



One day Wales will be a place where we recognise and provide for every child's play needs

A playworker's guide to risk

do we dare risk risk?

What do we mean by risk in terms of play provision?

We mean 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.

Every child is different; one child's idea of a risky situation might be another's idea of something 'easy-peasy'. We do not force children to do anything that they feel is beyond them, or encourage them to go any further than they feel safe. Neither do we simply leave children to fend for themselves.

If in doubt, or if we are unfamiliar with the child, we err on the side of caution; we have a duty of care towards the children in our setting.

We need to be aware that some disabled children will have been excluded from potentially risky situations, and that inclusive practice means opening up or supporting all children in creating what are risky play opportunities for them.



What does balancing risk with benefit and well being mean?

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.

As playworkers we make decisions all the time. This part of Principle 8 means we make a decision: is the good this child or children will gain from this experience stronger than the likelihood of their coming to serious harm?

Good – children getting to know what they can manage, children growing physically and mentally stronger, children learning skills, children gaining new knowledge, children gaining a sense of achievement, children growing in confidence, children feeling empowered and children participating and making a contribution.

Serious harm - children dying, children being seriously and permanently injured or physically impaired, the onset of life threatening illness, children experiencing severe long term mental trauma.

Scrapes, bumps and bruises, minor cuts, small burns, getting wet or muddy, and bruised pride are all part of growing up – they do not mean serious harm unless any of them are life threatening or likely to lead to long term severe illness.

The right place

We also need to be sure that the setting we work in is suitable for risky play opportunities. If we were sports coaches we would not organise a full-on rugby match on a tarmac car park because it is not appropriate for playing rugby; the risk of injury is all too evident and if we are weighing up good against harm our scales would weigh down heavily on the harm side in this instance.

If we are working in a church hall or a sports centre we need to be aware of the limitations of the environment – small spaces and hard floors do not lend themselves to the kind of running around, jumping and climbing that some children wish to do. We either adapt the setting so that we can minimise the risk of injury without stopping the children, or we find a more appropriate environment where they can run, jump and climb, or we intervene so that they can change what they are doing in the light of our concerns.

Getting to know children

If we are unfamiliar with the children we take a more cautious approach until we are confident that we know their capabilities. We introduce potential risk by starting small so that we can observe their reaction and make decisions as to whether to extend to slightly riskier play opportunities.

We always bear in mind that children will deliberately create their own uncertain and wobbly play opportunities – they will seek to be 'in control of being out of control'.

Some play provision, for instance a play ranger project or short-term playscheme, may not give us enough opportunity to get to know new children well. If this is the case we use our judgment and we only support risky play if we are comfortable to do so and feel that the risk of harm is low. There are lots of exciting play possibilities we can provide that offer the thrill of uncertainty with little risk of harm, we can save more ambitious ideas for a more appropriate time.

Why do we need to provide or support children to create their own opportunities that have a potential risk?

If children have opportunities to encounter uncertainty and deal with potential hazards they develop resilience – they can deal better with what our uncertain world throws at them. If they are protected from anything that is potentially emotionally or physically harmful they will have less chance to be resilient robust people who can stand on their own two feet and take life's knocks.

Children need and seek out risk – it is a natural part of growing up – it is a way of learning how to survive. If we don't introduce or support opportunities to experience risk in a play setting, children will seek the thrill and sense of achievement that comes with overcoming fears, in places that are less appropriate where there are no experienced people around to keep an eye on them. They can practice taking risks within the relatively safe setting of a play space.

In this country our culture tends to suggest that children are incompetent and incapable – we start from a position of distrusting them to be able to fend for themselves.

In other cultures, even those as close to us as Northern Europe, small children use axes to chop fire wood or walk to school on their own as a matter of custom – they are seen as competent and capable. They have been gradually introduced to these situations from an early age – they have gradually built up skills and confidence, the culture is that adults respect and trust children. The difference in the level of competence and capability between these children and those in our settings is our attitude towards them – the experience we provide them, the expectations we have and the assumptions we make.

These days our culture has grown to be more and more against taking risks; children may not have the opportunity to experience the simple pleasure of jumping off a wall or playing conkers, or catching raindrops in their open mouth, in their everyday lives. It is not long ago in history since children climbed trees, or made slides in the snow and no-one thought twice about it, it was considered natural and necessary. On very rare occasions a child would be harmed in their pursuit of thrills and spills, but this was considered an everyday part of life – an accident. Few things have changed since then except our level of fear and the constant (very often empty) threat of being taken to court or having a claim for compensation made against us.

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.



Case Study

Leeds Play Network runs street play projects with outreach playworkers, who do not shy away from providing opportunities for children to take part in 'risky play'.

During one of their sessions a boy jumped into long grass and badly cut his leg on a discarded razor blade. The boy's mother took him to hospital. He needed stitches, but he was fine and within a couple of days he had returned to play at the project. In the meantime his mother, supported by a "No Win No Fee" law firm, put in a claim for compensation for the injury.

The Director of the Network immediately informed their insurance company who sent an assessor to find out "how much money it would take to make the claimants go away" – to settle out of court. The Director showed him the Network's policies and procedures regarding risk, the risk assessment forms that are routinely completed, and he explained about the dynamic risk assessment that is part of all good playwork practice. He also showed the assessor the reflective diaries kept by the Network's playworkers, that showed that on the day of the accident all reasonable effort had been made to remove hazards from the site (e.g. "... picked up three shopping bags of dog muck today!").

The assessor was reassured and reported back to the insurance company, who stood up to the claim. The family backed down. At the same time the assessor recommended to the insurance company that given the thorough way in which the Network and its playworkers approach risk, their liability level should be lowered, and their premiums should be reduced. As the result the Network now pays less for insurance than they did before the claim.

How do we support children in creating risky play opportunities?

We start small and we do it cautiously in a common sense way.

The Playwork Principles do not say build a roaring bonfire as big as you can and then walk away and leave children to tend it. The Playwork Principles do not say lift an unknown child out of her wheelchair and push her down a slide, nor do they say if a child wants to dip their hands in honey we let them do it and then we stand aside waiting for the wasps to arrive, or if a child who has little control of their arms wants to use a craft knife we hand it over and turn our back. The Playwork Principles make the assumption that playworkers are sensible, responsible people who have common sense and will apply it to their job.

In the case of those children in Northern Europe who cut wood with axes, they first watched others chopping wood and have then been gradually and sensitively introduced to the skills involved; they weren't handed an enormous axe at the age of two and given a pine tree to hew down on their own. They started with little tools that they could easily hold in their little hands and they were closely supported so that they knew how to do the job, until they could do it confidently with minimal risk. The contribution this approach makes to children's sense of their own competence and to their sense of worth and participation is immeasurable.

As playworkers working to the Playwork Principles, we take a cautious but not mollycoddling approach that recognises that the majority of children, the majority of the time, are competent to judge their own capabilities and will not wish to harm themselves. This means that if, for instance, children are using tools, we keep an eye on them and the situation they are in, we continually risk assess – or judge the situation - and if it changes we make decisions that balance children's safety with the benefits to them of say, overcoming their fears, or mastering a skill.

If the balance tips more towards potential harm than potential good we intervene sensitively and change the situation to make it safer, always aware in deciding how to do this of the affect the intervention might have on the child.

Fearsome Fire

Providing experience of the elements is part of the playwork curriculum, but many of us are fearful of fire and worried about providing experience of fire for groups of children. On one hand we might make the argument that it won't harm children if they never experience fire, on the other, would we wish to deprive children and young people of the joy and fascination that fire provides, and the sense of mastery?

We all love looking in the flames and watching the changes that take place as something burns.

Children need to know how to behave around fires for their own safety; how to light them and how to put them out – it is a life skill. If we don't allow them to experience fire in our setting where else might they try it out? How many schools have been burnt down by children who didn't realise how quickly the materials they were messing about with would burn once they had lit the stolen match? How many hillsides have gone up in smoke because a group of children wanted to see what would happen if they shone the sun through a magnifying glass onto dry grass? We can't show children the danger of fire and the smothering qualities of thick smoke by holding their hand against a warm radiator.



If we want to introduce fire to our setting we start with a little candle or a little fire made of lollipop sticks in a biscuit tin. If we are working indoors we limit the fire in this way. We gradually introduce it and we make it an everyday thing. We always take safety precautions and we always keep an eye on the situation. Children do get excited about fires - fires are new and thrilling and fascinating - if they happen at a play setting once a year, then, just like Christmas, they generate plenty of giddy excitement which makes the situation unpredictable and difficult to risk assess, if they happen regularly they become commonplace and no-one gets giddy.

We need to remember that there are play settings in the UK that routinely provide fire as part of a range of experiences. Have any of them been prosecuted for allowing children to burn? No, because they have procedures and practices that mean the likelihood of injury is tiny. At settings where there is a fire every day, there is a culture that newly-introduced children pick up; children share knowledge about safety, and newcomers copy the behaviour of more experienced children who know how to behave. There is always a playworker keeping an eye out who can intervene if children's activity around the fire genuinely starts to threaten their safety.

Respect for danger

Some children may have or appear to have little sense of danger – some may have no experience from which to learn. We need to treat each child as an individual to form our decision about the balance of good against serious harm. But children do not always operate as individuals – very often they operate as part of a group and sometimes groups of children egg each other on or become giddy. So we don't simply make decisions based on our knowledge of individuals, we also make decisions based on our knowledge of how groups of children operate together.

“Any person who tells me they would be a good stunt person because they have no fear is instantly dismissed. No fear means no respect for danger”.

A stunt co-ordinator

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”.

Franklin D. Roosevelt (former US President and wheelchair user)

What do we fear?

What blocks us from providing opportunities for risk taking within our play setting?

Our own fear – the Playwork Principles are not asking us to do anything with which we are deeply uncomfortable. If we are upset or distressed by having to provide a certain type of play, we need to discuss this in supervision with our team leader or manager, or in mentoring sessions, we need to talk to our colleagues, identify training that might help and use our reflective diaries to examine why we are so fearful. We need to know whether our fear is reasonable. All of us have fears – some of them are easily understood (e.g. a fear associated with crossing busy roads) and others are harder to explain (e.g. a fear of money spiders) we are all human.

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 with providing risky play opportunities. We start small and we do it cautiously in a common sense way.

Parental fear

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. 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 (see earlier in this section). 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.

Fear of being sued

All play provision that employs playworkers must be insured against claims for compensation due to injury. If there has been a process of risk assessment and we can prove that we have taken reasonable care (as in the Leeds Play Network story) then we are not personally liable and it is up to the insurance company to settle the claim as it wishes.

Fear of being prosecuted - if there has been a process of risk assessment and we can prove that we have taken reasonable care then we are not personally liable.

Here is legal opinion from a barrister:

I conclude that it is entirely legitimate ... to emphasise ... the need to balance against the risk of injury, the benefits to children and young persons of undertaking play activities within an acceptable level of risk. Central, however, to the exercise of the balance is the undertaking of a careful risk assessment. Where there has been a careful risk assessment, resulting in a conclusion that it is permissible for play to involve a risk of injury, by reason of the resultant benefits, I am confident that Courts would be sympathetic to a Defendant, in the event of an accident and subsequent litigation.

Raymond Machell QC, for Playlink, 2006

It's too much hassle

if the real reason that we don't want to provide play opportunities that might include risk is that we really can't be bothered with the hassle of paperwork and keeping an eye on the children, then we need to reflect. The benefits to children have been covered earlier in this section, providing opportunities or supporting children to take risks is as much part of our job as making sure there are enough supplies of paint or filling in the register.

Health and Safety Practice

We've looked at why creating risk is such a vital part of children's play and explored how we might introduce or support it despite some of the challenges. How should we view our routine practice concerning health and safety? Just remember, time for PEE!

Time for PEE - Prepare Expect Enjoy

Prepare

Make sure the play environment is checked and that checks are recorded. Make sure checks are a mix of visual checking and physical testing. All settings should have clear procedures on what should be checked, by whom and how often.

Expect the best

Do not look for the smallest and most unlikely possibility of getting hurt in every activity. A very long chain of 'what ifs' are very unlikely to happen and they are not the focus of our playwork practice.

Playworkers use a careful but positive and practical approach; we assess whether a child is competent to make decisions about risk and hazards for themselves and we support them in their decision unless there is a real risk of serious harm.

Enjoy

As playworkers we are privileged to be able to operate in a world where play takes precedence. One of the best ways we can work within the guidance is to enjoy the play process.

The enjoyment of play for what it is, to play with enthusiasm when invited to play, and to be a passionate advocate for play, are the best ways to ensure an environment and atmosphere where children and young people can have their needs and rights met.

