

Developing Quality Practice Outdoors

Managing Hazard and Risk

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Best Working Practices

Model Risk Assessments

Introduction

These guidelines are based on the knowledge that ‘risk’ is a normal part of everyday life and that children are best equipped for life when they understand how to assess and manage risk for themselves – see Play Policy. They promote high quality practice which is full of rich and exciting opportunities that challenge children’s physical, emotional and cognitive abilities.

We provide rich experiences outdoor everyday, which are secure and challenging. We manage risk effectively as part of our everyday routines. Unfortunately, some settings attempt to manage risk by removing the hazards.

The following information will help to develop and maintain high-quality practice with the confidence that children are safe and secure. It reflects the fact that what young children might be expected to do, or how they may behave when outdoors, should be informed by observational assessment and knowledge of young children’s typical play and the developmental stages.

Managing Risk Outdoors

As Early Years practitioners we are aware of hazards and risk and have a realistic understanding of potential injuries. This knowledge and understanding will control and manage many elements of risk and so eliminate an unforeseen or negligent act. In Health and Safety we can then be seen to be acting and responding with ‘Due Diligence’.

Potential Hazards Outdoors – Injury from Slips, Trips and Falls

Hazard – The chances are that some, if not all, of the ground surface used outdoors will be uneven.

Control – Check the area prior to use.

- Tarmac – the surface should be in good condition with no broken area or trip hazards.
- Paving – this should be stable with no wobbling flags and no significant trip hazards.
- Soft Areas – such as sponge tarmac, these should be in good condition with no hidden trip hazards, particularly where the sponge joins a solid surface.
- Soft surfaces – such as tree bark, these should be deep enough to give some cushioning with no hidden sharp or solid items in it such as stones.

Contact with Chemicals

Hazard – These could be cleaning agents, moss cleaner, preservatives used on wooden resources or chemicals such as fertiliser, weed killer or pesticides. These could result in chemical burns, vomiting or more serious injuries.

Control – Awareness of substances used. This should be part of the setting or school COSHH (Control of Substances Hazardous to Health) assessment. If grounds maintenance is carried out by a member of staff or volunteer this can be controlled quite easily by stipulating what is used and when, for example during holiday time. If ground maintenance is carried out under contract then the contractor should provide a list of substances used, these should be agreed and the timing of use discussed to lower the risk as much as possible.

Contact with Sharp Ends

Hazard – In your outdoor area if there are shrubs, hedges or trees, ground maintenance will take place from time to time. How these plants or trees are pruned is very important for children and adults alike. If outdoor activities include growing sunflowers, peas, beans, tomato plants etc., then they will need some support, perhaps using sticks or twigs. These may not be easily seen and could cause serious eye injuries to children or adults.

Control – Check the area prior to use. Make sure plants have not been damaged so causing sharp ends. Arrange plants so soft foliage is near heavily used areas and woodier shrubs are more distant. Let woody shrubs grow taller to reduce the risk of face or eye injuries. When using support twigs or sticks, place large brightly coloured soft items on the end of the twigs such as soft foam, rubber balls or small plant pots for example. These give interest, colour and protect ends. As with woody shrubs using long canes so the ends are above head height also greatly reduces the risk of injury.

Infection from Soil and Plants

Hazard – Some of the outdoor areas may be accessed out of hours by animals or unauthorised persons. Hazardous plants may be present.

Control – Check the area prior to use. Any area accessed by children should first be checked for any animal or human waste which should then be removed. If a child has an incident with results in broken skin this must be covered and should be treated by a trained first-aider to avoid infection from bacteria within the soil.

Look closely at the tree, plants, shrubs or bulbs in the area, check to see if any of them are poisonous and therefore toxic or irritants which cause rashes. Children should be discouraged from eating plants without first checking with the practitioner to see if they are safe. This is a life skill and learning aid. Look to move hazardous plants away from the main area and access them under supervision. Young children's experiences of highly toxic plants such as Deadly Nightshade and toadstools should be restricted to books.

Contact with Unauthorised Persons

Hazard – Whilst playing outside children may be more visible to adults passing by. An adult may make an approach and talk to the child/ren. The adult may be harmless, perhaps a visitor or new parent trying to find their way in. However, the adult may potentially be a danger.

Control – Access and awareness. The level of security for the outdoor provision should be enough to slow down, if not stop, access. There should be good levels of communication between staff outdoors and inside. All staff should be made aware of what action to take whilst outside if an unknown adult approaches and know how to seek assistance from staff inside quickly when needed. Two trustworthy children to be sent inside to call for assistance. Or a Walkie Talkie to be taken outside with the adult to call for help if needed.

Contact with Animals

Hazard – Wild or feral animals may access the area or have nests or feeding areas in the outdoor provision. Whilst some wildlife is a good learning experience, bites or contact with body waste could result in infection. Larger animals such as dogs may be more hazardous.

Control – Awareness of animals in the area. Most wild animals are timid and will want to get away from people. Animals should not be cornered or trapped where they cannot escape, so always leave a very clear exit route for them. If they are feeding or nesting nearby they are best viewed from a distance as they are likely to want to protect their territory. Remember that whilst animals such as rats, squirrels or rabbits, may look fun and interesting, they can become aggressive. They have very sharp teeth and claws that will cut through even thick leather gloves, they also carry high levels of very hazardous bacteria. Hedgehogs, whilst not particularly aggressive, can be infected with blood-sucking pests such as fleas and ticks. If dogs, either individually or in a pack, access the area it is important that children and staff should retreat back indoors.

The Loss of a Child or Children

Hazard – A child or small group may wander off unnoticed. This is more likely if there is another incident in progress, such as staff dealing with a child who is injured, or at the beginning or end of each session when parents/carers are coming and going.

Control – Security and adequate staffing levels. The outside provision should be fenced and gated. Gates should be fitted with a securing mechanism that is out of reach of children. The method of communication between staff outdoors and those indoors should be agreed, to enable a request for assistance or support to be notified and handled immediately. For further information see School Policy.

Contact with Insects

Hazard – In most cases contact with insects is a good learning experience for children. However, a very small minority of children (or adults) may experience an extreme reaction to bites, stings or the residue from insects.

Control – Awareness of allergies. As part of the child's personal record, allergies should be listed as it is important that staff are aware of allergies and how to deal with an incident. This may need to include additional first-aid training, for example in the use of epidural pens. Don't forget these reactions may also need to be dealt with in adults.

Weather

Hazard – The EYFS document required children to have access to the outdoors in all but exceptional weather conditions. An assessment of the hazards should include:-

- Excessive Heat and Sun – Causing sunburn, dehydration, sunstroke and overheating.
- Strong Winds on Sunny Days – Can mask the effects of the sun causing excessive burning.
- Strong Winds – Causing items to blow over or fall from height such as branches from trees, roof tiles, or resources to collapse or blow over. Blowing debris and dust causing impact injuries or dust in eyes.
- Rain – Generating additional slip and trip hazards and making children and staff cold and wet.
- Cold, Frost, Ice, Snow – Causing excessive cooling of the body and increased risk of slips, trips and falls.

Control

- Sun and Heat – Look to protect children from prolonged exposure by generating shaded areas and by providing hats and appropriate clothing for arms and legs. If using sun cream/block be aware of how long the cream is effective for and reapply as needed. Some children or staff may have a reaction to the substance, particularly if it includes an insect repellent.

- Strong Winds – As far as possible, building maintenance should be sufficiently adequate to ensure there are no loose roof coverings. Trees may appear in good condition, but large, well established trees should be checked periodically to ensure they are healthy and in good condition. Any debris or items that are likely to collapse or be blown in the wind should be removed.
- Rain – Appropriate waterproof clothing is provided, initially by parents/carers or by the setting or school, which should include waterproof footwear, coats, possibly hats and gloves. Time in the rain is limited and an area to dry out and warm up is available.
- Cold, Frost, Ice, Snow – Appropriate clothing to be provided. Time exposed to cold limited and an area to warm up is available.

Best Working Practices Outdoors

Best working practices are supported by staff who understand the nature of outdoors, know their role outdoors and are effective in managing risk. They include the use of risk assessment which identify hazards and level of risk associate with each activity, and the ability of those involved in the activity. By using the guidance in this section which promotes the use of ‘Best Working Practice’, hazards and risks associate with outdoor play can be reduced as far as is ‘reasonably practical’.

General Considerations

Staffing

- Ensure adequate staffing levels.
- Use trained staff.

Policy and Procedures

- Provide Health and Safety training for all staff, including any volunteer or student assistance.
- Ensure staff members have been made aware of the risk assessment and working practices for the children and themselves.
- Undertake adequate Risk Assessments for the hazards and risk the staff members are likely to come into contact with.

Space and Resources

- Provide resources that are age and stage appropriate.
- Maintain the condition of resources.
- Maintain the condition of the area (particularly important if the area is accessed by unauthorised persons out of hours).
- Ensure suitable and well maintained ground surfaces/s.
- Maintain boundaries, gates and other forms of access.

Daily Considerations

The previous section highlights general considerations for making good risk assessments and explores best working practices outdoors. It is also important to consider best working practices and risk assessment for practitioners who will have daily contact with resources and the outside area including:

- staff being aware of wear and tear on resources and removing defectives items.
- staff being able to move, set-up, check, use, break-down and store resources safely.
- staff being able to deal with situations such as contamination of the area or a defective resource.
- staff being aware of how the changing mix of the resources can affect the hazards and risk in the area.
- staff knowing how to speak with a child who is handling a resource inappropriately.
- staff knowing how to seek assistance when dealing with an injury or illness of a child.
- staff knowing what to do when the site is accessed by unauthorised persons.
- staff knowing what precautions to take if the site is accessed by wild or feral animals or if animals are nesting nearby.
- staff knowing how to respond to sudden changes in weather conditions.
- staff being mindful of how ground condition and weather affect the resources.

Resource Management

Resources used to stimulate and support children's play outdoors are made from a variety of different materials. Many will be made from natural materials like wood or cotton, whilst others are made from plastic or metal. To gain the most from each of these types of resources and to extend their useful life, they require different care and management practice.

The following information will support you in maintaining the safety and upkeep of your outdoor resources:

Resources that hold water or are used in and around water

Resource Issues – Resources such as pipes, tubes, funnels, bowls, bucket and water containers are usually made of plastic which means they will not rot, however, they will start to grow mildew if stored away damp for long periods of time. Mildew is a toxic fungal growth which can cause stomach upsets if handled or ingested by children whilst playing.

Pipes, tubes and some water containers that have little air in or around them will begin to look unpleasant as the mildew takes hold, and this is a sure sign that they need cleaning before use. Brooms, cloths and sponges made from materials such as cottons and synthetic fabrics, can also become infected with mould.

Storage Suggestions – Plastic resources, such as those listed above, are generally used every day as part of the continuous play environment. If a solution of sterilising fluid and water (such as Milton, or a suitable alternative) is regularly flushed through and then rinsed, perhaps every 4/5 weeks, this should help to protect from mildew. Please Note: always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Products containing bleach should not be used as a cleaning fluid.

If however, the resources are to be stored for long period of time, perhaps a week or more, than they need to be allowed to dry first by placing them in a warm or airy space.

- Tubing should be unwound and placed over a suitable hook to dangle down.
- Pipes and guttering should be stored upright so that any water can drain away quickly.
- Water containers should have their caps removed and the container turned upside down, drained and allowed to dry.
- Larger items such as funnels, buckets, bowls and brooms should be wiped dry before stacking and storing.

Cloths and sponges should be hung up to dry fully before they are packed away and will need to be completely replaced at regular intervals. Children are likely to place cloths and sponges in their mouths, and although this should be discouraged, they must not be used with cleaning chemicals that could make a child ill if ingested.

Resources that are intended to stay dry but may get wet due to splashing or rain.

Resource Issues – As already highlighted, resources made from plastic will start to grow mildew if they are stored away for long periods of time damp. The fungal growth can cause sickness, and the resources will start to look unpleasant. Resources such as cones and crates are often used as part of everyday provision and may become wet with use.

Natural materials such as wool, fabric and cardboard, that become wet or damp will rot if left unattended. This includes resources such as rope, wooden planks and frames, carpet tiles, rugs, pillows, blankets and den covers. In the case of cardboard, large cardboard boxes and tubes, this will break down quite quickly if stored or used wet for long periods of time.

Storage Suggestions – Many of these resources will be used as part of everyday provision, and may become damp or wet as they are being used. It is important that they are wiped down at the end of the day. If any of the resources are to be stored for a week or more, they should be completely dried out prior to being stacked and stored away.

Wooden planks and frames should be allowed to dry out naturally if possible. Over time, the wood grain may begin to protrude and the surface become rough. If this occurs, once dry, the rough surface may be rubbed down using sandpaper which will bring back a smooth surface. As part of a natural process, wooden resources may crack or bend (warp), and they should be checked before use to ensure they are safe to handle.

Cardboard tubes will last much longer if they are kept dry at all times. If they become saturated with water, they should be taken out of use and allowed to dry in their natural shape. Cardboard should not be stored in a damp area as it will soak up moisture.

Covers and drapes will be made of both natural and synthetic materials. Those in use should not be treated with waterproofing chemicals as these chemicals may be toxic or irritants that may have an ill effect on children. As far as possible try to keep fabric pieces dry. If they become damp or wet, at the end of the session hang them up to dry in a warm or airy place. Once they are dry they should be folded and placed in a dry, airy container. Damp fabric or fabric stored away in plastic bags and sealed containers is more likely to become mouldy, particularly if they are kept in an unheated building.

Periodically these resources will need to be washed, causing colours to fade or run. This is a natural process. For best results, wash separately in a cool wash and allow to dry naturally as some fabrics shrink when dried using a tumble dryer.

Additional Considerations

If plastic resources are left in the open or stored in cold conditions, they may be more brittle until they warm up. Care should be taken when they are very cold as they may crack more easily if exposed to hard, sharp impact shock.

It is equally important to consider the effects of the sun. Many materials, including plastic, are affected by long periods of exposure to the sun. This can result in loss of colour and flexibility.

If plastic or polythene objects are stored for long period in hot conditions, for example in an outbuilding during hot sunny days, care should be taken to ensure they stay in their original shape. Items that are squashed together on top of one another may not go back to their original shape, which will reduce their future use.

If resources are used on abrasive surfaces, they may start to wear and rough surfaces appear on them that could prickle a child's skin. It may be possible to smooth these edges or surfaces using fine sandpaper.

Always check resources for wear and damage before they are used, monitor their use and check them when putting them away.

An outdoor risk assessment will be completed to include benefits and reasons for allowing activity to take place and to be saved in shared drive.