



## MANAGING RISKS IN PLAYGROUNDS

### Introduction

Playgrounds are owned and operated by a variety of public sector and commercial organisations, either as a stand-alone provision, or as part of a larger play or activity facility and are a useful tool for improving public health and providing a sense of community. In the commercial sector, playgrounds can be a feature that families consider when deciding where to book holidays or participate in leisure activities and therefore enhance revenues.

### The issues

The issues associated with playgrounds are summed up by the Play Safety Forum in their 2021 publication, *Managing Risk in Play Provision*: “The challenge is to let children take risks when they play, without putting them in undue danger of serious harm”. Where serious harm does occur, the impact on the future life of the injured party can be significant as can the resulting financial impact of future losses and the provision of ongoing care. A serious accident attributed to the negligence of the playground owner/operator also has the potential to significantly damage reputation.

### Risk Management Advice

Effective risk management of playgrounds involves creating a suitable balance of well-managed risk versus challenging activities to entice young people to play and explore. While risk assessment is an essential element of good risk management control, it is unlikely to be sufficient on its own and a more holistic approach is required to determine and maintain an appropriate balance of risk, involving the following elements:

#### *Policy*

There should be a play policy. This is a risk/benefit assessment that describes what opportunities are going to be provided for children to experience risk-taking and challenge as part of their normal development. The policy will be influenced by the extent of other managed risk-taking and challenging opportunities in the vicinity or locality; knowledge of children’s habits (i.e. identifying a need to get them engaged with physical activity); and local or national health initiatives relating to exercise as a means for improving mental and physical health and wellbeing. Where playgrounds, play equipment, play areas and activities are provided in response to a specific identified initiative, this must be clearly stated.

Key considerations:

- A playground is not a 'workplace' for children. It is there to provide an environment that contains challenges and involves the taking of risk
- A lack of risk and challenge may cause children to look elsewhere for play satisfaction, possibly resulting in them accessing unsuitable locations or structures that are not appropriately risk-managed for play

#### *Construction of or alterations to play areas*

Any construction or alteration to a playground or play area must be aligned with the objectives set out in the play policy. Use employees and/or contractors who can demonstrate competence in playground design and construction. Refer to appropriate standards such as:

- BS EN 1176. Fixed play equipment and surfaces
- BS EN 14974 Wheeled sports facilities (i.e. skate parks & BMX tracks)
- BS EN 15312 Free access multi-sports equipment

It is the standard in effect at the time a play area was constructed/modified that is relevant. Revision of standards are not applied retrospectively. If a play feature is not referred to in a standard, it may still be used subject to risk assessment – do not assume it is prohibited.

Other considerations:

- Equipment for younger children should be distanced and segregated from equipment provided for older children
- Fence play areas wherever possible to ensure segregation from other facilities e.g. sports pitches and safety from roads, rivers, lakes, car parks etc.
- Display of information and safety signage
- Ease of access for the emergency services

#### *Risk Assessment*

Each play area must have its own specific risk assessment. A generic risk assessment is not sufficient. Each risk assessment must highlight the objectives for that particular play area in terms of what type of play experience it should deliver. Ensure the risk assessment covers the wider environment including any planting and landscaping, gates, fencing or railings, surfaces (paths, safety surfacing), litter bins, dog fouling, seating and any nearby features such as steep drops, roads or water courses. Some risks are an integral part of the play experience, for example equipment with moving parts, changes in height or natural loose materials. Examples of risks that require elimination or minimising include sharp edges or points on equipment; weak structures liable to collapse; concrete surfaces in the vicinity of potential falls from height and trapping points for heads and hands/fingers.

The risk assessment must also define the types and frequency of inspections, having regard for the type of play equipment installed and its manufacturer/installer guidelines, the usage of the facility and the potential for damage or the presence of other hazards (i.e. known anti-social behaviour in the area).

#### *Inspection*

Play areas and equipment must be inspected in line with the risk assessment. All play equipment should be subject to a detailed independent inspection by a competent person at least annually, including the inspection of chains, nuts and bolts, shackles and weld joints, and a detailed report provided. Annual detailed inspections should be supplemented by more frequent regular inspections performed by the organisation's own competent and trained operatives. The inspection frequencies

must be determined by the risk assessment having regard to the features of the individual play area. Organisations should also have a process that allows members of the public to report issues and for ad-hoc reactive inspections to take place.

All inspections must be recorded, irrespective of the presence of defects, and include as a minimum:

- Name of the playground/area being inspected
- Date and time of inspection
- Name of inspector (printed)
- An indication as to whether each individual piece of play equipment is serviceable or defective, supported with photographic evidence
- In the case of defective equipment, details of any immediate action taken to make safe or prevent use (signage alone is unlikely to be sufficient), supported by photographic evidence
- The condition of any impact-attenuating surfaces, fencing or other street furniture

Playground inspectors must be competent to perform inspections i.e. have sufficient training, knowledge, skills and experience that enables them to perform inspections to a suitable and sufficient standard. The council should ensure inspectors are trained to know what they are looking for, understand what constitutes damage and that proper procedures are in place to prioritise and carry out repairs. Details of the training received, and inspector attendance (including refresher training) should be recorded and retained in order to demonstrate competency. If inspections are outsourced, there must be clearly defined responsibilities in the contract.

#### *Maintenance and Repair*

The playground owner/operator should have a formal and clearly defined process for:

- Maintaining play areas and equipment in line with manufacturer/installers recommendations or any increased frequency as may be required by the risk assessment.
- Performing reactive repair on receipt of a defect report
- Prioritising repairs
- Removing hazardous play equipment from use e.g. fencing/taping off/removing items/signage
- Triaging and responding to complaints or reports of accidents/injuries involving play equipment

All maintenance or repair must be recorded and include as a minimum:

- Name of the playground/area being inspected
- Name/identifier of the piece of equipment
- Date and time of maintenance/repair
- Name of technician/operative (printed)
- Details of maintenance or repair work carried out
- In the case of equipment reported as defective a statement that the equipment is now serviceable and may be brought back in to use, supported by photographic evidence

Technicians or operatives must be appropriately trained in the maintenance and repair of playground equipment. Details and the date of the training received should be recorded and retained.

#### *Managing non-safety related risks*

Organisations should also have a formal process for:

- Asset management/condition surveys, particularly play equipment of timber construction, to monitor ageing and deterioration of equipment.

- Play area cleanliness standards to include managing litter, dog fouling.
- Identification of incidents and damage due to vandalism and fire.
- Appointment and management of any contractors e.g. play equipment design, supply, install or inspection, to include contract monitoring and a requirement for contractual indemnity.

## Checklist

Has the playground been:

- ✓ Carefully planned and designed to meet specified objectives?
- ✓ Installed correctly by competent persons?
- ✓ Risk assessed?
- ✓ Annual inspection by independent competent person?
- ✓ Regular in-house inspections in accordance with the risk assessment?
- ✓ Maintained in accordance with manufacturer/installer recommendations?

Are there:

- ✓ Inspection schedules and records?
- ✓ Maintenance and repair records?
- ✓ Mechanisms for reporting and rectifying faults and defects?

Further information and guidance on this subject are available from:

- The Health and Safety Executive - <https://www.hse.gov.uk/>
- The Play Safety Forum - <https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/>



**For clarification or further information please contact –**

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