

better safe than sorry

Melanie Pilcher, policy and standards manager at the Pre-school Learning Alliance, outlines the importance of maintaining a comprehensive health and safety policy...

Every child deserves the best possible start in life, with the opportunity to develop in an environment both safe and secure. Parents who use early years services should be able to do so with the utmost confidence that their children will be getting the best possible experiences and are protected from harm at all times. The Early Years Foundation Stage welfare requirements (to be known as safeguarding and welfare requirements from September, 2012), is the framework that provides this assurance. The general legal requirements, including those concerning health and safety, are supported by more detailed specific legal requirements. Both the general and specific legal requirements have the force of regulations and must be complied with by all early years providers. The EYFS welfare requirements also contain statutory guidance which all providers must have regard to, as it underpins the general and specific requirements.

Providers have a corporate responsibility and duty of care towards those who work in and receive a service from their setting. Individual employees and service users also have responsibility for ensuring their own health and safety as well as that of others. A comprehensive set of policies and procedures written to meet the EYFS welfare requirements is the key means through which this is achieved.



The EYFS requires that:

- The premises and equipment should be clean, and providers should be aware of the requirements of health and safety legislation (including hygiene requirements). This should include informing and keeping staff up-to-date.
- A health and safety policy should be in place which includes procedures for identifying, reporting and dealing with accidents, hazards and faulty equipment.

Policy making

The provider's health and safety policy should contain reference to the procedures that the setting has in place, which may include:

- Risk assessment
- Manual handling
- Reporting Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences (RIDDOR) events
- Fire safety and fire risk assessment
- Emergency evacuation and other emergency procedures
- Control of substances hazardous to health (COSHH Regulations)
- Individual rooms (kitchen, bathroom, cloakrooms, stairways and corridors, laundry room)
- Outings/outdoors
- Maintenance and repairs
- Personal safety (including home visits and threats and abuse towards staff)
- Inventory
- Festivals and decorations
- Critical incidents – non child protection (including unauthorised visitors)

Making a judgement

WHATEVER THE REASON FOR THE RISK ASSESSMENT, THERE ARE FIVE STEPS THAT YOU NEED TO TAKE:

- **Identification of risk or hazard:** where is it and what is it?
- **Decide who is at risk and how:** for example, childcare staff, children, parents, cooks, cleaners.
- **Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions:** can you get rid of the risk altogether; if not how can you control it?
- **Record your findings and implement them:** prioritise, make a plan of action if necessary.
- **Monitoring and review:** how do you know if what has been decided is working, or is thorough enough?



findoutmore

More information about legal requirements and standards can be found on the Health and Safety Executive website at hse.gov.uk. Pre-school Learning Alliance publications including *Managing Risk, Good Practice in Early Years Infection Control, Accident Record and Incident Record* can be ordered from the Alliance shop. Call 0300 330 0996 or visit shop.pre-school.org.uk

Of course, other procedures will be required, depending on the type of service, the premises and the individual needs of service users. It is also important that health and safety procedures are reviewed regularly, particularly after an event such as emergency evacuation. Everyone involved at the time should have the opportunity to consider how the procedure worked for them – were they able to follow it correctly and, most importantly, did they understand what they needed to do in the first place? This is vital in an emergency situation where practitioners will have to act quickly and competently, with little or no time to refer to a written document for clarification. When reviewing a procedure after an 'event', changes may be required according to needs identified. If changes are made then every member of staff and all service users must be updated at the earliest opportunity.

What is risk assessment?

Early years providers are required to conduct regular risk assessments, which identify aspects of the environment that must be checked on a regular basis. This involves deciding what should be done to prevent harm and ensuring that the relevant actions are taken and are updated whenever necessary.

Health and safety law does not expect all risk to be eliminated, but that 'reasonable precautions' are taken and staff are trained and aware of their responsibilities. This is particularly important in an early years setting, as children should be able to grow, develop and take appropriate risks through physically challenging play. Children must have the opportunity and be encouraged to work out what is not safe and what they should do when faced with risk.

Settings should have comprehensive risk assessments that inform their procedures and a competent person in charge of implementation. Staff in all settings, and at every level, should be involved in reviewing risk assessments, as they

are the ones with first-hand knowledge of whether control measures are effective and can give an informed view to help update them accordingly. This is important as we work within the requirements of the EYFS and move away from the idea of a risk assessment being an annual or biannual event, carried out under headings that rarely change.

Parents have an active role to play too. They should be made aware of their responsibilities such as closing gates behind them and not letting strangers into the building, and also encouraged to report any potential hazards to staff – it is good practice to invite them to take part in reviews of procedures whenever possible. The basis of effective risk management is that everybody is involved and can therefore take responsibility for their and others' safety.

Risk assessments on aspects such as security of the building, fire safety, food safety, nappy changing, outings, and personal safety, should be in place. Other activities such as cooking or visitors bringing animals or vehicles to the setting should also be risk assessed. Risk assessments are also necessary when making reasonable adjustments for disabled children/children with additional needs in order that every child is able to take part in activities, whatever their level of need or ability. Patterns of minor accidents would also require further investigation and possible actions taken based upon a risk assessment.

Keeping children safe is of paramount importance, but that should not mean that early years providers have to be 'afraid' of doing anything involving an element of risk. Practitioners who understand their responsibility will have a can-do attitude rather than adopting what the media describes as "elf and safety gone mad" where simple common sense is not applied.