Balancing Risks and Benefits in Outdoor Learning and Play

A briefing for teachers and practitioners working with children

EMPTY CLASSROOM DAY

By Tim Gill

Front cover image from Mission:Explore Outside the Classroom.
Find out more at: www.missionexplore.net

INTRODUCTION

I was director of the Children's Play Council (now Play England) from 1997 to 2004, when I went freelance. I now write, research, speak and carry out consultancy projects on childhood, with a focus on children's play and free time. My aim is to challenge the false logic of the zero risk childhood, and to make the case for the expansion of children's horizons.

I have campaigned for more child-friendly streets, led the first ever UK Government review on play, helped to write the Mayor of London's planning guidance for outdoor play spaces, debated the nature of childhood on prime-time TV with Robert Winston, made the case for reconnecting children with nature in the UK, Canada and Australia, and led a successful global push for more adventurous, exciting playgrounds. I have spoken to audiences of teachers, parents, planners and decision makers on four continents. I am delighted to be supporting Empty Classroom Day as part of a global movement to get more children learning and playing out of doors. My book *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society* came out in 2007 and my website is at www.rethinkingchildhood.com.

This briefing sets out why a balanced, thoughtful approach to managing risks is needed in children's learning and play. It also introduces risk benefit assessment (RBA) as a suitable response. It is aimed at teachers, childcare workers, playworkers, managers of schools, early years settings and play and childcare facilities, health and safety professionals, risk managers, decision makers and parents.

WHY IS RISK IMPORTANT?

Children of all ages and abilities are naturally curious. They have an appetite for experience, and an urge to explore and understand. They want to find out how the world around them works and what they can do, and to extend their abilities and build their sense of themselves as competent, capable people.

Whenever children learn, they move from what is routine and familiar – and thus potentially boring – to what is less certain, more challenging and hopefully more engaging. This move is especially pronounced, and especially powerful, when children are learning from their own experiences and efforts, as happens in free play and child-initiated and child-led learning activities in outdoor environments.

Getting to grips with new challenges often brings a degree of risk; think of a child learning to take their first steps or to ride a bicycle. These risks can rarely be completely eliminated without also undermining the learning.

Adults arguably underestimate children's ability to manage risk. Even so, when children are given a degree of freedom to play and learn, they often make mistakes. These may in turn lead to accidents, especially in challenging, adventurous situations. However, minor accidents and injuries – from which children make a full recovery – are not in themselves a problem. Indeed children often learn a great deal from them. Overall, outdoor environments are comparatively safe places, and learning and playing out of doors is safer than taking part in many other sports or leisure pursuits.

WHY IS A BALANCED APPROACH NEEDED?

Managing risk in play and learning environments is a complex task. It is quite different to risk management in other contexts like factories. In most workplaces, risks rarely have any inherent benefits. Hence risk management focuses on control measures that reduce the risk of harm to an acceptable level. But in play or learning contexts, exposure to some risks is often a benefit.

Take for example a wobbly footbridge. In a factory or workplace, there would be no good reason to build a bridge that wobbles. Yet in a play area, a wobbly bridge has inherent benefits, even if it leads to more accidents than a rigid bridge. It presents a challenge to children: are they steady enough on their feet – and brave enough – to

cross it?

Such structures create rich learning opportunities, in addition to the intrinsic pleasure of playing on them. They help to develop balance and physical literacy, and – at a higher level – build children's sense of themselves as active, competent people who can overcome everyday obstacles. They test children's courage and determination. They promote intuitive risk management through allowing children to get a sense of their comfort zone (and what it feels like to stretch it). They offer opportunities for experiencing and learning how to handle peer interactions. Crucially, all of this learning will only be realised if a degree of risk is allowed.

Hence at the heart of managing risk is a balancing act between opportunities for learning and play, and safety – or to put it another way, between risks and benefits.

The need for a balanced approach is all the more important because of wider changes in children's everyday lives. The last few decades have seen a decline in the time that children spend out of doors independently. As a result, they have less opportunity to encounter and learn how to manage risks by themselves. Giving children managed opportunities to take risks compensates for this loss of freedom.

> *"Play outdoors teaches young people how to deal with risk and without this they are ill equipped to deal with working life."*
>
> *– Judith Hackitt, former chair of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE)*

WHAT DOES THE LAW REQUIRE?

In simple terms, the law requires those responsible to take reasonable steps to ensure the risks are at an acceptable level. There is no legal requirement to eliminate or minimise risk. The key task is to carry out a 'suitable and sufficient risk assessment', and to act on its findings. What counts as 'suitable and sufficient' – for instance, the type of risk assessment, the level of detail and whether or not it is written down – depends on the circumstances. However, what is expected is a proportionate approach. The HSE makes it clear that health and safety is not about generating excessive paperwork.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF A BALANCED APPROACH?

Adults often restrict children too much because of misplaced anxieties, based on myths or misunderstandings, about what might go wrong and what might happen as a result. The government, the HSE and bodies like the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) all recognise this problem. And they accept that the way to tackle it is to promote a balanced, thoughtful approach.

WHAT DOES A BALANCED APPROACH LOOK LIKE?

A balanced approach involves bringing together thinking about risks and benefits in a single process. Recent years have seen the development of risk benefit assessment as the best way to do this. Risk benefit assessment sets out in a single statement the considerations of risk and benefit that make up a decision to provide, modify or remove a facility, activity or feature. The approach is supported by HSE, which describes it as sensible approach to risk management.

> *"Risk benefit assessment reminds us that as well as the legal requirements we should assess the likely benefits of the activity."*
> *– RoSPA (2013)*

What marks out risk benefit assessment from conventional risk assessment is that it includes careful consideration of benefits. Because this takes place alongside a consideration of the risks, it allows for the inherent benefits of some risks to be properly taken into account. It also emphasises the point that good risk management does not always mean that risks should be reduced.

WHAT CAN I DO?

You should consider adopting a risk benefit approach. This will be particularly valuable if you are thinking about providing more adventurous, challenging play and learning opportunities in outdoor contexts. If you are just starting out on the process, you may find it helpful to create the opportunity to debate the issues, explore the barriers and build consensus about a way forward. Ideally this would bring together as wide a selection of interested parties as possible. In local authorities and other larger organisations, dialogue between front line staff, service managers, risk managers, lead officers and parents is crucial.

CONCLUSION

Risk benefit assessment may sound like a radical idea. But in fact it is widely used in a range of risk contexts. David Ball, professor of risk management at Middlesex University, notes:

> *"Applications ranged from the analysis of the risks and benefits of hands-free cell phone use while driving, to studies of avalanche protection measures, the optimal arsenic content of drinking water, and the lifetime of space satellites in orbit. It was abundantly clear that RBA was being applied in all sectors, from environmental to public health, fire protection, technological innovation, natural hazards and many more... This suggests that the original question, of whether the introduction of RBA to decision making about public space and activities was radical, should be replaced by a different question. That question is: Why has decision making about the safety of public space and activities departed from the norm?"*
> *– Ball and Ball-King, (2011)*

Improving play and learning opportunities for children and young people of all ages and abilities should be a key objective for teachers and practitioners. This means exposing children to a degree of managed risk. The challenge is to do this without putting them in undue danger of serious harm. Risk benefit assessment rises to this challenge by taking a balanced, thoughtful approach: one that allows children and young people to gain from more engaging, enjoyable learning experiences and more opportunities for healthy growth and development. The likely result? A happier childhood and more resilient, competent and confident people.

RESOURCES

David Ball and Laurence Ball-King (2011) Public Safety and Risk Assessment: Improving Decision Making.

David Ball, Tim Gill and Bernard Spiegal (2012) Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide and template RBA Forms: www.playscotland.org/resources/managing-risk-play-provision

Education Scotland materials on managing risk: www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/approaches/outdoorlearning/healthandsafety/managingrisk.asp

Tim Gill (2010) Nothing Ventured... Balancing risks and benefits in the outdoors: www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/n/genericresource_tcm4616582.asp

Health and Safety Executive (2012) Children's play and leisure – promoting a balanced approach: www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/childs-play-statement.htm

Health and Safety Executive materials for schools: www.hse.gov.uk/services/education

Learning through Landscapes online resources on RBA: www.ltl.org.uk/spaces/ltlriskbenefit.php

RoSPA (2013) Planning and Leading Visits and Adventurous Activities: Guidance for Schools and Colleges Teaching Children and Young People from 5 to 18 years: www.rospa.com/rospaweb/docs/advice-services/school-college-safety/school-visits-guide.pdf

Play Australia - Getting the Balance Right: Risk management for play: www.playaustralia.org.au

Forest Schools Canada Resources to understand perceptions of risk: www.forestschoolcanada.ca/home/resources/perceptions-of-risk

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RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT: A WORKED EXAMPLE

This section sets out a hypothetical worked example of an RBA for a permanent rope swing affixed to a tree in a playground. It is adapted from a worked example taken from an RBA form produced by the Play Safety Forum – a UK-wide expert body – and published by Play Scotland (see the Resources section of the website).

BENEFITS

- Pleasure and fun
- Physical play
- Rotational possibilities: good potential for some unpredictability and challenge
- Development of self-confidence and well-being
- Learning through experience: accidents from which one might learn
- Users encounter conditions similar to those with self-built tree swings: experience that will be useful if/when they play on them or make their own
- Engagement with natural environment and natural elements
- Potential for incorporation into imaginative games – eg Jungle Book
- Appeals to a wide age range, encouraging mixing between different children of different ages.

RISKS AND RESPONSES TO THEM

EQUIPMENT FAILURE

- Swing fitting fails due to wear: wear should be detectable through regular internal inspection.
- Swing fitting fails due to vandalism: This is the same as for a standard swing. The swing has a strong steel chain, cable and fitting which would require concerted effort with a hacksaw to cut.

PART OF TREE BREAKS

- The branch or support could collapse: tree checked by an arboriculturist and considered fit for purpose. All fittings carry certification for Safe Working Loads.
- The tree/branch could become damaged with wear: rubber protector mats fitted between all points of wear and the tree. The design of the fixing minimises wear on the tree. Fixing designed with an additional bracing to the tree crown providing a secondary bearing in the unlikely event of the branch giving way.

OTHER FALLS OR COLLISIONS

- Risk of minor injuries e.g. bruises, scrapes and possible long bone fractures: these would largely be incurred by falling from the swing onto the ground. A pendulum seat deters multiple users from using the swing simultaneously thus reducing unpredictability.
- Possibility of head injury upon falling: Fall height does not exceed 1.4m. Surface and adjacent area are cleared of obstacles and protrusions. Note wide general prevalence of children and teenagers creating own rope swings over similar surfaces and generally low risk of this activity.
- Risk of crashing into the tree or support or another person: there are no obstructions to the visibility of swing users and other users.

OTHER RISKS

- Risk of hanging: sleeved chain is impossible to knot or loop.

DECISION

Proposed tree swing offers an acceptable level of risk. Go ahead with suitable site modifications and management arrangements. Current ‘natural’ surface appropriate for setting.

RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT FORM: EXAMPLE

Location / Activity:		**Date:**	
Assessor:		**Review date:**	

Your overall risk rating – Low, medium or high – is based on your judgement about whether the BENEFITS of the activity or opportunity outweigh the RISKS.

ACTIVITY	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Possible hazards	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to reduce the risk of injury	Overall risk RATING: L/M/H
POND DIPPING: Slippery pond decking or edges	The decking allows close access to the contents of the pond and is an essential component of exploring this habitat.	Slips, trips and falls. Cuts, grazes and abrasions. Drowning.	Young people; adults	• Banks shallow and planted to prevent accidental entry. • No access to banks for young people; use decking or 'beach' area only. • Deepest area is centre of pond – keep to edges. • Perimeter kept clear of dense or high foliage so pond edges are clearly defined and can be seen / avoided. • Dipping platform kept clear of trip hazards (e.g. nets, trays) • Pond use rules clearly displayed and reviewed at the start of each session.	Low

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EMPTY CLASSROOM DAY

Empty Classroom Day is a UK campaign to celebrate and inspire learning and play outside the classroom. The campaign is backed by Persil, led by Eco-Schools England and supported by Project Dirt.

On the day schools across the world will be taking at least one class outdoors, teaching essential skills and raising awareness of the importance of play. We hope this will inspire schools everywhere to make outdoor learning and play a part of their school every day! With everyone's support, we can make sure children everywhere enjoy their childhood and have the foundations they need for the life they want to live.

Play for today, prepared for tomorrow!

Find out how you can get involved and access all the resources at: www.emptyclassroomday.org.uk

/emptyclassroomdayuk

@emptyclassroom

Do be aware you get involved at your own risk! Be prepared to be amazed...

Persil #dirtisgood

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