



Rich fields of learning



Butterknowle Primary School Opal Risk Assessment

1 - POLICY

The new Children's Plan from the DCSF recognises that 'children and young people need to enjoy their childhood as well as grow up prepared for adult life.' The new draft national play policy and strategy states that 'the Government attaches considerable importance to children having recreational time during the school day' and goes on to say 'there are ways in which the nature and quality of children's opportunities can be enhanced'.

In relation to concerns about over-protective health and safety regimes The draft national play policy states 'The Government is committed to addressing these concerns and to tackling safety issues and perceptions that are preventing children from enjoying play'.

The Council has made a corporate commitment to supporting improved play opportunities in schools in its Play Policy (2006). Official recognition of the Play Policy or adoption of their own play policy, provides schools with a set of values and principles to be applied when making decisions and judgements about play.

2 - LEGISLATION

The relevant legislation is the Health and Safety at Work Act, which requires that the employer ensure the health, safety and welfare of persons at work and those affected by the work, and the Management Regulations, which requires that a 'suitable and sufficient' risk assessment be completed on work activities. Although play is not actually a work activity it is part of the educational process and is therefore viewed as an activity affected by the work of the Local Authority and must therefore be subject to a risk assessment and this risk assessment must be recorded.

3 - RISK ASSESSMENT

Risk assessment is the process followed to produce a safe system of work. It needs to be undertaken systematically, the significant findings need to be recorded, actions identified must then be introduced and the risk assessment must be reviewed regularly or revised when it is no longer felt to be valid.

In schools the significant findings are normally identified by considering the potential issues and how these can be managed within the school environs. The decisions made then being compiled into a safe practice document.

4 - DEFINITIONS

The following are the definitions for terms used in the document and some more detailed explanation where appropriate.

a) Free Range Play – Free range play is where pupils are given permission to use and explore the school grounds or at least part of them without direct supervision.

b) Level of Supervision – The number of supervisors (competent adults) undertaking supervision indicated as a ratio to number of pupils being supervised.

c) Type of Supervision – This can be one of the following:

Direct – This is where the supervisor(s) will be able to see all areas of play, and be close at hand, circa a maximum of 20 metres away. Some play features in these areas such as play houses or planting may offer semi-hidden opportunities.

Remote – This is where supervisors are located at a relatively static location some distance from an activity, e.g. supervisor on the playground and activity 20 metres or more away.

Ranging – This is where the supervisor moves around the play area, usually on a set course/schedule. The distance from pupils therefore differing but can be 20 metres or more away.

d) Supervisor – This is the competent adult providing the supervision and can be a teacher, teaching assistant, lunch break supervisor or a volunteer. In each case they will have been assessed as competent to provide the supervision necessary and been trained on what is acceptable practice, what to do if unacceptable practice occurs and what to do in case of accidents.

5 - ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED (RISK ASSESSMENT PROCESS)

The following are the questions to be answered and the issues that impact on these answers are identified to help schools decide whether free range play is an option and if so what then needs to be covered by school procedures.

5.1 - Is free range play to be progressed?

The initial consideration is whether the School Leadership wishes to progress free range play or whether the existing arrangements for play are felt to be suitable. Although free range play is being encouraged there is no requirement that it be introduced, whilst it is emphasised that to be effective free range play needs to be supported by the Schools' Leadership.

In addition to getting the School Leadership's commitment it is also essential to consider the parents' wishes. It is advised that parents are notified if the School Leadership decide they want to progress free range play so that the entire school community are aware and committed to it. Most parents are actually very supportive of the development of free range play in a managed environment, but do need reassurance that risks have been considered.

If a commitment is made then move on to 5.2 but if not then this is the end of the assessment.

5.2 – Are the school grounds suitable for use as a free range play area?

It is advised that in order to answer this question the grounds be surveyed and that a detailed plan be produced. The plan needs to:

a) Identify the boundaries to the site - Detail on what the boundary consists of and any weak points in it must be included. Damaged hedges and open fencing in particular are a security issue in respect of pupils wishing to leave the site without authority.

b) Identify plants and trees – The different plants and trees around the site need to be marked on the plan. Information required is the type, particularly important to confirm whether poisonous or not, whether any have berries or fruit which pupils might eat and then if edible whether will be allowed to, and if have any thorns. Also consider whether children would be able to climb the tree or get into hedges etc. and if will be allowed to. Photographs are a good way of better identifying the plants referred to and these can be added to the plan.

c) Identify hidden areas - Some sites have dips in the ground or areas which due to planting cannot be seen from all points, this does not mean they can't be used but this information will help decide on the location of supervisors.

d) Consider if there are any areas that pupils are not allowed – There will probably be few but some schools have conservation areas or small gardens where pupils should only be in under direct supervision.

e) Identify fixed items for use by pupils at play – This will be fixed play equipment, seating, pagodas and sports equipment, e.g. basketball hoop.

NB The plan is the basic information gathering phase of the risk assessment process.

Once the above information is available a decision will be made on whether the grounds can be used. It is anticipated that in most cases the decision will be that the grounds can be used, in which case proceed to 5.3.

5.3 – What age of pupils can play safely?

Having identified what the site contains and decided that the school grounds can be used for free range play then a judgement will need to be made on what age of pupil free range play is suited for.

The individual making this assessment will be someone who appreciates how pupils play, e.g. an experienced teacher, and when they do this they should also start to consider what rules might be necessary, e.g. no climbing trees with branches hanging over boundary fences or those above concrete planters, no throwing of stones at one another etc. These rules will be necessary to ensure a consistent approach by the supervisors.

With regards a suitable age for free range play, because this depends on the awareness of risks and physical ability of the pupils, e.g. a junior aged pupil should be aware not to eat poisonous berries whilst a younger child may whilst some climbing activities require physical coordination which younger children may lack, the following advice is given. It is not however viewed as absolute but will hopefully provide a reference point.

For Reception/Nursery Pupils (Under 5) – No free range play. The view is that they are generally less steady on their feet so more prone to falling over and tend to be unaware of risks. They will also usually be in a separate enclosed play space and no parental expectation that would be outside of this area unless under direct supervision.

For Infant aged Pupils (KS1) – Free range play limited to more open fields with some use of hedges, borders and informal natural areas. Pupils tend to have a mix of fixed play equipment whilst use of natural and man-made materials is to be encouraged. Some heavier loose materials like bricks, planks etc, may be unsuitable for the age group as they are difficult for them to carry or manipulate.

For Junior aged Pupils (KS2) – In general terms any of the spaces identified as acceptable for free range play should be available to them as should most materials.

Having decided on what areas are able to be used and by what aged pupils then need to consider supervision

5.4 – What type of supervision is required to support free range play?

The basic recommendations for supervision are for a certain level of competent adults per number of pupils, this previously being indicated to be 1 competent adult per 75 junior aged pupils, 1 competent adult per 30 infant aged pupils and 1 competent adult per 20 nursery pupils.

What schools need to decide however is how to supervise the free range play. The following gives an indication of the factors to be considered for each of the types of supervision that could be used in respect of:

5.4.1 Remote supervision – This will be where staff are situated in places where they can see most of the play area and the activities taking place. This is the best option where there are limited activities on the school grounds but may not be suitable where there are a number of hidden areas. In practice therefore it may mean having more adult supervisors at certain points around the grounds as this means that pupils can choose to play close to an adult or be more adventurous depending on what they want. It does however mean if any incidents occur a member of staff should notice quickly and respond.

5.4.2 Ranging – This will be where adults will be tasked with walking a given route on a timed basis, e.g. circulate the field every 5 minutes or so. Although the route would be known it would be approximate and would allow staff to divert to check on remote spaces whilst at the same time pupils will know an adult will not be far away should they need support.

5.4.3 A combination of Remote and Ranging Supervision – This will involve having some fixed points of supervision and some staff walking around. For most schools where the grounds are substantial or there are hidden points this would be the preferred option.

5.5 – What is required to ensure supervisors are competent to supervise free range play?

In most cases competence will be based on the person having a level of authority with the pupils combined with instruction/training on where they are expected to be, how they are expected to supervise, what is acceptable interaction with the pupils and what to do in the case of accidents/incidents, which will include disciplinary issues.

This will require training to be provided to the supervisors as a group as it is essential that consistency is applied in respect of what is allowed and disallowed. This means that the misuse identified earlier in the risk assessment needs to be discussed and rules established. These rules must also be made clear to the pupils.

Staff should be aware of the benefits of free range play and of their role in deciding how to balance these benefits against the risk of possible harm.

6 - INTRODUCE THE PRACTICE AND REVIEW

Having established what is felt to be the appropriate safe practice it is a case of introducing it and this is best done slowly so that you have a chance to review the practice and the rules. This could be by allowing one year group at a time to exercise free range play or one class at a time, this allowing an opportunity to see how accurate your initial assessment was.

7 - CONCLUSION

The use of school sites for free range play is encouraged as it allows pupils to experience a level of risk in a managed environment in line with current Government. It is however accepted that injuries will occur as a result but these will be relatively minor and happen in a place where support can quickly be obtained. Schools must however have evidence in place that proves they have assessed the risks involved and have practice in place based on this assessment.

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