COMMUNICATING RISK:
AN INSIGHT INTO, AND ANALYSIS OF, HOW SOME OF OUR COLLEAGUES ARE CURRENTLY COMMUNICATING RISK TO PARENTS

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Introduction

Do you or your organisation have effective communication processes in place to enable your student's parents[1] to truly understand why their child is participating, and what this may mean in terms of both the risks and benefits associated with participation? Is this information sufficient enough for informed consent to truly be provided?

Coronial reports, recommendations and litigation following several fatal outdoor education incidents both in Australia and other countries have raised the issue of informed consent, suggesting that parents were not appropriately informed of the risks involved or were given insufficient information on which to base their consent (Ajango, 2005; Holden, 2002).

Holden (2002:2) refers to the importance of this consent, stating that it must be truly informed. "While evidence of consent is evidence of reasonable care, it is only relevant if the consent is informed consent, based on a full appreciation of the risks involved in the activity" (Holden).

The issue of informed consent was also highlighted in the Cathedral Ranges incident, a landmark for outdoor education in Australia. This incident occurred when a student badly sprained her ankle and while staff was attending to her, another student from the group fell nearby and sustained fatal injuries. The student who suffered the ankle injury successfully sued for emotional trauma at having to witness her classmate die. The judge found that "the information provided to parents did not advise them of the rugged and hazardous conditions" (Lazarus, 1988 in Stewart, 2000).

It is suggested that effective risk communication will assist in the development of positive relationships with clients prior to, during and post program participation; relationships that are based on a thorough understanding of both the risks and the benefits associated with participation. This paper draws on recent research into current risk communication strategies being employed by outdoor education coordinators[2] from this author's home state in Australia, although it is argued that these findings are also of relevance for global practice.

This paper will examine the theoretical perspectives of both risk communication and risk perception studies. This work is important in order for us to design effective communications; we must understand how and why people arrive at decisions regarding the complex world of risk. Finally, several practical applications for us to consider in our own communications will be offered.

What is Risk Communication?

Risk communication, simply put, is "the method by which the public[3] can be informed as to the potential risks and benefits of specific projects and programs" (Adler & Kranowitz, 2005:18-19). Effective risk communication is however much more than providing a client or parent with a page outlining the risks or hazards we foresee in our programs followed by a sentence asking them to "sign here" acknowledging they fully understand and accept these risks. Risk communication studies have found that several factors must be acknowledged and understood in order for risk communication to be truly effective.

The Importance of Trust

One such factor that has been suggested to be a major determining factor in ensuring effective risk communication is that of trust. The Royal Academy of Engineering (2002:16) suggests that the public is generally willing to permit the professionals to make decisions on their behalf as long as the decision-makers maintain the public's trust. Douglas & Wildavsky (1982:34) in a study of the Athabascan people of Northern California proposed that trust was a major factor in determining whether doctors were sued following patient deaths. If

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[1] This paper refers to informed consent being provided by parents for minors. If you have adult clients on your programs, the intent remains the same.

[2] The term "coordinator" is contextual to schools in Australia and could be replaced with program manager, director, administrator—essentially the person or people in your organisation who communicate with clients and parents.

[3] Public in the context of outdoor and adventure education programs, can mean clients or parents

trust was apparent in the relationship, the doctor was not sued. In a more recent and similar study, Gladwell (2005:41) commented that trust and relationship building were the key characteristics that affected whether or not a doctor faced a malpractice lawsuit. Burkin (in Gladwell, 2005:41) comments on the rationale for this as being that "people just don't sue doctors they like."

It seems from these examples that a key differentiation exists between merely providing information and actually communicating. When communication is genuine, relationships are formed in an environment of mutual respect and trust.

Within schools or outdoor education organisations, it is perhaps even more important that an atmosphere of mutual trust exists. Sandman (2007, Personal Communication) considers that while there may be low trust in the organisation who is proposing that a hazardous waste site be sited near their homes, parents in general have much higher trust in the school systems who are educating their children. This level of trust, in turn suggests that parents are then more likely to believe what they are being told regarding the risks and/or benefits involved with their child's participation in an outdoor education program. Sandman's posits that this is exactly the reason that parents must be involved fully in the risk communication process (Sandman 2007, Personal Communication).

Coupled with securing an environment where mutual trust and relationships are formed is the method by which the risk communication exercise is delivered. The Royal Academy of Engineering (2002:16) suggests that where possible, communications should occur with those who are personally affected actually knowing personally those who are making the decisions. Risk communication messages should also be delivered in as many mediums as possible.

The content of the message must also be sensitive to the receiver's frame of reference (Covello et al, 1988; Royal Society, 1992:123). It is possible that terms routine to outdoor educators (e.g. remote) may mean something quite different to parents, simply due to their differing frames of reference. These varied frames of reference and viewpoints are central to an important area of research, that of risk perception, which enjoys major influence in risk communication.

Risk Perception

Risk perception is the name attached to a body of research investigating peoples' identification of and concerns about risk (Jaegar et al, 2001:183). This area of research is considered critical to risk communication in that: "Perceptions of risk play a prominent role in the decisions people make in the sense that differences in risk perception lie at the heart of disagreements about the best course of action between technical experts and members of the general public" (Slovic, 1999:2).

In order to better understand how and why people perceive risk differently, we must first investigate what is understood about the term "risk." Slovic (in Krimsky & Golding, 1992) examined the multiple meanings of this word and concluded with four different representations. These involve risk being defined either as a hazard, as probability, as consequence, or as a potential threat. The fact that there are multiple and vastly different meanings to the word are a major challenge in communication. As mentioned previously, within a technical framework, the likelihood and severity of hazards, and therefore the risks themselves, are viewed as being quantifiable in an objective manner by risk assessment processes (Slovic, 1992). A social scientific approach however holds the view that risk is intrinsically subjective. In this regard, risk is not something that can be separated from the cultural and social background as well as the thinking mind of human beings. Rather, risk is something that humans have created to assist them to survive with the uncertainty and dangers of life. This social science view therefore negates the concept of risk being real or objective. The only thing that may be real is the dangers themselves (Slovic, in Krimsky & Golding, 1992).

Zink & Leberman (2001) suggest that the outdoor education literature is somewhat at odds with this view. They comment that the desire to quantify risk is prevalent within outdoor education and is evidenced through equations of risk measuring probabilities and likelihood, as well as the development of incident databases to track incidents.

The Psychometric Tradition

An additional approach, that of the psychometric tradition, has also been used to assist researchers to comprehend peoples' understanding of risk (Otway & von Winterfeldt, 1982; Slovic, 1992). What has been highlighted by these studies is the importance associated with the cause of the risk in the person's actual attitude to it (Renn, 1989a, in Krimsky & Plough, 1992). Allen (1987b in Krimsky & Plough, 1992:66) suggests that this demonstrates that risk is indeed a multidimensional concept and must not be reduced to probability and consequence.

The findings from this type of research, suggesting that the actual characteristics of the hazard being a major influence in the respondents' judgement to it (Slovic, in Jaegar et al, 2001:183), are of central importance to risk communication and outdoor education. This work also indicated a different approach in how experts and the lay public judged risk (Trautman, 2001). Experts tended to judge risk in the form of the annual number of fatalities whereas lay people could do this if requested, however, were much more likely to judge risk in terms of the hazard characteristics. The work of Slovic et al (1980) found that people's rating of the hazard characteristics emerged somewhat systematically, and with

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three important factors emerging. These factors were titled dread risk, unknown risk and, thirdly, how many people were exposed to the actual risk. What this research displays is that the qualitative characteristics of hazards are of importance in judgement about risk. Otway & von Winterfeldt, (1982) listed several attributes of hazards that they consider influence risk perception including inequity, lack of personal control and "kill size." Slovic (1987) also suggested that risk is more acceptable if it is voluntary, natural, familiar, fair, has no dread or catastrophic factor, if information is coming from a trustworthy source, and if the process of decision-making is appropriate.

Renn (in Krimsky & Plough, 1992:77) mentions that risks and benefits have to be evenly weighed in public decisions about risk. In this regard, wider society is not solely committed to only reducing risks. Should there be other goals to be achieved that meet with the public's acceptance then they may be willing to endure harm. However, should they judge the risk to have been unfairly weighted against them or if it infringes on their basic values, it will be rejected outright. In this sense, the acceptance or rejection of the risk is completely dependent on the surrounding circumstances. This has significant implications for outdoor education in that it suggests the importance of providing parents with information about both the benefits as well as the risks of outdoor education in order for them to make a truly informed decision.

It is therefore evident that the psychometric approach offers the outdoor education profession interesting challenges. Many schools in Australia and overseas conduct compulsory outdoor education programs. A large amount of schools that conduct outdoor education programs in Victoria are situated in the suburbs or city region of Melbourne; parents may be unfamiliar with areas that do not have reliable phone coverage and which may be hours from a functioning hospital. The environmental conditions are uncontrollable with severe weather (heat, wind or rain) a real possibility. The benefits from such participation in the program may not be immediately recognisable.

Brown (1998) states that public outrage in the aftermath of an outdoor education incident is greatest when activities are unfamiliar, leaders are professional, children are involved, professional standards are compromised, participants are uninformed and when the community is risk averse. These findings support the risk perception research. It therefore seems imperative that the risk communication process seeks to address as many of these areas as possible, in order to assist parents in being able to truly make an informed decision regarding their child's participation (Slovic, 2007 Personal Communication).

Additional Influences on Risk Perception

An additional factor posited to influence risk perception

concerns the gender of the person involved (Gustafon, 1998 in Zink & Leberman, 2001). Gustafon found that men and women expressed differing levels of concern about the risk as well as in the meanings they attributed to those risks.

It is also evident that heuristics play a major role in risk perception. Siegrist et al (2005) found that past personal experience was a significant factor in influencing how risky certain hazards are perceived. This has been termed the "affect" heuristic (Keller, et al 2006:631). Siegrist et al (2005, in Keller et al, 2006) established that the risk perception of respondents to flooding was strongly influenced by their own experiences with it. Another factor that has been shown to influence risk perception concerns the ease of remembrance that the event brings. This has been termed the "availability" heuristic. In this instance, people may judge air travel as high risk due to the ease of picturing such a sight on the television, whereas motor vehicle crashes are routine and do not carry such remembrance. This again displays the complexities associated with risk communication.

Social Amplification of Risk

Kasperson et al (1988) suggests the importance of effective risk communication from a global standpoint as well as from an individual perspective. With their social amplification of risk theory, they posit that the effects of one incident which may indeed be small in the number of casualties, but that occurs in an unfamiliar or poorly understood setting, may have far reaching consequences. These may include litigation, reputational or financial loss. Incidents in outdoor education are rare however when they do occur, the calls for cause and blame are not far behind (Bell, 2004). An example of the realities of social amplification of risk could perhaps be evidenced following the deaths of several students at Lyme Bay in the United Kingdom in 1993. This incident provoked massive media attention and the staff and management of the organisation faced jail terms, litigation and fines (Geary, 1995; Laurie, 1996). Arising from this incident, outdoor education centres in the United Kingdom were required to be licensed. In responding to public outrage, the United Kingdom government introduced a specific parliamentary act titled the "Activities Centres [Young Person's Safety] Act 1995." This example perhaps displays sensible rationale for ensuring that risk communicators are being open, transparent and fully involving parents in decisions about risk prior to an incident.

Practical Applications for Risk Communicators

The various approaches to assessing and evaluating risk perception have been advocated as presenting practicable applications to risk communicators. One such practical tool often employed is to compare risks in order to

assist the public put these risks in perspective (Slovic et al, 1990). This practice has also been employed in the outdoor education literature, attempting to show the relative safety of participation in an outdoor education activity against other activities, including driving and school yard activities (Bailie, 2003a). Roth et al (1990, in Slovic et al, 1990:389) found that comparing unrelated risks carefully could yield valuable insights. However several scholars have urged caution in the use of risk comparisons (Slovic et al, 1990; Gutteling & Wiegman, 1996). This surrounds the fact that while two hazard sources may have similar probabilities, they may indeed have very different qualitative characteristics. An example here could be in comparing the risk of driving with that of a child's compulsory participation in a whitewater rafting program, in a remote setting. It is apparent here that the qualitative characteristics of the hazards are quite different with driving being familiar, generally controllable and voluntary. Whitewater rafting may be unfamiliar, compulsory and the environment can be quite uncontrollable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature has described the complexities of communicating risk effectively. A person's perception of risk, whether they hold the title of expert or lay person is grounded in more than probabilities and consequences. Risk communicators must give due consideration to cultural biases, worldviews and past experience. They must attempt to place themselves in the position of the recipient. Risk messages must be distributed through as many mediums as possible with personal connections and relationship building being viewed as of crucial importance. Due consideration and attention must be placed on the qualitative characteristics of the hazard and an environment established to assist in the building of trust between risk communicator and recipient. The importance of this process between outdoor education coordinator and parent should not be underestimated. Improvements could be made by facilitating design of risk communications that balance the more traditional approaches to science as well as the contributions of the social scientists. The current risk climate as well as a moral duty, demands a more holistic approach to risk communication that both acknowledges and respects all frames of reference.

Methodology and Research Findings

What follows is a brief summary of how seven coordinators of outdoor education programs in Victoria, Australia are communicating risks to parents and the dominant motivations behind these strategies, in order for parents to provide informed consent for their child's participation.

Schools were approached who ran programs comprising of at least one overnight component. Seven schools

participated in total. A qualitative approach was undertaken with semi-structured interviews and documentary research comprising the sources of questioning and analysis. Coordinators provided all information that they used to communicate risk to parents from two different programs that they currently ran at school. This information, as well as the transcripts from the interviews were analysed and evaluated in the context of current theoretical thinking in the area of risk communication, as described earlier. Pseudonyms are used to assure confidentiality.

Process of Communicating Risk

By far the most common method used to communicate risk to parents was in the form of written documentation. Five coordinators used this method as their only formal mode of communicating risk to parents, whereas two schools also maintained websites. The vast majority of these photographic images on the website portrayed the programs in favourable conditions with many blue skies and smiling faces. While this may indeed be the case, it may also be possible that inclement weather would set in, struggles with heavy backpacks are necessary or steep hills would need to be negotiated. By only portraying programs in their best light could be misrepresenting to parents what the program actually involves and in fact, may void the informed consent in the event of a serious incident. This perhaps highlights the potential tensions between the sometimes competing desires to 'market' the program, as well as fulfilling obligations to appropriately communicate risk regarding the program to the intended audience.

Amount of Information

The amount of risk communication information provided to parents ranged from two to fifteen pages. Morgan et al (2002) comment that the public's time is considered to be a major factor in ensuring the effectiveness of risk communication. Although it would be impossible to dictate an ideal amount of information that should be communicated, it is uncertain as to whether parents would truly have the time to read fifteen pages of information regarding their child's upcoming outdoor education program.

Compulsory Participation

Three coordinators made explicit the compulsory nature of participation in the opening paragraphs of their communications. Stating the compulsory nature of the program so explicitly may have the effect of unconsciously placing the parents in a position where they may feel pressured to sign the consent form. No parent wants to see their child fail in school. If parents are led to statements firstly about the compulsory nature of the program, prior to any mention of the risks or benefits associated with their child's participation, they may question the need to

read or understand the remainder of the information. Their choice, or perception of choice, may in fact have been taken from them. In the event of an incident, this may become a concern.

Benefits of Participation

Five coordinators mentioned the purpose of the program in their risk communication. How this was referred to was dependent on the individual coordinator. One program informed parents that the program simply aimed to "fulfil the course aims, objectives and work requirements for Year 12 Outdoor and Environmental Studies" (Matt). Another coordinator alluded to the benefits of the students' participation in outdoor education in a more personal manner, informing parents that she believed, "That some of our best learning opportunities come from real experiences where the consequences are real and where we take responsibility for ourselves and those around us" (Carol).

What was of interest here is Carol's experience at the school she was teaching at. She had been teaching there (a small regional school) for fourteen years and was the principal outdoor education professional. She was also active in the local community and was personally familiar with many of the parents. It is possible that her style of risk communication; in this case stating a personal belief about the value of outdoor education; would have been influenced by her experience and relationships within the parental community. Out of all the research participants, Carol maintained the longest tenure at her school. As the Royal Academy of Engineering (2002) asserted in the earlier section of this paper, communication is most effective when it involves people who know each other personally. This would seem more achievable when the coordinator has been at the school for a considerable period of time.

Behaviour

A common theme that emerged in the risk communication provided to parents surrounded the expected behaviour of the students. Judging by the documentation, this was a key consideration for the coordinators in managing the risks on the program. One coordinator stated, "The safety of the entire group depends on each individual being prepared to follow instructions and complete cooperation will be expected at all times" (Lachlan). Another coordinator highlighted the importance of behaviour specifically relating to outdoor education programs, informing parents that "given the nature of these trips and the risks involved if students fail to obey instructions, it is imperative that students understand that an excellent level of behaviour is expected" (Matt).

What is not further explained in Matt's risk communication is exactly what the nature of these trips is, or indeed what the risks involved may be. A parent, who is

not overly familiar with outdoor education, may perhaps assume that if their child behaves appropriately, the risks on the program will be fully managed. Toft and Reynolds (1997) found that the cause of most major incidents is a combination of human and technical factors. Whilst it is certainly possible that inappropriate behaviour has been a casual factor in some outdoor education incidents, the literature does not fully support it as the major contributory factor to most (Brookes, 2003).

Logistical Information

It was evident from the risk communication that parents received largely logistical information concerning the program, including departure and return times, cost and information on what work the students would be missing in other subjects. This documentation also included, in six cases, an expected outline of the program which communicated the activities to be conducted day by day. There is no Department of Education policy stipulating that parents must be provided with this information, yet it appeared noticeably in the communication. It is of course highly probable that most parents would like to know what their child will be doing and when they will be doing it. On the other hand, by adding this extra information on the formal communication about the outdoor education program, it may have the effect of cluttering it, potentially taking parents' attention away from the information which they really need to know. There would be no reason why this information could not be provided, however perhaps in a different format.

Alongside this, one coordinator referred to the flexibility of the program outline due to the nature of the trip. As mentioned previously, the intent behind this comment is not further explained in the communication. It in effect, requires someone with knowledge of outdoor education, to be able to decipher the meaning behind it. In this sense, it employs a discourse of expertise and therefore appears that the "deficit" model of risk communication has been employed.

A parent can only provide informed consent for something they know and understand. Should the program change, especially for a reason they may not have been aware of prior, the consent they previously provided may be negated. This theory was successfully tested in one case, the Cathedral Ranges. Here, the Department of Education was judged to have given parents insufficient information on which to base their consent on (Stewart, 2002). Letters of consent had indeed been returned by parents, however on the day of the trip in cold and wet conditions, the teacher in charge made the decision to alter the route to a more demanding and higher walk than that which was originally agreed to. One student subsequently lost their life and another was seriously injured.

In another case, a teenage boy suffered a near-drowning after becoming foot-entrapped in a fast flowing river and consequently was deprived of oxygen for a period of time (Ajango, 2005). His parents had been informed of and had consented to their son participating in an alternative activity to that which the staff on the day of the program chose. As a consequence of this incident, the program suffered extensive reputational and financial damage.

What these examples display is the importance of being very transparent with parents as to what their children will actually be partaking in and the foreseeable risks involved. If there is the genuine likelihood of conditions changing which may then necessitate the altering of planned activities, perhaps parents should be informed about, and fully comprehend these contingencies as a matter of regularity.

Communicating Risks

Six coordinators specifically mentioned the existence of risks in outdoor education. Close to the section where parents were expected to acknowledge by way of a signature consent for their child to participate, they were expected to acknowledge that they understood "that programmed activities involve an element of risk" (Jen). What was obvious in the communication was that while most coordinators acknowledged there was indeed risk involved in the outdoor education program, it was not outwardly evident what these risks actually were.

One coordinator stated simply that there were "many high costs and risks" (Matt) associated with these activities, while another, in his only reference as to what the risks may be, specifically stated there was a risk that "students come to school on Tuesday and be told that the trip is postponed due to poor conditions" (Lachlan). Of note was this coordinator's placing of the statement about risks in the communication. It was placed under a section titled Special Note. What this may mean to the message receiver is debatable; however, it is possible that various receivers may interpret its meaning in differing ways. For some, "special note" could entail something to be really heeded, whereas for others, it could simply highlight an add-on to the communication and therefore not that important.

Activity Explanation

Three coordinators considered it important to provide parents with a description of the activities that their child would participate in. This meant that over half the school coordinators involved in the research did not believe this was necessary. Of the coordinators who did, this information perhaps assisted the parents who may not have been familiar with some of the language. One coordinator, in describing what the students would be doing while caving, informed parents that "the caves are in a small valley to a depth of 25m and are becoming well used by schools and adventure companies and follow a small creek bed. It takes approximately two hours to get through and involves a lot of scrambling over and under rocks" (Lachlan).

Lachlan here has attempted to provide his students' parents with information which helps them to picture the activity they are being requested to provide consent for. Technical language such as caving, Nordic skiing or rock climbing may have different connotations for people, depending on their level of knowledge. This coordinator has attempted to enable his parents to understand the activity and arrive at a clear understanding of what they are providing consent for.

English Language

All coordinators provided parents with risk communication in English only. This may have the effect of isolating parents who do not speak fluent English or who may not speak English at all. This scenario is highly probable given the diverse cultures especially in the metropolitan Melbourne area (Parents Victoria, 2000) and, indeed, one school involved in the research had 60 percent of its population originating from a Chinese background. This risk communication approach does not therefore account for the cultural background of the risk message receivers. In this case, the risk communicators may have failed to place themselves truly in the position of the receiver (Irwin, 1995).

Dominant Risk Discourse

The risk communication employed by the coordinators complied with the dominant discourse of risk in outdoor education. In supporting the current literature, the use of the term "risk" was employed largely in a negative way. Lachlan alluded to the importance of overcoming risk by the practice of risk management: "The nature of outdoor activities involves an element of risk and therefore risk management is fundamental to all aspects of the program" (Lachlan).

It seems from this comment that risk is viewed as something real, therefore something that can be managed in an objective and rational manner by the expert, the coordinator. Another coordinator further supported the dominant risk discourse by informing parents that "frequently, the perceived risks outweigh the real risks" (Carol). These comments imply that real risk is something to be seen and therefore able to be interpreted in the same way by all people (Zink & Leberman, 2001). This approach does not account for the fact that people interpret risk in different ways.

As described in the earlier section, people come from different social and cultural backgrounds and have multiple worldviews, therefore setting the scene for multiple interpretations of risk. This approach by the coordinators is also then influenced by their own interpretation of what risk is. Nevertheless, the fact that the communication has originated from the professional, the expert in this regard,

may make it credible to the reader. The coordinator in this case becomes the arbiter of what the real or perceived risks are, effectively barring the parents from this discussion.

"Safe" Programs

Three coordinators employed the term "safe" in their risk communication to parents. One program had the aim of providing "participants with opportunities to experience genuine adventure and to be challenged physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally through outdoor activities" (Michael). Here, the aim of the program purported to welcome the participation in activities that have an uncertain outcome. An accepted definition of the term "adventure" is the "undertaking of an uncertain outcome; a hazardous experience" (Macquarie, 1999:12). However, an additional aim of Michael's program was also to provide "a friendly, safe, caring and supportive learning environment" (Michael).

While this is indeed an aim to strive for, it may in fact, contradict the earlier statement which welcomes uncertainty and, therefore, the taking of risks. As the term "safe" is defined as "free from hurt, injury, danger, or risk" (Macquarie, 1999:700), it may be contradictory and perhaps misleading to welcome uncertainty yet provide this in an environment free from risk. Whilst this may seem a matter of semantics, it directly relates to how parents are communicated with. If parents are being informed that risk is a valuable educational tool and at the same time being informed that their child will be safe, they may reasonably expect their child to return home without injury and as such, may provide consent based on this assumption. In the event of a serious incident, a parent may quite correctly, assume they have been misinformed.

Aligned with this discourse is the language in describing or defining risk in outdoor education. Loynes (1995) suggests that there is not a widely understood language with which to converse about risk in outdoor education. Zink and Leberman (2001:54) assert that it is less about a commonly understood argot, but rather an actual lack of language itself to discuss risk. This paper would seem to concur with that position.

Summary of Findings

What became apparent in analysing the risk communication strategies employed by the outdoor education coordinators was the largely uniform way in which risk was being communicated; primary using one medium, paperwork and through the same channels as other school communication. The parent was largely a passive receiver and could if they so desired, get in touch with the school to ask questions or seek clarification. This, however, did not happen regularly to the surprise of some coordinators. Some coordinators doubted the ability of the parents

to be able to make an informed decision, however, fewer than half of them attempted to clearly explain the actual activities that the students would participate in.

The coordinators conformed, in their communication, to the dominant paradigm regarding risk in outdoor education; that is, to lose something of value. Yet, on a more personal level, they articulated the value and importance of risk within outdoor education curriculum. Coordinators also seemed to work largely in isolation; they perceived there were few opportunities available, at least formally, to get together and share learnings and professional practice.

By bringing together both the theoretical perspectives on risk communication, regarded as essential for risk communication to be truly effective, as well as the findings of this research, some practical strategies for influencing risk perception and improving risk communication will be offered.

Practical Strategies for Improving Risk Communication
Communication Methods
Use as many mediums as possible—these could include websites, photographs, personal contact, Google Earth, videos. These will assist in more accurately representing the actual program and most anticipated conditions to be prevalent. Ensure that this takes into account the reality of inclement weather and other terrain which may have to be negotiated.

Listen Well
Really invite and provide for multiple means for parents (or clients) to ask questions. Are your program and your staff truly assessable? Do not assume that parents are not interested if they do not contact you. Are you sending the message loud and clear that you welcome communication and any questions?

Competence
Avoid the use of jargon and other expert language; communicate risk in a way that is clear, assists in the understanding of people who may have no knowledge of outdoor education, and does not undermine the knowledge that some of your audience may have; e.g., do you have participants/clients who may have been on three of your programs before? Try to design your risk communications in a way that respects the knowledge level of your audience.

Inclusiveness
Ensure you are able to communicate with all your audience. Do you have non-English speakers or people who may not be able to read to whom you may be required to provide informed consent?

Acknowledge Uncertainty
Be wary of stating your programs are "safe." Be careful of

falling into the "telling them what they want to hear" trap. Do you have an adequate response to a parent who asks you, "Will my child be safe?" Remember that people are generally willing to accept the risks if they are clear and agree with what benefits are likely to be gained in return. Have you or your organisation clearly thought about what it is you provide and why, and can you communicate that in a consistent, confident manner?

Conclusion

Effective risk communication may be complex and time consuming. It is not simply a list of what bad stuff might happen. Parents certainly must be aware of what the foreseeable risks are likely to be on a program and what the outcomes of those risks may be. They also, however, need to know what benefits may come from being involved in the program. As a profession, we must be prepared to engage in this meaningful dialogue. The end result will be a parent who, based on the information they have, can make a conscious decision weighing the costs and benefits of participation against the costs and benefits of not participating.

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