

Play Matters

Play & Challenge



Briefing Sheet 3

PLAY AND CHALLENGE

Children have an innate urge to play from birth right through to teenage years and they are often at their happiest when playing or 'hanging out'. Taking risks, or being challenged is a necessary part of playing. Children will often need and want to create challenge and uncertainty in their play. As adults we can probably remember the thrill and excitement of testing boundaries – *climbing higher, swinging harder, balancing on beams, jumping rivers, running faster, swimming further, doing something for the first time!*

Children need the freedom to play how they choose and this includes taking risks and engaging in risky, challenging play. Children, regardless of their culture, background or ability will need to take risks physically and emotionally and for adults a balanced, thoughtful approach to supporting challenging play is a helpful starting point.

WHY CHALLENGE IS IMPORTANT IN PLAY

Challenging, risky play can look different for different children dependent on their age, stage or ability and children with a disability have an equal need for adventurous play. One child's idea of something challenging might be something easy for another. Children need to explore their limits, try out new experiences and develop their capabilities. This will be evident from a very young age. Children would never learn to crawl, walk, climb stairs or ride a bike if they were not afforded the opportunity to stretch and challenge themselves.

As adults therefore it is our responsibility not only to keep children safe but also to help them to manage and experience challenging, risky opportunities through play. Through this type of play children will learn to be **emotionally** and **physically resilient**, thus helping them to manage difficult situations, resolve disagreements between each other and keep themselves safe. This type of play raises their **resilience**, **self-esteem**, and **self-confidence**. It also encourages their **curiosity**, helps them to be more

physically active and gives them a sense of **independence**. The development of these skills in early childhood will help equip children to manage risk safely throughout their lives.

RISKY OR NOT?

Our desire to 'keep children safe' can sometimes result in too many limits or restrictions being placed on children and this can interfere with their healthy development.

Challenging, risky play will for children involve the thrill and excitement of 'testing' themselves or 'stretching their limits'. Children engaging in what can be perceived as 'risky' play may be

- Playing with heights (such as climbing trees or structures)
- Playing with elements (such as building a fire or playing with water)
- Playing at speed (such as running, cycling or skating really fast)
- Playing with tools or loose parts (such as hammers, scissors, saws, tyres, crates, pallets)
- Rough & Tumble (such as wrestling or play fights).

Children do occasionally (and will) have minor accidents (cuts, grazes, bruises) when taking part in some of these types of activities. We, as adults, need to recognise their desire to test their boundaries (remember your experiences as a child) and *consider the life-long benefits of those experiences*.

HEALTH & SAFETY

Challenging, risky play helps children to learn about themselves and to work out what their own individual limits are. Children learn skills to manage risk through play and these skills can be used in other life-long situations. When we try to '*wrap children in cotton wool*' or limit these experiences we take away valuable learning opportunities from children which may actually result in them being less safe (they will not learn how to do these things for themselves). If in doubt adults should ask themselves '*does the benefits of a child partaking in a 'risky' activity outweigh the perceived risk.*

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Helpful Tips!



It's hard not to want to 'jump in' and stop children from doing something that you perceive not to be safe. Some common worries or concerns might be:

- I think my child won't know how to stay safe
- I'm concerned someone might harm my child
- I'm worried that my child might get seriously hurt
- I don't think my child can do that!
- I think my child is safer indoors
- I'm worried someone might take my child
- I'm worried that other parents might think I'm a bad parent

When this happens, resist the urge to say 'No you can't', 'Be Careful' 'Stop that' 'Get down!' Try instead to consider:

- Accidents can happen anywhere – it's about showing my child how to stay safe
- I think this is a good opportunity for my child to build independence and resilience
- I trust my child and know that they can handle this
- I believe my child really wants to do this and I want to support and encourage them
- I want my child to be courageous, resilient and confident
- I've seen my child manage stuff like this before
- Scabby knees, bumps & bruises are a normal part of childhood
- I'm going to take small steps to help myself feel comfortable about letting my child do this.
- I remember doing this as a child, young person!
- I want my child to learn, to build skills and to try new challenges



Encourage children right from birth to extend their abilities. Teach them basic skills, such as riding a bike, learning to swim and road safety. Encourage them to learn from mistakes, to try again and to believe in themselves. Help them understand their limits and their boundaries but most of all let them have fun in their play!

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HSE fully recognises that play brings the world to life for children. It provides for an exploration and understanding of their abilities; helps them to learn and develop; and exposes them to the realities of the world in which they will live, which is a world not free from risk but rather one where risk is ever present. The opportunity for play develops a child's risk awareness and prepares them for their future lives.