

Risk Management and Forest School

HSE High-level statement

Key message: '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'. HSE Children's play and leisure: promoting a balanced approach

The Process

Getting ready – Managing Risk (From Council for Learning Outside the Classroom)

Risk-Benefit management is a fundamental part of life and is a skill needed for young people's safety and well-being. Staff have a duty of care towards young people. However, this certainly does not mean 'wrapping them in cotton wool'. Therefore we have responsibility not only to keep young people safe, but also to enable them to learn to manage risks for themselves.

Risk management is all about identifying and managing any significant chance of harm. Significance is determined by two factors:

1. the likelihood of an accident or incident happening.
2. the severity of injury or harm if it does occur.

A small risk of minor injury is not considered significant. Therefore many LOtC activities should not need any more risk assessment over and above applying the normal duty of care and under-pinned by your school/organisational policy. However, if there is a strong likelihood of minor injury or a small, but not negligible, possibility of serious harm, then this would be considered significant.

The risk assessment should be based on the following considerations:

- What are the hazards?
- Who might be affected by them?
- What safety measures need to be in place to reduce risks to an acceptable level?
- Can the group leader put the safety measures in place?
- What steps will be taken in an emergency?

The 3 categories of Risk Assessment

- **Generic** — statements of good practice covering the activity, when and where it takes place; applicable to Category 2 activities. They are useful to cover activities which are likely to be repeated and that do not need doing again unless the activity, the environment and/or the nature of the learners change significantly. Parental consent is not normally required for activities which take place during the school day. Your prospectus, together with newsletters and your website should create an expectation that young people will regularly learn outside the classroom.
- **Specific** — completed by the activity/group leader and unique to each occasion. These apply to Category 2 and 3 activities. They should take into account the site, learners' needs and activity-specific needs (environment, accommodation, leaders, transport etc).
- **Ongoing** — involves professional judgements during an activity in response to changing situations.

(LOTG, 2010)

Risk Assessments and Forest School

There are many different ways of recording the risk assessment process, different organisations have their own formats, some measure the risks though ranking high, medium and low and others use OK, not OK. There is no preferred format for Forest School risk assessments, however it is important that the practitioner is happy with the format and it is realistic and useable and the general opinion in the world of outdoor education and play is that the numbering system is not a realistic or truthful measure of risk. It is also increasingly important to measure risks against benefits – particularly on the 'more risky activities – see over for risk benefit assessment

Although each format may differ, the risk assessment process and recording format should include 5 steps (HSE):

1. Identify the hazard
2. Decide who may be harmed and how
3. Evaluate the level of risk (Likelihood x Consequence = Risk)
4. Record your findings and implement any control actions
5. Review the assessment and update as necessary

It is also important that all risk assessments are signed and dated by the person who has undertaken them, with a review date added.

Forest School Leaders may have a number of different types of risk assessment, based on need:

- Seasonal Site risk assessments
- Activity or Experience risk and risk/benefit assessments – for more complex experiences you may produce some generic procedures eg for fire, tools, storm kettles, making and using playstructures such as tree houses etc. you will refer to these in your risk assessments.
- Daily risk assessment/site and weather check
- Dynamic risk assessments – risk assessments that happen during the time in the forest that may then need to be recorded later if it is decided to go ahead with an experience.
- Risk assessments for individuals/specific groups with special needs

Risk assessments and procedures will need to be *reviewed* alongside all your other assessments, or if an accident/change occurs, and then dated. Involve the learners and leaders in the review as they will have taken part in the activity and will all have their own 'views' on the risks, control actions and benefits.

Risk Benefit Assessment in Practise

The HSE's Chair, Judith Hackitt, supports the view that activities with a degree of risk can be a benefit. In 2009 she told a Learning Outside the Classroom conference: *"part of the process can and should be about setting realistic expectations and making those who want to take part in the activities aware that in doing so they are exposing themselves to risk – and that's a good thing! Why? Because life itself is full of risks we cannot avoid. We all survive by learning how to deal with risk; and helping young people to experience risk and learn how to handle it is part of preparing them for adult life and the world of work."* (Gill, 2010, p16)

Risk-benefit assessment brings together in a single procedure an assessment of both risks and benefits. To quote the publication *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide*, which outlines how risk-benefit assessment can be applied in play services and facilities, it "focuses on making judgements and identifying measures that manage risks while securing benefits". The approach is supported by Government, and crucially has been recognised by the HSE as forming part of the risk management process, as required by health and safety regulations.

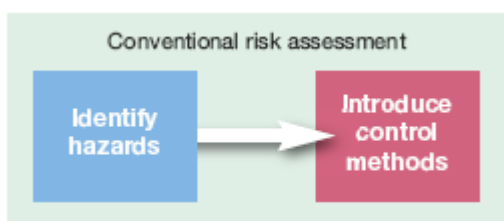
Risk-benefit assessment starts with identifying the benefits or objectives of an activity. It then considers the potential risks, and reviews the possible responses to these risks before reaching a judgement on the actual measures that will be taken. As with conventional risk assessment, the relevant considerations, including benefits, are recorded in written form to provide an audit trail. Being clear and explicit about benefits not only helps with risk management, it also provides a sound basis for evaluating programmes and activities. This is an important point because one of the criticisms of some outdoor learning initiatives is that they are not always well evaluated.

The method set out in *Managing Risk in Play Provision Implementation Guide* and by Tim Morton in *Horizons* (2011) does not involve any scoring or arithmetic, since such procedures can be confusing and difficult to apply consistently in play and learning contexts, and moreover can struggle to cope with the subtleties and dilemmas thrown up by real-life situations. Instead, it puts forward a narrative approach that simply encourages those carrying out the assessment to state the factors they have considered and the judgements they have reached – balancing the benefits with the risks to decide whether to carry out an activity. Some formats suggest stating if it is OK or not OK to carry out an activity after undertaking the risk benefit analysis while others may look at risk levels being high, medium or low, looking to reducing them from one level to a lower one.

Whichever approach it is the narrative and specific actions that count both in practise and on paper.



Professional awareness of risk-benefit assessment has grown considerably because of work on playground safety. However, it has long been implicit in the ethos and goals of agencies such as those providing adventurous and outdoor activities, and has been elaborated theoretically in the form of a 'triangle of risk' (benefits, hazards and control measures).



(Gill 2010)

Training and competency of outdoor and Forest School leaders needs to be

considered when looking at the risk benefit management process to support experiential learning.

Some SPECIFICS advice on writing risk benefit and risk assessments.

When writing risk and risk/benefit assessments the hazards, risks and control actions need to be **specific** ie stating the actual hazards, injuries that can result and how likely they are (this doesn't mean resorting to the old number formulas). Educators need to write what they 'actually do' - this is both helpful for other staff and will hold up in court if it ever comes to that.

For example;

A common hazard in the woods for early years small exuberant humans may well be tree roots, animal holes and brambles. The associated risk will be falling and a possibility of head bumps, and on rare occasions, concussion, if they hit a tree. The control action will be not just discuss this with the children, but discuss how to move mindfully ie looking for trip hazards such as roots and in some cases where there are many trip hazards to walk rather than run.

Also when stating benefits on a risk benefit assessment state the **specific** benefits. For example, with a knife use risk benefit assessment you may state one of the benefits as the 'development of fine motor skills' when handling a knife. However this does not quite state what the handling of a knife does for our fine motor skill development – what needs to be

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stated is what fine motor skills are developing ie hand eye co-ordination, developing of wrist and arm strength.

All risk, control action and benefit statements need to state the specifics!

Benefits do not need to be written for everything you do – most organisations do specific risk benefits assessments on the more complex and/or perceived more ‘risky’ activities. For a thought provoking approach to risk assessments in outdoor learning see the winter 2014 edition of Horizons David Crossland article (only available to Institute for Outdoor Learning members until 2016.)

Some final pieces of advice

- It is the ***reasonable and sensible*** things and risks you need to record – don’t see risks in things that really aren’t risks, ie don’t write down every possible eventuality that can both result in reams of paperwork and perceived risks that aren’t going to happen!
- Think of ***practical and simple*** ways to build dynamic risk assessment into your practise, keep your eyes out for changing circumstances at Forest School
- Involve ***everyone***, this includes all the children and adults involved with the Forest School programme, in practical solutions for risk management. While risk benefit assessments are an important step in feeling more confident in extending children’s Forest School learning and play opportunities it is important to remember that all learners and leaders will approach Forest School experiences and risks differently, some will be more enthusiastic than others, some more sensible. Some will feel more comfortable with what is viewed as risky activities than others and their reasons for this will need to be worked through to allow all to reap the benefits of this new approach to everyone taking on a risk management role.

It is a culture and not a piece of paper!

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