

Remember how you used to play

Increased fear of litigation is changing the type of play equipment found in the nation's playgrounds, but is that a good thing?

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SAFETY FORUM

Stop what you are doing and think for a moment. Think back to your childhood (for some, that may not have been too long ago!). Think back to those seemingly endless summer days, where you left home at nine and didn't come back until it was dark, spent playing with friends and generally having a great time. Fun wasn't it?

But think again; what were the places where you had the most fun while playing? Were they local authority playgrounds, nicely manicured parks or protected, staffed adventure playgrounds? Without wanting to decry the value of such places, my guess is probably none of these. If you were like me, the most enjoyable places to play were precisely those places where danger surrounded us. I vividly remember playing in active gravel extraction quarries and in haystacks on busy working farms. While we did play in properly designated play spaces as well, we had the most fun being where we shouldn't have been.

This brings to a head the comparatively recent phenomenon of risk – manageable and acceptable risk versus the downright dangerous. We all accept that play is a mechanism through which our children learn. Social, motor, cognitive and teambuilding skills are among the many benefits to be gained from playing in the early years, but so is an understanding and acceptance of risk.

Many of the places in which we played as children were favourites because they scared the pants off us. We learned to challenge ourselves and face up to our fears. The sense of achievement was real and had a massive effect on other aspects of our lives. Those of us who learned to take risks in our early years now understand why it is important to push yourself.

Sadly, the litigious culture we are fostering in society today, where someone is always to blame, is driving acceptable risk out of our children's lives. Wrapping our little cherubs in the proverbial cotton wool does not, in the long term, protect

them from harm, but rather denies them essential life education that becomes valuable when they are growing up. The boundaries between safe and unsafe practices become blurred and poorly understood if the individual has not experienced an element of risk in their play. It is widely acknowledged that, in deciding how to react to a situation that challenges us, we instinctively refer back to our experience: have we done this before? How did we get through it then? Without such experiences and understanding, the quality of decision is poor and we avoid safely stretching ourselves as a result.

Let's face it, most of us have broken an arm, a finger or ankle, dislocated a shoulder or suffered from some significant cuts, scrapes and bruises from our play, but we all understood that even if these were bad experiences and painful ones too, they were good in the sense that we learned not to do them again.

Colleagues sitting on the Children's Play Policy Forum are deeply concerned that risk in play is not simply seen as a way of protecting those who play from harm, but ensuring that children are exposed to levels of risk that are within safe boundaries. The Play Safety Forum statement (see page 42) clearly demonstrates this and is endorsed by the forum. The forum is also engaging in an active debate, with the Association of British Insurers, to highlight the problems that excessive insurance premiums and increasing cases of action being taken against play providers is having upon the fabric of society.

Local authorities are choosing – in ever greater numbers – to settle such claims out of court. This is lending strength and credence to the 'money for nothing' argument. If we want to create a society of young adults who have no concept of acceptable attitudes and social behaviour, let us continue to make our children's play experiences sterile, without personal challenge and ultra-safe. Those of us who remember our cuts and bruises and can still show others the scars after a few pints need to campaign to manage play safety sensibly – after all, a few knocks and scrapes have not done us any harm have they?



The view from ISRM

ISRM actively supports and participates in the CPPF and is also a member of the Children's Play Council. We believe that high quality play opportunities that are available to all contribute significantly to physical, mental and social education. Those children who have had access to quality play are recognised as having high physical and mental 'literacy'. Such children are therefore in the strongest position to make the best use of their talents, stay healthy and strong and perhaps be the next generation of Olympic and World champion athletes.

KOMPAN

With sky-high installations up to 5.4 metres tall and packed with an array of creative and challenging play options, the new Funky Elements range of playground equipment from Kompan is definitely going to attract children's attention. Poles,



handholds, walls, ladders, platforms, seats, pipes and slides are combined to create a series of installations that are big in scale and big in play value.

Designed to allow 360-degree access, each Funky Elements installation is approachable from all sides, providing easy access, even with intensive use. Activities and places to hang out are set alongside one another at each level, allowing children to move from one to another by climbing around, up, down or through the equipment. The range is designed for six- to 12-year-olds.

The materials used Funky Elements, such as stainless and galvanised steel, rubber vulcanised posts and thick walled plastics, which are extremely durable and require minimal maintenance.

● Tel: 01908 642466



THE INDUSTRY VIEW

We asked a couple of representatives from the play industry for their opinions on the safety versus risk debate

Robin Sutcliffe, the chief executive of Sutcliffe Play, said: 'It's important for children to experience risk and learn how it should be managed. Play forms one of the principal arenas for developing our capacity for risk-taking.

'I would like to see local authorities and other playground providers stop using rubber surfaces where actual levels of safety are confused with a false sense of security. In turn, I'd like to bring back four-metre high walkways and the concrete running surfaces that can make play more exciting.

'I am concerned that the ever-increasing fear of litigation is sanitising playgrounds, which in turn takes most of the fun out of play. My view is that our relationship with risk determines the extent to which our lives can be fulfilled. And this goes far beyond physical risk, into the realms of creativity, relationships and inclusivity. The way we allow our children to feel at ease with risk will determine the extent to which they can participate and contribute later in life.

'Whether it's creative art or business management, the essence of almost any act is that it will involve exposing ourselves to risk. Another aspect of risk-taking is in relationships. We long to be loved. Yet we are apprehensive about telling someone how much we love them – because of the risk of rejection.

'Risk-taking is one of the fundamental human needs. It enables us to be fulfilled and functional as adults in a wide variety of ways. Play is the activity where children can learn how to relate to and manage risk. It is vital that we do not allow our irrational fears to stand in the way of children being exposed to risk in play. Indeed the extent to which we provide these opportunities might well be a measure that we use to evaluate the quality of play places.'

Robert Goss, managing director of Kompan, says: 'Safety has to be a top priority for everyone involved in play provision for children. But that does not mean that risks and thrills need to be removed. Indeed, for older children in particular, learning to deal with risk is a fundamental part of their development. We shouldn't look to eliminate risk from playgrounds, but to understand and manage any risk.

'The playground should be an environment where children can learn how to manage and cope with risk. That means providing opportunities for them to push at the limits of their abilities and confidence.

'If we want children to use playgrounds, there have to be challenges that excite them and encourage them back time and again; things they couldn't quite do last time, but might be able to conquer next time. If playgrounds are designed without this element of repeated challenge, children simply start to play in places that present real

dangers. Any risk is displaced from a safe managed environment to an unmanaged and unsafe one.

'It is sad to see play areas that sit unused because they fail to engage, while children place themselves in real danger seeking thrills in places we don't want them to be.

'Good playgrounds should not be accident-free zones. Wherever large groups of children meet for activities, there will always be occasional accidents and injuries. I would regard a playground where there were no accidents as a failure – that would mean that all the fun and excitement had been removed. If we are going to provide playgrounds that thrill, then expect some spills as well.

'Good design will maximise the challenge and excitement – the perceived risk – for the child, while minimising the actual risk to their safety. 'The assessment and management of risk in playgrounds depends on the age range. Most pre-school children are accompanied to play areas by adult carers or older siblings. The design focus is on offering lots of developmental challenges and new experiences that are not, in themselves, inherently risky. But once children reach the age where they are playing unaccompanied, managing risk and safety is a balancing act. The nature of play for children at this age involves the desire to seek thrills and take risks as they test out their abilities and confidence levels. The challenge for those designing play provision is to find ways to meet the need for risk without compromising on safety.'

MANAGING RISK IN PLAY PROVISION

SUNSAFE



Interactive water play is now the most sought-after play experience

in the 6- to 10-year-old age bracket. The demand for new and exciting experiences has never been so great. Children want to enjoy new sensations, and interactive water play is top of their list when choosing where to go next for a day out with the family.

SSP WaterPlay, a leading UK exponent of water parks and playgrounds, is introducing new products for its 2005 installations, as more and more children discover the boundless excitement that playing in water can provide.

Free from the fear of being submerged, interactive water parks are the ideal solution that combines safe play with fully inclusive experiences for children of all ages and abilities.

The Sound Stick continues to delight all children as they thrill to the simple pleasures of interactive sound and water. The wide range of long-lasting and vandal-resistant equipment comes in an almost un-ending combination of effects, colours and styles, with each layout unique to a client.

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THE PLAY SAFETY FORUM

The Play Safety Forum brings together the main national organisations in England with an interest in safety and children's play. Members include representatives from providers, regulatory bodies and expert agencies. The aim of the Play Safety Forum is to build consensus on issues around risk and safety in relation to play provision. It is an independent body hosted by the Children's Play Council at the invitation of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Members include:

- Association of Play Industries;
- Child Accident Prevention Trust;
- Children's Play Council;
- Health and Safety Executive;
- Institute for Sport and Recreation Management;
- Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management;
- Kidsactive;
- Local Government Association;
- National Early Years Network;
- National Playing Fields Association;
- National Family and Parenting Institute;
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children;
- PLAYLINK; and
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents.

A position statement has been produced by the Play Safety Forum, of which the ISRM is a member:

In any human activity, there is an element of risk. Three factors are central to determining whether or not the level of risk is acceptable or tolerable:

- The likelihood of coming to harm;
- The severity of that harm; and
- The benefits, rewards or outcomes of the activity.

Judgements about the acceptability of risk are made on the basis of a risk assessment. Risk assessment and management are not mechanistic processes. Crucially, they involve making judgements about acceptability based on an understanding of the balance between risks and benefits. Even where there is a risk of fatal or permanent disabling injury, this risk may sometimes be tolerable. For instance, going paddling at the seaside involves an unavoidable risk of fatal injury, but this risk is tolerable for most people because, in most circumstances, the likelihood of coming to harm is very low and there are obvious benefits. Social and psychological factors are also important in risk assessment. Risks that are acceptable in one community may be unacceptable in another, and policies should take this into account.

Almost any environment contains hazards or sources of harm. In many cases the existence of hazards can be justified, perhaps because they are impossible to remove or, perhaps, because their removal would have undesirable consequences or be too costly. Where the existence of a hazard can be justified, measures should be in place to manage it. In a controlled environment such as a workplace or a playground, those responsible are required by law to identify and make informed judgements about the hazards to which people are exposed. They must take steps to ensure that the risks are managed and controlled so far as is reasonably practicable, while allowing the potential benefits to be delivered.

Children and risk

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. Children with disabilities have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers.

It is the job of all those responsible for children at play to assess and manage risk, so that children are given the chance to stretch themselves without exposing them to unacceptable risks.

This is part of a wider adult social responsibility to children. If we do not provide controlled opportunities for children to encounter and manage

RSS PLAYMAKERS



RSS Playmakers worked with Swale Borough Council on the £135,000 development of Faversham Recreation Ground, after winning a competitive tender against most of the major industry players.

Set to become its 'principal flagship park' for leisure provision in the area, the scheme aimed to create something new and exciting that addressed the needs of all potential users, and also satisfied the statutory requirements of both Section 17 of the

Crime & Disorder Act and the Discrimination and Disability Act (DDA). This was to be achieved without compromising the usability of the end design.

RSS Playmakers met the brief by choosing a mix of its Trailblazers and Pathfinders play systems, which allow the provision of separate play areas for toddlers and juniors. Each benefits from a combination of flat and cradle seat swings, roundabouts, an aerial runway, multiplay units, plus bins and benches, all confined within attractive, secure fencing.

For added safety, child-friendly surfaces have been introduced, together with paths to give easy access to all play items. For the older children, a new ball court will allow a range of ball sports to be played. There is also a BMX track, a skateboard area and a 'teen shelter' that encourages social activities and completes the plan.

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risk, then they may be denied the chance to learn these skills. They may also play in uncontrolled environments where the risks are greater.

Any injury is distressing for children and those who care for them, but exposure to the risk of injury, and experience of actual minor injuries, is a universal part of childhood. Such experiences also have a positive role in child development. When children sustain or witness injuries, they gain direct experience of the consequences of their actions and choices and, through this, an understanding of the extent of their abilities and competences.

However, children deserve protection against fatal or permanently disabling injuries, to a greater degree than adults. Children have a range of physical competences and abilities, including a growing ability to assess and manage risk that adults arguably tend to underestimate. However, children typically have less experience than adults of assessing the broad range of risks and hazards that they may encounter. Therefore, it is important to give them appropriate controlled environments in which they can learn about risk.

Play provision and risk

Risk-taking is an essential feature of play provision, and of all environments in which children

legitimately spend time at play. Play provision aims to offer children the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating, challenging and controlled learning environment. In the words of the play sector publication *Best Play*, play provision should aim to 'manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm'. While the same principles of safety management can be applied both to workplaces generally and play provision, the balance between safety and benefits is likely to be different in the two environments. In play provision, exposure to some risk is actually a benefit: it satisfies a basic human need and gives children the chance to learn about the real consequences of risk-taking.

Therefore it is acceptable that, in play provision, children may be exposed to the risk of minor and easily-healed injuries such as bruises, grazes or sprains. On the other hand, play provision should not expose children to significant likelihood of permanent disability or life-threatening injuries. However, it may on occasions be unavoidable that play provision exposes children to the risk – the very low risk – of serious injury, or even death. But this would only be tolerable in the following conditions:

- The likelihood were extremely low;
- The hazards were clear to users;

- There were obvious benefits;
- Further reduction of the risk would remove the benefits; and
- There were no reasonably practicable ways to manage the risk.

For example a paddling pool, even if shallow, involves a very low but irremovable risk of drowning (even with parental supervision), but this is normally tolerable. The likelihood is typically extremely low; the hazard is readily apparent; children benefit through their enjoyment and through the learning experience of water play; and finally, further reduction or management of the risk is not practicable without taking away the benefits.

Providers should strike a balance between the risks and the benefits. This should be done on the basis of a risk assessment. Crucially, this risk assessment should involve a risk-benefit trade-off between safety and other goals, which should be spelt out in the provider's policy. Given children's appetite for risk-taking, one of the factors that should be considered is the likelihood that children will seek out risks elsewhere, in environments that are not controlled or designed for them, if play provision is not challenging enough.

Another factor is the learning that can take place ▶

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TAYPLAY



No other playground structure currently available can match the

benefits offered by Activity Nets, claims Tayplay. Whether it is the number of children that can play on a structure at the same time, the number of access points available for both entry and exit, or simply the most cost-effective solution for busy play areas, nothing can match this amazing range of products for its ability to impress all.

All materials and components incorporated in Tayplay's Activity Net range are manufactured and tested to exacting standards using specialist machinery and highly skilled operatives.

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when children are exposed to, and have to learn to deal with, environmental hazards. Play provision is uniquely placed to offer children the chance to learn about risk in an environment designed for that purpose, and thus to help children equip themselves to deal with similar hazards in the wider world.

Good practice

Clear policies, with procedures that put them into practice, are the key to good practice in risk management in play provision. Policies should state clearly the overall objectives. Procedures, including risk assessment, should state how these policies are put into practice, giving guidance but also recognising the need for professional judgement in setting the balance between safety and other goals. Such judgements are clearly multidisciplinary in nature. For example, while they may contain an engineering dimension, of equal or greater importance is likely to be a knowledge of child development and play itself. The Children's Play

Information Service has information on sources of authoritative, relevant guidance on good practice.

Conclusion

Safety in play provision is not absolute and cannot be addressed in isolation. Play provision is first and foremost for children, and if it is not exciting and attractive, then it will fail, no matter how 'safe' it is.

Designers, managers and providers will need to reach compromises. These compromises are a matter of judgement, not of mechanistic assessment. The judgements should be based on social attitudes and broadly-based expert opinion informed by current best practice. They should be rooted in objectives concerned with children's enjoyment but take account of parents' concerns.

Ultimately, the basis of these judgements should be made clear in the policies of the play provider, as written down in policy documents. These policies should, in turn, be understood and embodied in practice by all the key stakeholders. ●

PLAYGROUND SAFETY CONFERENCE

RoSPA will be staging its first-ever Play Safety Congress on 6 June at the Stratford Moat House Hotel. Under the banner of 'protection versus risk experience', the event will promote how play can be both exciting and safe. Fears over litigation have made playground operators very wary of exposing children to risk. RoSPA, the HSE and the Play Safety Forum all believe that controlled risk is an essential part of play and child development and is therefore important to the future health of the nation.

Delegates will hear presentations from the

Welsh Assembly Minister for Business and Children, Jane Hutt, on 'play and health', and Jan Van Gils, president of the International Play Association, who will give an international perspective. Alongside the plenary speakers will be parallel workshop sessions on topics such as insurance, indoor play and BMX and skateboarding. Also included in the packed programme will be the presentation of the first RoSPA Play Quality Awards.

For more information on how to attend this event go to www.rospace.com/events

SPI PLAY



SPI Play is a leading designer, manufacturer, supplier, installer and service

provider of children's indoor and outdoor play systems and equipment, in the UK and Europe. SPI's 42,000 square foot manufacturing facility, together with the skilled team of designers, creative artists, product managers, developers, crafts people and installation/service technicians, are claimed to be unrivalled in the business. This combination of support proves SPI's commitment in ensuring that your vision is turned into a successful business. The same level of support is offered to customers with existing play equipment, ensuring it is maintained to the highest safety and hygiene standard. Whatever your play-related needs are, SPI has the all answers.

The company's mission statement is 'to be

the future of play', and that's exactly what SPI strives to do everyday. Its continuous policy of innovation and development ensures Commercial Play Customers always have the latest and best equipment, and that their play is exciting and revolutionary. SPI have more than 30 years of trusted experience in the industry and find it as exciting as their customers do, turning dreams into reality.

SPI has a dedicated customer service and specialist maintenance/after-care division. SPI Services offer an initial free site visit that evaluates any problems and provides a free, no-obligation quotation – regardless of the origin of the play equipment. Services provided can be made unique, valuable and tailored to the individual needs of every customer. Child safety is paramount at SPI, which prides itself in seeing play area running costs and litigation claims being reduced as a result of its innovative design and service levels.

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PLAYDALE

Playdale Playgrounds designs, manufactures, installs

and maintains children's outdoor play equipment, together with multi-sport and skate equipment for children and teenagers. Playdale is one of the UK's leading companies that offers a vast range of equipment for all ages and all abilities. With safety being a concern and of vast importance, all its manufactured products carry the prestigious kitemark as proof of compliance to EN1176. Playdale offers the complete service as a total package, with the unique ability to finance play areas, and help source funding.

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