RISKY PLAY IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EDUCATORS' AND FAMILIES' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Questo studio analizza le interpretazioni del rischio e del gioco rischioso nei contesti educativi della prima infanzia per bambini di età compresa tra 0 e 6 anni, basandosi sulle risposte a domande aperte di due questionari somministrati in Toscana a educatori, insegnanti e familiari. L'analisi qualitativa mostra come il rischio venga costruito e negoziato tra protezione, autonomia e opportunità di apprendimento, portando allo sviluppo del costrutto di comunità educativa del rischio .

KEYWORDS

risky play; educational risk; educators/teachers; families; educational community of risk.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, risk has progressively emerged as a significant interpretive category within pedagogical and socio-cultural debate, also in response to the increasing prevalence of educational models oriented towards prevention, control, and the management of uncertainty (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Research on risky play has contributed to challenging a conception of safety based on the mere elimination of risk, recognising uncertainty and appropriately challenging experiences as potentially valuable conditions for children's learning and development (Sandseter, 2007; Brussoni et al., 2015; Brussoni et al., 2023).

This perspective has shifted the educational question from eliminating uncertainty to creating contexts in which children can engage with progressively complex experiences under pedagogically sustainable conditions (Biesta, 2017). Such conditions, however, depend not only on the characteristics of educational environments, but also on the social and cultural representations through which adults interpret the relationship between protection, autonomy, risk, and educational responsibility (Lupton, 2013).

Although international literature has extensively documented the developmental value of risky play (Sandseter, 2009; Brussoni et al., 2015; Kleppe et al., 2024), less attention has been paid to how the adults who share educational responsibility construct and negotiate what counts as an acceptable risk in early childhood settings. Existing research shows that adults' beliefs influence children's opportunities for exploration and challenge (Little, Sandseter, & Wyver, 2012; Sandseter, 2014), but this leaves a further conceptual issue insufficiently addressed: how risk becomes educationally legitimate when actors occupying different educational positions apply different criteria to distinguish valuable challenge from unacceptable hazard.

The gap is therefore not only empirical, but conceptual. What remains undertheorised is the intersubjective construction of the educational legitimacy of risk: the process through which educational staff, teachers, and families negotiate thresholds of acceptability and determine, explicitly or implicitly, which forms of uncertainty may be recognised as educationally valuable. Risk, from this perspective, is neither simply an objective property of situations nor solely a matter of individual perception; it is socially and pedagogically negotiated within relationships of shared educational responsibility.

Building on these premises, the study analyses the representations of risk developed by educational staff, teachers, and family members, focusing on the cultural and pedagogical frameworks through which autonomy, protection, and responsibility are interpreted and regulated. It proposes the construct of educational community of risk as an interpretive lens for examining this specific process: the relational construction and negotiation of the conditions under which risk becomes pedagogically legitimate within the educating community.

2. Rethinking Risk in Early Childhood Education Settings for Children Aged 0-6: A Theoretical Framework

Recent research on risky play has progressively deconstructed the traditional equivalence between risk and hazard (Gill, 2007; Sandseter, 2014). Hazard refers to conditions that expose children to harm without educational value or developmental benefit; risk, by contrast, may be understood as a constitutive dimension of educational experience, learning processes, and child development. It does not coincide with a condition to be eliminated, but rather with situations characterised by uncertainty and challenge which, when proportionate to children's competences, can promote learning and

development (Sandseter, 2007; Little & Eager, 2010). From this perspective, risk takes on pedagogical value, as it offers children opportunities to develop autonomy, self-regulation, decision-making skills, and confidence in their own competences (Biesta, 2017).

Several systematic reviews have shown that such experiences foster motor, cognitive, emotional, and social development, contributing to the construction of autonomy, resilience, and perceived competence (Brussoni et al., 2015; Brussoni et al., 2023). More recently, Kleppe and colleagues (2024) have shown that exposure to appropriate challenges also supports coping processes and emotional self-regulation. This framework also includes Risk-Benefit Assessment models, which suggest an integrated evaluation of the potential risks and educational opportunities offered by different experiences (Ball, Gill, & Spiegal, 2019).

Recognising the educational value of risk does not, however, mean assuming that all children have the same opportunities to access risky play experiences. These opportunities also depend on the social and cultural representations developed by adults, who are called upon to interpret and regulate the relationship between protection, autonomy, and educational responsibility. The perspective of risk society highlights how contemporary societies are characterised by a growing concern with the prediction and control of uncertainty (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), while studies on risk perception show that it is mediated by values, beliefs, and cultural representations, which may be amplified or attenuated by social and communicative processes (Lupton, 2013; Kasperson et al., 1988). It follows that the opportunities offered to children depend not only on the characteristics of environments, but also on the models of educational responsibility shared by educators, teachers, and families. Along these lines, the most recent literature highlights how education

professionals are called upon to mediate between the recognition of the pedagogical value of risky play and the growing demands for safety, accountability, and prevention arising from institutional and social contexts (Little, 2023; Szpunar et al., 2023; Li et al., 2026).

This approach makes it possible to interpret risk as an intrinsically relational phenomenon, emerging from the interaction between child, environment, and adult. Affordance theory conceptualises environments as systems of possibilities for action arising from the encounter between environmental characteristics and individual competences (Gibson, 1979); consequently, their pedagogical quality depends not only on safety, but also on the opportunities for exploration and autonomy they make accessible to children (Kyttä, 2004). Outdoor Education further emphasises the value of environments that support movement, exploration, and situated learning (Farné & Bortolotti, 2026), while sociocultural perspectives assign adults a mediating role in enabling children to engage with challenges appropriate to their competences through scaffolding and progressively adjusted support (Vygotskij, 1978; Bruner, 1983).

These perspectives explain important dimensions of risky experience, but they do not fully account for how its educational legitimacy is constructed among adults who share responsibility for the child. Existing relational frameworks provide important but different analytical resources. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective conceptualises development through the interdependence of children's life contexts and, particularly through the mesosystem, highlights the significance of connections between family and educational settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2002, 2010). Family-school partnership models foreground communication, participation, and collaboration among families, educational institutions, and communities (Epstein, 2018). Educational co-responsibility, in turn, conceptualises the relationship between

families and educational institutions in terms of shared educational commitments and responsibilities, while recognising their distinct roles within the educational process (Pati & Dusi, 2011; Dusi, 2014). Communities of practice explain how participation in shared practices contributes to learning and the negotiation of meanings (Wenger, 1998).

These frameworks are complementary to the present perspective, but their primary analytical objects differ from the specific problem raised by risky play. Ecological theory explains connections between developmental contexts; partnership models focus on collaboration and participation; co-responsibility concerns the sharing of educational responsibility; and communities of practice address learning and meaning-making through participation in shared practices. None of these perspectives, however, places at its analytical centre the process through which actors holding different positions and responsibilities negotiate what degree and form of uncertainty may legitimately become part of a child's educational experience. Moreover, families and education professionals cannot simply be assumed to constitute a homogeneous community of practice, since they may retain different knowledge, expectations, responsibilities, and cultures of risk.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant in risky play because the same situation may be interpreted as a valuable opportunity for autonomy by one actor and as an unacceptable hazard by another. The issue is therefore not simply whether actors cooperate or share responsibility, but how thresholds of acceptable risk are constructed, contested, and revised, and how responsibility for allowing children to encounter uncertainty is consequently negotiated.

To make this specific process analytically visible, we propose the educational community of risk as a *sensitizing construct*. It does not replace or compete with ecological, partnership, co-responsibility, or communities-of-practice

frameworks; rather, it specifies a process that these broader perspectives do not make their central object of analysis: the intersubjective construction of the pedagogical legitimacy of risk. The construct refers to the relational field in which educational staff, teachers, and families interpret and negotiate the boundaries between protection and autonomy, acceptable risk and unacceptable hazard, thereby enabling, restricting, or reshaping children's opportunities for exploration and challenge.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Methodological Positioning

This contribution is situated within a broader mixed methods research project with a predominantly quantitative orientation, articulated in a preliminary scoping review of the international literature and a subsequent cross-sectional empirical study addressed to educational staff and teachers working in early childhood education services and preschools, as well as to family members of children aged 0-6.

For the purposes of this contribution, an exploratory qualitative approach with a constructivist orientation was adopted, according to which representations of risk are understood as socially and culturally mediated constructions that shape educational practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lupton, 2013). For this reason, the study involved adults who, in settings for children aged 0-6, directly participate in defining the conditions under which experiences of play, exploration, and risk are made possible, accompanied, and regulated.

Methodological quality was addressed with reference to the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported through iterative engagement with the corpus and the comparative

examination of interpretations across the research team; transferability through the explicit description of the participants, recruitment strategy, and study context; dependability through the documented progression of the analytical process from codes to categories and themes; and confirmability through reflexive discussion of the researchers' interpretations throughout the analytical process. The specific procedures through which these principles were operationalised are described in Section 3.4.

3.2. Participants

The study involved two groups of participants: (a) educational staff and teachers working in early childhood education services and preschools in the Tuscany Region; and (b) family members of children aged 0-6 attending the same educational settings.

Participants were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling and voluntary response sampling, by disseminating the questionnaires online through pedagogical coordination bodies, professional networks, educational services, institutional mailing lists, and social media channels dedicated to early childhood education.

Given the voluntary and non-probability recruitment strategy, participation depended on respondents' exposure to the dissemination channels and willingness to engage with the topic. The resulting sample should therefore be understood as an exploratory sample rather than as statistically representative of education professionals and families in Tuscany or Italy.

The final sample included 542 education professionals, of whom 59.6% were educators working in early childhood education services and 40.4% were preschool teachers, as well as 1,585 family members. The involvement of both groups responds to the aim of comparing different but complementary

perspectives in the construction of opportunities for exploration and risky play, consistently with what has been highlighted in the international literature (Little et al., 2012; Sandseter, 2012).

3.3. Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through two parallel questionnaires, developed on the basis of the preliminary scoping review and the main evidence from the literature on risky play (Sandseter, 2007, 2009; Little & Eager, 2010; Brussoni et al., 2015).

Both instruments included a socio-demographic section and two main areas of investigation: the first focused on scenarios referring to free play situations attributable to four macro-areas (bodily, sensorimotor, structured, and vicarious play); the second focused on indoor and outdoor play contexts. For each scenario, participants were invited to take the perspective of an adult observer and to assess separately the level of risk, understood as an opportunity for learning and development, and the level of hazard, understood as the possibility of harm, using two Visual Analogue Scales (VAS) from 0 to 10.

The questionnaires also included open-ended spaces for collecting comments and personal reflections. In this contribution, the textual responses relating to the section on indoor and outdoor play contexts constituted the qualitative corpus analysed.

The content validity of the instruments was pursued through an iterative process of design, revision, and discussion among the members of the research group, with particular attention to the coherence between the items and the theoretical constructs investigated. The procedures governing informed consent, participant protection, and data management are described separately in Section 3.5.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted according to the model of Reflexive Thematic Analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2022), an approach aimed at identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within a textual corpus. As previously stated, the aim of the study was not to quantify responses, but rather to understand how the different actors considered attributed meaning to the concepts of risk, hazard, safety, and child development.

The qualitative analysis of the responses was articulated in six phases: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated readings of the corpus; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) aggregation of codes into interpretive categories; (4) construction and review of themes; (5) definition and naming of the final themes; and (6) production of the analytical report.

Data coding was initially carried out independently by the three researchers using NVivo software. The purpose of this independent engagement with the corpus was not to establish coding reliability, but to make different interpretative readings visible and available for collective examination. At successive stages of coding, category development, and theme construction, the researchers compared their interpretations and discussed points of convergence and divergence. Interpretative disagreements were not resolved through majority decision or the calculation of intercoder agreement; rather, discrepant readings were returned to the relevant extracts and reconsidered in relation to the broader corpus, the developing thematic structure, and the research questions. Themes and categories were retained, reformulated, merged, or differentiated through this iterative discussion until the research team reached a shared interpretative rationale. This procedure is consistent with Reflexive Thematic Analysis, in which researcher subjectivity is treated as

an analytical resource to be critically examined rather than as a source of error to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022).

Traceability of the analytical process was supported by the documentation retained within the NVivo project, which preserved the progressive organisation of the corpus into codes, interpretive categories, and themes. This documentation enabled the research team to revisit earlier stages of the analysis and to trace the progression from coded extracts to the final thematic structure, providing a documented account of the main stages of theme development.

Illustrative quotations were selected after the final thematic structure had been defined. Selection was guided by their capacity to exemplify clearly the meaning of a theme or a relevant contrast between the two participant groups, while remaining consistent with the broader pattern identified across the corpus. Quotations were therefore not selected because they were particularly striking or rhetorically effective, nor were they intended to indicate the frequency of a given position. Where possible, extracts were chosen that preserved sufficient contextual meaning to make the analytical interpretation transparent. Quotations are used in the Results as illustrative evidence for the interpretation rather than as representative statements of either participant group.

The thematisation process followed a progressive logic that led from the identification of descriptive codes to the construction of conceptual categories and, subsequently, broader interpretive themes. *Table 1* provides an example of the analytical progression from initial codes to interpretive categories and final themes, thereby illustrating the traceability of the theme-development process.

Table 1: Example of the Theme Construction Process

Initial codes	Interpretive category	Final theme
Autonomy, experimentation, testing oneself, learning through experience	Learning through exploration	Risk as a necessary condition for development
Observation, support, supervision, arrangement of the environment	Adult educational mediation	The adult as regulator of risk
Garden, outdoor spaces, movement, exploration, opportunities for action	Environment as opportunity	Environments as mediators of experience
Falls, heights, materials, equipment; strangers, unknown people, public safety	Physical risk; Social risk	The distinction between physical risk and social risk
Autonomy, learning, supervision; protection, control, vigilance	Educational orientation towards risk; protective orientation	Different cultures of risk

The comparative analysis of the categories led to the identification of cross-cutting interpretive patterns concerning how families and education professionals attribute meaning to risk, responsibility, safety, autonomy, and development. These patterns provided the empirical basis for the subsequent theoretical elaboration, developed in the Discussion, of the *educational community of risk* as a sensitizing construct. The construct should therefore not be understood as an additional theme emerging directly from the data, but as a conceptual interpretation developed from the relationships identified across the themes.

3.5. Ethical Procedures

The study involved adult participants who voluntarily completed an online questionnaire and did not entail experimental procedures, interventions, or the

direct involvement of children. At the time the study was conducted, formal ethical approval was not sought, given the non-interventional and minimal-risk nature of the research and the absence of clinical or other sensitive procedures. Nevertheless, ethical safeguards were applied throughout recruitment, data collection, analysis, and reporting in accordance with the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and protection of participants' data.

Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were provided with information about the aims and nature of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the data for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained electronically through an explicit consent checkbox that participants were required to select before proceeding to the questionnaire. Participants who did not provide consent could not access the survey.

Particular attention was paid to protecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality throughout data processing and reporting. The responses used for the qualitative analysis were handled in anonymised form and access to the research data was restricted to the research team. Illustrative quotations were reviewed before publication to ensure that they did not contain information that could reasonably permit the identification of individual participants or educational settings. Data were used exclusively for the research purposes communicated to participants and were processed in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR) and applicable national data-protection provisions.

4. Results

The in-depth analysis of the thematic evidence emerging from the open-ended responses relating to indoor and outdoor play contexts led to the identification

of five interpretive themes that describe how the actors considered attribute meaning to the relationship between risk, hazard, and development:

1) risk as a condition for development;
2) the adult as regulator of risk;
3) environments as mediators of experience;
4) the distinction between physical risk and social risk;
5) different cultures of risk.

4.1. Risk as a Necessary Condition for Development

A first interpretive direction concerns the broad convergence between education professionals and families in recognising exploration and appropriately challenging experiences as relevant to children's development. Education professionals tend to frame risk as a pedagogical resource that contributes to autonomy, competence, and confidence, provided that it is embedded within intentionally designed educational contexts.

One educator effectively describes this view by stating that:

The classroom represents the primary space of everyday autonomy. In this space, risk becomes an opportunity to gain mastery over oneself and the environment […] These are all challenges that allow the child to refine fine motor skills and action planning, while building a solid foundation of inner security.

Family members also recognise the educational value of exploration, but their accounts more frequently make this value conditional upon the experience being perceived as controllable. As one mother summarises:

If it is controlled, it is not dangerous. My child helps me cook […] I know there is a risk, but under my supervision the opportunity matters more to me.

The comparison therefore reveals both convergence and divergence. The two groups share a positive orientation towards exploration and autonomy, but differ in the conditions through which risk becomes acceptable. For education professionals, its legitimacy tends to derive from its developmental potential and from the pedagogical conditions surrounding the experience; for families, it is more explicitly linked to the possibility of maintaining control and preventing harm. The difference is thus not simply between greater and lesser tolerance of risk, but between different criteria for legitimating children's exposure to uncertainty.

This distinction also reveals an underlying tension. The family statement "if it is controlled, it is not dangerous" suggests that the educational value of risk may be recognised precisely when uncertainty can be reduced through adult supervision. Professional accounts, by contrast, tend to preserve a degree of uncertainty as part of the learning experience itself. In both cases, adults seek to reconcile autonomy and protection, but they appear to do so through partially different regulatory logics: one emphasising pedagogically supported exposure to uncertainty, the other the controllability of its possible consequences.

These findings are consistent with research recognising challenge and uncertainty as relevant dimensions of children's learning and development (Sandseter, 2007, 2009), and with sociocultural perspectives that understand development as emerging through active engagement with progressively demanding experiences (Vygotskij, 1978). The comparative analysis, however, adds a further interpretive element: agreement on the educational value of autonomy does not necessarily imply agreement on the conditions under which

autonomy should be allowed to develop. Risk therefore emerges from the outset not only as an individual experience, but as an object whose educational acceptability depends on different adult criteria of regulation.

4.2. The Adult as Regulator of Risk

The second theme concerns the role attributed to adults in regulating "risky" experiences. Both groups recognise that risk should not simply be excluded from children's experience, but their accounts reveal different understandings of how adult responsibility should operate. Educational staff and teachers tend to describe regulation as a form of mediation: adults observe, design environmental conditions, and calibrate their intervention so that children can progressively manage challenges without having their initiative replaced.

As one educator observes:

[…] The presence of the educator as a discreet observer ensures that small physical experiments do not turn into critical situations, making the space a place of "protected risk" where motor errors do not have serious consequences.

The expression "protected risk" is particularly significant because protection does not imply eliminating uncertainty. Rather, uncertainty is maintained within conditions intended to limit the severity of its possible consequences. Adult regulation is therefore distributed across educational mediation, environmental design, and the child's developing competences. This logic is consistent with socioconstructivist perspectives on the zone of proximal development and scaffolding, in which adult support enables engagement with challenges while progressively leaving greater space for autonomous action (Vygotskij, 1978; Bruner, 1983).

Family members' accounts place greater emphasis on vigilance and anticipation. Safety is more frequently associated with the adult's capacity to monitor the situation and intervene before risk develops into harm. One family member observes:

The important thing is that the child is supervised by an adult (I do not mean always right next to them, but that they can always be seen).

The comparison therefore suggests a divergence not in the recognition of adult responsibility, which is shared, but in the regulatory mechanism through which responsibility is enacted. Professional accounts tend towards a distributed form of regulation, in which responsibility is exercised by arranging the conditions that allow children to encounter and progressively manage uncertainty. Family accounts more often locate regulation in adult supervision and anticipatory control. In the first case, protection operates by making uncertainty pedagogically manageable; in the second, it operates primarily by increasing the adult's capacity to monitor and contain its possible consequences.

This distinction also reveals a productive tension within the meaning of protection itself. Reducing adult intervention may, from the professional perspective, be necessary for children to develop competence in managing risk; from a protective perspective, the same reduction may be interpreted as diminishing the conditions that guarantee safety. The tension is therefore not between responsible and irresponsible approaches to risk, but between different constructions of responsible exposure to uncertainty. Adult presence can consequently function both as a condition enabling children's autonomous engagement with risk and as a mechanism through which the boundaries of that autonomy are established.

4.3. Environments as Mediators of Experience

The third theme concerns the role attributed to environments in shaping opportunities for exploration and risk. Unlike the previous theme, the comparison reveals substantial convergence between education professionals and families: both groups describe outdoor environments as particularly valuable because they provide varied opportunities for movement, experimentation, and progressively autonomous action.

One educator describes educational environments as:

[…] an ecosystem of possibilities. [In these spaces] children learn to navigate between their own passions and the limits of others.

This representation suggests that risk is not an intrinsic characteristic of an activity or of the child, but emerges relationally from the encounter between children's competences and the possibilities for action offered by the environment. This interpretation is consistent with Gibson's theory of affordances (1979) and Kyttä's contribution (2004), according to which environmental quality depends not only on available possibilities for action but also on children's actual opportunities to perceive, explore, and appropriate them.

Outdoor spaces are particularly significant in this respect. As another educator observes:

The garden represents an extremely rich context of opportunities: running, climbing, observing natural elements, experimenting with different materials. It is a space that gradually fosters autonomy and the ability to manage risk.

A similar interpretation appears in the account of one mother:

The garden or courtyard represents a privileged context for growth, as it fosters motor exploration, risk perception, and autonomy.

The convergence is analytically significant because outdoor environments are valued not despite their greater variability and unpredictability, but partly because these characteristics create opportunities for children to encounter and progressively interpret uncertainty. The environment therefore appears to perform a mediating function: it does not simply contain more or less risk, but contributes to shaping the forms of uncertainty that become available to children and the conditions under which they can engage with them.

This finding introduces an important qualification to an exclusively adult-centred interpretation of risk regulation. Gardens, courtyards, and natural environments can distribute regulation across spatial organisation, available affordances, children's competences, and adult mediation. Their educational significance therefore lies not in eliminating uncertainty but in making different degrees of challenge accessible and manageable. This helps explain why both groups can simultaneously value environments described in the literature as diversified and less predictable (Knight, 2013; Waite, 2017) and associate them with autonomy and risk management.

The shared appreciation of outdoor environments nevertheless raises a further interpretive question: variability does not appear to become problematic in itself; what matters is whether uncertainty can be read and managed within a recognisable educational context. In this sense, the environment functions not merely as the setting in which risk occurs, but as one of the mechanisms through which uncertainty may be transformed into an educationally meaningful challenge. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that environmental characteristics shape opportunities for exploration and risk management (Brussoni et al., 2015), while suggesting that the pedagogical meaning of risk depends on the relationship between environmental affordances, perceived manageability, and adult mediation.

4.4. The Distinction Between Physical Risk and Social Risk

The fourth theme reveals a more pronounced divergence in the ways education professionals and families construct the object of risk itself. Educational staff and teachers predominantly refer to the physical and organisational dimensions of educational environments, identifying space design, materials, and competent supervision as conditions through which potential hazards can be anticipated and contained. Family members, by contrast, extend their concerns to the social uncertainty associated with public contexts, particularly the presence of unknown others and the unpredictability of interpersonal situations.

One educator observes, for example, that:

[…] Hazard is mainly present in relation to confined spaces, unsuitable materials, or possible accidents, but it can be contained through careful organisation, safe materials, and educational supervision. Within this framework, space becomes a means for education and development, not a limitation.

This account is significant because physical hazard is represented as pedagogically tractable: it can be identified, modified, and contained through intentional organisation and professional mediation. Risk does not disappear, but its conditions can be acted upon. The perceived possibility of intervention therefore appears to contribute to distinguishing manageable risk from unacceptable hazard.

Family narratives introduce a different form of uncertainty. When reflecting on public spaces, concerns shift from the material characteristics of the environment towards social actors whose behaviour cannot be anticipated in the same way. One mother states:

The problem is not so much playing in the park, but who might be at the park.

Similarly, one father reports:

When we are in a public place, my concern is not about the equipment but about the people I do not know.

The comparison suggests that the divergence concerns not only how much risk is considered acceptable, but what is recognised as a source of risk in the first place. Whereas physical and organisational hazards can be represented as modifiable through environmental design and educational supervision, social uncertainty is described as less predictable and less directly controllable. The distinction may therefore reflect different perceptions of manageability: uncertainty appears more readily framed as acceptable risk when adults perceive that they possess the resources to interpret, organise, or regulate it, whereas uncertainty that exceeds these resources is more easily constructed as a potential threat.

This interpretation is consistent with approaches emphasising the social and cultural construction of risk (Kasperson et al., 1988; Lupton, 2013), but the comparison adds a further analytical element. The boundary between risk and hazard appears to depend not only on the characteristics of the situation, but also on the actor's perceived capacity to intervene upon it. This helps explain an apparent tension with the previous theme: variability and unpredictability can be valued in outdoor environments when they remain pedagogically manageable, yet become sources of concern when they are associated with social situations perceived as less governable. Risk perception thus emerges as relational not only because it depends on the child and the environment, but also because it is shaped by adults' perceived capacity to make uncertainty intelligible and manageable.

4.5. Different Cultures of Risk

The cross-cutting analysis of the themes reveals different orientations towards risk among education professionals and families, but these cannot be reduced to an opposition between risk-oriented and safety-oriented positions. Both groups recognise the developmental value of exploration and autonomy; what differentiates their accounts more clearly are the criteria through which exposure to uncertainty is represented as acceptable.

Education professionals tend to describe risk as acceptable when challenge is proportionate to children's competences and supported through environmental design, observation, and calibrated adult mediation. Regulation is therefore represented as distributed across the child, the environment, and the adult, allowing a degree of uncertainty to remain part of the experience. Families also recognise the value of exploration, but more frequently associate its acceptability with supervision, anticipation, and the adult's capacity to prevent or contain possible harm. The difference therefore concerns not the presence or absence of responsibility, but different representations of what constitutes responsible exposure to uncertainty.

This comparison also reveals a tension within the meaning attributed to protection. Although both groups value autonomy, the conditions they associate with its safe exercise differ. Professional accounts suggest that reducing direct adult intervention may support children's developing capacity to assess and manage risk; family accounts more frequently associate safety with maintaining adult oversight. The divergence therefore concerns not simply autonomy versus protection, but different understandings of how protection should operate in order to make autonomy possible.

A further distinction concerns the perceived manageability of uncertainty. Physical and environmental variability is more readily represented as

acceptable when it can be organised, interpreted, and mediated through space design and supervision, whereas social uncertainty, particularly in relation to unknown others, is more frequently associated with situations perceived as less predictable and controllable. The boundary between acceptable risk and unacceptable hazard thus appears to be related not only to situational characteristics but also to adults' perceived capacity to act upon them.

As a cross-cutting interpretation of these empirical patterns, we identify two partially different logics of legitimation: a *pedagogical-regulatory logic*, in which uncertainty is represented as acceptable through the interaction of children's competences, environmental conditions, and adult mediation; and a *protective-control logic*, in which acceptability is more strongly associated with supervision and the perceived possibility of anticipating or containing harm. These should not be understood as empirically discrete or fixed attributes of education professionals and families, but as interpretive tendencies developed through the comparative reading of the themes within this sample. Their coexistence helps explain why shared educational values do not necessarily correspond to shared criteria for risky experiences. This gap between shared values and divergent criteria identifies, within the present context, a potential space of educational negotiation, whose relational dynamics cannot be directly observed through the present data.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that differences between education professionals and families cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between risk acceptance and risk avoidance. Both groups broadly recognise the developmental value of exploration and autonomy, but their accounts differ in the criteria through

which exposure to uncertainty is represented as educationally acceptable. The central divergence therefore concerns not shared educational values as such, but the ways in which those values are translated into judgements about acceptable risk.

Education professionals tend to describe risk as pedagogically manageable when challenge is proportionate to children's competences and supported through environmental design, observation, and calibrated adult mediation. Family narratives, while also recognising the value of exploration, more frequently associate acceptability with supervision, anticipation, and the adult's capacity to prevent or contain possible harm. These patterns suggest different representations of responsible exposure to uncertainty rather than a contrast between responsible and irresponsible approaches to children's safety.

The comparison also helps clarify an apparent tension in the data. Both groups value autonomy, yet they associate its safe exercise with partially different forms of adult regulation. Professional accounts tend to preserve a degree of uncertainty as part of children's experience, whereas family accounts more frequently emphasise the maintenance of adult oversight. The divergence therefore appears to concern how protection is understood to operate in order to make autonomy possible.

A further interpretive pattern concerns the perceived manageability of uncertainty. Physical and environmental variability is more readily represented as acceptable when adults perceive that it can be organised and mediated, whereas social uncertainty, especially in relation to unknown others, is more often associated with situations considered less predictable and controllable. This suggests that the distinction between acceptable risk and unacceptable hazard may depend not only on the characteristics of the situation, but also on

adults' perceived resources for interpreting and regulating it. Such an interpretation is consistent with approaches emphasising the social and cultural construction of risk (Kasperson et al., 1988; Lupton, 2013).

These patterns should also be interpreted as contextually situated. Because they were identified within a voluntary, non-probability sample drawn from a specific regional and cultural context, they should not be regarded as stable characteristics of Italian families or education professionals. Rather, they represent tendencies within the present sample whose relevance beyond the Tuscan ECEC context requires comparative investigation.

These empirical patterns should, however, be distinguished from the theoretical interpretation developed from them. The present study documents participants' representations of risk, autonomy, protection, and adult responsibility; it does not directly observe the relational processes through which families and education professionals negotiate these meanings in practice. The findings therefore do not demonstrate the existence of an *educational community of risk* as an empirical phenomenon. Rather, the convergence around educational values and the divergence in criteria of legitimation provide the empirical basis for proposing this construct as a sensitizing interpretive framework.

Broader relational frameworks provide important resources for understanding the context within which such processes may occur. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological perspective (2002, 2010) conceptualises the interdependence between children's life contexts, particularly through the mesosystem linking family and educational settings. Family-school partnership models emphasise communication and collaboration, educational co-responsibility foregrounds shared educational commitments, and communities of practice address learning and meaning-making through participation. The present findings

point, however, to a more specific theoretical question: how actors holding different educational positions may negotiate the criteria through which uncertainty becomes pedagogically legitimate.

On this basis, we propose the educational community of risk as a *sensitizing construct* for interpreting the relational space in which such differences may be negotiated. Its analytical object is not cooperation per se, nor does the construct imply that shared criteria concerning risk already exist among the actors involved. Rather, it directs attention to the processes through which different educational actors may negotiate the thresholds separating pedagogically valuable uncertainty from unacceptable hazard. In this sense, the construct represents a theoretical implication of the findings rather than an empirically demonstrated outcome of the study.

Its heuristic value lies in making analytically visible a question that emerges from the comparison: how shared educational aspirations can coexist with divergent criteria of legitimation and how these differences may be addressed within relationships of educational responsibility. Further research capable of directly observing interaction and negotiation is required to examine whether, and under what conditions, such processes occur in educational communities.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The interpretation of participants' responses suggests that the promotion of risky play may benefit from processes through which educational actors make explicit and compare their understandings of risk, rather than relying exclusively on individual decisions. The implications that follow therefore concern not only educational practices, but also the conditions through which educational services, schools, and families may develop forms of educational co-responsibility.

A first direction for development concerns the initial and continuing training of educational staff and teachers. Alongside traditional training pathways on safety, it appears necessary to develop competences in the pedagogical assessment of the relationship between risk and benefit, also through the adoption of Risk-Benefit Assessment procedures (Ball et al., 2019), capable of supporting educational decisions oriented not only towards the prevention of harm, but also towards the enhancement of the learning opportunities offered by uncertainty.

A second implication concerns the design of educational environments. The quality of spaces cannot be assessed exclusively in terms of safety, but also in relation to their capacity to offer affordances that promote exploration, autonomy, and the progressive assumption of responsibility, reducing avoidable hazards without eliminating opportunities for learning.

A third direction concerns the strengthening of the partnership between educational services, schools, and families (Buonanno & Dusi, 2023). The different representations of risk that emerged in the study suggest the opportunity to establish systematic spaces for discussion in which educational staff, teachers, and family members can examine the criteria through which they assess risk, make their respective responsibilities explicit, and construct shared educational orientations. Educational co-responsibility thus takes the form of a continuous process of negotiation, rather than a simple distribution of tasks.

Within the context examined, the educational community of risk offers a sensitizing perspective from which to consider how the relationship between exploration and protection might be collectively interpreted and negotiated. Rather than assuming that shared regulation already characterises educational communities, the construct highlights the potential value of creating reflective

spaces in which education professionals and families can make explicit their respective criteria of acceptable risk, compare them, and explore possible shared orientations.

7. Future Research Perspectives

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of some methodological challenges that should be considered when assessing their transferability and identifying directions for future research.

First, the study relied on non-probability convenience and voluntary response sampling. Although the final sample was numerically substantial and included both education professionals and family members, its composition cannot be assumed to represent the broader population of early childhood professionals and families in Tuscany or Italy. Recruitment through pedagogical coordination bodies, professional networks, educational services, institutional mailing lists, and social media may have increased the likelihood of participation among individuals already interested in educational issues, outdoor play, or the relationship between risk and child autonomy. A self-selection effect therefore cannot be excluded: participants who chose to respond may differ systematically from those who did not in their sensitivity to the topic, educational orientations, or willingness to reflect on risky play. The findings should consequently be interpreted as exploratory and context-dependent rather than as estimates of the prevalence of particular attitudes or orientations within the wider population.

A further consideration concerns the geographical and institutional specificity of the sample. All participants were recruited within the Tuscany Region, and their representations are therefore embedded within the Italian early childhood education context and, more specifically, within a regional system

characterised by its own organisational traditions, pedagogical cultures, professional networks, and forms of coordination between educational services and families. Since perceptions of acceptable risk, adult responsibility, autonomy, and protection are culturally mediated, the interpretive patterns identified in this study may not transfer unchanged to educational systems characterised by different regulatory frameworks, safety cultures, conceptions of childhood, or family-service relationships. Transferability should therefore be understood analytically rather than statistically: the value of the findings lies in the possibility of comparing the mechanisms and tensions identified here with those emerging in other cultural and institutional contexts.

Second, the analysis is based on self-reported representations collected through self-administered questionnaires. These accounts provide access to participants' meanings, concerns, and interpretive frameworks, but they cannot be assumed to correspond directly to practices enacted in everyday educational situations. This distinction between reported representations and everyday practices is especially relevant to the relationship between empirical findings and theoretical interpretation in the present study. The data make it possible to identify patterns in how risk, protection, autonomy, and responsibility are represented, but they do not allow direct observation of how these meanings are negotiated in interaction between families and education professionals. Observational, ethnographic, or video-based studies would therefore be necessary to examine how risk is actually interpreted, regulated, and negotiated in practice.

A further direction for future research concerns the inclusion of children's perspectives. Children are increasingly recognised as competent participants in the construction and management of their own play experiences, yet the present study examines only adult representations. Including children's

narratives, embodied responses, and situated decision-making would allow future research to investigate how children themselves interpret challenge, uncertainty, protection, and autonomy, and how their perspectives interact with those of adults.

Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow analysis of how representations of risk evolve over time or in response to training, organisational change, or repeated interaction between families and education professionals. Longitudinal research could clarify whether the interpretive patterns identified here remain stable, become more differentiated, or are transformed through professional development, educational experience, or changes in institutional practice.

Finally, the *educational community of risk* is proposed here as a sensitizing construct derived from the theoretical interpretation of the empirical patterns, rather than as a phenomenon directly demonstrated by the data. The present study provides an empirical basis for identifying shared educational values alongside divergent criteria of legitimation, but it does not directly observe the relational processes through which such differences are negotiated. Future research should therefore examine whether these patterns recur across different regional, national, and cultural contexts and whether the proposed construct proves heuristically useful in interpreting such processes. Comparative studies across different ECEC systems, together with research designs capable of directly observing interaction and negotiation, could refine the constitutive dimensions of the construct, distinguish context-specific from potentially broader patterns, and assess its usefulness across educational settings characterised by different institutional arrangements, pedagogical traditions, and family-service relationships.

8. Conclusions

The meaning attributed to risky play cannot be reduced to the objective characteristics of environments or activities, but is constructed within a cultural and pedagogical horizon through which educational staff, teachers, and family members interpret the relationship between autonomy, protection, and development. Within the context and sample examined, the findings show broad agreement among education professionals and families on the educational value of exploration and progressive autonomy, while also revealing different ways of interpreting the conditions under which risk becomes acceptable. Education professionals tend to emphasise pedagogical mediation, environmental conditions, and children's developing competences, whereas families more frequently foreground supervision, protection, and the prevention of harm. These differences should not be read as a simple opposition between safety and development, but as distinct representations of how responsibility should operate in relation to uncertainty.

Within this framework, the study proposes the *educational community of risk* as a sensitizing construct arising from the theoretical interpretation of the findings. It does not describe an empirically demonstrated form of educational community, nor does it imply that families and education professionals already share meanings or criteria concerning risk. Rather, it offers a conceptual lens for investigating the relational processes through which different educational actors may negotiate the boundaries between protection and autonomy, acceptable risk and unacceptable hazard.

The contribution of the construct is therefore primarily heuristic. The present findings provide an empirical starting point by identifying shared educational values alongside divergent criteria of legitimation, but the relational processes hypothesised by the construct require direct investigation through research

designs capable of observing interaction and negotiation. The *educational community of risk* should therefore be regarded as a theoretically informed proposition generated from the present study and open to further conceptual refinement and empirical investigation.

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