

In the second of her three-part series, **Melanie Pilcher**, policy and standards manager at the Pre-school Learning Alliance, discusses the importance of allowing children to engage in risky play...

# RISK & REWARD

**W**hen parents entrust the care of their children to early years providers they must be able to do so secure in the belief that their children are being well cared for, that their learning and development needs are being met and that they are kept safe at all times. The early years sector achieves this by operating within a regulatory

framework that ensures that the safety and protection of young children is paramount. The Early Years Foundation Stage (2012) states that:

*Children should be provided with safe and secure environments in which to interact and explore rich and diverse learning and development opportunities. Providers are*

*required to produce and implement a written procedure for assessing any risks to children's safety and reviewing risk assessments regularly.*

When creating and maintaining a safe environment, practitioners must pay heed to their legal duties, but should also take into account those risks which are acceptable too. The risk of falling off larger pieces of play equipment is quite high; however, the risk of harm is minimised by ensuring that there is adequate supervision, correct positioning of the equipment (away from windows, or walls),



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crash mats, and some 'rules' set by adults that are appropriate for the individual child's level of understanding. In order to remove all risk the use of such equipment would be banned altogether, but the benefits of the activity happening, with the risk that some children will fall, includes children being able to expand their skills, as they risk climbing higher, reaching further, or balancing for longer. Children will also learn how to fall, how to pick themselves up and start over again. Equally importantly, they will begin to understand the consequence of taking risks beyond their current ability.

### Allowing risky play

Within the structure of health and safety, we must always remember that risk-taking is a very important part of a child's development. But when linked to the care and protection of young children, the word 'risk' raises all sorts of concerns, especially when we consider that

### Risk and additional needs

Some children with disabilities will have to have many things done for them in life because it is quicker, safer and easier for those people taking care of their needs. For them, having the opportunity to take risks is even more vital, as they may not always have the same freedom of choice given to their non-disabled peers. The child with mobility problems will probably have to wait to be asked, and then taken to the climbing frame, but once there will enjoy the challenge of getting to the first or second level. The sense of pride and achievement will be as great, if not greater because the risk was higher and the challenge harder.

the process of risk management through risk assessment means that all perceived dangers should be removed or, at the very least, minimised. Unfortunately, this often means that practitioners err too far on the side of caution. There is a huge difference between putting a child at risk and allowing a child to take risks.

How will three-year-old Lily ever know that the bridge she has created between two milk crates is safe if she does not take a tentative step onto it? Only by having the time and opportunity to test it out will she realise that it is too wobbly, that the materials she has chosen are not strong enough, or that the supporting structure is not stable. Lily must have the opportunity to test out her ideas and find solutions for herself wherever possible. The conscientious practitioner may be tempted to step forwards to stop the activity, telling Lily "You'll fall and hurt yourself, this isn't what these milk crates are for". But while this may well be described as 'good accident prevention', it is not good risk management.

A much better approach would be for the practitioner to hold back for a moment and observe the learning that is taking place. What will Lily do when the bridge wobbles? Will she continue anyway? If she is determined to stand on the unsafe structure then some adult intervention is going to be justified. But will Lily realise that the task that has thoroughly engaged her for the past 10 minutes is not yet complete and, with the determination central to confident learners, try again and again until she has got it right? Of course, the practitioner can intervene at any stage with suggestions such as "Why don't you place the crates closer together, Lily, and see what happens then?" The rewards for Lily are obvious as she succeeds in her task. Meanwhile, the practitioner gains valuable insight into Lily's emerging skills and will be able to plan for appropriate activities to help her develop them further.

### Valuing risk

If we are not careful, concerns about safety can get in the way of every child's fundamental right and need to 'play'. In 2002, *Managing Risk in Play Provision: A Position Statement*, produced by the Play Safety Forum said:

*All children both need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, venture into new experiences and develop their capacities, from a very young age and from their earliest play experiences. Children would never learn to walk, climb stairs or ride a bicycle unless they were strongly motivated to respond to challenges involving a risk of injury.*

The Play Forum's Position Statement is focused more on play equipment and playgrounds, but the message is relevant to children's play in a much broader context too. Play and risk go hand-in-hand. If we are to truly value play then we must also value risk.

Children do not set out to deliberately hurt themselves, but they do not always realise their own limitations or the limitations of the environment that surrounds them. As they grow and develop there are going to be times when they will have to make choices about what is safe to attempt and what is not. How can they ever do this confidently if they have never experienced acceptable levels of risk upon which to test their judgements?

Whilst there is quite rightly much emphasis on safeguarding children in early years settings, we must be confident in our own competence and 'take a risk ourselves'. Children need and instinctively want to be able to take risks in order that they can test their abilities and strengths. What better environment for them to do so than that of an early years setting where practitioners will already have removed hazards not readily identifiable to young children and will provide well-managed opportunities for appropriate risk-taking to take place?