Practical tips for play rangers to facilitate risk in play

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Play rangers

Play rangers in parks actively listen, encourage and support children, make them feel comfortable about playing in their neighbourhoods, and extend the range of play opportunities available. The monitoring of projects has shown that many children come to parks because they, and their parents, feel reassured that someone is there. Many older children also choose to come to the public spaces where play rangers are present, not always to join in, but mainly to feel better about hanging out in a more vibrant and loosely-supervised space. When consulting with children about their sessions, play rangers have found that children will often request challenging play activities that involve elements of risk.

Don’t let this stop you - challenging play has its benefits. It helps children to develop their own skills in regard to assessing hazards, risks and safety and is a key approach to reducing injuries.

Key points

• Play rangers need to effectively communicate what the service is to all their key clients
• Establish the baseline of current park or open space usage
• Make contact with local agencies that impact on play ranger provision
• Establish a good marketing campaign with strong publicity to ensure a professional image of the service.

About these briefings:

This series was compiled by Dan Rees-Jones; a practising play ranger and author of Playing on the Range. The briefings have been developed in response to FAQs to the Play Ranger Support Service e-group. The e-group was set up by Dan in 2008 with support from Playwork Partnerships and Play England to provide play rangers and playworkers with an access point to share experiences, information, advice and good practice.
Risk, or perceived risk, is different for each individual so will need to be considered as a dynamic process.

For example, to one child, playing in the dark on a swing might seem very exciting and risky. For another child, the risk might be plucking up the courage to go down to the park for the first time by themselves. Through play ranger provision, children may take part in play activities which include making and cooking on fires, making and using outdoor ovens, using knives for whittling and stone carving, playing with large catapults, building go-karts and using a range of tools.

Play rangers are responsible for the play activities they organise and therefore need good risk-assessment skills. They need to clearly identify the difference between risks and hazards in order to make assessments and complete formal risk assessment forms.

- A hazard is something that can cause an accident or harm to someone.
- A risk is the chance of the hazard causing an accident or harm.

Note: the October 2010 review by Lord Young: Common Sense - Common Safety can be found in the reference section at the end of this document.
Risk-assessment forms should detail the activity, potential hazards, possible risks and precautions that need to be considered.

A generic formal risk-assessment template is available online from the Playwork Partnerships website: www.playwork.co.uk

Use the Risk Assessment Aide Memoir on pages two and three of that PDF for help in completing formal risk assessments.

External hazards at each setting such as loose gravel, broken glass or dog faeces should be detailed on a separate assessment. Activity risk-assessment forms should therefore be quick and easy to complete and regarded as guidance and support to staff rather than just more cumbersome paperwork.

Note: It is extremely important that play rangers attend a risk-assessment training course run by their respective local authority.

It is important for children to take responsibility for themselves when playing outdoors. Getting children to create their own rules in play is a good way of developing risk management skills and independence.

The open access nature of play ranger provision means that the numbers of children can fluctuate, sometimes dramatically in a short space of time. This may mean that some activities, such as making small fires, might become too difficult to manage safely and will need to be discontinued. This judgement will be based on the observations of the play rangers at the setting.

Being sensitive to the Playwork Principles and intervention styles, while also making sure that children don’t seriously hurt themselves is a difficult skill to master, but improves with confidence.

For more information on intervention styles, please refer to Bob Hughes’ First Claim: a framework for playwork quality assessment. This provides a description of appropriate ways to intervene in the play process.

Ultimately, talking openly about hazards and potential risks helps children manage their own safety while still enjoying freely chosen outdoor play.
‘Dynamic risk-benefit assessment refers to the minute-by-minute observations and potential interventions by adults who have oversight of children in staffed provision…’

(Ball D, Gill T, and Spiegal B, 2008)

Play rangers need to be proficient in making dynamic and informal risk assessments. These assessments happen on site and are based on observations of what is happening at any one time.

Play ranger sessions are of an open access and free play nature, which means that situations can escalate very quickly. Therefore play rangers need to make frequent dynamic risk assessments as sessions progress.

Accurate assessments will help play rangers to be aware of, and sensitive to, different play behaviours as they arise. This, in turn, will help them work with children and young people to support them through situations of danger or conflict.

In many cases, young people will need to make decisions for themselves about how to move forward or what collective action they should take.

Becoming a perceptive observer will enable play rangers to remain calm in stressful situations, unprejudiced and objective at all times, and focused on maintaining a positive and exciting play environment.

A dynamic risk-assessment template is available online from the Playwork Partnerships website: www.playwork.co.uk

It is important to stress that although this template is on paper - drawn as a flow diagram - the actual assessment play rangers will make using this model should not be in written form. Crucial to the model are the thought processes adopted, which should be measured very quickly and then communicated with colleagues, to establish a suitable way forward.
Below are some useful guidelines and advice on facilitating children to encounter and manage risk in play activities.

**Fires**

‘Anyone that has sat around a campfire knows, that they have the capacity to bring people together while making us feel closer to the natural world; and children are captivated by the magic of a campfire.’

(Danks, F and Schofield, J 2005)

If play rangers are planning to use fire in a session they will need to first request permission from the landowner. Once permission has been granted it is also advisable for organisations to have a fire policy and/or safety guidelines so that all staff are aware of the principles and procedures.

The following websites will prove helpful in this area:

- A generic fire guide can be found at the Playwork Partnerships website: [www.playwork.co.uk](http://www.playwork.co.uk)

**Playing with trees**

Children and adults alike are naturally attracted to trees; they are places for all sorts of adventures, places just to sit quietly, and places that provide shelter from the elements.

Not all play ranger settings will have access to trees but if there are some nearby, not surprisingly, children’s play may eventually gravitate towards them in some way.

**Tree safety tips**

- Children should only attempt to climb reasonably mature trees with sturdy branches
- Do not let children climb along dead branches
- Limit the number of children climbing any one tree
- Encourage climbers to stay close to the trunk of a tree

(Danks, F and Schofield, J, 2005)

The Forestry Commission has publications online that can help you understand and manage the risks of children playing in and around trees.

‘The Forestry Commission...is committed to providing opportunities for outdoor play and growing adventure for children and young people...

...Woodlands are great places for children to make their own choices about play and to create their own play environments...Provision of...[these]...spaces...helps to deepen their engagement with, and understanding and appreciation of, those settings.’

(Harrop, P, 2006)
Loose parts

Loose parts represent anything that could be played with by a child. This means that the sky is pretty much the limit.

Recycled loose parts are a great solution for play rangers as the resources used are cheap, varied, unusual and also help to reduce waste going to landfill. Once you start looking at waste as potential playthings, it’s amazing how much of it there is and how much children enjoy playing with it! Simon Nicholson wrote about the theory of loose parts back in 1971. He noted that:

‘In any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.’

So according to the theory, a greater variety of objects and materials to hand will multiply the possibilities for play potential - with the child being stimulated in a variety and combination of ways.

Children play with far more imagination and flexibility with loose parts that are lying around compared to specially designed play equipment.

Loose parts also lead to children developing greater flexibility in their play and being more flexible and adaptable in their thinking.

It is advisable to have some safety guidelines for using loose parts. A generic example is provided on the Playwork Partnerships website.

Scrap stores are a valuable resource for sourcing loose parts of all descriptions: www.scrapstoresuk.org

Rope swings, dens, tree houses and fires

A risk-based approach for managers facilitating self-built play structures and activities in woodland settings is available online: http://bit.ly/ropeswings

More details and safety guidance for tree climbing and related information can be found in the publication Nature Play: simple and fun ideas for all, available online: www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-7LSEHW

Resources

- Rees-Jones, D (2008), Playing on the Range, Gloucester: Playwork Partnerships, University of Gloucestershire. Online: www.playwork.co.uk
Please also note the recent review (October 2010) of health and safety by Lord Young, *Common Sense - Common Safety*.

Commissioned by the Prime Minister, the review makes recommendations for improving the way health and safety is applied and tackling the compensation culture.

‘Shift from a system of risk assessment to a system of risk–benefit assessment and consider reviewing the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to separate out play and leisure from workplace contexts.’