

Assessing Risk and Benefit in Playspaces

Introduction

Preventing unintentional injury to children is important but a degree of managed risk in playspaces is beneficial.

Providing children with the opportunity to enjoy challenging, adventurous play, encountering hazards and taking risks will assist in their physical, emotional and intellectual development. It can also assist them learn how to assess and manage risks for themselves. The learning process is invaluable.

Risks and hazards need to be assessed and managed carefully but not always removed.

A risk benefit approach is likely to deliver better overall learning outcomes in playspaces. It helps decision makers identify unacceptable risks whilst providing developmental benefits for children engaging in a range of experiences or activities.

Risk Benefit Assessment

A risk benefit assessment is a comparison between the risks of a specific experience or activity and its benefits. It documents any required actions to manage elements of risk which would enable the experience to proceed.

AS 4685.0 Playground equipment and surfacing—Development, installation, inspection, maintenance and operation acknowledges that some elements in a playspace may not neatly align with the playground standards (such as nature play) and suggests that a risk benefit assessment will assist in identifying the potential hazards while acknowledging the potential benefits to be gained from an experience.

Talking through this process with educators and children is useful to help them understand the thinking behind these decisions. For example,

when talking to children about tree climbing, discuss why a certain tree was chosen, how high to climb and why and which branches to choose. This guides children on how they can assess risks themselves and what is best for them, at that point in time.

Assessing the level of risk presented by a particular experience or activity is based on seven basic steps outlined in *AS/NZS ISO 31000 Risk management—principles and guidelines*:

STEP 1: COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION

The successful assessment and management of risk depends on effective communication and consultation with users of the playspace throughout the entire process.

STEP 2: ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT

Identify all contributing factors which may impact on assessing a risk. Some examples may include: environmental, cultural, trends, opinions, beliefs, mission statements, policies, procedures, regulations and relevant Australian standards. These factors may impact on the way risks need to be considered and how decisions will be made.

STEP 3: RISK IDENTIFICATION

AS/NZS ISO 31000 Risk management—principles and guidelines recommends a systematic approach in identifying any risk. Initially it is useful to ask the following questions in relation to a potential hazard:

What can happen, where and when?

Generate a comprehensive list of potential sources of risk or hazards

Why and how can it happen?

Consider possible causes and scenarios



child safety is no accident

STEP 4: RISK ANALYSIS (Refer to Matrix)

This will help you decide the best approach(s) to deal with the risk(s):

- Evaluate the controls that are already in place, and consider their effectiveness
- Examine each risk in terms of 'consequence' (what could happen) and 'likelihood' (the probability of something happening). This will help when making the decision about treating risk(s)
- If risks are not deemed as 'unacceptable or high risk', the use of a risk benefit assessment may be used to support retaining a specific activity by identifying any skills, knowledge and learning benefits the opportunity will provide for children.

STEP 5: RISK EVALUATION

Use the information in Step 4 to make a decision about rating each of the risk(s). The matrix below can assist with this process. The risk rating can determine the appropriate action, and different levels of risk require varied levels of action. Note: If a risk is rated high, risk benefit would not be taken into consideration due to the potential consequence of serious injury.

STEP 6: RISK TREATMENT

Depending on the seriousness of the risk there are a range of responses:

- Removing or avoiding the risk entirely if identified as 'high/unacceptable'
- Reducing the likelihood of the risk by putting control measures in place e.g. installing a barrier or relying on close supervision
- Undertake a risk benefit assessment i.e. there is a moderate risk however the benefit of the experience is significant and the benefits may out way the risk, and therefore there is benefit to managing the risk.

STEP 7: MONITOR AND REVIEW

Regularly monitor and review the effectiveness of the risk treatment to ensure it is the most appropriate action.



Below: Example of a risk severity matrix adapted from AS 4685.0

LIKELIHOOD	1	2	3	4	5
5	L	M	H	H	U
4	L	M	M	H	H
3	L	L	M	M	H
2	L	L	L	M	M
1	L	L	L	L	L
	1	2	3	4	5
	CONSEQUENCE				

Legend		Score
L	Low Risk	1 to <8
M	Medium Risk	8 to <13
H	High Risk	13 to 20
U	Unacceptable	>20

The risk score is calculated by multiplying the likelihood rating by the potential consequence rating to quantify the risk event according to

Likelihood of an injury is rated as:		Potential consequences of an injury is rated as:	
Rare (highly unlikely event)	1	Little or no injury	1
Unlikely (conceivable event)	2	Minor injury requiring first aid	2
Possible (could occur event)	3	Moderate injury causing absence from school	3
Likely (almost certain event)	4	Serious injury with long term consequences	4
Almost certain (will occur event)	5	Death or major disability	5

Resources and References

Kidsafe NSW: Challenging Play – Risky!

<https://www.kidsafensw.org/safety/playground-safety/challenging-play-risky/>

Kidsafe NSW: Information Sheets

<https://www.kidsafensw.org/resources/information-sheets/playground-safety/>

Play England: Managing Risk in Play Provision

<https://www.playengland.org.uk/>

AS/NZS ISO 31000 Risk management—principles and guidelines

ISO Guide 73 Risk management – vocabulary

Safe Work Australia:

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/risk#the-benefits-of-assessing-and-managing>

Little & Wyver, 2008:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234648983_Outdoor_Play_Does_Avoiding_the_Risks_Reduce_the_Benefits

Nicola Russell, 2019:

<https://thesector.com.au/2019/08/01/practicing-essential-risky-play-safely-in-ecce-settings-to-boost-childrens-wellbeing/>

AIHW: Pointer SC (2021):

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/25a1c441-4946-4e6d-8d34-12c4f552aada/aihw-injcat-217.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

Dr Sharman, Rachael. (2014). Too much screen time and too little outside play is holding back kids, research article:

<http://theconversation.com/too-much-screen-time-and-too-little-outside-play-is-holding-back-kids-31116>

Wyver, S., Tranter, P., Naughton, G., Little, H., Sandseter, E.B.H., & Bundy, A. (2010). *Ten ways to restrict children's freedom to play: The problem of surplus safety*. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 11(3), 263-277:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236986877_Ten_Ways_to_Restrict_Children's_Freedom_to_Play_The_Problem_of_Surplus_Safety



SAMPLE—RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Activity:	Tree Climbing				
Date of assessment:	14/07/2021				
Location:	Preschool Playground				
Assessment undertaken by:		Approved by:			
BENEFITS OF ACTIVITY:	Building self-confidence through challenge Coordination and strength – upper and lower body activity Problem solving – getting up and getting down Learning limitations – how high can you go Social interaction – helping others Connection with nature – learning about trees, bark, bugs, birds, etc. Creative and imaginative play				
Hazard/Risk	Preliminary Risk Rating* (no measures in place)	Precaution/Control Measures	Who	When	Risk Rating* (following assessment)
Suitability of tree – health and structural integrity	U	Assess health and viability as climbing tree Remove lower limbs to minimise accessibility (if deemed unsuitable)	Tree specialist Ground keeper	Prior to use Yearly or as advised	L
Suitability of tree – protruding branches dead wood	M	Re-enforce rules of climbing Change climbing location into tree if required Children self-assess climbing location Remove protruding and dead sections of branches	Staff Children Tree specialist Ground keeper	Ongoing	L
Fall heights – fall from tree	M	Re-enforce rules of climbing Monitor landing surface for obstacles Highlight height boundary with a marker/ tape/ribbon Support children when required e.g. hold hand, provide guidance Children self-assess abilities Install bark chips or mats (impact attenuating surface)	Staff Children Ground keeper	Daily	L
Slippery surfaces	M	Check condition of surfaces prior to climbing activity Evaluate weather conditions Inform children of hazard and allow self-monitoring	Children Staff	Daily	L
Tree branch breaks while child is climbing	U	Assess health and viability as climbing tree	Tree specialist	ASAP	L
Child unable to get down from tree	M	Re-enforce rules of climbing Children self-assess height limits Use of a ladder to assist child if required	Staff Children	As required	L
	Overall Preliminary Risk Rating M				Overall Risk Rating L
Actions	Impact attenuating surface in impact area (under climbing branches) such as bark chips or mats Trees suitable for climbing to be identified by a green ribbon around the trunk Maximum heights for climbing highlighted with a marker/tape/ribbon Rules of climbing to be developed in consultation with children Designated active supervision				
*Refer to Risk Severity Matrix on page 2 to determine risk rating					