



7 RISKY PLAY

For children to play during their early years is a natural adaptation for them to explore their surroundings, seeking opportunities to engage with others and challenge their judgements. Risky play is a natural concept of children's play, which can be defined as a, 'thrilling and exciting opportunity that involves a risk of physical injury, testing limits and exploring boundaries' (Sandseter, 2007; Little & Wyver, 2008).

Activities that could be suggested as risky are jumping from heights, climbing, sliding, using tools, or hanging upside down. It is common within early year settings to be aware that health and safety regulations may obstruct children from these vital forms of play.

A Challenge or a Hazard?

Risk can be perceived by many to have a negative outcome; however, many positives can come from taking risks. Therefore, it can be helpful to think of risk as being divided into two parts:

- **A CHALLENGE:** something obvious to the child where they can determine their ability and decide whether to take that risk.
- **A HAZARD:** something unseen or not obvious to the child that often results in injury.

Research has suggested that BOTH are risks! Some hazards may have value in that they can be an opportunity for learning. It is important to break down each hazard focussing on each beneficial element, while assessing the level of risk it poses, i.e.

- Do they need to be removed or modified?
- Is this acceptable because it offers opportunity for children to gain benefits?
- Can this hazard be managed as a challenge?
- What hazards should be identified to enhance children's potential?

Play is great for children's well-being and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childrens-play-july-2012.pdf>

Why is Risky Play Important?

Involvement in risky play gives children the opportunity to access risks and manage situations allowing children to begin to analyse their personal judgements. Children start to find out through judgmental thinking if they are capable of jumping from a certain height, if they are strong enough to climb a tree or walk over a narrow beam. Risky play allows children to extend their limits and learn life skills. Movements which are fun, including climbing, sliding, balancing and jumping are activities that can help develop vital motor skills. Risky play can also help children by growing their confidence, problem solving, social development, balance, self esteem and developing curiosity to name but a few!

Various feelings can be associated with risky play such as fun, excitement, pride, thrills and achievement.

Risk / Benefit

Effective risk assessment and management requires:

- Judging the probability of coming to harm.
- The severity of that harm.
- The benefits, rewards or outcomes of the activity.
- Observing the children and identifying those who need a greater challenge or specific support.
- Establishing and displaying expectations for behaviour.
- Actively encouraging children to assess risks and possible consequences.
- Establishing a systematic maintenance program.

If a Risk / Benefit Assessment based on the above is completed and it is found that the benefits outweigh the risks then there is the opportunity to allow the child to take part in the activity.

By weighing up the positives as well as the negatives of risks in a play area, providers are more likely to be able to provide managed risk which is engaging, developmentally appropriate and beneficial for children of all ages.

Smart Play Network Members Support

Member you have access to telephone and email support. For more information about the topics covered in this guidance sheet, or any other queries you may have about your project, please contact us using: 0131 554 2620 or admin@smartplaynetwork.org