1. Summary of Research Results

Our research explored children’s’ and parents’ landscapes of risk and the negotiation and management of risk anxiety in family contexts. We set out to explore the tensions which have emerged, in recent years, in relation to children and childhood: tensions between children’s empowerment and autonomy on the one hand and their passivity and dependence on the other. We were also interested in parents’ memories of their own childhoods, their perceptions of social change and their reflections on their own parenting practices.

We conducted the research in two localities: Edinburgh and East Lothian. The research entailed interviews with children between 9 and 12, and with one sibling aged between 12 and 15 and co resident parent or parents (including step-parents or guardians). The sample was made up of 52 children and 42 parents from the 30 households – 15 in Edinburgh and 15 in East Lothian – and included 34 children aged 12 or under and 18 who were over 12. There were 27 boys and 25 girls. In the children’s interviews we used a topic guide to explore everyday fears and concerns, and their strategies for managing risks and negotiating parental boundaries. In the interviews with parents we encouraged them to speak about their own childhood experiences. This was followed by asking them to talk about each of their children and then to tell us about their experiences of parenting and the ways in which they made decisions about safety and danger.

We asked parents and children to identify what they saw as the risks to children’s safety and well-being. The main risks identified by both parents and children were traffic, strangers and drugs. The only major sources of risk discussed by parents but absent from the children’s accounts were economic insecurity, the consequent pressures to achieve, and the negative effects of consumerism. There was a marked absence of concern about health risks including those arising from food and the environment and little attention was given to the risk of accidents in the home. Here we focus on some key themes, which emerged, from our data: children’s landscapes of risk; parental risk; negotiations of risk and safety within households; ‘Stranger Danger’ (this is the common shorthand for the education programme provided by the police in conjunction with primary schools in Scotland) and sexual risk in general.

Most of the children associated their home and family with safety and risk was linked to distance from the home. Cities were defined as riskier places than the countryside, both by children living in cities and those living in more rural areas. Frequently this was in terms of the sheer numbers of people in cities, and thus the greater threat from strangers. Certain areas were identified by the children as dangerous because of their physical features, which were read as signs of dangers from their inhabitants - often this reflected perceptions of class differences. It is of interest – and considerable concern – that a
number of the children we interviewed made direct associations between affluence and safety.

One of the few ways in which risk was seen to enter the ‘safe haven’ of the home was through the media, in particular television. There has been considerable public discussion of the impact that watching ‘inappropriate’ material on television might have on children and this discourse of risk featured in the children’s accounts, especially in relation to violence. Children evaluated their ability to handle potentially risky material in terms of their knowledge. However, many of the children considered knowledge without experience to be insufficient.

Among the parents there was a strong sense of living in a rapidly changing world and felt that the world had become a less safe place for children. The specific dangers identified were traffic, drugs and ‘weirdoes and paedophiles’. However, not all parents accepted uncritically the current concern about risks to children and not all assumed that childhood was ‘better’ in the past. In addition, parents also talked about the world becoming a more pressured place for children. This was frequently related to an increasingly consumerist society and growing economic insecurity.

Many parents recalled risk taking from their own childhood and adolescence and such memories could serve as antidotes to worry – ‘kids will be kids’ or exacerbate it ‘I know what I was like’. Drug use was something that few parents had direct experience of. Here lack of practical knowledge made them more reliant on media scare stories for information, which heightened anxiety and made them more dependent on expert advice.

Although there was variation both within and between families in relation to the definition and enforcement of ‘rules’ and ‘boundaries’, each of our case study families presented similar accounts of what might be called the ‘bottom line’. This ‘bottom line’ represented either the minimum level of parental expectations of certain behaviours, or a set of mutually acknowledged boundaries which limited children’s actions. Some families stressed the importance of active parental surveillance of children in order to manage risk, safety and danger. This strategy enabled parents to insulate themselves from continual worries about the children’s safety. The articulation of bottom lines can be seen as the public face of control, conforming to a wider cultural expectation that parents should manage children’s worlds, and that children should at least acknowledge, if not always acquiesce in, this process.

Children are taught who to trust and who not to, in particular through ‘Stranger Danger’ education, which tends to reinforce the public/private dichotomy in relation to risk – strangers by definition occupy public not private spaces. Yet while being told not to trust strangers, children are not told why or how to cope with everyday social interactions with unknown people. They do, however, make judgments based on specific criteria including: appearance; gender; manner; the type of questions asked; and the relative vulnerability of the stranger. It was clear from our data that Stranger Danger education came as part of a jigsaw puzzle of knowledge without a picture on the box. Pre teenage children, even where they had received some sex education had no means of making sense of
specifically sexual risks. The younger respondents rarely spoke directly about sex; rather they discussed strangers in terms of being taken away, kidnapped for ransom, physical violence, being forced into crime or even being murdered. In fact many of them seemed confused by the messages which they were presented with. A few of the children had heard about stories in the papers which dealt with sexual risk to children and some described local incidents, but without necessarily seeming to be very clear about what was entailed. Some appeared to have conflated stranger and danger or even looking strange with being dangerous and many seemed to be very frightened of strangers.

There was a range of views, both across and within the parents’ accounts of the extent to which they worried about stranger danger on an everyday basis. However, it was clear that they were in no doubt as to the sexual nature of the threat. The extreme version was a view of a world full of weirdoes, perverts and paedophiles waiting to pounce on their children. Some parents reflected on whether this risk was real or perceived and differed in the conclusions they drew. While there was near consensus amongst parents about the importance of being honest with their children about sex and a commitment to answering questions frankly, there was nonetheless an enormous gulf in the children’s knowledge. It seemed as if the existence of sexual abuse could not be directly spoken about with children — it was everywhere implied in the admonitions given to children but always unmentionable. This has practical consequences for children because they lack the knowledge and skills to anticipate and manage the very threat which ‘strangers’ are assumed to pose.

The one form of Stranger Danger that was not thought of as sexual by parents was risk from teenagers. Both the children and parents had particular concerns about teenagers as a threat to younger children. Young people seemed to be categorised as unsafe strangers simply by virtue of being teenagers. Such concerns were especially evident in relation to young people ‘hanging around’ apparently aimlessly in public space. The children themselves often saw teenagers as a greater threat than adults and many expressed anxieties about groups of teenagers who congregated in the parks where they played. They tended to see teenagers as a homogenous group, which they had little desire to join.

Our data do not bear out the ‘end of childhood’ thesis - which argues that children are growing up to soon and gaining greater and greater independence. While many parents accepted the view that childhood itself was under threat our data nevertheless suggest that they are putting some effort into keeping their children childlike. In this context risk anxiety serves both to justify this strategy and to reinforce the boundaries of childhood.