

Risk benefit assessment

'All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities.'

(Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group 2005)

The vital role of physical play and movement for brain development has been proved through brain imaging (EEG) alongside the serious consequences of failing to provide the necessary conditions for appropriate movement. The importance of waking 'tummy time' is now recognised by practitioners for 'increased vestibular input, respiratory benefits, digestive benefits and strength benefits in neck, trunk and arms which result in appropriate gross and fine motor development' (Early Intervention Support). Children who have been strapped into chairs, entertained in complicated play centres and 'kept safe' from the floor are more likely to struggle with crawling and handwriting as they get older.

Many commentators have written about the dramatic decline in free play opportunities for children and the corresponding increase in adult control of a child's every waking moment. Articles have appeared in the national press about 'cotton wool kids' and 'helicopter parenting'.



Writing in 'No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society' play expert Tim Gill argues for a philosophy of resilience and questions the effectiveness of the current philosophy of protection arguing that 'childhood is becoming undermined by risk aversion' and that risk is what helps children 'get the hang of being human'. He argues for a more robust balance between safeguarding and allowing children increasing levels of autonomy and responsibility to play outside. The Forest School approach is a powerful way to begin redressing this balance. Providing children and babies with rich outdoor environments in the setting can emulate some of what Forest School offers. We offer Forest Tots at [Hill End](#) to show families and carers how much enjoyment and challenge the natural world offers

Babies and toddlers are free to crawl up hills, roll down slopes, splash in streams and puddles, climb and walk in mud, bury themselves in sand, clamber over rocks. They pick up sticks, and follow ants through long grass.

Robust risk benefit assessment is essential for such rich outdoor play to give children and adults freedom to play safely within a challenging environment. It is about weighing up the benefits of play against the level of risks involved.

There are three elements to this assessment:

- **Benefit** - the positive outcomes of the experience / planned activities
- **Hazard** - the potential for something to cause harm
- **Risk** - the likelihood of it happening

Evaluating these elements allows decisions to be made about managing and taking risks. The Health & Safety Executive have produced advice and guidance on risk assessment identifying five logical steps to obtain effective risk assessments:

- Identify the hazards
- Decide who might be harmed and how
- Evaluate the risks arising from the hazards and decide what measures are required to reduce the risks
- Record the findings
- Review the assessment periodically, making revisions as necessary

Although the written evidence of risk assessments is important it is the process which is vital.

Several types of risk benefit assessment are needed for outdoor play as follows:

- A risk assessment of the natural and non-natural hazards with an accompanying hand drawn map of the site
- A general risk assessment of experiences the children may choose to undertake on the site e.g. climbing trees, log piles, digging in soil
- Risk assessments of specific individuals taking part in an activity, particularly if they have any special needs
- New risks identified on visual check
- Dynamic on-going risk assessments during a session

It requires the hazards to be listed, and then a risk level to be recorded stating if the risk is Un-acceptable or Acceptable and measures taken to reduce the risk.

Risks can be minimised, but they cannot be eliminated altogether and health and safety concerns need to be balanced against the potential benefits of any activity. Children, young people and adults may suffer the occasional bump, cut or bruise, but these are a part of everyday life.

The application of robust risk assessment alongside common sense will ensure that everyone is safe enough whilst enjoying all the physical and intellectual challenges of playing outside.



Further Reading

- 'No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society' by Tim Gill
<http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk/pdf/files/--item-1266-223-No-fear-19-12-07.pdf>
- '5 Steps to Risk Assessment' leaflet
www.hse.gov.uk
- 'Risk and Adventure in Early Years Outdoor Play: Learning from Forest Schools' by Sara Knight SAGE publishing ISBN 9781849206303
- 'Give Us a Go – Children and Young People's Views on Play and Risk-taking' report
www.playday.org.uk
- Practical tips for Play Rangers 2
<http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/343457/practical-tips-for-play-rangers-2.pdf>
- Play England Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide
<http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources/managing-risk-in-play-provision-implementation-guide.aspx>
- Playful Risk: Risk Benefit toolkit
- http://www.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/siteimages/Children-and-Young-People/Childcare-Play/playful_risk_-_risk_benefit.pdf
- The Importance of Tummy Time & Its Effect on Motor Skills Development
<http://www.earlyinterventionsupport.com/importance-tummy-time-effect-motor-skills-development/>