In the second of her three-part series, Melanie Pilcher, policy and standards manager at the Pre-school Learning Alliance, discusses the importance of allowing children to engage in risky play...

When parents entrust the care of their children to early years providers they must be able to do so secure in the belief that their children are being well cared for, that their learning and development needs are being met and that they are kept safe at all times. The early years sector achieves this by operating within a regulatory framework that ensures that the safety and protection of young children is paramount. The Early Years Foundation Stage (2012) states that:

Children should be provided with safe and secure environments in which to interact and explore rich and diverse learning and development opportunities. Providers are required to produce and implement a written procedure for assessing any risks to children’s safety and reviewing risk assessments regularly.

When creating and maintaining a safe environment, practitioners must pay heed to their legal duties, but should also take into account those risks which are acceptable too. The risk of falling off larger pieces of play equipment is quite high; however, the risk of harm is minimised by ensuring that there is adequate supervision, correct positioning of the equipment (away from windows, or walls),
Some children with disabilities will have to have many things done for them in life because it is quicker, safer and easier for those people taking care of their needs. For them, having the opportunity to take risks is even more vital, as they may not always have the same freedom of choice given to their non-disabled peers. The child with mobility problems will probably have to wait to be asked, and then taken to the climbing frame, but once there will enjoy the challenge of getting to the first or second level. The sense of pride and achievement will be as great, if not greater because the risk was higher and the challenge harder.

Risk and additional needs

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Valuing risk

If we are not careful, concerns about safety can get in the way of every child’s fundamental right and need to ‘play’. In 2002, Managing Risk in Play Provision: A Position Statement, produced by the Play Safety Forum said:

All children both need and want to take risks in order to explore limits, venture into new experiences and develop their capacities, from a very young age and from their earliest play experiences. Children would never learn to walk, climb stairs or ride a bicycle unless they were strongly motivated to respond to challenges involving a risk of injury.

The Play Forum’s Position Statement is focused more on play equipment and playgrounds, but the message is relevant to children’s play in a much broader context too. Play and risk go hand-in-hand. If we are to truly value play then we must also value risk.

Children do not set out to deliberately hurt themselves, but they do not always realise their own limitations or the limitations of the environment that surrounds them. As they grow and develop there are going to be times when they will have to make choices about what is safe to attempt and what is not. How can they ever do this confidently if they have never experienced acceptable levels of risk upon which to test their judgements?

Whilst there is quite rightly much emphasis on safeguarding children in early years settings, we must be confident in our own competence and “take a risk ourselves”. Children need and instinctively want to be able to take risks in order that they can test their abilities and strengths. What better environment for them to do so than that of an early years setting where practitioners will already have removed hazards not readily identifiable to young children and will provide well-managed opportunities for appropriate risk-taking to take place?

The conscientious practitioner may be tempted to step forwards to stop the activity, telling Lily “You’ll fall and hurt yourself, this isn’t what these milk crates are for”. But while this may well be described as ‘good accident prevention’, it is not good risk management. A much better approach would be for the practitioner to hold back for a moment and observe the learning that is taking place. What will Lily do when the bridge wobbles? Will she continue anyway? If she is determined to stand on the unsafe structure then some adult intervention is going to be justified. But will Lily realise that the task that has thoroughly engaged her for the past 10 minutes is not yet complete and, with the determination central to confident learners, try again and again until she has got it right? Of course, the practitioner can intervene at any stage with suggestions such as “Why don’t you place the crates closer together, Lily, and see what happens then?” The rewards for Lily are obvious as she succeeds in her task. Meanwhile, the practitioner gains valuable insight into Lily’s emerging skills and will be able to plan for appropriate activities to help her develop them further.

Within the structure of health and safety, we must always remember that risk-taking is a very important part of a child’s development. All children both need and want to take risks. Some children with disabilities will have to have many things done for them in life because it is quicker, safer and easier for those people taking care of their needs. For them, having the opportunity to take risks is even more vital, as they may not always have the same freedom of choice given to their non-disabled peers. The child with mobility problems will probably have to wait to be asked, and then taken to the climbing frame, but once there will enjoy the challenge of getting to the first or second level. The sense of pride and achievement will be as great, if not greater because the risk was higher and the challenge harder.