

The Benefits of Risky Play

What is risky play?

The term 'risky play' is often used but is still either not fully understood or put in to practice. So what does risky play actually mean? Play Wales (2008) states that play means '...providing opportunities for all children to encounter or create uncertainty, unpredictability, and potential hazards as part of their play. We do not mean putting children in danger of serious harm.'

'Good risks and hazards in play provision are those that engage and challenge children, and support their growth, learning and development. These might include... loose materials that give children the chance to create and destroy constructions using their skill, creativity and imagination. Bad risks and hazards are those that are difficult or impossible for children to assess for themselves, and that have no obvious benefits. These might include sharp edges or points on equipment, weak structures that may collapse, and items that include traps for heads or fingers.' (Play England, 2007)

A risky play situation for one child might be different to that of another but once you get to know a child, you can support them to take appropriate risks in their play. Playworkers have a duty of care towards children so it is important that risk assessments are carefully carried out first; remember risk assessments are used to evidence that practitioners have considered and eliminated *significant* risks to children, not to eradicate all risks entirely.

Why is risky play important?

It is widely known that children are now given less opportunities to engage in risky play than the children of previous generations. So what exactly are modern children missing out on?

'Children and young people themselves recognise that 'you can't make everything safe' and that a balance is needed between risks and fun. Children recognise that knowing about risks and how to manage them is an essential part of growing up... Through play, children are able to learn about risks and use their own initiative. If children and young people are not allowed to explore and learn through playing and taking part in positive activities, they will not learn how to judge risks and manage them for themselves. These skills learnt through play and other activities can act as a powerful form of prevention in other situations where children and young people are at risk.' (Play England, 2007)

'It is argued that taking risks can have positive implications in terms of children's developmental, social and emotional needs, as well as their overall health. By providing the opportunities for children to manage their own risks in a controlled environment, they will learn vital life skills needed for adulthood, and gain the experience needed to face the unpredictable nature of the world (Gill, 2007)... Risk taking is considered to have further benefits, which contribute to the development of desirable personality traits, including creativity (Susa and Benedict in Ball, 2002)... Dweck (2000) states that

encouraging children to enjoy challenges rather than to shy away from them could also increase their persistence and learning abilities.'

Hazards, then, especially for children and young people, have some value in that they can be an opportunity for learning.

Supporting Frameworks and Risky Play

EYFS (2012) Development Matters: Characteristics of Effective Learning – Support for children to take risks and explore... Encourage children to try new activities and to judge risks for themselves... Always respect children's efforts and ideas, so they feel safe to take a risk with a new idea.

PSED – Be aware of and alert to possible dangers, while recognising the importance of encouraging young children's sense of exploration and risk-taking. Physical Development – Ensure children's safety, while not unduly inhibiting their risk-taking.

EYFS (2008) Principles into Practice 4.1: Learning Through Experience – While playing children can express fears and re-live anxious experiences. They can try things out, solve problems and be creative and can take risks and use trial and error to find things out; Adult Involvement – Practitioners plan and resource a challenging environment where children's play can be supported and extended.

3.3: The Indoor Environment – The indoor environment provides a safe, secure yet challenging space for children.

1.4: Challenges and Dilemmas – Ensuring safety without stopping reasonable risk-taking.

Playwork Principle 8 says 'Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well being of children.' This part of Principle 8 means that we make a decision based on a risk-benefit assessment; is the good this child(ren) will gain from this experience stronger than the likelihood of their coming to serious harm, during which children may encounter life threatening risks or risks which are likely to lead to long term severe illness?

What can we do to promote risky play?

When completing a risk assessment for a play activity, reflect on whether the risks outweigh the benefits or vice versa to help you come to a conclusion that will be in the best interests of the children. This is known as a risk-benefit assessment.

Risk-Benefit Assessment Template:

Questions for Consideration	Possible Sources of Information
What are the benefits – for children and young people, and for others?	These will vary depending on the topic under consideration. They could

<p>What are the risks?</p> <p>What are the options for managing the risk, and what are the pros, cons and costs of each?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the opportunities for engagement (with good risk). • Do nothing. • Monitor the situation (including supervision). • Lessen or manage the risk. • Remove the risk. 	<p>include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common sense / experience. • Observation of play space / equipment in use by children. • Standards. • Guidance and resources from relevant agencies. • Expert opinion. • Views of colleagues and peers. • Relevant experience from other providers. • National / local data sources / research studies. • Local knowledge.
<p>What is the risk-benefit judgement? Notes for implementing the judgement.</p>	

'It is highly unlikely that a competent playworker will ever be taken to court and successfully prosecuted for negligence because the safeguards that we put in place to protect both ourselves and the children are sensible and show that we have a professional approach to risk.' (Play Wales, 2008)

Just as children need to be introduced to some potentially risky play opportunities in small steps in order to build skills, judgment and confidence, so we need to take small steps towards feeling comfortable ourselves with *providing* risky play opportunities. Begin this cautiously and with common sense; when your confidence is developing, you can look at providing riskier (but still assessed!) opportunities.

We may allow ourselves to be influenced by parents or carers who are frightened that their child might be harmed. We need to reflect on this – quality play opportunities involve some element of risk taking or creation, however small, and most parents will understand this if they think back to their own childhood. However parents/carers concerns do need to be taken in to consideration as they need to feel that their children are safe in our care.

'Parents need to have appropriate information: when we talk about providing opportunities for children to take risks, we are not talking about risk at all cost and they need to know that we have procedures in place that minimise the danger of harm.

Many of us are frightened of the unknown and the word risk has some negative meanings – we need to be able to explain to parents why we are doing this... Ultimately if they are still unhappy they have the right to stop their child attending; if we back down because one parent or carer complains we will be depriving many more children of quality play opportunities.' (Play Wales, 2008)

Health and Safety

The Occupiers' Liability Act (1957) states 'The common duty of care is... to see that the visitor will be reasonably safe in using the premises... However, an occupier must be prepared for children to be less careful than adults.'

There is no requirement under the Act to eliminate or minimise risk, even where children are concerned.

'In a playground, bumps, bruises scrapes and even a broken limb are not necessarily warning signs of greater dangers, as they might be considered in a factory or office environment. They are to be expected as part of everyday life for children growing up.

Providers need to decide for themselves what level of risk is appropriate in their provision, because the type and style of provision must be responsive to local circumstances...However, there are benefits from this approach at all levels and for all those involved in play, but above all for the children, who will have happier and more satisfying experiences of childhood with richer opportunities for healthy growth and development into competent and confident adults.' (Play England, 2007)

Extended Reading

- Play England (2008) 'Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide' <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/managing-risk-in-play-provision-implementation-guide>
- Play Wales (2008) 'A Playworker's Guide to Risk' <http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/playworkers%20guide%20to%20risk.pdf>
- Simon Nicholson's 'Theory of Loose Parts'
- Bristol Scrapstore's PlayPods project – <http://www.playpods.co.uk/>
- Play Englands 'Play, Naturally' project – <http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/130593/play-naturally.pdf>

References

- Dweck (2000) 'Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development'
- Gill (2007) 'No Fear: growing up in a risk adverse society'
- Play England (2008) 'Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide' Download from <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/managing-risk-in-play-provision-implementation-guide>
- Play Wales (2008) 'A Playworker's Guide to Risk' Download from <http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/playworkers%20guide%20to%20risk.pdf>
- Susa and Benedict in Ball (2002) 'Playgrounds: risks, benefits and choices'