Playing safe: Factors that enable, or challenge teachers to support safe risk-taking for young children as they transition into, or within an early childhood setting

Vikki Hanrahan | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

Karyn Aspden | *Institute of Education at Massey University*

Tara McLaughlin | *Institute of Education at Massey University*

As children transition into, or within an early childhood centre they engage in a multitude of new interactions with the people, places and things in the setting. Teacher support for navigating these new environments and the challenges and opportunities within them must be considered. The outdoor environment of an early childhood education setting is a prime opportunity for safe risk-taking for young children, as they climb, run, build, jump and explore. Such risk-taking supports a child to develop an understanding of their body, to manage challenges, understand limits, foster problem-solving and enhance resilience. This article presents the findings from a study that used an online questionnaire to explore early childhood teachers' beliefs, practices and experiences in relation to safe risk-taking in the outdoor environment, in particular the factors that support or inhibit teachers' decision-making. Implications for teachers in supporting children to positively navigate safe risk-taking and fostering their learning in these moments, with a focus on times of transition are highlighted.

Introduction

Teachers play a key role in shaping the way in which children engage in acts of risk-taking in early childhood education (ECE) settings, through the environments provided. Safe risk-taking offers a positive learning experience that supports children to solve problems, develop an understanding of limits and boundaries, foster resilience and enhance learning (Sandseter, 2012). Yet, a range of factors serves to either enable or inhibit a teacher's ability to support children to take safe risks and access these benefits. Whilst the ECE profession is regulated to foster safety and prevent harm where possible, teachers' individual views of risk can impact on the opportunities provided for children to engage in safe risk-taking (Van Rooijen & Newstead, 2017). In addition, when children are new in a setting or during a period of transition, opportunities for risk-taking require special consideration as children learn about the new environment, teachers get to know the child and whānau/family, and shared understanding and expectations are established (Traum & Moran, 2016).

Risk-taking, in the broadest sense, is defined as "the act or fact of doing something that involves danger or risk in order to achieve a goal" (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Elements of danger or excitement are also evident in many definitions, for example Brussoni et al. (2015) state that "risky play is defined...as thrilling and exciting play that can include the possibility of physical injury" (p. 6425). Nicol (2013) further suggests that an "acceptable risk is where a child learns and develops from taking a risk, but not getting hurt in any way, i.e. physically, mentally or emotionally" (p. 66). Risk-taking has also been defined as "attempting something never done before; feeling on the borderline of 'out of control' often because of height or speed, and overcoming fear" (Stephenson, 2003, p. 36).

Little, Sandseter and Wyver (2012) note that definitions of risk tend to be restricted to viewing risk in a negative or dangerous light, hence leading to risk-averse practices. Risk can conjure feelings of fear, injury, or harm to children, as well as concern as to potential repercussions for families, other stakeholders and accountability organisations (for

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example, government departments). Fear of harm can cause teachers to become risk averse and potentially overprotect children, especially toddlers and younger children, which may result in children who are less prepared to cope with challenge and overly cautious towards taking risks (Madge & Barker, 2007). Yet the concept of risk and how it is understood in relation to play and early childhood is subjective (Little, Sandseter, & Wyver, 2012), and has shifted across time and context. For example, the recent update of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (*Te Whāriki*) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017a) positions risk-taking more clearly within the curriculum than the original 1996 version, and affirms the role of teachers in supporting children's risk-taking endeavours. The term safe risk-taking has been adopted, to encompass the positive potential of activities that challenge children's capacity, whilst in the context of risk minimisation and adult support.

There is growing support for safe risk-taking as a means of supporting learning and resilience (Braithwaite, 2014). Brussoni et al. (2015) believe that the term risk is evolving from being viewed negatively as a term associated with danger, to a more optimistic view of risk being defined in relation to positive opportunities for learning. This view proposes that risk can be perceived as an activity or experience in which a child can identify a challenge and weigh up their approach to engaging with this experience. Engaging in safe risk-taking in the outdoors provides opportunities for children to learn how to manage risk, develop an understanding of safety, and come to understand their own limits (Gill, 2007; Little, & Wyver, 2008).

In the context of early childhood education in New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a) states that children should:

> …have opportunities to make choices, take risks, and engage in a wide range of play, both inside and outside, with the support of kaiako, and that the environment should be "challenging but not hazardous… [and] while alert to possible hazards, kaiako support healthy risk-taking play with heights, speed, tests of strength and the use of real tools. (p. 28)

The curriculum outlines specific outcomes for tamariki related to the value of safe risk-taking and provides kaiako with guidance related to their role in minimising harm and ensuring age appropriate opportunities for children to engage in challenging outdoor play. In addition to the curriculum, there is also a regulatory and legislative framework in place that provides the parameters for safe risk-taking in ECE settings. The *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008* (MoE, 2008a) and the *Licensing Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Services 2008* (MoE, 2008b), together with *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a), outline a range of health and safety standards for ECE services. In particular, Health and Safety Standards 12-18 have relevance to protecting the safety of children (MoE, 2008b) through careful identification, attention to, and reporting of potential hazards on a daily basis.

In addition to education policy and practice, the *Health and Safety at Work Act 2015*, came into effect from April 2016 (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2016a) and heightened the liability to individuals and organisations for insufficient attention to potential hazards. A school or early childhood service is required to identify any risks in the environment and ensure that adequate practices are established to manage these risks. Managers of schools or early childhood services can now face personal prosecution should an injury occur (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2016b). The new Act caused some confusion around the responsibilities of education settings and the implications should the provision of health and safety measures be found to be insufficient, and led to anecdotal reports of schools making decisions to limit risk-taking activities. For example, a Wairarapa primary school banned children from climbing trees due to the ambiguous nature of how much justification is required to clear a school or individual of liability (Jackman & Fallon, 2016). The tension arising from such regulatory restraints is the assumption that all risk can be managed to meet accountability requirements, and as a result the environment can become too safe and not stimulating enough to support children's learning and development (Sandseter, 2010).

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Stephenson (2003, 1999) in her observation-based studies of children aged 0-5 years in a parent cooperative run centre, noted that the regulations that govern outdoor playgrounds influenced the removal of potential hazards from the outdoor area as a means to ensure children's safety. Furthermore, Stephenson(2003, 1999) argues that the threat of potential injury from physical hazard can be so serious that it can dominate decisions with regards to outdoor environment provisions. This tension can impede teachers' drive to provide enticing and physically stimulating outdoor environments that are conducive to risk-taking. Little (2017), in a study of Australian early childhood education and care services, found that regulatory requirements, in particular those relating to heights and space, were factors that impacted on teachers' choices to provide children with opportunities to engage in challenging play and take safe risks.

Within early childhood settings, if children are not provided with sufficient opportunities to take risks in the outdoor environment, boredom or lack of challenge can lead them to seek out their own risk-taking experiences (Greenfield, 2004; Stephenson, 2003), perhaps through adapting equipment in the outdoor environment or using equipment in an unsafe manner. If children are not engaged in risk-taking in early childhood and do not learn how to self-assess and manage risk, then they may potentially lack these skills as they move into adulthood (Gill, 2007). A practitioner's role can therefore be fraught with tension as teachers balance the benefits and risks associated with safe risk-taking, and ensuring the provision of sufficient challenges within regulatory requirements (Gill, 2007; Greenfield, 2004; Sandseter, 2007).

This article considers the findings of the risk-taking study in light of potential implications for transition both into, and within early childhood settings. The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a) reminds us that transitions are critical times for children as well as their whānau/family, which require sensitive and attuned teaching practices to support the process. As children transition, they must navigate a new environment that presents opportunities and challenges, while learning the established culture and expectations. Conversations with whānau/family are imperative to ensure that teachers consider children's current capabilities and funds of knowledge, and come to understand the aspirations and expectations of parents and whānau/family (MoE, 2017a). Engaging in dialogue with whānau/family offers the opportunity to ascertain their views on risk-taking in relation to their child, and to allay potential fears and uncertainties. During this dialogue, teachers can also take the opportunity to discuss the setting's approach to safe risk-taking and its consistency with *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a), the benefits of risk-taking activities, and the way in which these experiences will be managed as their child transitions into the environment and becomes familiar with their new surroundings.

Research design and methodology

This article draws on results from a larger post-graduate research study (Hanrahan, 2018) which sought to examine early childhood teachers' and centre managers' perspectives and practices related to children's risk-taking in the outdoor environment. The study was guided by the overarching question: *What factors influence New Zealand early childhood teachers' and centre management perspectives and practices related to children's risk-taking in the outdoor environment*? The topic was explored in relation to barriers, enablers and the impact of regulation and policy. Although the original study took a dual focus on teacher and leader perspectives, for the purposes of this article, findings from the teacher data are presented.

A qualitative research approach guided the design of the study, in order to investigate participants' personal experiences and perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) related to risk-taking in the outdoor early childhood environment. To gather a broad range of teacher responses, an online questionnaire of predominantly open-ended questions was developed and distributed via Survey Monkey to all early childhood services in the Canterbury/Ōtautahi region. This region was selected to support manageability of the study consistent with post-graduate student research. Questions targeted teachers' beliefs about risk-taking, examples of risk-taking evident in their teaching environments,

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enablers and barriers to risk-taking, the impact of media, teaching practices and strategies, and notions of protection and resilience. Photo-elicitation (Schwartz, 1989) was also embedded as a data gathering tool within the questionnaire (see Figure 1). Participants were asked what opportunities they saw depicted in the image for children to engage in safe risk-taking and, what concerns teachers might have about the environment depicted in the image in relation to safe risk-taking. Photo-elicitation paired with open-ended questions in the context of the online questionnaire enabled the collection of rich data across a range of teachers, to gain a deep understanding of how individuals interpret children's risk-taking (Mutch, 2013).

Figure 1: Photograph used in questionnaire to elicit risk-taking beliefs

(Terreni & Pairman, n.d.)

Within the Canterbury/Ōtautahi region, 335 early childhood centres were emailed an invitation to participate in the study, which included a clear statement related to the ethical considerations of the study and the expectations and rights of participants. The questionnaire was open to participants from the start of April until the beginning of May 2017. A total of 40 early childhood teachers submitted a completed questionnaire. Responding teachers were all female, working predominantly in private or community based education and care settings (92%) with the majority holding a bachelor degree in ECE (49%) followed by a undergraduate diploma (30%), graduate diploma (13%) or primary/secondary teaching qualification (8%).

The key ethical issues requiring consideration in the study related to gaining access to participants for the online questionnaire, informed consent and preserving the anonymity of participants. The Early Childhood Services Directory, a publicly available web-based dataset was utilised to access centre emails within the defined region. Potential participants received full disclosure of the nature of the study and participant rights in the information sheet provided and were informed that voluntary responses to survey questions implied consent to participate. The nature of the questionnaire was such that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was protected, with no identifying features collected, and the participants' identities unknown to the researcher.

An iterative approach to data analysis was adopted to look for patterns to emerge from preliminary coding. The text from open-ended questions was reviewed on multiple occasions to determine emerging categories, which were then further refined into broad themes (Mutch, 2013). These were considered in terms of shared understandings, as well

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as divergent perspectives. The interpretation of findings was also informed by the researcher's own experiences as an ECE teacher, and teacher educator.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the questionnaire highlighted that there were a range of factors that served to either inhibit or enable teachers in promoting safe risk-taking for young children in the outdoor environment of early childhood settings. Among the potentially inhibiting factors teachers reported were: concerns about parents' perceptions, regulatory requirements, and recent significant harm events reported in the media. In contrast, teachers' deep knowledge of children and effective team work were viewed as enablers in facilitating safe risk-taking. Each of these factors are considered in the following discussion, drawing together the findings of the questionnaire with the extant literature, before highlighting the significance of the findings in the context of transition both into, and within, early childhood settings.

Concerns about parents' perceptions

Teachers identified that they restricted safe risk-taking opportunities because they felt concerned about parents' beliefs about children's risk-taking and potential parent responses. One teacher commented that she would potentially inhibit children's opportunities for risk-taking because of "parent concerns around child safety [and the] differing opinions on what they would want their child to be doing" (participant 21). Another teacher commented that she would inhibit children's risk-taking opportunities because of "parent feedback" (participant 20). Teachers noted that what some felt were optimum opportunities for engagement in safe risk-taking in the outdoors, were viewed by some parents as unsafe and potentially hazardous. Participants' responses suggested teachers choose to align their practice with parents' wishes, potentially curtailing the learning experience for the children. This finding was similarly found in work such as Little (2015), Little and Wyver (2008), and Little, Wyver and Gibson (2011), who found that parents' attitudes can cause a tension between the provision of risk-taking opportunities and the need to protect children. Notably, *the Growing up in New Zealand* study reported that approximately 65% of mothers indicated that they would let their child take a risk often or very often if there is no major threat to the child's safety (Morton et al., 2014), suggesting understandings of safety are paramount.

Regulatory requirements

The *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008*, and other regulatory requirements were identified by participants as a factor that can potentially either inhibit or enable teachers' abilities to support safe risk-taking in the outdoors. Some teachers felt that the stringent nature of the *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008*, inhibited their ability to foster safe risk-taking in the outdoors, as specifying a range of constraining factors, such as the height of equipment and the spacing requirements between equipment, contributed to predefined and less challenging environments. Participants believed that such parameters limited children's ability to navigate and self-manage risk. Similarly, Bown and Sumsion (2007) reported that teachers found early childhood regulations hindered their teaching practice and impacted on their professional practice, ultimately diminishing their passion for teaching. Furthermore, Little (2017) found that "opportunities for risk-taking in play are likely to be restricted when teachers defer to the advice provided by regulatory authority assessors" (p. 10). This is due to regulatory requirements being seen as overly prescriptive and protective, limiting risk-taking to low level risk-taking. As one participant noted: "the regulations inhibit as children lose the ability to self-assess risk as environments have already defined parameters." (p. 10). Moreover, as Maynard and Waters (2007) found, teachers worry about children being hurt and the possibility of being held accountable and even facing legal action.

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In contrast, several early childhood teachers in this study felt that the ECE regulations and accountability served to encourage them to ensure children were kept safe in the outdoors while engaging in safe risk-taking opportunities. For example, one respondent commented:

> When the Ministry visited our centre they got me to sign an attestation form to say that the centre provides safe structures and equipment for the children to use as I think they were surprised [by] the risks that we offered to the children. (participant 27)

This sense of caution was affirmed by a participant who stated that "the rules and accountability are quite stringent. But there is a lot to be said for common sense, correct ratios and adequate supervision" (participant 32).

Van Rooijen and Newstead (2017) explored ways to develop practitioners' capabilities to assess risk. They found that "in responding authentically to children's needs, professionals are often required to take risks themselves, frequently finding themselves in situations where they must make choices without being able to predict or even control the results of their interactions" (p. 954). In the present study, it was interesting to find that while teachers were aware of the *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008*, they acknowledged potentially pushing these boundaries to benefit children's learning. Teachers appear to use their pedagogical knowledge and personal understanding of the regulations to benefit the children's ability to engage safely in acts of risk-taking. Participants were aware that their decision-making occurred in a context of professional accountability, which reinforced the need to be able to articulate the reasons why their actions were important in the development of young children's ability to engage in, and manage risk.

Influence of media reporting on significant incidents in the outdoors

With the growth of social media and online platforms, media reports about incidents of harm in ECE settings are readily accessible and quickly shared. The impact of the media surrounding children's play in the outdoors has been documented in regards to influencing adults' fears for children's safety (Gill, 2007; Little, 2015). The media is quick to report on incidents of harm occurring in the outdoor environments of ECE settings and these reports can worry parents. One participant commented on "negativity from parents, often due to media" (participant 33) and reported that such parental views had impacted negatively on her decisions to provide risk-taking opportunities. Yet, 82% of participants stated that the recent harm events reported in the media had not had any impact on their teaching practice. However, when given the opportunity to comment further, a number of these same participants indicated that reporting from the media had made them more aware of the potential of risk and raised their awareness around risk assessment and children's safety. One participant noted that "a tree falling down in the preschool in the North Island is not something anyone could foresee but I have checked the trees in our outside environment" (participant 2). Findings suggest that while such incidents may serve to heighten awareness of possible risk; for example, "yes, I am very aware of ropes in the environment" (participant 4), teachers maintain a commitment to ensuring children are exposed to safe risk-taking opportunities.

Teachers' knowledge of children

Teachers emphasised the importance of knowing children and their families as key in promoting safe risk-taking in the outdoors. Participants commented that they more readily support children to engage in risk-taking if they know the children well and have a sound awareness of their current capabilities. Conversely, teachers also commented that they would inhibit children from taking a risk in the outdoors if they did not have a sound knowledge of the child and their whānau/family, and could not therefore evaluate the child's abilities and limits. Teachers were aware of the need for time to observe children at play and build their awareness of individual children's capabilities to be able to support

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them further with safe risk-taking. Sandseter (2012) supports the view "that observation of the children's play was a key to providing appropriate support for children's risk-taking" (p. 306).

Team work

Participants indicated that effective teamwork was a key component in supporting them to provide opportunities for children to engage in safe risk-taking in the outdoors: "we work so well as a team, there are no limits to what we can provide for children in terms of well managed risk-taking" (Hanrahan, 2018, p. 50). Teachers affirmed that having a supportive team, shared beliefs and values, and working collaboratively, ensures that there are fewer limits to well managed and safe risk-taking. It is therefore essential for teams to negotiate shared expectations, for example one teacher noted they had been overprotective of children with regard to risk because of "different opinions within the team, [and] needing to accommodate this" (Hanrahan, 2018, p. 51). In illustration, teachers commented that they would swap supervision of particular activities if a teacher initially assigned to this learning experience felt out of their comfort zone, affirming the importance of staff working together and knowing each other's strengths and areas of discomfort. The importance of collaborative practice with regard to outdoor play is highlighted by Bento and Dias (2017) who note that effective collaboration among professionals is essential in promoting quality outdoor learning experiences.

Implications for transition

The process of transition, whether into or within an early childhood setting is a time of change and uncertainty for everyone involved. According to the Ministry of Education (2017b) "Early childhood teachers are important players in these transitions as they support children and their families or whānau/family to navigate their pathway to a new place" (p. 1). As children navigate their transition into a new environment, they must come to know the physical space, the routines and rituals, limits, boundaries and expectations. They must also engage in new relationships with the people, places and things of the settings. A great deal of new learning must take place (Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012), which is particularly significant in relation to safe risk-taking in a new, and often more physically challenging environment. Likewise, parents and whānau/family will potentially be experiencing some uncertainty and apprehension about their young child in the space, which may have more challenging physical options and play experiences than the child experiences at home, or in an infant/toddler space (Merrill, 2010). Therefore it is critical that teachers ensure they take time to engage in dialogue with whānau/family in regards to risk-taking as children transition into the new environment. Through conversations with whānau/family, teachers can find out information about a child's current capabilities and limits, as well as coming to understand parents' feelings and expectations about safe risk-taking opportunities (Merry, 2015).

Given the importance that teachers ascribe to having a deep knowledge of individual children and their capacity in shaping decision-making, transition times take on even more significance. Teachers need time to observe tamariki in order to gather an understanding of their current capabilities so they can actively promote knowledge of safe limits and boundaries, as well as support further engagement in risk-taking experiences. Teachers can develop their understanding of children through "conduct[ing] 'orientation' visits... so that children are familiar with the room, its equipment and layout before they make the move..." and teachers can "encourage them to use new or more challenging equipment during orientation visits" (National Quality Standard: Professional Learning Program, 2013, p. 4).

As part of the 'coming to know' process, teachers can and should talk with newly transitioning children about the expectations for safe risk-taking in the outdoor environment, as well as fostering peer teaching moments in which peers communicate information about limits, boundaries and expectations. Such conversations should affirm what

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children can do in the space, while presenting clear guidelines as to boundaries. For example, highlighting markers which show how far a child may climb a tree. Intentional teachers will also talk about characteristics of safe risk-taking in the context of play, and highlight episodes of safe risk-taking to make good decisions visible and support children who may be risk averse to take some forward steps. They will also consider the need for any support or adaptations that a transitioning child may need to support their engagement in outdoor play.

As part of conversations with families entering the setting, teachers should ask parents about their views of risk-taking and seek to understand what past opportunities for safe risk-taking in outdoor settings children have experienced. Teachers should be able to articulate the centre position on safe risk-taking and describe benefits for children's learning. If parents are concerned about media reporting of recent harm incidences or have other concerns about safe risk-taking, teachers should allay fears through discussion of how safe risk-taking is managed within the centre and work toward shared understandings for expectations for the child. As Bento and Dias (2017) noted "if professionals explain to the parents why it is important to play outside and make an effort to get them involved and satisfied, possible negative reactions related to fears about children getting sick, dirty or injured will be progressively solved" (p. 159). This message highlights the importance of making time and space for parents and whānau/family to be alongside their child in the centre during transition times, fostering a sense of belonging and familiarisation with the setting (McLaughlin, Aspden & McLachlan, 2015). The early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017a) affirms that it is "important that whānau/family feel welcome and able to participate in the day-to-day curriculum and in curriculum decision making" (p. 31) which allows for mutual consideration of safe risk-taking opportunities.

A further consideration when supporting children transitioning into a new environment is to ensure that teachers maintain a sound understanding of the *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008.* Teaching teams should regularly revisit the mandated regulatory requirements to support a shared understanding of application within their own early childhood setting. Having a sound understanding of the regulations can support the team to provide an environment where hazards that may result in serious injury or death are removed, but the environment is still established in such a way as to provide appropriate challenges and opportunities for children to engage in safe risk-taking. Seeing the environment through the lens of a newly transitioning child and whānau/family can remind teachers not to become complacent, but to be intentional and considered in the way safe risk-taking is navigated within the setting.

Limitations of the study

The participants selected for this research study were from Ōtautahi/Christchurch, in the South Island of New Zealand, and as such this research study may not be indicative of the wider teaching population. Because the questionnaire invitation went to just one primary contact in an ECE setting, it was reliant on this person sharing the invitation to participate with teachers in the centre, and thus access to some potential participants may have been limited. Furthermore the small response size (40 participants) from the 335 invited settings impacts on the validity of generalisation to a larger target audience. An accurate response rate is not able to be determined, as the number of teachers employed in each setting is not publicly available information. Multiple efforts were made to foster participation, and elicit responses, including ease of completion and reminder notifications, however, the number of responses is likely to reflect survey fatigue, and the nature of the study as a post graduate research project. Moreover, it is possible that those who chose to participate were interested in risk-taking as a topic, and thus results may be influenced by this orientation. Nonetheless, the findings do reveal some insight as to teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to supporting safe risk-taking that may be of benefit to the wider ECE teaching sector.

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Conclusion

Transition is a significant time for children, teachers and whānau/family, in establishing new relationships and becoming part of a new environment, including people, places and things. There are many considerations in ensuring that the transition is positive and supportive, including navigating the topic of safe risk-taking. The purpose of this article was to explore the factors that influence New Zealand early childhood teachers' practices related to children's risk-taking in the outdoor environment, and to consider potential implications for children transitioning either into, or within an early childhood setting. The study offers new insights as to the reported barriers and enablers to supporting children's risk-taking opportunities in the outdoor environment of an early childhood setting, as well as the potential impact of regulatory and policy compliance on teachers' perspectives and practices. Teachers play a vital role in supporting both tamariki and whānau/family as children transition from one space within a setting to another, or into an early childhood setting for the first time. The child's entry to a new environment creates emerging opportunities to engage in safe risk-taking which can be supported by sound understanding of the regulations; open communication with children, colleagues and whānau/family; and time for teachers to observe children's current capabilities in order to provide appropriate, targeted support.

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