

Illustrating adventurous play

Dr Lily FitzGibbon, University of Stirling



What is adventurous play?

Child-led activity where children experience feelings of **excitement**, **thrill** and **fear**; often this occurs in the context of age-appropriate **risk-taking**.

[Dodd & Lester \(2021\)](#)

Sandseter's (2007) themes

01

Great heights

02

High speed

03

Rough and tumble

04

Disappear/
get lost

05

Dangerous elements

06

Dangerous tools

Why is it important?

Declines in children's independence and opportunities to take risk has been identified as a cause of the decline in children's mental wellbeing (Gray et al., 2023)

The more time children spend playing adventurously, the less likely they are to experience symptoms of anxiety (Dodd et al., 2023)



Froebel and adventurous play

"Play is the highest level of child development"

"To climb a tree is... to discover a new world; seen from above, everything looks quite different..."

... a child who lacks experience will not know capabilities and is more likely to encounter danger."

Froebel in Lilley, 1967



Images from <https://www.froebel.org.uk/>

Researching adventurous play

Previous research typically took one of the following approaches:

Observational methods (researcher perspective, e.g., Dodd et al., 2022)

Survey methods (caregiver perspective, e.g., Sandseter, 2009)

Child's perspective is often missing



Project objectives

To co-produce a pictorial self-report measure that captures the activities, thoughts, and feelings associated with adventurous play with preschool and primary-age children and with a children's illustrator



Image credit: Kasia Matyjaszek



Image from Stirling Psychology Kindergarten

Developing a more Froebelian approach

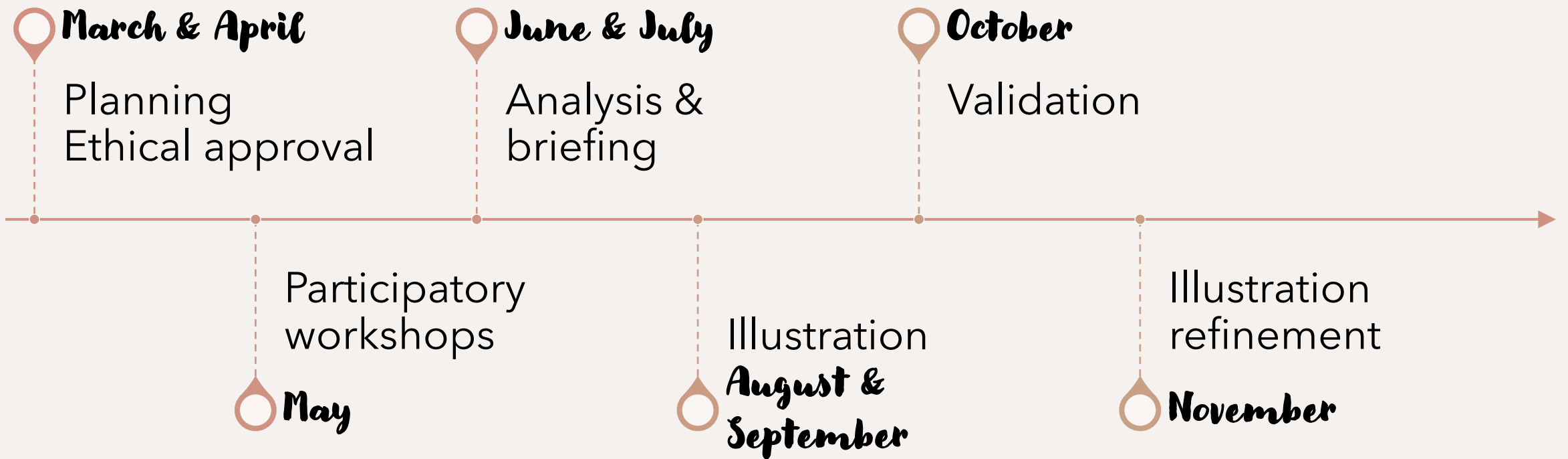
From a checklist tool...

... to an opportunity for rich and multi-dimensional engagement – a conversation starter

Encouraging observation and reflection



Project outline



The illustrator

Kasia Matyjaszek

Prize-winning children's illustrator based in Scotland

Expressive style well suited for capturing the experiences of adventurous play

Extensive experience leading engagement workshops with primary-aged children



Images from <https://www.kasiamatyjaszek.com/>



Image credit Kasia Matyjaszek

Workshops

Mosaic approach (Clark, 2001; 2017) - key elements:

- Playground tour – static, researcher and child videography (Hinchion et al., 2021)
- Brainstorm about central character – “who would you like to go on an adventure with”
- Explore what an adventure looks and feels like
- Make and draw – children’s artifacts are explored and annotated through conversations between researcher and child (Wiseman et al., 2019)

Ethical conduct

BEFORE

- All the methodologies employed in the project were approved by the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel (GUEP 2023 13710 9870)
- Consent obtained from Stirling Council to contact schools for the purpose of participating in research activities
- Consent obtained from parents and legal guardians

ON THE DAY

- Children informed of aims of the two research sessions and introduced to research team by classroom/kindergarten staff
- Children asked for verbal assent before taking part including for video or audio recordings
- Children were informed about their right to withdraw

IF CONSENT WAS NOT OBTAINED OR WAS WITHDRAWN

- Child was not included in any video footage (workshops)
- Child was not invited to participate in focus groups (validation)
- Child still had the opportunity to play and be involved with the activities as much as they wished to
- Any artifacts they created were not removed from the classroom or included in any analysis

Further ethical considerations

POWER DYNAMICS

- Awareness of power dynamics between adults and children
- Ensured children were empowered to participate in their own way
- E.g., children were invited to take over the camera-work in the playground

FACILITATING PARTICIPATION

- Activities were adapted for children's age to facilitate participation
- Activities took place in familiar settings – classrooms and playrooms

AUTHENTICITY OF CHILDREN'S VOICES

- The authenticity of children's voices was fostered
- Children's responses were always met with interest and curiosity
- Children's analysis and interpretation was never undermined, but rather respected and explored



Data obtained

Video footage of playground tours

Video footage of central character brainstorming and adventure storyboard exercise

Video footage of make and draw activities

Annotated artifacts (drawings and collages) from make and draw activities

Analysis and briefing

Recordings transcribed and annotated in ELAN

Themes extracted from drawings, storyboards, videos and transcriptions using deductive thematic analysis

Mapped onto Sandseter's risky play themes

Where examples were missing from the workshops, we used the literature to guide the illustration briefing





Kindergarten child balancing across plank



P2 child jumping between bench and pile of pallets

Workshop reflection

In the playground, children demonstrated many examples of adventurous play, for example, **balancing across planks** of wood precariously placed between tyres, **jumping across large gaps** between benches and stacks of pallets, **chasing each other at high speeds** with wheelbarrows, and **dangling upside-down** off railings.

Children were very willing to show off these activities to the researcher and illustrator.



Workshop reflection

However, when it came to **talking about** and **drawing** adventurous play, or play at all, the primary-age children, in particular, quickly moved into **fantasy**, describing and drawing dragons and sea monsters and epic adventures (see examples from the artefacts)

This suggests that adventurous play may be **fun to do**, it is **less fun to talk about** and draw in realistic terms

Demonstrated the **need for illustrated prompts**



Illustration considerations

Diverse and relatable characters

Outdoor setting with natural elements

Nature had excellent affordance for adventurous play

"The child should experience nature in all its aspects" Froebel in Lilley, 1967

Heights



P2 child climbing tree



P2 child hanging from railing



P2 children jumping between tyres



Kindergarten child balancing across plank



Kindergarten collage: swings

Speed



Kindergarten collage: ladders and slides



P2 children playing chasing games



Kindergarten children chasing with wheelbarrow

Rough and tumble



P2 children wrestling



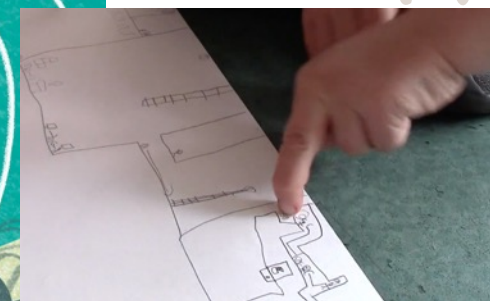
Visibility



P2 children hiding in bushes



P2 child with freedom to roam between playgrounds



P2 drawing: tunnels

"I was stuck on this ledge"

Child, P2

Dangerous elements

*"When you go up the hills
and you look for stuff"*

Child, P2



"I think they're having adventures because Beavers like me and you go like building rafts"
Child P3 (validation)

Dangerous tools



Validation

Back into school and kindergarten to discuss the illustrations with children

Small focus groups of children were invited to discuss, colour, and augment the images, and share their thoughts about how these relate to their own play

Children also expressed how the play makes them feel more often when describing and relating to the pictures than in previous conversations

"I think going down the slide head-first would be a bit scary"

"If it's a tunnel slide, yes, that would be scary going head-first down a tunnel slide"

"And going very fast"

"That might be a bit bad, if it's a rainy day then it might be a bit wet"

P3 children discussing 'Speeds' picture

"This is really scary when you're trying to jump off and you've never done it before"

"I would jump off of that"

"I also like like daring and like jumping off and stuff"

"And that person is upside-down"

"Try not to fall!"

"This one looks like it's doing gymnastics – I like climbing trees and I like gymnastics"

P3 children discussing 'Heights' picture

From prompts to provocations

Through conversations with my Froebelian mentor and reflections on children's drawings in the workshops, I recognised the need for children to represent their own ideas in their own way within conversations about adventurous play

As well as colour and greyscale versions of the illustrations, the illustrator also produced line drawing versions (colouring sheets)

These allow children to modify, enhance, and embellish the illustrations with their own creative interpretations



Accessing and using the Toolkit

The illustrated toolkit can be used for non-commercial purposes under a Creative Commons license

The Toolkit is available in several formats (for screen and print) in a repository hosted by the Open Science Framework ([click here](#))

We welcome creative and novel uses of the illustration to explore children's perspectives on adventurous play



What's next?

The Toolkit will be used in ongoing work evaluating adventurous play interventions in primary schools

New work using the Toolkit to explore conversations between children and their teachers and caregivers about adventurous play

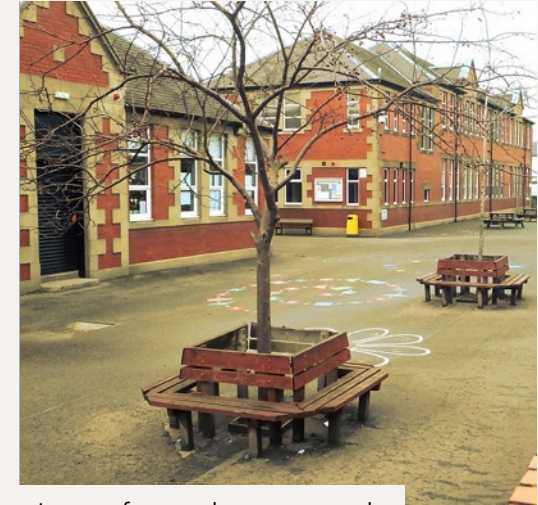


Image from educators.co.uk



Acknowledgements

THE CHILDREN WHO TOOK PART IN
THE WORKSHOPS AND VALIDATION
FOCUS GROUPS

KASIA MATYJASZEK

LAUREN TAYLOR

LYNN MCNAIR

HELEN DODD

LINE CAES



References

- Clark, A. (2001). How to listen to very young children: The mosaic approach. *Child Care in Practice*, 7(4), 333–341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575270108415344>
- Clark, A. (2017). *Listening to Young Children, Expanded Third Edition: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Dodd, H. F., & Lester, K. J. (2021). Adventurous Play as a Mechanism for Reducing Risk for Childhood Anxiety: A Conceptual Model. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 24(1), 164–181. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-020-00338-w>
- Dodd, H. F., Nesbit, R. J., & FitzGibbon, L. (2022). Child's Play: Examining the Association Between Time Spent Playing and Child Mental Health. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-022-01363-2>
- Hinchion, S., McAuliffe, E., & Lynch, H. (2021). Fraught with frights or full of fun: Perspectives of risky play among six-to-eight-year olds. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 29(5), 696–714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1968460>
- Lilley, I. M. (1967). *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from His Writings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Montreuil, M., Bogossian, A., Laberge-Perrault, E., & Racine, E. (2021). A Review of Approaches, Strategies and Ethical Considerations in Participatory Research With Children. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1609406920987962. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920987962>
- Sandseter, E. B. (2007). Categorising risky play—How can we identify risk-taking in children's play? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 15(2), 237–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930701321733>
- Sandseter, E. B. (2009). Characteristics of risky play. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 9(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729670802702762>
- Wiseman, N., Rossmann, C., Lee, J., & Harris, N. (2019). “It's like you are in the jungle”: Using the draw-and-tell method to explore preschool children's play preferences and factors that shape their active play. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 30(S1), 85–94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hpia.209>

