



# **South Gloucestershire Play Policy and Strategy 2006**

**Agreed by Cabinet December 4<sup>th</sup> 2006**



## **South Gloucestershire Council Play Policy for Children and Young People**

This policy sets out South Gloucestershire Council's understanding of play and confirms its commitment to ensuring that quality environments for play, hanging-out and informal recreation are available to all its children and young people<sup>1</sup>.

South Gloucestershire Council endorses Articles 12 and 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This affirms the Council's commitment to ensure that children have the right to:

- freely express their views on all matters that affect them;
- have due weight given to those views;
- enjoy rest, leisure, play and recreational activities; and
- participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

### **Aim**

**The overarching aim of this play policy is to ensure that South Gloucestershire's children and young people have easy access<sup>2</sup> to a range of quality play opportunities.**

### **Commitment**

South Gloucestershire Council will take this corporate play policy into account whenever decisions need to be made that could or should affect children and young people's play opportunities. This means, for example, that planning guidance and decisions, renewal and maintenance programmes and relevant policies (e.g., those for transport, parks, open spaces) will work to the values, objectives and criteria of this policy.

South Gloucestershire Council will encourage parish and town councils, voluntary sector organisations, community groups and other agencies to adopt this play policy. Many valued services are delivered by non-council bodies, for example, child minders, out-of-school clubs, nurseries, youth clubs, holiday play schemes, schools and play centres. The widespread adoption of this policy will help

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<sup>1</sup> All references to child or children include teenagers and young people.

<sup>2</sup> 'Easy access' will be defined by indicators being developed in collaboration with the Children's Play Council.

ensure the development of a wide, coherent and cohesive approach to children and young people's play.

### **Age**

This policy does not prescribe age ranges for play provision. This is based on the understanding that children and young people need and like to play, and benefit from doing so.

*'While few teenagers would describe what they do as play, they need the time, space and freedom associated with play for younger age groups.... play [means] what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons.'*

Getting Serious about play: a review of children's play<sup>3</sup>

Subject to local discretion and conditions, there should be a presumption in favour of children and young people of all ages having access to quality opportunities to play, hang-out and engage in freely chosen recreation.

### **What we mean by 'all' children**

South Gloucestershire Council believes that all children and young people want and need opportunities to play. Play provision should be welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, economic or social circumstances, ethnic or cultural background or origin, or individual abilities.

We intend that play provision shall meet the play needs of children and young people within inclusive provision. Some children and young people will require additional support to ensure that they have access to the best possible play opportunities and some children and young people will need and want to have access to specialist as well as inclusive provision.

*'Children and young people with disabilities have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers.'*

Play Safety Forum Position Statement

### **Understanding play**

Play is any freely chosen activity which a child finds satisfying and creative. It may or may not require equipment, have an end

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<sup>3</sup> Play review commissioned by DCMS, supported by the New Opportunities Fund, other Government Departments and administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

product or involve other people. Play may be boisterous or quiet, energetic or contemplative, light-hearted or very serious.

Play is one essential way in which children and young people come to understand themselves and the world around them. Play is a vital component of a child's life: a child's capacity for positive development will be inhibited or constrained if access to a range of stimulating play opportunities is denied.

Play is essential for physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development. Through play children and young people explore the physical and social environment, ideas and concepts, and how to deal with situations that trouble or frighten them. In this way they learn through experience things which cannot be taught: for example, self-confidence, the sense of themselves as individuals able to make choices, the ability to cope with dispute or overcome fears and much more.

Play is an aspect of society's and children's cultural life. Through play children and young people learn how values, beliefs and traditions come to life through their actions and engagements with other people. Play enables children and young people to explore and develop the balance between their right to act freely and their responsibilities to others.

Adult cultural and leisure pursuits share with play the common characteristics of being undertaken voluntarily and requiring no necessary outcome. It is central to our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as a society that we value such freely-chosen engagements. These engagements are intrinsically worthwhile, and are distinct from those driven by necessity. They enrich and give meaning to our lives.

South Gloucestershire Council wants to ensure that play opportunities are created that allow children and young people to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment within challenging settings, free from unacceptable levels of risk<sup>4</sup>. The emphasis is always to be on the child's choice and control over their own experience.

South Gloucestershire Council will ensure that play is properly represented in cultural, community and related strategies.

## **Values and principles**

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<sup>4</sup> '... play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury.' Play Safety Forum Statement. See Appendix One.

The following values and principles will inform all South Gloucestershire Council's decisions about play provision. Children and young people:

1. are entitled to respect for their own unique combination of qualities and capabilities;
2. should have their opinions and reactions taken into account;
3. are part of, and contribute to, the cultural life of their communities;
4. have a right to be seen, heard and provided for in shared public space to the same degree as adults;
5. have responsibilities in sharing public space with others;
6. have a right to play environments free from unacceptable levels of risk;
7. should be able to control their own play activity; and
8. have the right to expect consistency and clarity in adults' application of values.

*Children and young people must see the connection between stated policy and what actually happens. They need to feel part of a community underpinned by trust and co-operation.*

South Gloucestershire Council's play provision will be based on the principle of empowering children and increasing their choices.

### **Play and Formal Education**

South Gloucestershire Council recognises play as equal to formal education in terms of its fundamental role in enabling children and young people to engage positively with the complexities of the world around them.

South Gloucestershire Council notes that there is evidence to suggest that free play has a direct positive impact on children and young people's ability to meet formal educational goals. For example, a Head teacher who improved free play opportunities during school breaktime reported that,

*'The children value the freedom of playtime and find that the range for their choice is wider so that they are more ready to accept the work load demanded during the time of their formal education.'*

Play at School published by PLAYLINK<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Play in Schools PLAYLINK 1999 ISBN: 0 9535665 0 1

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix for publication details

South Gloucestershire will encourage measures to be taken that will enhance children and young people's free play opportunities within educational settings during and after school.

### **Play and Health**

Play is critical to children and young people's physical and emotional health. There is growing concern about the rise in childhood obesity and related disorders, along with evidence showing a growth in mental illness.

*"... the shift from unstructured to structured events for children is one of the causes of their decrease in walking and ... letting children go out to play is one of the best things that parents can do for their children's health: outdoor play uses more calories than clubs and tuition."*

Centre for Transport Studies, UCL, 2004

The Mental Health "Bright Futures" report states that opportunities for risk-taking in unsupervised play helps children build self-confidence and resilience.

### **Shared Public Space**

Children and young people being seen and heard in public spaces is one hallmark of a healthy and sociable society.

The health and vibrancy of our local area depends to a significant degree on people's perception and use of public spaces and thoroughfares. Planning, design and architecture, along with sensitive approaches to overseeing public space, can create the conditions necessary for the development of a sociable society, one that demonstrates its respect for children and young people and values them as part of a wider community.

South Gloucestershire wants to ensure that its public spaces - e.g. thoroughfares, shopping areas, housing estates, parks and open spaces - are places where generations, individuals, groups and communities can share a common public realm.

Children and young people are entitled to play safely in a wide range of public spaces, including those close to their homes. It is likely that where parents and carers feel confident about their children and young people using shared public space, so too will others. Parents and carers are right to expect that local open spaces should be available for children and young people to enjoy play, free from unacceptable levels of risk.

This policy commits South Gloucestershire to creating and developing public places that integrate children and young people and meets their needs. These needs include some places that are designated specifically for the use of children and young people.

Perceptions of crime and community safety affect decisions about whether and where children and young people can play. However, people often believe that crime levels are higher than they really are. South Gloucestershire will work with others to ensure that misperceptions about crime levels do not have a negative impact on children and young people's ability to play outside

South Gloucestershire recognises that environmental issues such as transport, waste and pollution affect the quality of locations where children and young people play. In developing play opportunities, South Gloucestershire will aim to minimise the negative environmental impact of its activities and enhance the environmental benefits. South Gloucestershire's actions will be informed by its Environmental Policy.

South Gloucestershire recognises that play environments, whether designated play spaces or part of the general public spaces, must be properly maintained. Proper maintenance contributes to the sustainability of play environments and forms a necessary part of a positive approach to what CABI Space<sup>6</sup> has described as 'place making'.

*'CABI Space believes that the use of target hardening as a first response to anti-social behaviour is resulting in the fortification of our urban environment. There is a better solution: invest in place making, improving public spaces, to prevent the onset and escalation of these problems. Evidence from CABI Space's study shows that well designed, well maintained public spaces can contribute to reducing the incidence of vandalism and anti-social behaviour, and result in long term cost savings.'*

CABI Space Policy Note:  
Preventing anti-social behaviour in public spaces<sup>7</sup>

## **Children and Young People's Views**

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<sup>6</sup> CABI, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, is the government's adviser on architecture, urban design and public space. CABI Space is the part of CABI dedicated to encouraging excellence in the planning, design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in England's towns and cities.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix

Children and young people's views shall be central when decisions are made about their play opportunities.

The process of finding out and responding to children and young people's needs and wishes is more likely to occur where a culture of dialogue and conversation is nurtured. Conversation and dialogue presuppose a multiplicity of voices and the possibility of more than one point of view. A culture of conversation, based on shared values and meanings, will respect not only the child's voice, but also that of adults.

South Gloucestershire will work to ensure that a culture of conversation with children and young people is promoted. It will use and promote variety, innovation and quality in its approach to listening to, working with and responding to children and young people.

### **Play and risk**

Play providers fail in their responsibility if they do not create opportunities that allow children and young people to explore both themselves and their world through the medium of play. An essential element of this exploration is the opportunity for children and young people to experience freely-chosen activities and situations, where they can take acceptable risks and push against the boundaries of their existing capabilities. The benefits of allowing them to do this are the learning of new skills and the development of their ability independently to judge risks.

*'Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children and young people stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this, play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury.'*

Play Safety Forum Position Statement on  
Managing Risk in Play Provision<sup>8</sup>

Without opportunities to take acceptable levels of risk children's development is inhibited, undermining their capacity to deal with the wider unsupervised world.

*While the same principles of safety management can be applied both to workplaces generally and play provision,*

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<sup>8</sup> The full Play Safety Forum Position Statement on Managing Risk in Play Provision and a list of Forum members forms Appendix One of this play policy.

*the balance between safety and benefits is likely to be different in the two environments. In play provision exposure to some risk is actually a benefit: it satisfies a basic human need and gives children the chance to learn about the real consequences of risk taking.*

#### Play Safety Forum Position Statement<sup>4</sup>

If play provision fails to offer children varied and interesting experiences, they may seek challenge and stimulation elsewhere, in areas that may contain unacceptable levels of risk. Equally, if children and young people are denied opportunities to assess some risks for themselves in a variety of settings and situations, then it is reasonable to be concerned that they will lack the experience and skills to distinguish between levels of risk in the wider world.

South Gloucestershire adopts the Play Safety Forum's Position Statement on Managing Risk in Play Provision.

#### **Objectives of Play Provision**

The objectives that follow are broad statements which are intended to set out how the definition of play and the underpinning values and principles should be put into practice. They form the basis against which play provision can be evaluated.

The objectives take account of those published in 'Best Play: what play provision should do for children', the outcome of a partnership between PLAYLINK, Children's Play Council and the National Playing Fields Association.

South Gloucestershire affirms that its play provision, and that which it supports, will work to the seven objectives below.

**Objective One:** The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.

**Objective Two:** The provision recognises the child's need to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.

**Objective Three:** The provision manages the balance between children and young people's need and want to play and the need to keep them from being exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury.

**Objective Four:** The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.

**Objective Five:** The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.

**Objective Six:** The provision fosters children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.

**Objective Seven:** The provision fosters the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

## **Quality**

The quality of play provision cannot be judged solely in terms of usage levels and children and young people's apparent enjoyment of the facilities on offer. Whilst it would be nonsense to propose that children and young people's use and enjoyment of play facilities are not necessarily indicators of quality, this alone is not sufficient. Quality assessments of play environments need also to be judged by reference to the play environment criteria that form part of this policy.

## **Criteria for Play Environments**

The play environment criteria should be taken into account when planning, designing and maintaining places where children and young people should be able to play. This will require a new emphasis on the natural environment, natural materials and play-friendly art works and structures.

The criteria<sup>9</sup> below appear in 'Best Play: What Play Provision Should do for Children.' The examples given in each section are in no sense exhaustive, merely indicative.

### ■ **A varied and interesting environment.**

Examples: things at different levels, spaces of different sizes, places to hide, trees and bushes, open spaces, made things, places to inspire mystery and imagination.

### ■ **Challenge in relation to the physical environment.**

Examples: activities which test the limits of capabilities, rough and tumble, sports and games, chase.

### ■ **Experiencing the natural elements - earth, water, fire, air.**

Examples: campfires, digging, water slides, flying kites, shelter making.

### ■ **Movement - e.g. running, jumping, rolling, climbing, balancing.**

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<sup>9</sup> The criteria are adopted from those given in B. Hughes 'Play environments: a question of quality'. See Appendix Two for a fuller discussion on the context and benefit of play.

Examples: skateboarding, dance, ropes swings, bike riding, juggling equipment, ladders, space to move.

■ **Manipulating natural and fabricated materials.**

Examples: materials for art, cooking, making and mending of all kinds; building dens; making ramps, making concoctions; using tools; access to bits and pieces of all kinds.

■ **Stimulation of the five senses.**

Examples: music making, places where shouting is fine, quiet places, different colours and shapes, dark and bright places, cooking on a campfire, rotting leaves, a range of food and drink, using and manipulating objects of different sizes and textures, varied lighting.

■ **Experiencing change in the natural and built environment.**

Examples: experiencing the seasons through access to the outdoor environment; opportunities to take part in building, demolishing, or transforming the environment, making a BMX track.

■ **Social interactions.**

Examples: being able to choose whether and when to play or hang out alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, compete and resolve conflicts. Being able to interact with individuals and groups of different ages, abilities, interests, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and culture.

■ **Exploring identity.**

Examples: dressing up, make-up, role play, performing, showing off, taking on different kinds of responsibility, trying out conforming and challenging behaviours.

■ **Experiencing a range of emotions.**

Examples: opportunities to be powerful/powerless, scared/confident, like/disliked, in/out of control, brave/cowardly.

### **Staffed provision and Playwork Principles**

South Gloucestershire Council endorses the established principles and ethical framework for the playwork profession set out in Appendix Four. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.

### **Practical considerations: extending play opportunities**

All children and young people's services whose work includes play should assess and develop their provision by reference to the

criteria for play environments and the seven play provision objectives set out above.

The potential for creating quality play environments is substantial. South Gloucestershire, in collaboration with other sectors, agencies, groups and organisations, will work to create a society that is increasingly receptive to the play needs of children and young people.

The Council will keep under review the extent to which, for example, thoroughfares, residential estates, parks and open spaces, school grounds and designated play provision already contribute to local play opportunities or could do so in the future. Changes in traffic management, by-laws and regulations and the management of open spaces will be made where necessary to ensure that they become accessible to children and young people and enrich their opportunities for play.

### **Inspiring Change and Action**

This play policy and strategy aims to improve the way we think about and provide for children and young people's play. South Gloucestershire Council wants its children and young people to benefit from the best possible opportunities for play and informal recreation. We recognise the challenge that this sets, not only for the Council itself but also for the many organisations, agencies and groups which have a contribution to make.

This policy is rooted in collaboration between South Gloucestershire Council members and officers, voluntary and private sector organisations and groups and parish and town councils. It represents, in other words, a broad-based consensus and a shared commitment. The responsibility now is to bring this policy to life on the ground. This will require that the tradition of collaboration now established is maintained and extended and that children and young people notice the difference.

## **South Gloucestershire Council Draft Play Strategy Summary**

### **Fundamental Objective**

**The fundamental objective of this play strategy is to work towards South Gloucestershire's children and young people having easy access to a range of quality play opportunities.**

#### **Priority 1: Better Knowledge of Play and Informed Decision Making**

*Working towards decision making that shows an increased awareness and understanding of the value of play shared between decision makers, parents and children.*

#### **Objective 1A**

The design and implementation of the Council's Play Strategy will reflect the values, principles and qualities agreed in its Play Policy.

#### **Objective 1B**

All who provide or benefit from high quality opportunities for play gain a greater understanding both of its principles, qualities and benefits.

#### **Objective 1C**

The views of children and young people are increasingly central to decision-making on the planning, design, creation and supervision of play opportunities.

#### **Priority 2: Improved Quality of the Play Environment**

*Working to improve the quality of play environments and play opportunities for all children and young people*

#### **Objective 2A**

Increase the extent to which all play provision meets the agreed quality criteria, having due regard to the particular circumstances of the provision.

#### **Objective 2B**

Increase the extent to which all children and young people encounter challenge, stimulation and acceptable levels of risk in

their experience of play and have opportunities to make and shape their play environment.

**Objective 2C**

Increase the extent to which the design of each individual play area will be integral to its wider environment and reflect local identities, cultures and histories.

**Priority 3: Greater Access to Play**

*Working to ensure all children and young people have reasonable access to play environments and opportunities suitable to their needs.*

**Objective 3A**

Extend the availability of accessible play opportunities for children and young people which are within a reasonable walking distance from home.

**Objective 3B**

Identify and remove avoidable barriers to children and young people's access to play and their opportunities to spend time together.

**Objective 3C**

Increase opportunities for accessible play for children with disabilities or additional needs in both inclusive and specialist contexts.

**Objective 3D**

Improve the compatibility of play with other legitimate uses of public space by children and adults of all ages.

## Appendix One

### Managing Risk in Play Provision

#### A Position Statement by the National Play Safety Forum

"We consider *Managing Risks in Play Provision* to be an important document that will contribute to the debate on the provision of children's play. It articulates the balance between the benefit and the need for children to play against the duty of play providers to provide safe play. We must not lose sight of the important developmental role of play for children in the pursuit of the unachievable goal of absolute safety. It makes clear that the safety must be considered at all stages of play provision but that, inevitably, there will be risk of injury when children play, as there is risk of injury in life generally. The important message is though that there must be freedom from unacceptable risk of life-threatening or permanently disabling injury in play."

Health and Safety Executive

### The Play Safety Forum

The Play Safety Forum brings together the main national organisations in England with an interest in safety and children's play (see Appendix 1 for a list of members). Members include providers, regulatory bodies, expert agencies and insurers. The aim of the Play Safety Forum is to build consensus on issues around risk and safety in relation to play provision. It is an independent body hosted by the Children's Play Council at the invitation of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

### Introductory remarks

#### *Intended audience and scope*

- This statement is written for those involved in play provision of any kind (for example play areas, playgrounds, adventure playgrounds, play centres and holiday playschemes). These include local authorities, voluntary organisations, play equipment manufacturers and inspection agencies.

- The statement has equal relevance to children and young people of all ages from 0 to 18, and it uses the term 'children' to cover the whole age range.
- The statement has relevance to other settings and environments in which children play, such as childcare provision, schools, parks and public open spaces.
- The statement will also be of interest to those involved in insurance and litigation in relation to play provision.
- The statement focuses on physical injuries resulting from accidents. However the overall approach, namely that a balance should be struck between risks and benefits, is also relevant to agencies concerned with other issues such as the personal safety of children.
- The statement is in two forms: a summary and a full statement. The summary aims to state the key points of the full statement in a more accessible form, for a non-technical audience.

### ***Purpose***

There is growing concern about how safety is being addressed in children's play provision. Fear of litigation is leading many play providers to focus on minimizing the risk of injury at the expense of other more fundamental objectives. The effect is to stop children from enjoying a healthy range of play opportunities, limiting their enjoyment and causing potentially damaging consequences for their development.

This approach ignores clear evidence that playing in play provision is a comparatively low risk activity for children. Of the two million or so childhood accident cases treated by hospitals each year, less than 2 per cent involve playground equipment. Participation in sports like soccer, widely acknowledged as 'good' for a child's development, involves a greater risk of injury than visiting a playground. Fatalities on playgrounds are very rare - about one per three or four years on average. This compares with, for instance, over 100 child pedestrian fatalities a year and over 500 accidental fatalities overall.

In response to this situation, and in order to ensure that children's needs and wishes are properly acknowledged, the Play Safety Forum has prepared this statement.

### ***How this statement should be used***

All those involved in play provision should give close and explicit consideration to the issues raised by this statement. This would most effectively be done through reviewing policies and procedures,

preferably as part of an overall review of policies on play. Providers are encouraged to use the statement to stimulate discussion and debate amongst key stakeholders when reviewing and developing their policies and procedures. Providers may want to explicitly adopt the statement, in full or summary form, in policy statements.

### **Summary statement**

Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this, play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury.

## **Full Statement**

### *Acceptable and unacceptable risk*

In any human activity, there is an element of risk. Three factors are central to determining whether or not the level of risk is acceptable or tolerable:

- the likelihood of coming to harm;
- the severity of that harm;
- the benefits, rewards or outcomes of the activity.

Judgements about the acceptability of risk are made on the basis of a risk assessment. Risk assessment and management are not mechanistic processes. They crucially involve making judgements about acceptability based on an understanding of the balance between risks and benefits. Even where there is a risk of fatal or permanent disabling injury, this risk may sometimes be tolerable. For instance, going paddling at the seaside involves an unavoidable risk of fatal injury, but this risk is tolerable for most people because in most circumstances the likelihood of coming to harm is very low and there are obvious benefits. Social and psychological factors are also important in risk assessment. Risks that are acceptable in one community may be unacceptable in another, and policies should take this into account.

Almost any environment contains hazards or sources of harm. In many cases the existence of hazards can be justified, perhaps because they are impossible to remove or perhaps because their removal would have undesirable consequences or be too costly.

Where the existence of a hazard can be justified, measures should be in place to manage it. In a controlled environment such as a workplace or a playground, those responsible are required by law to identify, and make informed judgements about, the hazards to which people are exposed. They must take steps to ensure that the risks are managed and controlled so far as is reasonably practicable while allowing the potential benefits to be delivered.

### ***Children and risk***

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. Children with disabilities have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers.

It is the job of all those responsible for children at play to assess and manage the level of risk, so that children are given the chance to stretch themselves, test and develop their abilities without exposing them to unacceptable risks. This is part of a wider adult social responsibility to children. If we do not provide controlled opportunities for children to encounter and manage risk then they may be denied the chance to learn these skills. They may also be more likely to choose to play in uncontrolled environments where the risks are greater.

Almost by definition, any injury is distressing for children and those who care for them. But exposure to the risk of injury, and experience of actual minor injuries, is a universal part of childhood. Such experiences also have a positive role in child development. When children sustain or witness injuries they gain direct experience of the consequences of their actions and choices, and through this an understanding of the extent of their abilities and competences. However, children deserve protection against fatal or permanently disabling injuries, to a greater degree than adults.

Children have a range of physical competences and abilities, including a growing ability to assess and manage risk which adults arguably tend to underestimate. However children typically have less experience than adults of assessing the broad range of risks and hazards that they may encounter. Hence it is important to give them appropriate controlled environments in which they can learn about risk.

### ***Play provision and risk***

Risk-taking is an essential feature of play provision, and of all environments in which children legitimately spend time at play. Play provision aims to offer children the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating, challenging and controlled learning environment. In the words of the play sector publication *Best Play*, play provision should aim to "manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm". While the same principles of safety management can be applied both to workplaces generally and play provision, the balance between safety and benefits is likely to be different in the two environments. In play provision exposure to some risk is actually a benefit: it satisfies a basic human need and gives children the chance to learn about the real consequences of risk taking.

Hence it is acceptable that in play provision children may be exposed to the risk of minor and easily-healed injuries such as bruises, grazes or sprains. On the other hand, play provision should not expose children to significant likelihood of permanent disability or life-threatening injuries. However it may on occasions be unavoidable that play provision exposes children to the risk - the very low risk - of serious injury or even death. But this would only be tolerable in the following conditions:

- the likelihood were extremely low;
- the hazards were clear to users;
- there were obvious benefits;
- further reduction of the risk would remove the benefits;
- there were no reasonably practicable ways to manage the risk.

For example a paddling pool, even if shallow, involves a very low but irremovable risk of drowning (even with parental supervision) but this is normally tolerable. The likelihood is typically extremely low, the hazard is readily apparent, children benefit through their enjoyment and through the learning experience of water play and finally, further reduction or management of the risk is not practicable without taking away the benefits.

Providers should strike a balance between the risks and the benefits. This should be done on the basis of a risk assessment. Crucially, this risk assessment should involve a risk-benefit trade-off between safety and other goals, which should be spelt out in the provider's policy. Given children's appetite for risk-taking, one of the factors that should be considered is the likelihood that children will seek out risks elsewhere, in environments that are not controlled or designed for them, if play provision is not challenging enough. Another factor is the learning that can take place when children are exposed to, and have to learn to deal with,

environmental hazards. Play provision is uniquely placed to offer children the chance to learn about risk in an environment designed for that purpose, and thus to help children equip themselves to deal with similar hazards in the wider world.

### ***Good practice***

Clear, well-understood policies, together with procedures that put these policies into practice, are the key to good practice in risk management in play provision. Policies should state clearly the overall objectives. Procedures, including risk assessment, should state how these policies are put into practice, giving guidance but also recognising the need for professional judgement in setting the balance between safety and other goals. Such judgements are clearly multidisciplinary in nature. For example, while they may contain an engineering dimension, of equal or greater importance is likely to be a knowledge of child development and play itself. There are a number of sources of authoritative, relevant guidance on good practice.

One valuable approach to risk management in play provision is to make the risks as apparent as possible to children. This means designing spaces where the risk of injury arises from hazards that children can readily appreciate (such as heights), and where hazards that children may not appreciate (such as equipment that can trap heads) are absent. This is particularly useful in unsupervised settings, where the design of the equipment and the overall space has to do most of the work in achieving a balanced approach to risk.

### ***Conclusion***

Safety in play provision is not absolute and cannot be addressed in isolation. Play provision is first and foremost for children, and if it is not exciting and attractive to them, then it will fail, no matter how 'safe' it is. Designers, managers and providers will need to reach compromises in meeting these sometimes conflicting goals. These compromises are a matter of judgement, not of mechanistic assessment. The judgements should be based on both social attitudes and on broadly-based expert opinion informed by current best practice. They should be firmly rooted in objectives concerned with children's enjoyment and benefit. And they should take into account the concerns of parents. Ultimately the basis of these judgements should be made clear in the policies of the play provider as written down in policy documents. These policies should in turn be understood and embodied in practice by all the key stakeholders.

### **References**

Ball D (2002) *Playgrounds - risks, benefits and choices*, Contract Research Report No. 426/2002, Health and Safety Executive.  
British Standards Institute (1998) *BS EN 1176-1 Playground equipment - Part 1*, British Standards Institute.  
National Playing Fields Association, Children's Play Council and PLAYLINK 2000, *Best Play: What play provision should do for children*, National Playing Fields Association (available from Children's Play Council).

### **Play Safety Forum members**

Association of Play Industries  
Child Accident Prevention Trust  
Children's Play Council  
Health and Safety Executive  
Institute for Sport and Recreation Management  
Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management  
Kidsactive  
Local Government Association  
National Early Years Network  
National Playing Fields Association  
National Family and Parenting Institute  
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children  
PLAYLINK  
Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

The Association of British Insurers has been approached to seek its views on this statement.

Adviser: David Ball, Middlesex University

Observers: Department for Culture, Media and Sport Play Wales

From the Children's Play Council website at  
<http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpc>.