



## OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY  
Douglas F. Kauffman,  
Consultant, Boston, MA, United States

\*CORRESPONDENCE  
Maleka Donaldson  
✉ mdonaldson@smith.edu

RECEIVED 11 February 2025  
ACCEPTED 17 February 2025  
PUBLISHED 04 March 2025

CITATION  
Donaldson M and Solis SL (2025) Editorial: The  
role of risk-taking and mistakes in early  
childhood learning and teaching.  
*Front. Educ.* 10:1575027.  
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1575027

COPYRIGHT  
© 2025 Donaldson and Solis. This is an  
open-access article distributed under the  
terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution  
License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or  
reproduction in other forums is permitted,  
provided the original author(s) and the  
copyright owner(s) are credited and that the  
original publication in this journal is cited, in  
accordance with accepted academic practice.  
No use, distribution or reproduction is  
permitted which does not comply with these  
terms.

# Editorial: The role of risk-taking and mistakes in early childhood learning and teaching

Maleka Donaldson<sup>1\*</sup> and S. Lynneth Solis<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education and Child Study, Smith College, Northampton, MA, United States, <sup>2</sup>WestEd, San Francisco, CA, United States

## KEYWORDS

risk-taking, mistakes, teaching, learning, early childhood

## Editorial on the Research Topic

[The role of risk-taking and mistakes in early childhood learning and teaching](#)

## Introduction

Children are prompted to learn and engage with new experiences, tasks, and content on a daily basis. When facing novel challenges during their work and play, children need opportunities to take risks and grow from the mistakes they make. Risk-taking, autonomy, and corrective feedback about mistakes are pivotal aspects of the learning process. However, there is still much to learn about human interactions during these instances, whether they involve teachers, parents, or other trusted adults who are working with young children. Our goal in this Research Topic was to offer a collection of studies that help deepen our understanding of children's risk-taking and learning from mistakes.

We have identified three cross-cutting themes that serve to enhance our understanding of this Research Topic: (1) supporting children's autonomy is essential to learning and play; (2) a careful look at real-world encounters between children and adults provides insights into their moment-by-moment reactions; and (3) the reactions that children and adults have to mistakes and risk-taking are situational, anchored in interpersonal contexts and activity-specific goals.

## Supporting children's autonomy in learning and play

Across these inquiries, time and again we recognized the importance of empowering young children to take risks. We also observed the extent to which the adults in their lives are most empowered to foster these dispositions. [Feng and Wang](#) revealed that key aspects of the approach to learning include competence, motivation, creativity, and persistence. These aspects require children's agency to take risks and make mistakes, as well as adults' comfort with children's autonomy in learning and play. In [Stamatis et al.](#), the parents' appetite for or tolerance of risk shaped the role they assumed with their child during play. While families supported and made space for children to take small risks, the researchers observed a range of approaches across caregivers and situations. In [Donaldson](#), children were inevitably afforded differing levels of autonomy depending on how much support the teacher offered. In essence, the teacher curated the level of autonomy extended to different children based on perceptions of their needs and temperament. [Baker et al.](#) highlighted how naturalistic play has many opportunities for problem-solving and autonomy when time allows and when it is prioritized and supported by the adults in a child's life.

## Moment-by-moment reactions to mistakes and risk-taking

Three studies in the Research Topic offered insights into what happens during adult-child interactions in a risky moment or in response to a mistake. Baker et al., Donaldson, and Stamatis et al. provided textured descriptions of how children and adults interact in the face of risks they encountered during learning and play. In the results sections, the authors shared richly told stories and vignettes as evidence to illustrate the broad categories identified, thereby bringing the findings to life. By presenting detailed descriptions, the authors offer readers a window into how these moments are negotiated between adults and children. At the same time, they show how the interventions of adults and the responses from children affect how children ultimately react to and learn from their own risk-taking and mistakes.

## Situational nature of child and adult reactions to mistakes

All of the articles illustrate the extent to which situational and contextual factors shape responses to mistakes and willingness to take risks. For instance, in Baker et al. and Stamatis et al., parents and caregivers supported children differently across various play experiences, some feeling more open to supporting children's risk-taking and autonomy, while others more heavily weighed the potential risks. Donaldson observed how a veteran teacher offered each child different responses to mistakes, even within a single classroom context. And in Feng and Wang, the authors worked to develop an instrument that could reliably measure the extent to which children remain engaged in learning activities, taking into account differences in parents' and teachers' perceptions across home and early learning contexts.

## Conclusion

As all of the studies in this Research Topic are anchored in both child-adult relationships and learning in context, they collectively illustrate the power of closely attending to small

daily interactions. Looking forward, we encourage researchers to further expand the array of contexts in which risk-taking and making mistakes are studied. We hope to expand the conceptions of risk-taking, mistakes, and corrective feedback and position them as areas of learning and possibility, while advocating for the use of a variety of approaches to tease apart the nuance of real-world experiences. There are rich opportunities to develop findings into usable knowledge that adults—including teachers and parents—can use to intentionally create environments that enhance children's experiences with mistakes and risk-taking. And finally, all too often, adults shy away from mistakes, electing to mitigate both physical and emotional risks in an effort to protect children. We hope that this work inspires them to focus on developing a greater tolerance for mistakes made in learning and to better support appropriate risk-taking in their classrooms, play spaces and beyond. By providing much needed feedback even for developmentally-appropriate mistakes, adults have the power to cultivate a positive error climate that can support rich and joyful learning for young children.

## Author contributions

MD: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.