

Wrexham County Borough Council

Risk Management Policy for Play Services

April 2013



Glossary of Terms¹

Benefit	–	something that promotes or enhances well being
Risk	–	the possibility of suffering harm or loss
Risk Taking	–	to expose to the possibility of harm or loss
Hazard	–	a potential source of harm
Harm	–	physical or psychological injury or damage
Uncertain	–	not known or established; not determined; undecided.
Challenge	–	a test of one's abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking
Reasonable	–	capable of reasoning; in accordance with reason or sound thinking; not excessive or extreme; rational; fair.

Developed by the Conway & Wrexham Risk Management Group, 2010.

¹ The Free Dictionary (online) available at: www.c@freedictionary.com (accessed 1st November 2011)

WCBC Policy for Risk Management in Play Services

Introduction

This policy has been developed to provide a coherent, consistent and balanced approach to the management of risk in play services and facilities for children and young people across Wrexham County Borough Council and to ensure greater clarity of understanding around this issue. In doing this the policy aims to present some challenge to the existing risk averse nature of our society which can limit children's play experiences², therefore better supporting Local Authority employees in their role of working with, and on behalf, of children and young people.

The policy is informed by contemporary theory and practice and based on the approach set out in *Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide*.³

Risk Management Systems:

'Risk Management' in this policy is used to refer to *all* elements involved in the management of risk which can, and should, incorporate more than paper risk assessments alone. Where all these elements are appropriately supported there is potential to develop more robust and better informed risk management systems.

As represented in figure 1 (see end of document), this policy underpins our risk management system and provides the context within which our employees can operate. A risk management cycle then exists within this framework and incorporates:

- The professional practice and judgements of individuals
- Experience gained from personal and team reflections on practice
- Our ability to plan our approach to future practice
- The training and guidance produced to inform professional practice

Each element of this cycle is informed by, and can inform, every other element, and any future policy developments. Together these elements form an ongoing process, continuously improving our ability as an organisation to appropriately manage risk in services and facilities for children and young people.

Play and Uncertainty

"Children deliberately seek out physical and emotional uncertainty in their play. From birth children are inquisitive and curious with a deeply rooted and compelling drive to explore the unknown and experiment with their surroundings. By taking risks and having adventurous play experiences children can challenge themselves, test the limitations of the environment around them, develop problem solving skills and find creative approaches to new situations. Ultimately play influences a child's ability to be adaptable and resilient, to cope with stressful events and therefore enables them to support their own well-being."⁴

² Gill, T. (2007) *No Fear – growing up in a risk averse society*, London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

³ Ball, D., Gill, T. and Spiegel, B. (2008) *Managing Risk in Play Provision: implementation guide*. London: Play England

⁴ Wrexham County Borough Council (2009) *Wrexham Play Policy 2009*, Wrexham: WCBC

Play permeates every aspect of a child's life and children display a playful disposition to their worlds where they continuously seek out disequilibrium, disorder, uncertainty and opportunities for 'as if' (make believe) behaviours. The wide reaching potential benefits of play accrue from its unique design features of unpredictability, spontaneity, goallessness and personal control and it is these irregularities that occur in play which foster adaptability.⁵

If we remove these irregularities by attempting to predict and place controls on children's playful behaviour we risk creating sterile, predictable and ultimately ineffective play spaces which limit the scope and potential of children's play. We must therefore be careful that our adult desires for order, clearly defined outputs and safety, although well meaning, do not restrict children's need for disorder, uncertainty and challenge.⁶

Perceptions of 'Risk'

"In general use, the word 'risk' refers to the probability, likelihood or chance of an adverse outcome. In risk management contexts, the word tends to include a measure of the seriousness of the adverse outcome, as well as its probability"⁷

However, it is important to recognise that engaging with risk may also lead to desirable and beneficial outcomes, for example, the act of balancing along a wall inevitably involves a *potential* outcome of physical injury but the outcomes might also include the development of self awareness, a sense of achievement, increased confidence and self esteem, as well as feelings of pleasure.

Wrexham County Borough Council recognises that childhood is full of new experiences, which necessarily involve some degree of risk taking, whether it be physical or emotional, because they require the individual to engage with that which is uncertain.

"The player is able to be in control of being out of control and so enjoys both a sense of risk and of mastery simultaneously"⁸

When playing children create their own uncertainty in order that they may experience being at the edge of their control ("in control of being out of control") and as such there is a high degree of risk management built into playing by children themselves.

Childhood is a continuous process of trial and error with the potential for achievement but also the inevitability of accidents. Furthermore, life in general is full of uncertain situations that can not be avoided or removed. The ability to negotiate risk is therefore a critical life skill, which can only be developed and perfected through hands on experience across a broad range of personal challenges. Enabling children to experience some risk is therefore not only reasonable but essential.

⁵ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008). *Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice - a Review of Contemporary Perspectives*. London: National Children's Bureau.

⁶ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008) 'Tell your mum I saved your life' *Play Rights Magazine*, Issue 2/08

⁷ Health & Safety Executive (2006) cited in Ball, D., Gill, T. and Spiegel, B. (2008) *Managing Risk in Play Provision: implementation guide*. London: Play England.

⁸ Gordon, G. and Esbjorn-Hargens, S. (2007) *Integral Play: an exploration of the playground and the evolution of the player*. Journal of Integral Theory and Practice.

Providing for Uncertainty

We have a duty of care to try and protect individuals accessing our services and facilities from the potentially, long-term, damaging effects of being exposed to serious and *unreasonable* physical and emotional harm. However in doing this we must not overlook, or seek it at the expense of, enabling children to actively participate in their own personal development of health, well-being and resilience, as a result of engaging in situations with uncertain outcomes.

Due to the impacts of our modern society the free time and space children have for playing has become increasingly restricted resulting in children today having reduced freedom and independence with which to play.

“What has previously seen as the private activity of children, carried out away from adult gaze, is now the object of public scrutiny and concern”⁹

Never the less running down hills, climbing trees and swinging off branches, jumping streams and playing rough and tumble have all been common in the lives of previous generations of children. These “everyday adventures”, and others like them, which inevitably involve a chance (risk) of injury, should not be restricted due to the context of children’s play changing.

We aim to create places that stimulate, engage and excite children, in which they can explore and adapt and be inspired to play in many different ways. In doing this we will provide “safe *enough*” environments where children can feel confident to play and are unlikely to come to serious physical or emotional harm but in which they can experience risk (and therefore challenge) of their own volition, whenever possible, unconstrained by the potentially limiting actions of adults.

Reasonable Hazards

The types of hazards that children should be exposed to comes down to a question of what is *reasonable*. That which is reasonable in services and facilities for children is different to that which may be considered reasonable in a place of work for adults. Hazards that present a significant probability (risk) of injury are rarely desirable in a place of work where as the opposite may be true in places where children wish to play and engage in challenging activities.

How reasonable it is to allow children to engage with a particular hazard will depend on the acceptability of that hazard given its context. ‘*Good*’ hazards are those which can *reasonably* be expected in relation to the activity or environment and/or offer some form of potential benefit to children when engaging with or negotiating them.

‘*Bad*’ hazards are then the opposite of this – those which children can not *reasonably* be expected to be aware of and which offer little in the way of benefit to the child. No guarantees can ever be made of offering children absolute protection from harm, however children should be protected from hazards that present an unreasonably high probability (risk) of serious injury whenever *reasonably* possible.

Risk-Benefit Assessments

⁹ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008) ‘Tell your mum I saved your life’ *Play Rights Magazine*, Issue 2/08

Decisions about what is *reasonable* and the desirability of children engaging with hazards will be made using a risk-benefit approach. This process involves considering the potential benefits afforded by an opportunity alongside any potentially negative outcomes and then making a judgement about whether the potential for loss or harm is proportional to the benefits i.e. do the potential benefits justify allowing a significant risk of injury to remain?

For the purpose of risk-benefit assessments, benefits can be physical, emotional, social or environmental (and are likely to be a combination of all of these) and may apply to an individual, a group of people, or a community as a whole.

In the context of Health and Safety, risk is primarily associated with the potential for physical or emotional harm to occur and involves considering the likelihood of any potential injury together with the potential severity of that injury. However, risk could also refer to an environmental or social loss. For example, an individual or organisation may risk their reputation or could risk a financial loss. These 'associated' risks should also be considered when making risk-benefit assessments.

'Dynamic' (Primary) Risk - Benefit Assessments

As humans our primary method of risk management is to assess hazards as they appear in front of us and to decide on appropriate action based upon the hazard and its context at any given moment. Dynamic risk assessment refers to this ongoing process of risk management in a rapidly changing environment.

Due to children's playful behaviour being spontaneous and unpredictable we cannot reasonably be expected to anticipate and plan for all the uncertainties children will engage with through their play. We therefore support the professional judgements of those working with children and recognise that these individuals will often be best placed to make decisions about hazards as they materialize. In doing this staff should aim to balance the need for intervention to prevent harm with the benefits of children experiencing uncertainty for themselves.

It is important to recognise that individual perceptions of risk are subjective and that one person's tolerance for risk may be different from another. To support them in making informed decisions, and to encourage consistency in practice, staff will be given access to risk management training and guidance will be produced (or adopted) relating to a range of play opportunities and activities.

'Paper' (Secondary) Risk - Benefit Assessments

Paper-based (or secondary) risk assessments provide the opportunity for teams to reflect together to agree their approach to certain kinds of risk taking behaviours and can therefore help to address issues before they arise. As part of the risk management cycle, paper based risk assessments should be used to respond to issues identified through practice or to plan an agreed approach to previously anticipated hazards.

Paper based risk assessments can inform future practice following thorough discussions with relevant staff. These assessments should be based on knowledge of the play process, the dynamic risk-benefit assessment process, sound reflective

practice, evidence of potential benefits and evidence about the probability (risk) of harm. The outcome of a paper-based risk assessment will be the development or adoption of appropriate procedures, staff training, guidance, or policy changes that help to describe how that hazard is to be managed.

The risk-benefit assessment pro-forma we will use allows for the consideration of generic hazards and is therefore not specific to particular sites. Individual play provision sites are risk-managed through a range of methods within the risk management cycle, including dynamic risk-benefit assessments, regular site checks and specific operational procedures (for example, fire lighting guidelines or tree swing guidance).

Reasonable Controls

During the risk-benefit process it may be necessary to identify control measures in order to reduce risk of harm to an acceptable level. However, the control measures that can reasonably be implemented will depend on the resources available and the cost of any potential control measures must be justified by being proportional to the risk of harm involved. For example, on unstaffed sites intermittent checks can be made to identify and manage hazards. However, the frequency of these checks will depend on what can reasonably be achieved given the resources available, the type of facility and its location.

Prior to the implementation of control measures consideration should also be given to any potentially negative impacts that may result from making that intervention. It is important that children's need to use their environment in novel and unexpected ways is not constrained in the search for providing absolute protection from injury.

Children's Capability

Children are capable of managing some risk for themselves and there is a need to avoid excessive adulteration of children's desire to experience uncertainty and challenge. How capable children are at negotiating risk will be dependant on their age, capabilities and previous experiences. Children are likely to require access to increasing risk as their competency develops to ensure they continue to have opportunities to challenge themselves.

The risk of harm it is *reasonable* to allow will depend on considerations of these factors and, as a result, these factors should be considered when making risk-benefit assessments.

Conclusion

- There is intrinsic value in children experiencing uncertainty and personal challenge through their play.
- We recognise that children are capable of managing some risk for themselves and that their competency will develop as their experience grows.
- Children need to feel free to experience risk of their own volition and they will only be able to do this if adults allow some degree of uncertainty to remain.

- There is a need for balance between ensuring appropriate levels of protection and preserving reasonable levels of risk.
- We aim to manage risk so that whenever reasonably possible the risk of harm children are exposed to is proportional to the potential benefits associated with the situation.
- Any potential controls measures must be justified by being proportional to the risk involved and consideration should be given to any negative impacts that could arise from implementing these controls.
- Our risk management system incorporates a number of different elements which work together, enabling us to continuously improve our practice.

Figure 1: Risk Management System

