



OPAL Play and Risk Management Policy

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OPAL Play and Risk Management Policy

At Wessex Primary School, we recognise that play is an essential part of a happy and healthy childhood. As a school we aim to provide consistently, high-quality, sustainable play experiences for all children across the school. We will do this by providing carefully considered outdoor spaces, play structures and resources that offer a rich choice of accessible play experiences for every child. At Wessex Primary School, we are committed to using our school vision and this play policy to guide our planning and actions in providing play opportunities for children. We believe play has a vital role in children's health, happiness and wellbeing. Play creates children who are independent, confident, imaginative, adaptable, social and able to assess risks. This policy provides a framework for supporting play and making decisions about the associated risks.

Commitment

We will refer to this play policy in all decisions that affect our children's play. We are committed to providing the strategic and operational leadership needed to provide and maintain quality play provision for all our children.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) supports the provision of diverse play environments, recognising that well-managed spaces may involve some degree of risk and occasional danger and that safety concerns should not create restrictive environments that limit challenge, preventing children from expanding their learning and capabilities (HSE, 2012). This policy provides a framework for supporting play and making decisions about the associated risks.

To support the development of high-quality play times, our school has invested in the OPAL Programme, providing us with a tried and tested framework for improving children's opportunities for play. We will be following the principles and practices recommended by OPAL, as we seek to ensure children in our school have access to well considered and exciting play.

Policy Rationale

Play is central to the physical and social development of all children. Through play children learn how to negotiate, take risks and overcome obstacles. Most importantly, it is through play that children develop friendships and a sense of belonging.

Children spend up to 20% or 1.4 years of their time in school at play. Therefore, this time needs to be coherent and planned for. Changes in society such as heavier traffic, busier lifestyles, fewer areas for play and risk aversion have led to a significant reduction in children's opportunities for play. This makes their play opportunities at school even more vital.

Better quality play leads to happier children and happier staff. With better quality play opportunities there are fewer behaviour problems, a more positive attitude to school and improved skills development and learning. As the children improve their quality of play and have more enriching play times, there are fewer accidents and behavioural incidents. In addition, classroom learning is enhanced as the children come in from play happy and ready to learn.

Play is recognised for the important contribution it makes to children's enjoyment of life and to their growth and development; a finding confirmed by many studies of early childhood. Play is essential to the health and well-being of children and promotes the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional

strength and skills. Play can enhance problem solving, encourages a 'can do' approach and through its opportunities for social interaction supports language development, which is vital for all our children. The contribution of play to educational development is generated through the inherent value of different play types e.g. through risk taking and exploratory play in formal and informal settings, allowing children to experiment, try new things and push their boundaries in a supportive and well managed environment.

Wessex Primary School, believes that all children need opportunities to play that allow them to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment. We believe play provision should be welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, economic or social circumstances, ethnic or cultural background or origin, or individual abilities.

Definition and Value of Play

Play is defined as a process that is intrinsically motivated, directed by the child and freely chosen by the child. Play has its own value and provides its own purpose. It may or may not involve equipment or other people.

UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) General comment 17:

Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.

We believe play has many benefits, including:

- Play is critical to children's health and wellbeing, and essential for their physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Play enables children to explore the physical and social environment, as well as different concepts and ideas.
- Play enhances children's self-esteem and their understanding of others through freely chosen social interactions, within peer groups, with individuals, and within groups of different ages, abilities, interests, genders, ethnicities and cultures.
- Play requires ongoing communication and negotiation skills, enabling children to develop a balance between their right to act freely and their responsibilities to others.
- Play enables children to experience a wide range of emotions and develop their ability to cope with these, including sadness and happiness, rejection and acceptance, frustration and achievement, boredom and fascination, fear and confidence.
- Play encourages self-confidence and the ability to make choices, problem solve and to be creative.
- Play maintains children's openness to learning, develops their capabilities and allows them to push the boundaries of what they can achieve.

Our children have told us they:

- Value their playtimes.
- Mainly enjoy active play (running, climbing, football, dancing) and social play (sitting, talking, quiet games).
- Feel supported by adults.
- Feel restricted in where they can play and how creatively they can engage with their environment.

Aims

In relation to play our school aims to:

- Ensure play settings provide a varied, challenging and stimulating environment.
- Allow children to take risks and use a common-sense approach to the management of these risks and their benefits.
- Provide opportunities for children to develop their relationships with each other.
- Enable children to develop respect for their surroundings and each other.
- Aid children's physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Provide a range of environments that will encourage children to explore and play imaginatively.
- Provide a range of environments that will support children's learning across the curriculum and learning about the world around them.
- Promote independence and teamwork within children.
- Build emotional and physical resilience

Clothing and Environment

So far as is reasonably practicable, we want children in our school to have freedom of movement across the whole school grounds, making the most of the opportunities for play the environment offers. We also recognise the value of different ages and abilities of children mixing and the importance of promoting children's self-regulation of their play. This includes children being allowed to be out of sight for short periods of time, enabling them to make dens, play hide-and-seek-type games, and enjoy a degree of privacy in their play. Importantly, there will be adults on hand to check in on children and offer help, or guidance should they need it.

Again, so far as is reasonably practicable, children should be enabled to control what, where, with whom and how they play. To support this, we will use the principle of 'everyone has a right to play', meaning that children have freedom to play in ways that are of value to them, so long as this does not prevent others from doing the same in a safe and happy environment.

To enable full site access, we would advise that all children come to school prepared for outdoor/all-weather play. To be able to enjoy the space and activities, children should always come to school with a waterproof coat. We will aim to keep all the school playground space open all year - this means children will play on the field even in the winter months. During the colder and wet weather, children are expected to wear wellington boots and waterproofs on the field, and if they want to play in the puddles and the mud kitchen. A welly store has been created, and families have been asked to provide/donate wellies for use at lunchtimes.

To further enhance and extend children's opportunities for play, we will develop and maintain our school grounds in ways that maximise their play value. This includes providing children with easy access to a large amount and a wide variety of loose parts - junk materials and natural resources that children can use creatively in their play. Enhancing children's opportunities for play in these ways will support children's enjoyment of school, their learning and creativity, the development of friendships, and, in turn, their sense of well-being and resilience. These benefits of quality play time experiences are also key to the realisation of our school values Positivity, Honesty, Respect and Pride.

Given the importance of play to children and the school's commitment to upholding children's right to play, children's access to play times will only be restricted if their behaviours do not consistently meet our school values. Such action will only be taken when necessary, and careful consideration will be given to how these children can be supported to return to play times.

Taking a Risk-Benefit Approach

At Wessex Primary School, we are committed to developing a rich play environment and the support children need to develop these sorts of experiences in a carefully managed way. The Health and Safety Executive offer guidance on the provision of play and we adopt their stance:

'HSE fully supports the provision of play for all children in a variety of environments. HSE understands and accepts that this means children will often be exposed to play environments which, whilst well managed, carry a degree of risk and sometimes potential dangers'. (HSE 2013)

Risk refers to the uncertain outcomes of a situation and is often associated with negative consequences. However, risk can also bring positive benefits. For example, balancing along a wall may result in physical injury, but it can also generate pleasure, excitement, self-awareness, confidence, risk perception and management skills, and a sense of achievement.

The level of risk children should be exposed to is a question of what is reasonable and practicable. We will use a risk-benefit approach when making decisions about what is reasonable and the desirability of children engaging with heightened levels of risk. This approach aims to ensure that children can experience the benefits of uncertainty in their play while seeking to reduce the risk of serious harm and those risks that are not beneficial to children.

To manage the levels of risk we will follow the following guidelines:

- Recognise the need for professional judgment in setting the balance between safety and goals
- Ensure risks are as apparent as possible to staff and children
- Design spaces where the risks of hazards are clearly apparent
- Ensure risks that children may not appreciate are controlled and managed
- Provide staff with training to supervise play setting (face to face training and through the OPAL college app)

The benefit risk assessment at Wessex Primary School is reviewed annually in line with this policy.

Strategic Risk Management

Our role as play providers is to facilitate enriching opportunities for children. They need to learn to manage risk for themselves in an environment that is as safe as it needs to be, rather than completely devoid of risk. The benefit to children of challenging play opportunities should be balanced with any potential risk when carrying out risk assessments.

Our risk management strategy is an ongoing process informed by OPAL's R.A.P.I.D. approach to risk management in play. R.A.P.I.D. stands for Risk-benefit assessments, Assemblies, Policy, Inspections, and Dynamic risk management. These different elements of our risk management strategy work together ensuring we have robust systems in place to support good decision-making and the ongoing maintenance of a 'safe enough' environment for play.

Following HSE guidance (see Appendix 1), we recognise that detailed risk-benefit assessments for every scenario are unnecessary, impractical, and time-consuming. Instead, we take a proportionate and balanced approach to risk assessment, ensuring that higher-risk activities receive greater scrutiny but low-risk opportunities (whilst still subject to professional judgement), remain unburdened by excessive paperwork.

Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment

Children's play is inherently exploratory, flexible, and varied. While playing, children naturally seek uncertainty, which means risks can emerge in the moment. To manage these 'real-time' risks, we adopt a dynamic risk-benefit assessment approach, where staff assess risks as they arise, considering the environment and play context to determine the most appropriate response.

Risk perception is subjective, and individual staff may differ in their tolerance of risk. To support consistency in decision-making, we have adopted guidance on dynamic risk-benefit assessments (see Appendix 4), supporting staff in making balanced and informed choices.

In addition to standard risk-benefit assessments the school will practice dynamic risk management with children, encouraging them to identify and manage risks in an environment where adults are present to support them.

We conduct regular inspections of the play environment and resources to ensure risks remain at a reasonable and acceptable level.

Supervision of playtimes

At Wessex Primary School we understand the importance of suitable and sufficient supervision during play times. The law requires that children in school be supervised, but for primary school play times, there are no stated adult-to-child ratios, only that there should be one or more adults present when children are playing outdoors.

At Wessex Primary School, we will use OPAL's three models of supervision: direct, remote and ranging. To allow children to make full use of our school grounds, direct supervision is not always

possible or beneficial. Whilst direct supervision may be used for our youngest children starting school, most of our playtime supervision will take remote and ranging models. This will mean that children can quickly find an adult (wearing high-vis-vests for easy identification), and adults can patrol large areas of the site to gain an awareness of the types of play and levels of risk emerging.

Our school grounds will be divided into supervision zones with an adult patrolling each area. The OPAL play coordinator will be an additional 'floating' member of staff who will be present during each playtime to have an overview of the whole site and to offer support in specific areas as necessary. Adults within each zone will communicate via walkie-talkies, and a fixed first aid point will be used for any significant accidents.

The staff involved in supervising playtimes are called our Play Team. The Play Team's role is to facilitate and enhance children's play, enabling all children to play in ways that are of value to them, and encouraging children to assess the risks and benefits of their play behaviours. We will help children maximise the benefits they can gain from playing by training our Play Team to work in accordance with the Playwork Principles (see Appendix 2). These principles will help to guide how supervising staff interact and intervene in children's play.

Ultimately, we strive to facilitate an environment which nurtures children's self-directed play. However, children's play is complex and allowing children freedom is not always an easy thing for adults to do. The Play Team will therefore be provided with regular opportunities to reflect on and develop their practice, as well as what is available in the play environment.

Whole school communication

At Wessex Primary School, we, as an entire staff team, are fully committed to working with children to provide the play experiences that they want and need in their school. We will maintain an open dialogue with children about our play provision, with the aim of further developing their playtime experiences using their voices and ideas as guidance.

Play assemblies are a key aspect of our risk management strategy and are planned and led by the play curricular lead. Play assemblies includes meeting with children at least once per half term and discussing with them the play opportunities on offer, the play environment and their play behaviours, as well as our approach to working with play.

We use OPAL's C.I.N.I format, which incorporates:

- **Celebrating** children's play,
- **Informing** children about aspects of our play provision,
- **Negotiating** with children about aspects of the play offer, and
- **Innovating** with children about improving our play offer.

These assemblies routinely include conversations with children around various aspects of risk management.

As a school, we will also maintain an OPAL working group, which will oversee the implementation of the OPAL Programme, ensuring that all aspects of school life that influence our play times are aligned with the aims and aspirations of this policy. Appendix 3 sets out the staffing structure we have in place to support quality play times.

Review

This policy will be closely monitored by the OPAL Play Team, SLT and governors.

A working play group, comprising of the Headteacher, play co-ordinator, play leader, site controller and play governor, will take responsibility for managing the action plan for play.

This policy has been shared with the whole school community.

This policy is under continuous review in line with our OPAL journey.

Appendix 1

Health & Safety Executive: Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting A Balanced Approach

Appendix 2

Playwork Principles

Appendix 3

Staffing structure to support play times:



Appendix 4

Dynamic Risk Benefit Assessment Flow Chart