

London Play Briefing

November 2006 (updated February 2009)

Risk / Benefit Assessment in Play: it's not rocket science! A light-hearted look at a serious issue



The Health and Safety Executive are very concerned about the reduction in risky play opportunities, and have publicised the fact that good quality risk assessments can help play providers to keep or but back the risky play children need to undertake to learn about risk for themselves. Leaflets and practical examples on Risk Assessment are on their website - www.hse.gov.uk/risk/index.htm. Access all the risk assessments that Sheffield City Council make available for schools to use in organising activities: www.thornbridgeoutdoors.co.uk/genericrisk.htm Here, London Play balances risk against benefit to children, this is different to simply removing all risks to children.

We do Risk Assessment all the time without realising it - every time we cross the road, meet someone new to us, drive anywhere or find something tasty in the fridge a day over the sell by date. They are a legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act - Management must ensure they are done properly, usually by instructing a site or setting manager to do it, so don't shirk it. You don't need a training course, (although they are useful), you do need to share with colleagues, children, staff, managers, volunteers and parents. Put it up on the wall for all to see, get the children to work on them themselves - (perhaps with illustrations of the more unlikely outcomes to make it interesting).

A written risk assessment is not difficult, and can help share concerns with parents and colleagues. List the possible problems in a column, then next to that note the probable result, then the likelihood, then what can be done to avoid the problem, lastly assign a value to each line and decide if the risk is outweighed by the value of the experience It is important that they are seen as public documents, not stuffed in an office filing cabinet and forgotten. Put them up on the wall for all to see and comment on, they should be seen as a collaborative effort, reached by consensus and after discussion.

Make them an ongoing, live-action type of work, not an excuse to hide in the office (or work from home). There is no need to restrict every activity that arises spontaneously until they are risk assessed, just think it through as you watch the play develop, and then intervene to restrict only if obviously dangerous. If colleagues or managers misuse the risk assessment process to avoid doing something they don't like - they need a holiday, perhaps a long one.

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Possible problem or hazard	Possible Result or outcome – worst case scenario	Likelihood – Risk assess for different age/ability groups	Is risk apparent and controllable to children participating?	Reasonable and Practical Steps available to avoid or reduce problem	Value of allowing activity	Decision (note any restriction/exclusion) Signed..... Date.....
Playfighting with wooden swords	bruising	Low BUT could rise – if bad temper develops	yes	1 Ensure all are very blunt. 2 discuss need for fair play 3 only allow under active supervision	Developing dexterity, strength, historical understanding. Fun	Allow BUT supervise to ensure no bad tempers
Playfighting with wooden swords	Centre is accused of facilitating fighting	High	yes	Discuss with all concerned to ensure it is happening only to experience an important facet of cultural heritage**, and not to settle a grudge	As above	Allow (Risk assessment is for children's health and safety, not to centre's reputation)
Playfighting with real swords	death	Low to medium	no	Confiscate swords and hand over to police	none	Not allowed
Outdoor play during which a branch may fall from a tree unexpectedly	Death or serious injury	Very low	no	1 No outdoor play under trees in gale force winds 2 remove any dead branches	Outdoor play is very important	Allow
Jumping from a 5 foot high wall	Broken bones	Low BUT medium with younger children	Yes BUT not with very gullible young children if bullied into it by others	1 supervise to begin with 2 ensure informal peer risk assessment happens (older or more able kids explain to others how to do it- hit the ground running, with bent knees and finish with parachutists roll)	Developing judgement, ability, Older ones take responsibility for younger peers	Allow for over 7's only
Poisoning with exterior paint/wood preserver/domestic chemicals	Illness, hospitalisation, long term tissue damage	unsure	no	1 Check contents, use COSHH (control of substances hazardous to health) information sheets from manufacturers 2 use recommended protective clothing etc 3 Store out of reach of children	Low, as not a play activity	Use only by trained/competent adults

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Bead stuck up nose	Child distressed, visit to casualty to remove	Low BUT higher with younger children	no	It is impossible to control, if you tell them not to, they will be more likely to do it	Bead work is a popular and inexpensive craft activity	Allow
Drowning in paddling pool	death	Very low UNLESS specific medical problem identified	yes	1 Ensure all medical records checked for any children with epilepsy/fits/sudden loss of consciousness. 2 supervise	Water play is great fun	Allow BUT close (unobtrusive to avoid scapegoating) supervision of any children at higher risk
Staff spend all their time on doing risk assessments	No play or fun, children play somewhere better	High (especially if desperate for promotion to management level)	yes	Relax – don't do it	1 Keep OFSTED at bay 2 Head office Manager cannot visit as too busy checking and filing risk assessments	Not allowed (unless Senior manager always present and willing to be tied up and have wet sponges thrown at them by children)

