

EDITORIAL

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## Risky Childhoods in Uncertain Times

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In recent years there has been considerable public debate and moral panic about what is widely perceived as the changing nature of childhood (Kehily, 2010; Moran-Ellis, 2010). Within these debates, actual, potential and imagined risks of physical and psychosocial harm pertaining to individual children are often amplified and held up as examples of broader social deterioration. Society thus represented is seen as no longer constituting a safe space for childhood, and childhood is, in turn, constituted as posing social risks of its own. As Mary Jane Kehily observes, a perceived crisis of childhood 'exists as a reflection of adult anxiety and insecurity in "new times"' (2010, p. 183). This is not to deny that many children do, indeed, live in situations where risks associated with violence, abuse, neglect, poverty, discrimination and social exclusion are part of everyday life-worlds, nor is it to minimise the effects of such situations on children's lives and futures. Rather, it is to suggest that dominant discourses about childhood are heavily predicated on normative assumptions and collective fantasies about how childhood 'should' be experienced, and to argue that these norms, anxieties and cultural imaginings are implicated in producing the very risks about which they voice concern (Payne, 2008; Khan, 2009).

Scholars over the past decade have identified a number of key issues seen as impacting on the lives and well-being of contemporary children, with debates often polarised around questions of children's perceived vulnerability and exposure to various risks associated with a range of social, cultural and geopolitical uncertainties. Key issues identified in the research literature over the past decade include: the pressures of globalisation and global corporate culture on children and families (Giroux, 2000; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004, Trask, 2010); the sexualisation and commercial exploitation of childhood (Fass, 2003; Piachaud, 2008); changing gender relations, family structures and patterns of intimate social relations (Rasmussen, 2006; Ferfolja, 2007; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007; Kehily, 2010); the perceived loss of connectedness (de Souza, 2005; Hyde, 2008) to family and community that accompanies changing patterns of social interaction and restrictions on children's time and activities (Wyver et al, this issue); the intensification of diagnoses of emotional, behavioural and anxiety disorders in increasing numbers of young children (Andrews, Van Vliet & Wuthridge, 2006; Graham, 2007, 2008); the complex range of images, information and activities to which children now have access via the Internet, mobile phones and other new technologies (Goldstein et al, 2004; O'Rourke & Harrison, 2004; Plowman et al, 2010); and the role of popular and visual culture on children's identities, learning and social relations (Arthur, 2001; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Baker, 2004; Magno & Kirk, 2008; Saltmarsh, 2009). Many of these issues have been popularly understood as presenting significant risks to children, and challenges for parents (Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Yet, as has been argued by Foucauldian scholars in the field of early childhood, risk needs to be understood 'not as "truth", but as a social construction' (Fenech et al, 2008, p. 38). As such, we are interested in the ways that certain risks are discursively

produced and inscribed, as well as in the ways that we might take seriously their implications for children's lives. In this special edition of *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, we asked contributors to consider these and related issues from their own research perspectives.

In the lead article, Linda Graham, Naomi Sweller & Penny Van Bergen interrogate the over-representation of boys in special schools and classes in Australia. Drawing on annual student enrolment data published by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET), they question the diagnostic and procedural trends that lead to the segregation of disproportionate numbers of boys in NSW schools. They consider how the designation of students as 'at risk' simultaneously deems students as potentially posing risk within educational settings, and critique recent policy decisions that have increased the power of schools to intensify and extend segregation practices. They argue that such policy attempts to contain risk through segregation leading to the further disenfranchising of students already disproportionately disadvantaged as a consequence of gender, race and socio-economic background. This, they contend, ignores the risks thus posed to the most vulnerable students, jeopardising their educational and social outcomes in what they refer to as a 'home-grown school-to-prison pipeline'.

In their article on children's sexual knowledge, Cristyn Davies & Kerry Robinson discuss how children's access to knowledge about sexuality and intimate relationships is controversial. It is a 'risky' issue due in part to widespread misconceptions that all too often reduce sexuality to sexual contact or sexual orientation. They argue that dominant constructions of childhood innocence and normative assumptions about childhood create tensions and anxieties for parents. 'Good parenting' discourses place parents under pressure to protect their children from what may be seen as developmentally inappropriate sexual knowledge. Drawing on focus group interviews with parents and children, they show how these discursive tensions get in the way of effectively educating children about gender, sexuality and ethical relationships.

For those who are sceptical of risk discourses, the landscape of adult responsibility in relation to children has changed dramatically, leading to a general climate of hyper-vigilance, over-indulgence, and privileging of forms of play, learning and social activity that present the least possible risk to growing children. As argued in the article by Shirley Wyver, Paul Tranter, Geraldine Naughton, Helen Little, Ellen Beate, Hansen Sandseter and Anita Bundy, excessive fear of risk imposes unnecessary and limiting restrictions on children's play. Based on research from Australia and Scandinavia, they provide a thought-provoking discussion of the ways in which current emphases on particular forms of safety lead to overly regulated learning and home environments. Excessive adult intervention and management of children's activity, they argue, leads to conditions in which 'surplus safety' limits children's rights to freedom, mobility and autonomous play, and ultimately leads to poorer quality outcomes for children.

Eva Lloyd & Helen Penn approach questions of risk from the vantage point of research concerning children living in zones of political unrest and violent conflict. Here, they are concerned with the kinds of interventions offered to children suffering the traumatic effects of armed conflict. Their article undertakes a systematic review of literature that evaluates such interventions, particularly in relation to those approaches aimed at addressing the cognitive and psychosocial development of children who have been affected by armed conflict. They argue that therapeutic interventions utilised in these situations tend to be predicated on the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder, which they locate within paradigms and cultural norms from the global North. They pose the challenging question of whether such approaches are appropriate given the limited evidence to support their effectiveness, and call for more robust research in order to ensure that the needs of children affected by armed conflict are met.

Anticipating risk and preparing children for responding to dangerous situations is another dimension of work undertaken by adults from a range of professions with responsibilities for children's learning and well-being. Drawing on an ethnographic study in multiracial, multiethnic early childhood settings in western Sydney, Sue Saltmarsh shows how gender and racial politics both precede and pervade the provision of safety lessons by police and emergency services personnel. She argues that children's knowledge of fire and police services is culturally situated, and impacts significantly on the effectiveness of such visits as a means of communicating lessons in personal safety. Her article explores how children's responses to safety lessons in their childcare

centre are shaped by gendered and racialised relations of biopolitical power and state-sanctioned violence.

Focusing on an early childhood teacher's discursive construction of students as risk-takers during a writing lesson, Steve Bialostok & George Kamberelis argue that this teacher's attempt to promote and produce risk takers belied her commitment to neoliberal ideologies and new modes of capitalism. The teacher's efforts, they argue, were mediated by tensions between: old and new forms of capitalism, modernist and postmodernist notions of agency, safety and risk, and freedom and control. Their analysis demonstrates that economic discourses of embracing risk – thoroughly grounded in the ideologies of neoliberalism – permeate other sectors including education. Risk taking, they argue, is currently understood as something everyone should valorise, and a necessity for freedom and choice. Bialostok & Kamberelis show that teachers' appropriations and recontextualisation of the tensions between these theoretical paradigms and discourses impacted upon her students' understandings of choice, risk, and freedom.

Contributions to this special edition highlight the impact discourses of risk have had, and continue to have, in the field of early childhood education. Dominant discourses of risk have the capacity to reinscribe hegemonic understandings of childhood, significantly influencing the way we interact with and educate young children. Reconceptualising understandings of risk can challenge current values and practices, and pedagogical approaches, providing opportunities for self-reflection and developing critical awareness of the effects of our interactions with young children.

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