

DANGER!

Early years!

In an increasingly risk-averse society, it's important not to deny children the opportunity to experience life and experiment with their surroundings, says **Kevin Harcombe**...

In the days when mobile communications consisted of shouting down one tin can to another via a piece of string, children took risks. My childhood days were spent roaming the streets of Liverpool, chasing lorries to hang a lift on the back of their trailers, climbing into builders' yards, making dens and generally learning – through doing – all about what was an acceptable risk and what was not. As long as I was home by tea and didn't bring officialdom or angry neighbours knocking at my parents' door, all was well and good.

There was less traffic on the roads and much less concern about 'stranger danger' because it seemed so rare. (Statistically, it still is, by the way.) This was, though, no halcyon age. There were injuries and sometimes worse; hanging off the back of a lorry trailer appals me in retrospect, though it was terrific fun at the time. But children were seldom 'wrapped up in cotton wool' as they are today. Just because bad things sometimes happen does not mean that all children should be denied access to life in all its joys, sorrows, successes and failures.

Worth the risk?

Children live in a risk-averse society. Post-Jamie Bulger and post-Soham, the streets are seen to be dangerous places because of the traffic; green spaces – where they still exist – are perceived to be teeming with predatory paedophiles, and children are positively discouraged, in the main, from exploration. The growth in litigation has led to schools and councils nailing down (with a non-slip hammer) every last health and safety batten. This is a regrettable but understandable reaction to a culture which seeks blame for every accident and in which lawyers are dedicated ambulance chasers. Among the consequences are children who live surrounded by electronic gadgetry in the supposed safety of their own bedrooms, growing obese at the games console and

seldom experiencing the unbridled joy of whooping like a red indian (or Native American, I should say) as they maraud round the local park, unencumbered by controlling parents.

So, what can we do in education to provide children with calculated risks to help them develop independence, self-awareness and know, as they grow, which activities are safe and which are not?

1 Danger! Speaking!

Risk-taking doesn't have to be of the physical type: bungee jumping has no place in early years, popular though it would be. What about the child for whom simply



speaking in a group seems risky? Can you remember being four and that awful anticipatory stomach-churn when you suspected you were to be chosen next to answer? A large part of what we do with the children has to be encouraging them to 'have a go', whether that be attempting to read the next word, speaking aloud or riding a bike.

We do this by providing a supportive learning environment. One in which they feel secure and where their self-esteem is developed through verbal and physical encouragement. People with high self-esteem take positive risks, learn from their mistakes and are willing to ask for help. Those with low self-esteem take negative risks, are more likely to blame others for mistakes and find it hard to ask for help.

2 Danger! Puddles!

Assessing risk is about weighing up the benefits against the costs. Children can do this and will improve at it if you provide the real experiences, which do not have to be dangerous. When children splash puddles in their shoes they will learn it's fantastic fun, but afterwards their feet are cold and soggy and their trousers are sodden. When they change into Wellies, however, they get all the fun and none of the misery. They can still do it in ordinary shoes, but in the full knowledge of the downside. Likewise, when they arrange guttering to pour water into the sand tray, it makes a fantastic gloopy mix – but then they have no dry sand to play with till it dries out. Armed with such experience they can make more informed choices.

3 Danger! Home Corner!

A boy spent all his time playing house. He avoided anything that didn't involve that particular safe role-play. To encourage him, the teacher ingeniously set up the home corner outside so he had to venture out. The 'house' was, some days later, blacked out and the boy provided with a torch. Eventually



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the point was reached where he was, with friends, making his own den and using tools safely to do so.

4 Danger! Hammer-wielding child!

Most early years settings will have some plastic tools. This is fine, but how much more fun would real tools be? A real spade to dig with, a saw that actually cuts materials, a hand drill that makes holes, a hammer that's weighty enough to knock real nails into real wood. The benefits are twofold. The children can achieve something – cutting stuff, joining it, making something real. (Misshapen, too, normally, but so are the shelves I put up at home.) Secondly, they learn to use them safely and to respect safe use. Tap your friend on the head with a bright yellow plastic hammer and not much happens (though you may receive a retaliatory poke in the midriff with a plastic banana). Try that with a real hammer and we're in serious trouble. If they only ever use light plastic tools, not only will the skill of using them not develop, they'll also be so used to using them to pretend to hammer walls, tables (each other!) that when they get their hands on real tools later on they will not have the understanding of consequence to limit themselves! Supervise it well and there'll be no problems.

Striking a balance

WHEN IT COMES TO PLANNING PHYSICAL PLAY, THERE ARE ESSENTIAL RULES TO FOLLOW TO ENSURE A SAFE BUT STIMULATING ENVIRONMENT...

- Strike a sensible balance between what is risky and what is reckless.
- Train and encourage the children to risk assess for themselves through questioning: what could happen? What do you need to do?
- If the child simply does not have the experience and intellectual agility to risk assess, you need to explain (and maybe demonstrate) the potential hazards.
- Self-regulation is the ultimate aim.

