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# Adventurous play in schools: The parent perspective

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## Abstract

Adventurous play (play that is exciting and thrilling,
where children take age-appropriate risks, for example
climbing trees and jumping from rocks) is increasingly
being recognised as beneficial for child health and de-
velopment. Despite this, children's opportunities for and
engagement in this type of play have declined in recent
decades. Break times in schools may provide an ideal op-
portunity to provide adventurous play opportunities for
all children. Recent work has identified myriad factors
that help and hinder schools in offering adventurous
play opportunities, but parent perspectives have largely
been absent. Through one-to-one semistructured quali-
tative interviews, this study aimed at capture parents'
perspectives on adventurous play happening in schools
and what they perceive as the key barriers to and facili-
tators of adventurous play in schools. The findings were
analysed using reflective thematic analysis. Five themes
were identified: *Needs, Schools as Gatekeepers, Risks and
Benefits, Societal Constraints and Individual Differences.*
Findings are discussed with reference to parental sup-
port for adventurous play, as well as parent and school
level needs that should be addressed if barriers that may
hinder adventurous play opportunities in school are to
be overcome.

# INTRODUCTION

Adventurous play is synonymous with risky play and has been defined as play that is exciting and thrilling, where children are able to take age-appropriate risks. There is evidence that children enjoy playing in an adventurous way and when doing so experience simultaneous feelings of fear and joy (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). A growing body of research demonstrates the benefits of adventurous play for child health, behaviour and development (Brussoni et al., 2015; Bundy et al., 2009; Farmer, Williams, et al., 2017; Lester et al., 2011). For example, a systematic review examining the association between risky outdoor play and child health-related outcomes reported positive associations between risky play and physical activity as well as social competence, social interactions, creativity and resilience (Brussoni et al., 2015). It is theorised that adventurous play provides children with a positive context through which they can learn about fear, uncertainty, risk judgement and coping. This learning is proposed to help children later in life when they are faced with situations that may provoke fear and uncertainty and help to prevent anxiety (Dodd & Lester, 2021). In support of this, recent research found that children who spent more time playing adventurously have fewer internalising symptoms (Dodd et al., 2022).

Despite a growing body of evidence indicating that adventurous play may be beneficial, children's opportunities for and engagement in adventurous play have declined in recent decades (Clements, 2004). This may have negative consequences for children's mental health and wellbeing. Schools could provide an ideal setting for counteracting this decline and providing children with adventurous play opportunities, given their nearly universal reach in the UK and the fact that children access play opportunities during break times every day. Unfortunately though, typical UK schools have risk-averse policies and playgrounds that contain few to no features that support adventurous play, with most comprising a hard play surface (99.5%), with playground markings (98%) and some fixed play equipment (81%; Baines & Blatchford, 2019).

Against this backdrop, several school-based programmes have been developed to increase children's opportunities for challenge and risky play in the playground, both in the UK and internationally. These typically involve the introduction of materials that children can use for play (e.g. tyres, sand, fabric and crates) as well as staff training and support around risk assessments and policies. Where these interventions have been evaluated, findings show decreases in reports of disruptive behaviour (Lester et al., 2011), increases in children's reported happiness at school (Farmer, Fitzgerald, et al., 2017) and improvements in children's learning and social development (Lester et al., 2011). Despite the reported benefits of such programmes, a recent systematic review highlighted several factors that prevent schools from allowing children to engage in adventurous play during break times (Nesbit et al., 2021). Core barriers for schools included fear of external judgement and legislative concerns, as well as the need for parental support for adventurous play initiatives.

Although parent support is identified by school staff as a vital consideration regarding adventurous play, there is a dearth of research examining parents' views of adventurous play in schools. Outside school, the amount of time children spend playing in an adventurous way is associated with parents' attitudes and beliefs about risk during play (Dodd et al., 2021), and children's access to activities is dependent on the risk perception of the adults around them (Niehues et al., 2015). Recent findings from the British Children's Play Survey highlighted that the social

and physical environment, risk of injury and child factors all affected parents' decisions regarding adventurous play for their child outside school (Oliver et al., 2022, 2023). Cited barriers for children's opportunities included busy roads, perceived neighbourhood safety, lack of time and lack of accessibility of adventurous play spaces. Importantly, many of these barriers relating to the physical and social environment may be overcome if adventurous play takes place as a regular part of the school day. Crucially though, very little is currently understood about how parents view adventurous play in schools.

The aims of this research were therefore to capture the perspective of parents in relation to adventurous play in schools, including what they perceive may make it harder or easier for schools to offer children adventurous play opportunities. A qualitative approach is taken as qualitative methods provide a way to gain a depth of understanding that cannot be achieved using quantitative methods. One-to-one interviews were deemed most appropriate to capture parents' perceptions towards adventurous play. This approach was favoured over the use of focus groups given that parents have reported feeling scrutinised or judged by other parents in relation to their views and behaviours regarding their children's play (Little, 2015).

## METHOD

This research received a favourable recommendation of conduct from the Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Reading (2020-020-HD) and the COREQ checklist for reporting qualitative data was used (Tong et al., 2007).

The study adopted an essentialist/realist epistemological position in which reality is subjective and can be understood through the meaning that participants attach to their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The researchers considered how their own assumptions may have shaped the data (see Data analysis). Authors R.J.N and H.F.D both research children's play and mental health and have positive attitudes towards adventurous play. K.H contributed expertise in qualitative methods and does not conduct research in adventurous play and, at the time of the research, S.P was a clinical psychology master's student with a positive attitude towards adventurous play. Both K.H and H.F.D are parents.

## Recruitment

Parents were recruited via social media, word of mouth and through leaflets advertising *The Children's Outdoor Play Project* that were distributed to partner organisations. Information provided to parents explained that we were interested in what affects decisions about play activities and why schools differ from one another in the activities on offer during break time. Our recruitment materials purposely did not reference *adventurous play*, to avoid attracting parents who were particularly supportive of adventurous play.

To facilitate purposive sampling, interested parents were invited to complete an expression of interest form (hosted on Survey Monkey) and provide information about characteristics on which we aimed at seeking diversity, namely parent age, sex, number of children, ages and sex of children, ethnicity (Office for National Statistics, 2021) and geographical location. Respondents were also asked whether they were currently a member of school staff in a primary school. All respondents gave permission to be contacted for participation in a one-to-one interview about children's play in and outside school. These data created a pool of potential participants and

enabled us to recruit a diverse group of parents including both mothers and fathers, parents in different geographical locations, a variety of ethnic backgrounds and parents with varying numbers and ages of children. This was deemed particularly important to ensure diversity of views on adventurous play, given that parent sociodemographic factors have been associated with parents comfort with their child's risk-taking in play (Brussoni et al., 2013), and the amount of time children spend playing adventurously (Dodd et al., 2021).

The only exclusion criteria for participation in this study was respondents who identified themselves as school staff in primary schools (interviews were conducted with school staff as part of another project). Eighteen parents expressed an interest in participating but identified themselves as school staff in primary schools and were not included.

## Sample

After removing parents who were currently school staff, 70 eligible parents expressed an interest in participating. The majority of those who expressed an interest were women (80%) and White British (74%). Parents were selected to be invited for interview via email at which time they were provided with detailed information about the study and a link to book an interview time. To facilitate participation, the researcher offered evening interviews. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021b), sample size was guided by Malterud et al. (2016) concept of information power. According to this concept, the more information relevant to the study aim that a sample holds, the fewer participants are needed. Given the focussed nature of the research question, it was judged that 10 participants diverse on a range of characteristics were sufficient to address the study aim (see Table 1 for a full list of participant characteristics).

## Procedure

Written, informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants prior to the interview, and verbal consent was obtained at start of the interview. A topic guide, informed by the research team's expertise in adventurous play and the study research questions, was developed and piloted with one parent. As a result of piloting, additional prompts were included to encourage parents to discuss their views in greater depth, thus providing richer data. The final topic guide included closed and open questions about children's play both in and out of school, including questions on break time in school, parent general views and experience of risky/adventurous play, as well as parent views on adventurous play in schools and what might make it easier or harder for schools to offer these opportunities. The topic guide can be viewed in the Supplementary Materials. Photo elicitation, demonstrated by Van Auken et al. (2010) as assisting with discussion generation, was also used. Two pictures depicting traditional school playgrounds in Britain were shown together followed by two pictures depicting adventurous school playgrounds. The traditional school playground pictures included a hard playground surface with playground floor markings, and fixed equipment (wooden structure). A survey of primary schools in 2017 found that the primary school playgrounds in Britain often consist of hard surfaces (99.5%), with playground markings (98%) and some fixed play equipment (81%; Baines & Blatchford, 2019). School playgrounds in Britain are private property. The adventurous playgrounds included loose parts play (materials with no fixed purpose e.g. tyres, sticks and ropes) and play at heights, respectively.

**TABLE 1** Parent characteristics.

| Respondent | Sex | Age | No. of children | No. of children (5–11 years) | Age (years) and sex of child/children (5–11 years) | Ethnicity | Region of UK |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parent 1 | F | 29 | 3 | 1 | 7M | White British | South-East |
| Parent 2 | F | 40 | 1 | 1 | 9M | White British | South-East |
| Parent 3 | M | 42 | 1 | 1 | 5F | Mixed Ethnicity | West-Midlands |
| Parent 4 | F | 38 | 4 | 3 | 8M; 11F; 11F | White British | North-East |
| Parent 5 | F | 47 | 1 | 1 | 9F | Mixed Ethnicity | South-East |
| Parent 6 | F | 28 | 2 | 1 | 5F | Other: Turkish | London |
| Parent 7 | F | 30 | 1 | 1 | 9M | White British | South-West |
| Parent 8 | M | 41 | 2 | 2 | 5F; 8F | White British | East-Midlands |
| Parent 9 | F | 40 | 3 | 2 | 5M; 7F | Asian or Asian British (Pakistani origin) | West-Yorkshire |
| Parent 10 | M | 43 | 2 | 2 | 5F; 5F | White British | North-East |

Abbreviations: F, female; M, male.

Each parent was interviewed on one occasion. All interviews were conducted by R.J.N who is a female researcher with a Doctorate in Psychology. R.J.N is trained in qualitative methods, including in qualitative interviewing and data analysis. Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. For all but one of the interviews, only the researcher and participant were present. For one interview, with the consent of the participant, an MSc student attended (with camera off) as part of her placement.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher introduced herself, discussed the aims of the project and invited any questions prior to the recording commencing. The interviewer had no prior relationship to the parents. Interviews were video-recorded and lasted an average of 49.5 min (range 21–74 min). At the end of each interview, the researcher spent time reflecting on the interview and noting down parents' key ideas and perspectives. The MS Team autotranscription was edited by R.J.N and S.P for accuracy and to ensure the removal of all identifying information, for example locations and names. Parents were assigned an identifier. Participants received a £20 e-gift card. During the interview, one parent said that they were currently a teacher in a secondary school (our screening only asked about working in a primary school). In addition, despite our screening procedures, four parents said that they had previously worked in a school ($n = 3$) or early years settings ($n = 1$). These five interviews were carefully scrutinised to establish that the participants had been describing their views of adventurous play as parents, although it is accepted that their experience as school staff may have shaped their responses.

## Data analysis

NVivo for Mac was used for the analysis (QSR, 2020). These data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Anonymised transcripts are available on the Open Science Framework (see https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6U3JV). Through analysis and interpretation, this approach enables patterns of meaning to be developed while being informed by researchers' expertise and acknowledging their role in shaping the data. Braun and Clark's six-stage approach to reflective thematic analysis was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which consists of (1) data familiarisation, (2) data coding, (3) initial theme generation, (4) theme development and reviewing, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes and (6) writing up the manuscript.

Data familiarisation began during the transcription process. Following transcription, R.J.N re-listened to the recordings and re-read the transcripts, referring to contemporaneous summaries and notes. Following data familiarisation, A1 analysed each transcript using line-by-line coding. Whilst a primarily inductive approach was used, only data pertaining to adventurous play broadly or within the school context were coded for analysis. Given some questions asked specifically about children's adventurous play outside school, these data were not coded unless the parent referenced their perceptions about adventurous play broadly or referred to the school context. The coding was therefore shaped by the research questions, but R.J.N remained open-minded about the relevance of material and erred towards inclusivity when choosing whether to code data. R.J.N led data analysis and the development, refinement and finalisation of the codebook. Discussions between the primary coder (R.J.N) and a second coder (K.H) took place throughout the coding process to ensure transparency and credibility. This also provided an opportunity to challenge R.J.Ns assumptions about the data and explore different interpretations of the data. K.H was chosen for these discussions given their extensive expertise in qualitative methods and because they do not conduct research in the topic area. Once all

transcripts were coded, R.J.N organised the codes into initial clusters that reflected similarities in meaning. At this stage, an initial codebook was developed by R.J.N. Two coding meetings were held (R.J.N, K.H and H.F.D) to discuss and resolve uncertainties, and to refine, define and name themes, further enhancing transparency and credibility. R.J.N finalised the codebook after the final meeting.

## RESULTS

The analysis examined parent perspectives of adventurous play with a focus on play within the school context. Five themes were identified, four of which had subthemes (Figure 1). The five themes were as follows: *Needs, Schools as Gatekeepers, Risks and Benefits, Societal Constraints and Individual Differences*.

## Theme 1: Needs

Parents readily identified needs, including what they judged schools needed in order to offer adventurous play, their own needs and the needs of the play itself. These needs are captured through the subthemes of (1.1) the need for resources, (1.2) the need for support, (1.3) the need for knowledge and education and (1.4) the need for supervision.

### 1.1. Resources

Parents discussed that schools needed resources to support adventurous play. Some parents mentioned specific resources in relation to: staff (adequate numbers, experience and training); the development of procedures, particularly safeguarding; appropriate clothing for children; the need for space and guidance on playground design. Most parents discussed the need for schools to be provided with additional funding and that the lack of funding could act as a barrier to adventurous play opportunities in schools.

> I think the probably the biggest obstacle is probably the funding of stuff, 'cause ultimately whether that's through extra staff to supervise the riskier activities or whether it's bringing in specialists or specially trained people to do extra activities, that's all gonna come at a cost, isn't it? Which has to come from somewhere so yes, so I think cost is probably the biggest barrier.
>
> (Parent 8)

On the contrary, some parents held the view that adventurous play may not require a lot of financial resource:

> I love the fact that it's cheap as well, like it's not expensive, I guess the log thing would have been free probably and the tyres and most of the other stuff. It's not expensive to set up, is it?
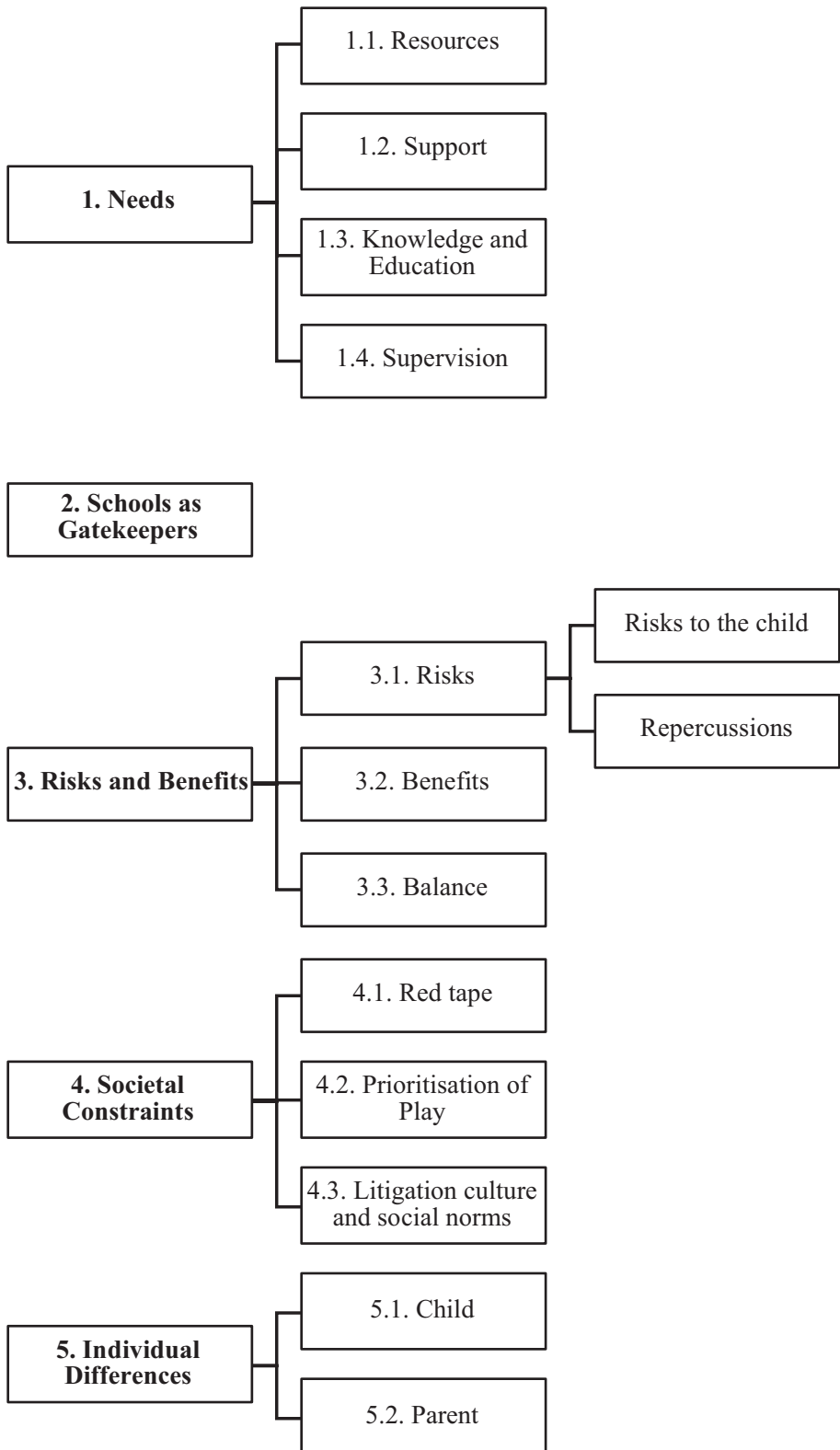>
> (Parent 4)

**FIGURE 1**   Thematic map illustrating themes and subthemes.

## 1.2. Support

Parents described the need for schools to have support for adventurous play. Specifically, they described the need for internal support, external support and validation and parental support. Parents described the need for positivity towards adventurous play from both school staff and parents. For school staff, parents spoke of the need for advocates within the school and a lack of support being a barrier to adventurous play:

> I think probably somebody in the school whose got a real passion for it and really truly believes the benefits of risky play or adventurous play'.
>
> (Parent 5)

> If that head teacher or that leader isn't an advocate for outdoor play, it doesn't disseminate down, and I know lots of early years practitioners that are very eager to do outdoor play, adventurous play, but they don't have the permission from higher up to do that, again it comes down to their priorities and how they want to run their school, but I think management does play a hand in that and their lifestyle or their needs and views of how that schools should be run or that particular year group.
>
> (Parent 9)

Parents also commented on the need for schools to have external support and validation.

> I think if we're gonna have any change on it, then it has to come from higher up of a kind of like people, Government and Ofsted and all the other people who have powers, that they have to say we want this or the Government or whatever it is need to say this is important we need it more and then maybe people think "Oh yeah, it's not just the school saying it it's important".
>
> (Parent 4)

> Or maybe get people from other schools or settings that have introduced risky play or adventurous play and kind of talk about the benefits. And then maybe reassure and say "actually there haven't been any accidents" or... "There's only been one minor accident" or something.
>
> (Parent 5)

It is noteworthy that when asked explicitly whether they would be supportive of adventurous play happening in schools, all parents responded that they would. Whilst this shows that parents were generally supportive of adventurous play, this was often under certain conditions and circumstances (see 1.4) and parents expressed reservations as the dialogue developed (see 3.1).

For some parents, their positive view was directly reflected in their school choice for their child:

> It's great, that was the reason why we chose it. We went and visited when the kids were outside on a break doing exactly that.
>
> (Parent 10)

They recognised, however, that parental support alone would not be sufficient and support from other organisations also required:

> I just think that they need more support.... [from] parental and governing bodies.
>
> (Parent 1)

Parents described trusting their child's school to make good decisions and suggested that schools needed to talk to parents:

> I think they need to speak to parents more then and get their thoughts on it rather than just thinking about, you know, wondering what parents might think, ask parents.
>
> (Parent 7)

Some parents identified specific examples of ways in which schools could be supported including through fundraising, community investment, helping with supervision and changing the school grounds.

Parents also described what they needed from schools. Primarily, they described needing reassurance that adventurous play is safe or within guidelines.

> At the end of the day if they can convince me that it's really, it's a safe activity, or at least give me all the information so I can make that, decision that its safe in my view and maybe even see the equipment would be a good thing.
>
> (Parent 3)

## 1.3. Knowledge and education

Some parents spoke of their lack of knowledge about their child's play in school, as well as expressing uncertainty about adventurous play, what might be possible and what this might look like at school. Indeed, parents considered there was a need to educate parents and school staff about the benefits of adventurous play,

> So, if the school could, does not show the reason why they will provide the adventurous play, I mean, maybe some scientific facts needs to be given for the parents, showing the benefits of the adventurous play for the kids then that will make more sense for the parents and then they will maybe support as some parents just wanna see some facts and information and by the facts and information they can be sure that that as a result this will benefit the kids.
>
> (Parent 6)

> I reckon staff, not just like support staff, like probably teaching staff need some training to know what is play and what, why do children do it...I guess they spend a lot of time in play time don't they? So if there's like benefits to be had from that, staff should know what they are and how to help children get the most from it.
>
> (Parent 4)

## 1.4. Supervision

During the interviews, parents often referred to the need for supervision as a condition of adventurous play in schools, and it was clear that parents considered this would make adventurous play safer for children. Some parents discussed that adventurous play was only acceptable if the play was being supervised and that more specific expertise was needed when supervising adventurous activities:

> I wouldn't want them going doing something where the teachers weren't qualified to be supervising them to do it...if the school says to me right, we're going to do X and you know, either our staff have been trained in it or we're bringing in an outside company ...I mean as I say as long as it was suitably qualified people doing it I would have no issue.
>
> (Parent 8)

There was a view that smaller groups were required for adventurous play and higher student–staff ratios for the supervision of more adventurous play:

> Just smaller groups with the right amount of staffing with them...You know, there's more control over it and keeping an eye on them.
>
> (Parent 7)

Further illustrating this, often parents highlighted concerns about supervision when shown the photographs of adventurous play:

> There seems to be a lot of climbing frames and things, and although they're not very high, there's no one watching them.
>
> (Parent 7)

By contrast, some parents perceived the lack of supervision in the photographs as positive.

> Actually the lack of adults in those pictures makes me more happy, because it's not something that's just being constantly monitored.
>
> (Parent 10)

## Theme 2: Schools as gatekeepers

Parents conceptualised schools as gatekeepers for children's opportunities for adventurous play, with schools having a deciding role regarding whether to offer adventurous play opportunities for children in their care:

> Yeah, I sometimes think that the staff at my children's schools are very strict about what my children can and can't do during break time.
>
> (Parent 4)

Parents described the need for regular adventurous play in school as a way to supplement opportunities outside of school and commented on its potential role as a leveller:

> It would be great for kids to have like on a regular day to day basis wouldn't it? Like not "we've got this time on the weekend we're gonna get it".
>
> (Parent 4)

> I think it would give the chance for all children to have it so then it's not solely based on parents being able to or parents wanting to give adventurous play.
>
> (Parent 5)

## Theme 3: Risks and benefits

Parents described perceived risks and benefits parents of adventurous play and also acknowledged the need to balance them.

### 3.1. Risks

Parents readily described the risks of adventurous play; these risks can be best understood in relation to risks to the child and repercussions.

### 3.1.1. Risks to the child

Parents often spoke of the general risk of injury as a result of adventurous play and how adventurous play equipment was considered higher risk:

> But then... I wouldn't personally want it if somebody let a child be too adventurous and then they ended up hurting my child or another child.
>
> (Parent 1)

> Oh 'cause it's a log, isn't it? They're climbing up a fallen over tree by the looks, whereas a climbing frame is built as, well a climbing frame, this isn't built for climbing.
>
> (Parent 7)

Another parent spoke of the potential negative impact on children who do not wish to play in this way.

> But still some kids are shy, and does not prefer this adventurous play, because of that these kids will affect, can be affected vulnerably you know, couldn't join the communication, couldn't join the teamwork, etc. That will affect the self-confidence for these kind of kid.
>
> (Parent 6)

A contrasting view related to the risks of not allowing children to have opportunities for adventurous play in school.

> They need to stop protecting.... I understand why they protect children for certain reasons, but in terms of play they need to stop protecting them so much because you're not letting a child explore their full potential.
>
> (Parent 1)

### 3.1.2. Repercussions

Parents described that there may be repercussions for schools who offered adventurous play or if injury occurred during adventurous play such as parent complaints, external investigation and litigation and risks to professional reputation.

> The parents can make it harder by refusing or saying we're not happy about this.
>
> (Parent 7)

> People worried about Ofsted, maybe what they would say perhaps.
>
> (Parent 4)

> I think they [schools] would just be worried about being sued or I think probably be caught up with health and safety bureaucracy.
>
> (Parent 5)

### 3.2. Benefits

Parents also readily discussed the benefits of adventurous play for children describing them as an important learning opportunity and a way: for children to have a sense of control; to build confidence, independence and leadership skills; to push themselves out of their comfort zone; to experience feelings of pride; to increase resilience; to and learn about themselves and the world around them.

> I reckon they're the kind of things that build character or resilience maybe, and independence. There are a whole host of other things, confidence and being able to manage yourself and leadership maybe, and all of those things.
>
> (Parent 4)

> It's all part of growing, growing up and building your confidence and just exploring things, and finding out about the world and what you can do, it's all part of growing their confidence, I think.
>
> (Parent 7)

Some parents also discussed how adventurous play may support children in their formal education.

> And I think probably does... impact on learning, you know 'cause I know schools have got obviously pressures to perform well academically, but I can't help thinking that if children are feeling happy and they've had lots of exercise and adventure and

might feel like they've taking risks with that, then maybe they can take risks with their maths or their writing or their friendships at school.

(Parent 5)

### 3.3. Balance

Parents recognised the need to balance the risks and benefits of adventurous play and recognised that not all risk could be removed.

> I absolutely understand the anxieties around that because adventurous play will lead to risk taking, which will lead eventually to an accident happening and I can understand from their point of view what that would, you know, the anxieties of were you not watching that child, you know, there's a balance of allowing that risk and see what happens, and then the child coming to harm, so I understand that but as a parent, as long as it's not, you know so long as they're not jumping off a six foot building, and you know, and it's a calculated risk that you've got to take.

(Parent 9)

> It's just about having risk assessed that it's safe enough; that you can't get rid of every bit of risk.

(Parent 5)

Some parents spoke about being accepting of accidents that might happen and perceiving them as a learning opportunity for children. For example,

> And if they hurt themselves, I know it's a bad consequence, but I do believe that if that happened then it's something they would learn from.

(Parent 1)

## Theme 4: Societal constraints

Parents identified that the society in which we live may constrain children's opportunities for adventurous play in schools via 'red tape', prioritisation and litigation.

### 4.1. 'Red tape'

During the interviews, parents mentioned 'red tape' as something that made it hard for schools to offer adventurous play. Red tape in this context referred to perceptions of unnecessary external barriers that may make it difficult for schools to feel they can offer adventurous play for children. Parents discussed that 'red tape' may stop schools from offering adventurous play even if they are in favour of giving children these opportunities and suggested that lessening it might make it easier for schools to offer these opportunities.

Some parents believed that current guidelines and protocols restrict children's play and that they discourage schools from offering it:

I'm sure schools will go oh we could do, oh it's too risky we can't, you know we can't do that in case somebody falls and or does this and that and the other and yeah, I think to a degree it's a shame, I mean we used to you know climb trees and all sorts of stuff and you know if you if you fell out of them you learned not to do it again, but yeah, there they'd be a risk assessment and a bit of paperwork to stop you doing that.

(Parent 8)

I think schools would be put off by risk assessments and stuff like that.

(Parent 2)

## 4.2. Prioritisation of play

Parents often discussed how play was not a priority for schools and that formal education, meeting targets and assessments were the priority. Furthermore, parents discussed that even if schools wanted to provide adventurous play opportunities, external pressures may inhibit this as play was viewed as not a priority for the Government.

It's again it's "we'd love to" and I know many headteachers, deputy heads, leaders that have said you know "we'd love to do that but we've got these you know SATS coming up" or "we've got these tests coming up and we haven't you know, forget national average, we haven't got regional average" and all the stress that the teachers are under to get you know to get your core subjects up to some form of standard it's no wonder and no surprise that the adventurous play and the outdoor play gets over-looked 'cause that's not the priority really for the Government, is it?

(Parent 9)

## 4.3. Litigation culture and social norms

Parents discussed cultural and social norms of the society referring to the 'litigation culture' and 'blame culture' making it harder for schools to offer adventurous play opportunities.

Generally today there seems to be more rules in that you gotta be a lot more care-ful and people are a lot more...I don't know, there's always risk of being sued for something.

(Parent 3)

# Theme 5: Individual differences

Parents recognised that both parents and children differ in their attitudes, preference and sup-port of adventurous play.

## 5.1. Child

Parents discussed how children are different in their likes and dislikes of adventurous play:

> Also, obviously some children, you know children are different so some barriers might be that the children are too scared of everything.
>
> (Parent 2)

## 5.2. Parent

Parents frequently described that they recognise parents differ from one another in how they view adventurous play, judge risk and how they differ in what they would allow their child to do. For example, parents recognised there is often polarisation in risk perception, which may present a challenge for schools:

> You could have parents that are like "no that's not risky jumping off of that" but then another parent "oh no that's too high for children".
>
> (Parent 2)

Many parents compared their own views and actions as contrasting with those of other parents. In doing so, they typically described themselves as holding positive or liberal views regarding adventurous play but described other parents as holding more negative and conservative views:

> I mean I would say all my friends would like their kids to do the adventurous things but I'm sure there's parents out there that, a minority at least that wouldn't
>
> (Parent 3)

> I'm definitely right at the top end in my group of mums in terms of what I would let my children do independently.
>
> (Parent 4)

## DISCUSSION

This study examined parents' perceptions of adventurous play within a school context and their views on what might help or hinder schools in offering adventurous play. Reflective thematic analysis of parent responses during one-to-one interviews led to the development of five themes: *Needs*, *Schools as Gatekeepers*, *Risks and Benefits*, *Societal Constraints* and *Individual Differences*. Below, we draw upon the key findings to discuss whether parents are supportive of adventurous play in schools, and what they identify as factors that may help or hinder schools in offering adventurous play opportunities for children.

To our knowledge, this is the first empirical research to capture the voice of parents in relation to adventurous play in schools. This is important because previous work has highlighted that schools may view parents as a barrier to providing adventurous play opportunities at school (Bundy et al., 2009; Nesbit et al., 2021). A central finding from our research is that all the parents we interviewed indicated they would be supportive of their child's school

offering adventurous play. Parents were able to recognise the benefits of adventurous play for their child and described how they seek a balance between risk and safety so that children can benefit from the freedom and opportunity to explore risks. Notably, parents in our study recognised schools as gatekeepers to children's opportunities for adventurous play, in particular they were recognised as being able to provide children with opportunities they might otherwise not have.

Although this initially seems to conflict with previous findings regarding parents as barriers, some parents also described that adventurous play was only acceptable if certain conditions were met. Concerns expressed by parents were often in relation to the risk of child injury and the acceptable conditions were often ways of increasing children's safety and decreasing parent anxiety. For example, some parents discussed how, for them, adventurous play was only acceptable under supervision. For other parents, adventurous play required that supervisors have expertise or training, and for some, adventurous play was described as requiring higher pupil–staff ratios and smaller groups of pupils. Our findings are consistent with other work with British parents, which found that lack of adequate or direct supervision was considered by parents to be a barrier to children's engagement in adventurous play (Oliver et al., 2022). It seems likely therefore that whilst parents might have relatively positive attitudes to adventurous play, if they perceive certain conditions have not been met then their support might be lessened. In the light of this, schools would benefit from working with parents to understand their concerns and the conditions they feel important in order to sensitively overcome potential barriers.

Importantly, related to this, our findings highlight that parents valued opportunities for open dialogue with schools about adventurous play. Furthermore, schools may in fact benefit from working with parents, with some parents describing how they, other parents and the community could provide support for schools, including through fundraising and volunteering. This suggests that, with the right approach to communication and working together, rather than being a barrier, as outlined in previous research (Nesbit et al., 2021), parents can, in fact, facilitate adventurous play in schools. Parents described and appreciated that myriad barriers exist for schools that might hinder adventurous play opportunities and they were often sympathetic to the challenges that schools face. In particular, parents highlighted 'red tape', external pressures and lack of resources as key factors. Societal constraints were described as affecting schools' perceptions of whether adventurous play is feasible. Parents expressed that guidelines, protocols and the litigation culture may restrict children's play and discourage schools from offering it. For example, parents readily expressed that a major concern for schools would be repercussions in the event of a child injury and potential for litigation and damaged reputation. These concerns mirror those reported by school staff themselves (Nesbit et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2016; Wright, 2016), which suggests that parents may be sympathetic and supportive if engaged in dialogue by schools.

Parents discussed that play and adventurous play were not a priority for schools, and they cited the cause of this as being external pressures to meet educational targets. Indeed, school break times are not currently evaluated within the remit of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted; Ofsted a regulatory body and department of the UK Government responsible for inspecting educational institutions that care for children and young people) in the UK and they are only referred to in the handbook for evaluators in relation to an opportunity to observe behaviour (Ofsted, 2019). It was clear from parents that having policy and Government support for adventurous play, including removal of 'red tape' and clear guidance on liability would remove many central barriers that schools face.

Our findings highlight parents' views that a lack of resources is a core barrier for schools in being able to offer adventurous play. The need for investment and funding to support this type of play was referenced by all parents. This aligns with findings from school staff themselves, who cite lack of funding as a barrier for offering adventurous play (Farmer, Fitzgerald, et al., 2017) and highlights the need for investment in and support for schools to ensure that all children are able to benefit from outdoor adventurous play.

In additional to recognising a range of barriers, parents also described positive actions that could support adventurous play in schools. For example, parents cited that for many parents including, in some circumstances, themselves, there was a lack of education and knowledge surrounding adventurous play. Indeed, parents believed that addressing this need would be a means of gaining parental support and ensuring that school staff value and feel confident in providing adventurous play opportunities for children. In addition, some parents described their need for reassurance that protocols and guidelines are being followed during adventurous play. As such, parents believed that both educators and parents need to be able to access education and training, including around the benefits of adventurous play, what adventurous play might look like in schools, the protocols, and guidelines in place to ensure their child's safety, and for staff how to supervise this type of play.

## Limitations

This study used purposive sampling, which enabled us to capture a range of perceptions. Parents in Britain were recruited across geographical regions and ethnic groups and were selected to capture diversity in parent sex, age, number of children and age of children. Our final sample was relatively diverse, but we acknowledge that the views of very young parents and parents with a large number of children may not have been captured. Furthermore, as highlighted earlier, four parents who took part in this study expressed within the interview that they had previously worked in a primary school setting, whilst we scrutinised these interviews to ensure it reflected their view as a parent and not staff, it is likely that these parents' views may have been shaped by their previous work experience. Furthermore, whilst we ensured our recruitment materials did not contain any information about the focus on adventurous play specifically to avoid attracting parents who were particularly supportive of adventurous play, we recognise that the recruitment methods may have led to being more accessible for individual who are likely to have a greater interest in children's play more broadly. Given we did not purposively sample on the basis of parents' attitude to adventurous play (e.g. responses on a questionnaire to assess perceptions and tolerance of risk in children's play), it remains possible that the whole spectrum of views that exist on this topic were not captured. Similarly, given this research focussed on the views of parents living in Britain, it is likely that the findings may not hold across cultures. Indeed, variability in adults' views towards adventurous play is believed to reflect cross-cultural differences in the litigious environments and regulatory requirements, as well as the quality of the outdoor environment (Little et al., 2012).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the aims of this research were to capture the parent voice in relation to children's adventurous play in schools. Our findings point to myriad factors that parents feel may help or hinder

schools in offering adventurous play opportunities for children. Parents were generally supportive of and valued this type of play often owning positive views and more likely to assign negative views to other parents. Despite this, parents described certain conditions that would be required for them to be comfortable supporting adventurous play in schools. Our findings highlight the need for schools and parents to work together and communicate effectively but also that without policy and Government support for play, the potential for adventurous play in schools may not be realised.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
HD is funded by a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship which also funds RJN's salary. Play England, Play Wales, PlayBoardNI, HAGS and the Association of Play Industries are partners on this fellowship. Outdoor Play and Learning and Learning through Landscapes are collaborating organisations. No direct funding is received from any of these organisations. All other authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study at openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6U3JV.

## ETHICS STATEMENT
The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of University of Reading School of Psychology and Clinical Language Science (Protocol code 2020-020-HD).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.