



**Statutory framework requirement: The early learning goals; physical development**  
Children show good control and co-ordination in large and small movements. They move



## **Risky play policy**

Play England state ‘children need and want to take risks when they play. Providers should strike a balance between the risks and the benefits’.

In order to address risk, we need to ensure that we prioritize the identification of real and actual hazards. In particular, risky play is hugely important for children. But for many, when we hear the words risky play, our thoughts will often turn towards health and safety before anything else. In some circumstances risk management and the perceived need to remove all risk has stifled children’s opportunities for risky play that is vital to development. In Ofsted’s Annual Report published in December 2018, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman, said:

*While it is a basic expectation of any institution that cares for children to carry out proper risk assessments, some level of risk is an essential part of childhood. Without it, we stifle children’s natural inquisitiveness and their opportunities to learn and develop and deny them those opportunities to build that muscular strength and dexterity. We hope that nurseries and other childcare settings take a common sense approach to managing risk.*

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) also state:

*If you believe some of the stories you hear, health and safety is all about stopping any activity that might possibly lead to harm. This is not our vision of sensible health and safety - we want to save lives, not stop them.*

A hazard is anything that may cause harm under certain circumstances, such as chemicals, electricity, working with ladders, or an open drawer for instance. The risk is the chance, high or low, that somebody could be harmed by these and other hazards, together with an indication of how serious the harm could be.

Risky play is more than activities that may, or may not, result in a child hurting themselves. It is not about hazards that must be eliminated in the name of health and safety. In fact, risk, whilst not referred to explicitly, is reflected in the ‘characteristics of effective learning;’ for example, **playing and exploring** is about ‘having a go, investigating and experiencing things’ – these are risky activities for a young child when every new experience is untested and the skills required have yet to be fully mastered. When children are playing they test their physical skills, rehearse ideas and set their own challenges.

Play, and in particular, risky play must belong to children. It helps them to dare to learn, to take considered chances and to make sense of their world. It should not be defined by adults whose main focus is health and safety. Where this is the case, the adults may inadvertently change the focus from risky play with its potential for meaningful active learning, to safe play where the outcomes are predetermined by the adults.



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As children play they develop 'risk perception' which in turn builds confidence in their own abilities and gives them the essential skills they will need to stay safe in situations that may actually harm them. Unfortunately there are fewer and fewer opportunities for children to really test themselves – but more importantly to decide what risks to take and how to approach them.

## Joining in

*A group of children aged 24-30 months are playing in the sand tray. Yashvi is 28 months old and relatively new to the group. She has been watching the other children from a distance for some time, glancing over every now and again as she looks through a book in the book corner. Her key person Sam thinks that she wants to join in, so she decides to intervene. She takes Yashvi by the hand and leads her towards the sand tray. Yashvi is reluctant to go and pulls away from Sam, she retreats back to the book corner and continues to play on her own.*

Something as simple as entering an unfamiliar social situation is a 'risk' for a young child and one that they will in time, and with practice, learn to manage. Yashvi has been observing the other children, absorbing and processing information about how they are playing, and undoubtedly beginning to develop a strategy in her mind for how she might join in. She will test such strategies many times as she develops her social skills, and will no doubt make many mistakes along the way that she can learn from. As her communication skills become more refined she will possibly ask to join in, she will learn to take turns and share, and to consider other ways in which she can engage her peers.

## Why is risky play avoided?

We all have a responsibility to protect children and to keep them safe from harm. This sometimes requires us to make decisions on their behalf and, in some situations, stopping them from trying to do something when they are playing because we believe the risk of harm is too great. Children are vulnerable and unable to judge risk as they have not yet developed the cognitive ability required to apply past experience and knowledge to a situation and make an informed judgment about what may happen. However, they can only develop this experience and knowledge through risky play.

Trusting your child to the care of another person is a difficult decision to take. Parents have every right to expect that when their child is being cared for within an early years provision, they are at the very least safe from harm. Parental expectations are also greatly influenced by their experiences as children, which is a factor that influences their choice of childcare in the first place. Being risk averse may lead some parents to choosing a nursery that is sited in a fenced compound, equipped with a wealth of toddler sized plastic representations of real-life, which would keep their children 'perfectly safe', instead of a nursery that has a great outdoor ethos, perhaps with direct access to a beach or wood, or places an emphasis



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on children being able to use tools, therefore, naturally exciting and stimulating with numerous opportunities to learn and develop.

Practitioners need to consider whether they are discouraging or even disallowing children from taking risks. There is no argument with the fact that our role as adults is to keep children safe, but it is also our role to help children to keep themselves safe.

In any situation that involves risk, the child is the last line of defence. They have to learn to manage risk and this is what risky play enables them to do in a manner and at a pace that suits them best and is appropriate for them. For example, a child will often stand back and watch an older or more confident child climb the ladder to the big slide for weeks before attempting to do so themselves. This is a good example of a child identifying a new challenge, assessing the likelihood of harm but also taking into consideration the important 'risk benefit' which is the delight and thrill of sliding at speed down the other side of the ladder.

It is certainly the case that family leisure time is more likely to be structured with a visit to a site, theme park, play barn or other venue where all hazards have been removed and children are directed in how they use equipment to avoid any chance of harm occurring. So there are fewer real opportunities for children to really test themselves, but more importantly, to decide what risks to take and how to approach them.

### **Play is a process not a product**

*Play is dynamic, it constantly surprises and delights children as they test boundaries and revel in its endless possibilities. Play allows children to test their physical skills, to rehearse ideas and to set their own challenges. Play belongs to children, helping them to learn, to take risks and to make sense of the world around them.*

If we consider the above statement, we see that play is not something we should structure for children. Play should belong to children and be on their terms. One of the many risks a baby takes is driven by their innate need to play, as they role to reach something that has caught their attention, as they take their first steps towards a toy despite falling down time and time again, probably with a bump and a few tears, as they move away from their trusted adult, their secure base for the first few times, because the need to play and to explore is so strong within them.

### **Why is risky play important?**

Children need risk. It is an important part of their play; they will take risky decisions, actions and interactions with others, identify risky behaviour in others and will develop confidence through taking risks. If children's environments do not offer sufficient risk and challenges, they will seek it out elsewhere. Trial, error, failure and success all contribute towards resilience, helping to ensure that children keep on trying and are willing to 'have



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a go', in other words, risky play and the characteristics of effective teaching and learning, go hand in hand.

Once children make a decision to take a risk in their play, they must evaluate their decision, and taking time to reflect on the outcome of their action is incredibly important. Thinking about what to do differently next time leads to strategic, thoughtful risk-taking in the future. Every time they go through the process they will strengthen their independent thinking skills.

By taking risks children start to develop age-appropriate strength, coordination and good body awareness. To constantly prevent children from taking risks will lead to some delays in sensory and motor development that may not have been an issue if they had been given daily exposure to these experiences. This can also lead to poor spatial awareness and, without an exposure to risk-taking, children can become more accident-prone and unsafe in the long run.

Reasonable risk-taking also allows children to develop the assertiveness and self-confidence they need to participate positively in social settings. Practice and more practice helps them to learn to balance assertiveness with respect and compassion. While voicing an opinion or thought is important in social circles, over time, children will recognise that peers may have alternative ideas to consider.

It also results in a willingness to make mistakes and learn from failure. For instance, a child grazes his knee climbing a rock, but in the process, learns that he can still reach the top. This assurance that a child can overcome obstacles translates to other risky-life decisions presented in childhood. It is important that children learn the excitement of success, the coping skills needed to handle failure and the perseverance to try and try again, even if it is uncomfortable and hard.

## Pushing boundaries

*Jack (4 years old) is on a walk with four other children and their key persons Ellie and Raj. Along the edge of the Park is a shallow stream with a gently sloping bank on each side. The stream is no more than two feet wide in some places and up to five feet wide in others. Jack wants to jump across the stream but his key person Raj says 'no'. Jack insists that he can do it and that he 'really, really wants to'. Ellie turns to Raj and says, 'let him have a go, what's the worst that could happen?' She turns to Jack and asks him how deep he thinks the stream is and does he think it will go over the top of his wellies?*



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*Jack pauses and looks across the stream. 'It is not deep', he says, 'I can see the bottom'. Ellie knows this is correct and tells him that he can 'have a go then'. Jack walks along the edge of the stream for a while before deciding on a point that he thinks he can jump across. 'Can you help me?' he asks. Raj steps across the stream and holds out her hand to Jack who then jumps across the stream. After two more goes he says, 'I can do it on my own now'. Jack continues to jump backwards and forwards across the stream, the other children soon join in with much laughing and squealing.*

*After several more minutes, Jack looks for more challenge by attempting to jump the stream at a wider point. He overstretches his self and slips down the bank, landing with one boot fully in the water. This scares him and he looks to Raj for reassurance, 'your legs are not long enough yet for that jump' says Raj, 'come back to this bit, it's narrower'. Raj helps Jack up and he stands with her for a few minutes before joining in with his friends again.*

*Jack and the other children have tested their physical limitations in a safe environment, there has been enough risk to thrill them but the consequences of failure have not caused harm.*

## **Risky play opportunities**

- *Children need to make risky decisions in their play* –this is about independent thinking and self-reflection. Children demonstrate this from a very young age when they first let go of the edge of the sofa to reach for a toy, despite falling over many times, or when they first leave their carer's side to join their peers at play. In time children learn to reflect on their decisions. Did the risk lead to success? What needs to be done differently next time? Each time a child goes through this process it strengthens their independent thinking skills. Practitioners must give children time to make their own decisions rather than assuming that they always know best.
- *Children will take risky actions in their play* - when a group of children construct a bridge of wooden blocks and planks, the practitioner may see that it is unstable, and may intervene to prevent the children from attempting to stand on it. But the children will learn more if they are able to test it for themselves and experience the consequences first hand.
- *Children will have risky interactions with others during play* – children often take risks while playing with others. It allows them to develop confidence among their peers. The risk itself might be to stand up to a child who wants to take their toy. Reasonable risk-taking allows children to develop the assertiveness and self-confidence they need to participate in the early years setting. Practice and more practice will help them to balance assertiveness with empathy, recognising that their peers may have other ideas and other needs.
- *Children will develop confidence through taking risks* – every small success goes some way to compensating for the many failures that a child experiences when they are mastering a new skill. The first time a child climbs to the top of the ladder on the big slide will probably have been preceded by several failed attempts. The child may even stop trying for a while, until they feel physically and mentally ready to try again. Reasonable



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risk-taking in play results in a willingness to make mistakes and learn from failure. It's vital that children learn the thrill and reward of success, the strategies they will need to manage failure and the perseverance to try and try again, even if it is difficult.

There is little doubt that when practitioners consistently prevent children from taking risks there are consequences that in themselves are a hazard to children's development. By taking risks children develop age appropriate strength, coordination and body awareness. Without daily opportunities to engage in risky play children are likely to become more accident prone, they have less spatial awareness and are less likely to be able to fully engage the characteristics of effective learning.

Risk management and health and safety considerations will always be a priority, and are of course important. But when we begin to place risky play in the same context as risk management, we are in fact taking the focus away from the real health and safety hazards.

### In summary

- **Understand** what 'risky play' really is and stop seeing it as a health and safety issue.
- **Enable** children to take acceptable risk when they play, knowing when to step back and when to step in.
- **Facilitate** opportunities for children to make judgments for themselves.
- **Observe** the learning that is happening and look for the *risk benefit* before stopping any activity.
- **Provide** challenge and let children make mistakes

This policy was created by the Early Years Manager: Debbie Arnett and adopted by Hartfield Playschool staff and Trustees in September 2018.

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