

Life is a risky business!

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This article was first published in Nursery World Management Supplement 25.03.2013

Photographs from The Pilgrim School, Borstal, Kent for further information visit <http://outdoormatters.co.uk/case-study-the-pilgrim-school-early-years-foundation-unit/>

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Life is a risky business and, as argued by Moss and Petrie, ‘risk is inherent in human endeavour, and for children not to engage with it is for them to be cut off from an important part of life’ (2002, p130). The UK Mental Health Foundation asserts that free play outdoors ‘enables children to take risks, think through decisions, and gain increased self confidence and greater resilience’(1999, p36). So, if exposing children to risk in a managed and supportive situation is a positive aspect of our outdoor practice, how do we balance the benefits of risky play against the potential for harm? How do we introduce challenge whilst keeping hazards to an acceptable level? How can we offer children adventure and keep them safe?

In early years settings across the UK staff teams grapple with these questions and it is a recurring theme in my work to support practitioners wanting to create an enabling outdoor environment. There is no one right answer to these questions; instead we have to use our professional judgement to reflect on what is appropriate for our children and their families in our setting. This article takes a holistic approach and explores some of the key considerations that staff teams need to think about when they make that judgement.



Management/Workforce considerations

- Policies -what do your policies say? Health and Safety policies and Outdoor Play policies should reflect your approach to managing risky play. If you feel they need reviewing and updating then don't act alone, use this opportunity to have an in-depth discussion with the staff team. Some staff may feel anxious about letting children climb a tree or jump off a wall, their concerns are real and they will need sensitive support to overcome their anxiety and embrace the opportunities and benefits of adventurous outdoor play. Good practice leadership and management strategies, such as coaching and mentoring are a useful approach in such situations.
- Recruitment –an important aspect of your role as a leader or manager is to create a team that has a shared and positive approach towards risk management. Exploring attitudes to risk as an integral part of your recruitment processes is good practice. Discuss the issue with potential employees at interview, and as part of any informal visits prior to interview. Asking candidates to suggest an appropriate response to a ‘risky play’ scenario will help you establish how they feel and whether they understand the value of enabling children to have challenges and adventures in the outdoor play environment.
- Partnership with parents –parents are understandably anxious about their child's safety and your approach to managing risk will need to be shared with parents so that they are reassured and supportive. Share your ethos and attitudes with prospective parents when they first visit your setting. Share your policies and procedures, and create photographic displays with captions that identify the learning that is taking place. Draw parents' attention to the characteristics of effective learning; playing and exploring, active learning, creating and thinking critically. These three strands provide the context for all learning, and there is an implicit expectation that risk, challenge and adventure are key features of these characteristics. Within the playing and exploring strand ‘Being willing to have a go refers to the role of

play in children finding an interest, initiating activities, seeking challenge, having a 'can do' orientation, being willing to take a risk in new experiences, and developing the view of failures as learning opportunities' (Tickell 2011, p89). The informal daily conversations between parents and the child's key person are an ideal opportunity to reinforce the positive aspects of adventurous play. 'Joe made a wibbly wobbly bridge with the bricks and planks today and then managed to walk across it and jump off the end of it –it was quite high but he was ready to have a go and he did it!'

Environment considerations

- Risk assessments - it is no longer a requirement of the EYFS (2012) that risk assessments are written down, although you may wish to for your records. However, your ongoing assessment of risk is vital. When thinking about risk it is helpful to keep in mind that we are not risk assessing to restrict children's play, we are risk assessing to reduce the likelihood of harm to an acceptable level and thereby enable children's play. Analysing the benefits of an experience and reviewing these against the potential for harm is an important part of our approach to risk assessment. There are some questions that we can reflect on as part of our daily practice that will help us assess and manage risk;



'How will children benefit from this experience?'

'Does the potential for harm outweigh the benefits to children?'

'If so, how can I reduce the likelihood of harm to an acceptable level?'

In reality we are already making these decisions everyday, for example; you decide to take two children to the post office to post the letters they have written. The benefits are obvious, you are supporting their play interests, valuing their attempts at purposeful mark making, and raising their awareness of features of their locality. But there are some potential hazards, the road is busy and the weather is cold. So, you reduce the likelihood of harm by wrapping the children up warmly and holding their hands –an example of dynamic risk assessment, i.e. it is happening in the here and now, it is not written down two weeks in advance and filed!

Your approach to risk assessing resources and play experiences should be a positive process that enables children to enjoy a wide range of learning opportunities. The same approach applies to assessments of your physical environment. Rather than seeing slippery surfaces, prickly bushes, stinging plants, walls, steep steps, gravel and sharp stones as hazards to be avoided at all costs, we need to look at how we can reduce the likelihood of harm to a level that is acceptable. We want children to face challenges with a positive attitude, we want them to develop a 'can do' approach and enjoy the challenges they face, rather than feeling fearful and helpless. When you assess a particular feature you may have a different response depending on the age of the children. For example, you may decide to trim back the lower branches of prickly bushes in the 'baby garden' but not in the 'preschool garden' where a visual prompt such as a sign will be enough to remind most children to be careful –and those that ignore the sign will quickly learn through experience!

Practice considerations

- Mixed age groups of using the same space. When children of different ages and stages of development share the same outdoor area you will need to think through the set up and management of the space to support their different needs. For example, mobile babies need to be able to crawl and move without being in the pathway of children on trikes. Zoning your space is a good strategy to address these concerns. Think about the types of activity you're your children engage in and where they could be sited. You may locate an area for babies near to the garden door –so that they can crawl or toddle that far and be safe from more active pursuits taking place on the other side of the garden. This safe space for babies will also be attractive to older children wanting rest or respite from physical activity. Moveable boundaries such as tyres, straw bales, planters can all help to define the space and the way it is used. For example, if you are concerned about older children heading down the slide at speed and crashing into a toddler passing by at the bottom you could arrange tyres in a circle at the base of the slide to enclose the space and provide a visual barrier. This is another example of *'reducing the likelihood of harm to an acceptable level to enable an experience to happen'*. Some settings use traffic light colour coding on storage boxes. Older children learn very quickly that resources in the green box can be accessed independently, whilst resources in the red box need the presence of an adult. Of course babies and toddlers will not be able to make this distinction, however they will be in the company of an attentive playful practitioner who can help them to access appropriate resources. Use your professional judgement to decide on the level of risk and challenge that is appropriate; a toddler just finding his feet may need a smooth surface to walk on to boost his confidence and practice this new skill, whilst a toddler that has mastered walking will enjoy the challenge of tackling gentle slopes and uneven surfaces.

- Large and small spaces: Big outdoor areas can seem overwhelming to staff. Anxieties about children's safety if they are out of sight are natural and we need to balance these concerns against the importance of letting children move, explore, discover and experiment. The EYFS states that 'children must usually be within sight and hearing of staff and always within sight or hearing' (EYFS Statutory Framework 2012 3.27 p18). Talk to staff about what this means for your outdoor

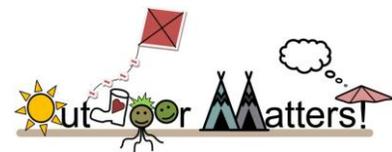


practice. Ongoing risk assessments of the environment will help staff to feel more confident that children are safe even when they are out of sight for short periods of time. A managed and gradual approach to using a large space is a good strategy; use temporary structures such as cones to define a smaller area, then as staff and children become familiar and confident, reposition the cones to include a larger area, repeat this process until the whole area is being used. Many settings need to manage the risks associated with smaller spaces; if the outdoor area is small it is tempting to try and fill it with lots of different types of equipment. However this approach can result in a chaotic crowded environment that hampers children's play and creates an unacceptable level of risk as children jostle for space. Instead try a 'less is more' approach; focus on having a selection of resources that can be used in different ways according to children's enthusiasms and play interests, and that offer effective support to their learning across several aspects of the curriculum.

- Coping with accidents: If we create an environment that is as safe as necessary (rather than as safe as possible) it is likely that there will be some accidents. Rather than being over anxious we need to recognise that accidents do happen, and that learning to deal with them is a vital life lesson for us all. Children need to fall over, jump and land awkwardly, or slip on the mud in order to work out how to keep themselves safer in the future. Your attitude to accidents will help children think about their own responses, and work out what they need to do differently. Model a positive attitude by talking about what happened and identifying alternatives, for example ‘ouch that prickle scratched me, next time I am going to wear my gloves’. Review your accident and incident book and take a problem solving approach to any accident ‘black spots’. Rather than a knee jerk response of banning a piece of equipment or an activity that has resulted in an accident, ask yourself ‘what do I need to do to reduce the likelihood of harm to an acceptable level....?’ Children can be involved in this process; in one setting practitioners were concerned that children liked to clamber about in the scrubby bushes next to the shed. However, rather than ban something that was clearly a popular and beneficial activity for children they carried out a risk assessment, and looked at the benefits versus risks. This review resulted in practitioners testing and removing any branches that were not capable of bearing a child’s weight, whilst children scoured the earth and removed twigs and stones so that if they tumbled they would have a safer landing on the earth.



Whatever you decide is the next step for your setting you may want to bear in mind that the ultimate aim is to empower children to keep themselves safe. The actions you take to provide challenging and risky learning experiences will support babies, toddlers and young children on this journey to becoming creative, motivated and adventurous learners.



Sources of support and information

Outdoor Matters www.outdoormatters.co.uk offers training and onsite advice about creating an enabling outdoor environment

Learning through Landscapes www.ltl.org.uk is an educational charity offering support and resources to schools and settings wanting make better use of their outdoor space

References

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