimension within the model. Here the child has agency when the concept of self is shaped by social factors such as interactive experiences with the teachers and parents in consideration of the roles and positions each individual occupies within the learning process (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004) as part of the ideal form of development. The model helps conceptualise how the societal and personal issues associated with injury risk can be brought together through a shared learning process. In addition, an acknowledgement of the social situation of development where children have a

risk assessment relationship with their social and material environment best advances a new conceptualisation of safety. This model is used in this paper to support the process of reconceptualising the concept of risk through moving the lens away from a division between the child and the environment, to show the relations between the child and their social and material environment as a dynamic two way process. A cultural-historical conceptualisation of safety risk assessment assumes collective responsibility for shaping childhood safety and injury risk understanding. In the next section, the model is used for examining risk in the community. The case example of Australia is given in order to demonstrate the nature of community conceptions of risk found in the popular press and as illuminated in research. Here risk is conceptualised as individual and static, whereas a cultural-historical conception treats risk as dynamic and relational. The former positions the child as needing to be protected, whilst the latter treats the child as active in their own development of risk assessment.

### Risk Averse Societies - Case Examples from Australia

The *safety risk assessment model* offers an educational solution to counteract risk aversion often created by influences and tensions between risks and safety in communities. With trends of over regulated and over protective societal change, parents and educators are challenged in providing children with opportunities and experiences important in developing safety and risk capabilities. Due to a number of changes in society and movements in risk thinking, the role of parents in the upbringing of their children has been redefined (Smeyers, 2010). In some cases activities that children have taken part in and benefited from in the past are now often considered to be dangerous. Generational trends suggest children's reduced opportunities for outdoor play are influenced by parental and societal concerns (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet, 2012). Extensive research in many fields has been conducted on and with children who represent Generation Z, children born between 1995 and 2009 that occupy places in preschools and schools today. Palmer (2006) argues that children from this era are being deprived of many opportunities and experiences due to perceived dangers and injury risks, coupled by Occupational Health and Safety guidelines, bringing about prohibitions of activities in schools. Brussoni and Olsen (2012) suggest whilst injury prevention plays a key

role in childhood safety, imposing too many restrictions on outdoor risky play opportunities for children, hinders their optimal healthy development.

Public commentary through media has been responsible for bringing attention to prohibitions and play restrictions for safety reasons in Australian childcare centres, pre-schools and schools. 'Childcare centre's ban superheros', reports *The Adelaide Advertiser* (April 06, 2009) and in the *Townsville Bulletin* (August 26, 2008). The Townsville school was reported to have banned all forms of gymnastics during breaks, including handstands, somersaults and forward roll. According to Murn (2008), although the Townsville school incident created media attention, it is only one episode of a trend affecting all Australian schools. Murn (2008) recounts the removal of monkey bars in one school, the ban of football and soccer during recess and all games that are deemed "too rough" at another. Swings, seesaws, flying foxes and roundabouts are banned from two States within Australia, where NSW and Victorian public schools with playground equipment having to meet strict building guidelines and standards (Murn, 2008). According to Mitchell, Cavanagh and Eager (2006) studies in NSW have demonstrated that previous playground safety standards in Australia (Standards Australia, 1981) have had no significant impact on reducing hospitalisations resulting from playground equipment falls. Although parents are being blamed for bans on some playground equipment due to compensation claims, Murn (2008) believes that these guidelines actually invite litigation and are responsible for encouraging a risk averse culture in educational facilities. The expansion of rules is often influenced by exceptional cases where something has gone terribly wrong and not necessarily a reflective solution for every related issue (Smeyers, 2010).

There is much public debate on activity restrictions at schools and public places for safety reasons, some communities have become proactive in voicing their opinions about such matters. In one community in Australia a public commentary appeared in the *Wentworth Courier* (2011) reporting on a group of children and their parents from North Bondi who alerted the media when the Waverley Council announced it would remove their community tree house. According to a council spokesperson, the tree house was not compliant with the Australian Standards for Building and Play Equipment and found to be "potentially dangerous". Although several residents had offered to improve the structure to meet safety requirements, it was not an option. A child and family therapist wrote in response to the

article:

As a child and family therapist I see the incredible damage being done to children by fear-filled, over-controlling and over-anxious adults. Of course we have to be mindful of risks and danger but children also have to be exposed to risks in order to learn, through graded experience, how to make good decisions and keep safe. It's unhelpful complaining about risk taking, aggression and mental health problems in adolescents and adults who never had the chance to learn their lessons in childhood (Wentworth Courier, 2011).

It appears challenging environments that children once enjoyed, for instance building cubby houses in trees are often replaced by controlled or semi-controlled environments, such as playgrounds. Mitchell et al. (2006) believe many traditional play areas have been eliminated in current urban environments in the developed world, resulting in reduced opportunities for spontaneous children's play. They argue for many children playgrounds are now the only practical space available for them to play (Mitchell et al, 2006). Whilst playgrounds facilitate valuable experiences for childhood development they are also a common place of childhood injury (Cassell & Clapperton, 2007). Finding a balance between real and other dangers, also between safe play places and degree of managed risk, challenges the parents, educators and creators of play environments to find a common sense approach that is irrespective of practices that prohibit children from activities that are important for their development. Children who are not exposed to risk and have play restrictions placed on them are more likely to encounter problems related to their learning ability, mental and physical health such as obesity (Eager & Little, 2011). According to Mack, Hudson and Thompson (1997) play spaces need to involve some degree of challenge, creativity and stimulation. Brussoni and Olsen (2012) make the point that in seeking strategies for keeping children safe the aim should be "as safe as necessary" rather than as "safe as possible". To introduce a shared learning *safety risk assessment model* means parents and educators can take an active role in working with children to expose them to manageable risks through play and other activities important in safety risk learning.

## Opportunities for Safely Experiencing Risks

Through play children learn to manage challenges that are important for their development and for learning life-skills vital for a healthy lifestyle (Mitchell et al, 2006). There is an abundance of evidence to suggest children need opportunities for a range of experiences that allow them to make informed decisions about their capabilities in risk situations (Malone, 2009). Play is an important stimulus for providing these experiences because it is a main activity in childhood, particularly during the preschool period (Karpov, 2003).

Collaborative experiences are important in developing the capabilities children need for independently managing risk. Children need to be provided with guidance in a manner that allows them to have developed safe reasoning so that they are equipped with the competences to do so (Malone, 2009). Adult mediation in children's everyday and play activities provides opportunities for guidance in safe practices and in most cases rules that often govern them. Rules are important because they provide a framework for behaviours, even in play (Vygotsky, 1966). According to Karpov (2003) play is not free of rules, it is governed by play rules created by the participating children in the play in accordance with the roles. However, literature suggests when there are too many rules and over regulation occurs, this restricts activities considered important for childhood development (Malone, 2007; Gill, 2007; Ungar, 2007).

According to Gill (2007) and Mitchell et al. (2006), self-development for independence builds resilience, a sense of self-worth and the capacity to act safely. It has been shown by Ungar (2007) that parents and educators can be proactive in facilitating this by providing good supervision. Good supervision does not mean watching a child but rather through guidance taught skills and provide knowledge that helps them to become responsible risk takers (Gill, 2007). For example in the SeeMore Safety intervention program the children were introduced to 'SeeMore Safety on a walk'. Initiated through literature and animated characters the children were educated on potential risk situations when on an outing. The children were then taken on a walk around their local area with more experienced adults in a manner that allowed the children to be active in constructing environmental knowledge and safety reasoning. This process allows for children's development so they can eventually take on the role to assess their own contexts independently. According to Bodrova and Leong

(2007), it is the social context adapting to the new skills that is responsible for forming the child's growing competencies. Over time parents will gain an increased level of trust in their children's ability, which in turn will bring an increased level of independence and freedom for the child. Independence is gained because the child is perceived to be more responsible due to assumed knowledge of safety. As noted by Vygotsky (1994), the child's attitude and relationship to the environment is central for a child's development, and we argue this is particularly so for the development of risk averse relationship to the environment – acting safely through accurately reading risk situations. Socially and then independently, the child thinks and acts, creating new levels of safety consciousness, which is a source of development in itself.

Independent play develops resilience, a sense of place, a sense of self-worth, social connectedness and environmental knowledge. Whether it is strolling up to the local shop to buy milk, talking to elderly neighbours or having a tree to watch the world from, these freedoms and privacies to be a child within our local environment help develop important competencies that are drawn on throughout our lives. As environments become more complex, these competencies play a key role in supporting children to become streetwise and good risk assessors. At a time when children need these competencies more than ever, we are limiting their capacity to develop them (Malone, 2009, p. 1).

Whilst it is generally understood that children initially cannot make their own way in life unguided, giving children agency with their everyday challenges and associated risks where genuine threats are understood, provides children with an enriched foundation for building resilience and a safety risk understanding (see Murn, 2008). It appears in many communities children are not getting the experiences and the right amount of risk and responsibility they need. Whilst supervision is critical in the safety of children, equally important is providing children with opportunities that advance new safety learning. Murn (2008) suggests children are missing out on such experiences and "being harassed by the fun police", resulting in long term consequences on their development. This view is supported by Ungar (2007) who argues that adults are keeping children "vacuum-safe", creating a generation of youth who are not prepared for life. He believes in his 20 years of experience of working with troubled youth tells him that often parents consider they give their children everything, but what he thinks they really need are opportunities to experience the responsibility of managing risk for

themselves and others (Ungar, 2007).

Numerous studies have been conducted to indicate that children want to be given the opportunity to be trusted with making decisions about their own safety and assessing risk for themselves (Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008; Green 1997; O'Neill et al, 2013). Morrongiello and Matheis (2007) argue that many injuries happen during play at a time children are responsible for making their own decisions about safety and risk. Therefore it is in these situations that life and experiences become important teachers. Ungar (2007) suggests that by providing children with opportunities to make mistakes, that they can learn from, even if it means getting a minor injury and teaching them how to stick up for themselves, we will be creating a generation of independent, self-sufficient kids that can manage risk.

A discussion about assessing and managing risks is very much a subjective phenomenon that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Gill (2007) makes a positive case for risk in childhood and provides four theories: The first is that certain types of risk help children manage those risks, for example safety education initiatives that teach children to swim or ride a bike; the second is based on children having a desire for risk-taking which may expose them to greater risks; the third claims that children are exposed to other benefits as a side-effect of having opportunities to engage in activities that have a degree of risk. For instance the level of risk associated to outdoor play outweighs health and physical development benefits; the final argument in favour of risk is that children build character and personality through risk, overcoming challenges in their everyday lives. It is through risk experiences that children learn to recognise, evaluate and competently negotiate their own course of action that mitigates harm (Christensen & Mikkelsen 2008; Sandseter 2009; O'Neill et al., 2013). Whilst there appears to be much evidence from psychologists and education professionals (Malone 2007; Robbe 2004; Anderson 2010) to support Gill's arguments, it is challenging in most cases to quantify the level of risk verses the benefits. However, in the *safety risk assessment model* the child's conceptualisation of injury risk understanding is a collective responsibility where a more knowledgeable person is engaged in the process, therefore the level of risk is reduced and the benefits enhanced. What is important in providing the right level of risk and responsibility is in the interrelationship between the child, the parents and teachers. This cultural-historical informed model provides a framework for Australian early childhood education to be active in the course of developing competent safety risk managers and to

counteract risk aversion evident in some Australian education settings.

## Conclusion

There is a consensus in the views of Gill (2007), Malone (2007), Palmer (2006) Anderson (2010) and Ungar (2007) that reduced independence and play opportunities coupled with growth in adult control has been brought about by parents increased fear of danger. They believe an over protective social change in the Western society has resulted in children being deprived of opportunities and experiences important in shaping childhood safety and risk understanding. These authors point to the need for re-thinking how adults think and act with their children in risk situations. Evidence of such risk averse practices have been coined as "bubble-wrapping" in some Australian communities, as has been reported in public commentary. This suggests a need for reconceptualising community thinking about risk in relation to young children. Many children are missing out on the benefits that come with independent play important in developing resilience, self-worth, social connectedness and environmental and safety knowledge. A common sense approach to balancing risk management is needed if we are to stimulate safety related learning. A cultural-historical reading of risk assessment gives a new way of thinking about the relations between the child and their environment, supporting a new way forward. Reconceptualising risk gives a new framework for education and health. With a new conceptualisation, it becomes possible to see how new types of programs can emerge where the practice models support collective learning of risk – something not routinely contemplated in Australia and many other Western countries. Educational programs where a *safety risk assessment model* is conceptualised as part of the learning experiences of children, rather than a hazard to be avoided, gives a new way forward for the development of curriculum.. The framing of safety messages within the pre-school curriculum during a period where children can engage in a more cognitive orientation to safety provides a foundation for a whole-of-life strategic approach to addressing the child injury problem within the safety and risk landscape. The shared safety learning method offers a collective style of engagement including children, parents and teachers. With such an approach safety messages are more likely to be consistent and real injury risk challenges

better understood. The inclusion of safety learning within the preschool landscape will create new opportunities that allow for a better chance for the next generation to become safety risk aware. The arguments put forward in this paper call for a reconceptualisation of safety risk. Whilst there are challenges in designing sensible injury risk strategies, they should be achieved without creating risk adverse societies.

In conclusion this paper advocates a shared learning philosophy to help counter risk aversion and provide a balance between protecting children from genuine injury risks and giving them challenging opportunities to build competencies. Education through a *safety risk assessment model*, is a very different conceptualisation to that which currently exists - 'bubble-wrapping children'.

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