

Thursfield OPAL play policy

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1. Commitment

Our school undertakes to refer to this play policy in all decisions that affect children's play. Our school is committed to providing the strategic and operational leadership needed to provide and maintain quality play provision for all of our children.

2. Rationale

Thursfield Primary School is committed to using this Play Policy as a key document in all decisions it makes which have an impact on children's play. At Thursfield Primary School, we want to help children to be safe, reliable, independent and successful citizens which reflects our school's vision and values. We believe play has a vital role in children's happiness and wellbeing. It creates children who are independent, confident, imaginative, adaptable, social and able to assess risks. We want to ensure every child is making appropriate progress in line with school achievement aims. We aim to give our children confidence and a desire to achieve their full potential.

We aim to:

- Implement the changes set out in this policy gradually and systematically
- Be informed by the children and work with the children to create a space that is exciting, engaging and enthuses children, where they feel safe to take risks and explore their world
- Work in partnership with parents and the community making use of local expertise
- Build projects collaboratively, respecting existing boundaries

The OPAL Primary Programme rationale is that *"... better, more active and creative playtimes can mean happier and healthier children, and having happier, healthier, more active children usually results in a more positive attitude to learning in school, with more effective classroom lessons, less staff time spent resolving unnecessary behavioural problems, fewer playtime accidents, happier staff and a healthier attitude to life."*

3. Definition and value of play

Play is defined as a process that is intrinsically motivated, directed by the child and freely chosen by the child. Play has its own value and provides its own purpose. It may or may not involve equipment or other people.

We believe play has many benefits, including:

- Play is critical to children's health and wellbeing, and essential for their physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.



- Play enables children to explore the physical and social environment, as well as different concepts and ideas.
- Play enhances children's self-esteem and their understanding of others through freely chosen social interactions, within peer groups, with individuals, and within groups of different ages, abilities, interests, genders, ethnicities and cultures.
- Play requires ongoing communication and negotiation skills, enabling children to develop a balance between their right to act freely and their responsibilities to others.
- Play enables children to experience a wide range of emotions and develop their ability to cope with these, including sadness and happiness, rejection and acceptance, frustration and achievement, boredom and fascination, fear and confidence.
- Play encourages self-confidence and the ability to make choices, problem solve and to be creative.
- Play maintains children's openness to learning, develops their capabilities and allows them to push the boundaries of what they can achieve.

4. Aims

In relation to play our school aims to:

- Ensure play settings provide a varied, challenging and stimulating environment.
- Allow children to take risks and use a common-sense approach to the management of these risks and their benefits.
- Provide opportunities for children to develop their relationships with each other.
- Enable children to develop respect for their surroundings and each other.
- Aid children's physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Provide a range of environments that will encourage children to explore and play imaginatively.
- Provide a range of environments that will support children's learning across the curriculum and learning about the world around them.
- Promote independence and teamwork within children.
- Build emotional and physical resilience.

5. Rights

Our school recognises the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes *the right to play, recreation and leisure* (Article 31) and the *right of children to be listened to on matters important to them* (Article 12). We acknowledge that we have a duty to take these rights seriously and listen to children's views on their play.

6. Benefit and risk

'Play is great for children's wellbeing and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.'

Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (Play Safety Forum, 2012)

The school will use the Health and Safety Executive guidance document *Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach* (September 2012) as the principal value statement informing its approach to managing risk in play. In doing so, the school will adopt a risk-benefit



approach as detailed in *Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (Play Safety Forum, 2012)*.

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 managed play environment. As outlined in 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 and young people safe from harm*'.

In addition to standard risk-benefit assessments the school will practice dynamic risk management with children, encouraging them to identify and manage risks in an environment where adults are present to support them.

See Appendix 1- Health and Safety executive safety guidance

7. Supervision

The law requires that children in school have supervision but for primary school playtimes there are no stated ratios. During the school day there should be one or more adults present outdoors. The school recognises OPAL's three models of supervision: Direct, Remote and Ranging. Except for new children in reception, whose skills and orientation in the school environment need to be assessed, the school does not believe direct supervision is possible or beneficial. Supervisors will use ranging and remote supervision models, so that children can quickly find an adult and adults can patrol large sites to gain an awareness of the kinds of play and levels of risk likely to be emerging.

See Appendix 2 for free-range supervision guidance

8. The adult's role in play

The school will help children maximise the benefits they can gain from play by the provision of trained staff who are informed by and work in accordance with the Playwork Principles. Staff will use and refer to these principles when appropriate interventions are needed, and ultimately will strive for facilitating an environment that nurtures children's self-directed play.

The playworker's core function is to create an environment that will stimulate children's play and maximise their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences. A skilled and experienced playworker is capable of enriching the child's play experience both in terms of the design and resources of the physical environment and in terms of the attitudes and culture fostered within the play setting. Playworkers are a channel of access to new materials and tools and they can act as a stimulus to children to explore and learn. They are also available to participate in the play if invited.

9. Equality and diversity

Through providing a rich play offer meeting every child's needs we will ensure all children, regardless of age, gender, race, disability or other special needs, can develop and thrive, build strong relationships and enjoy school.

10. Environment



We believe that a rich play setting should ensure that all children have access to stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable or unnecessary risks and thereby offer children the opportunity to explore for themselves through their freely chosen play.

We will strive to continually improve the quality and diversity of our school's grounds to enhance play. We will use the document 'Best Play' to guide us on what a quality play environment should contain. www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/pubs/bestplay.pdf

Appendix 1- Health and safety executive guidance

CHILDREN'S PLAY AND LEISURE – PROMOTING A BALANCED APPROACH

1. Health and safety laws and regulations are sometimes presented as a reason why certain play and leisure activities undertaken by children and young people should be discouraged. The reasons for this misunderstanding are many and varied. They include fears of litigation or criminal prosecution because even the most trivial risk has not been removed. There can be frustration with the amounts of paperwork involved, and misunderstanding about what needs to be done to control significant risks.

2. The purpose of this statement is to give clear messages which tackle these misunderstandings. In this statement, HSE makes clear that, as a regulator, it recognises the benefits of allowing children and young people of all ages and abilities to have challenging play opportunities.

3. HSE fully supports the provision of play for all children in a variety of environments. HSE understands and accepts that this means children will often be exposed to play environments which, whilst well-managed, carry a degree of risk and sometimes potential danger.

4. HSE wants to make sure that mistaken health and safety concerns do not create sterile play environments that lack challenge and so prevent children from expanding their learning and stretching their abilities.

5. This statement provides all those with a stake in encouraging children to play with a clear picture of HSE's perspective on these issues. HSE wants to encourage a focus on the sensible and proportionate control of real risks¹ and not on unnecessary paperwork. HSE's primary interest is in real risks arising from serious breaches of the law and our investigations are targeted at these issues.

Recognising the benefits of play

Key message: 'Play is great for children's well-being and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool'.

6. HSE fully recognises that play brings the world to life for children. It provides for an exploration and understanding of their abilities; helps them to learn and develop; and exposes them to the realities of the world in which they will live, which is a world not free from risk but rather one where risk is ever present. The opportunity for play develops a child's risk awareness and prepares them for their future lives.



7. Striking the right balance between protecting children from the most serious risks and allowing them to reap the benefits of play is not always easy. It is not about eliminating risk. Nor is it about complicated methods of calculating risks or benefits. In essence, play is a safe and beneficial activity. Sensible adult judgements are all that is generally required to derive the best benefits to children whilst ensuring that they are not exposed to unnecessary risk. In making these judgements, industry standards such as EN 1176 offer bench marks that can help.

8. Striking the right balance does mean:

Weighing up risks and benefits when designing and providing play opportunities and activities

Focussing on and controlling the most serious risks, and those that are not beneficial to the play activity or foreseeable by the user

Recognising that the introduction of risk might form part of play opportunities and activity

Understanding that the purpose of risk control is not the elimination of all risk, and so accepting that the possibility of even serious or life-threatening injuries cannot be eliminated, though it should be managed

Ensuring that the benefits of play are experienced to the full

9. Striking the right balance does not mean:

All risks must be eliminated or continually reduced

Every aspect of play provision must be set out in copious paperwork as part of a misguided security blanket

Detailed assessments aimed at high-risk play activities are used for low-risk activities

Ignoring risks that are not beneficial or integral to the play activity, such as those introduced through poor maintenance of equipment

Mistakes and accidents will not happen

What parents and society should expect from play providers

Key message: 'Those providing play opportunities should focus on controlling the real risks, while securing or increasing the benefits – not on the paperwork'.

10. Play providers should use their own judgement and expertise as well as, where appropriate, the judgement of others, to ensure that the assessments and controls proposed are proportionate to the risks involved.

11. They should communicate what these controls are, why they are necessary and so ensure everyone focuses on the important risks.

12. It is important that providers' arrangements ensure that:

The beneficial aspects of play - and the exposure of children to a level of risk and challenge - are not unnecessarily reduced

Assessment and judgement focuses on the real risks, not the trivial and fanciful

Controls are proportionate and so reflect the level of risk

13. To help with controlling risks sensibly and proportionately, the play sector has produced the publication *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide* which provides guidance



on managing the risks in play. The approach in this guidance is that risks and benefits are considered alongside each other in a risk-benefit assessment. This includes an assessment of the risks which, while taking into account the benefits of the activity, ensures that any precautions are practicable and proportionate and reflect the level of risk. HSE supports this guidance, as a sensible approach to risk management.

If things go wrong

Key message: 'Accidents and mistakes happen during play – but fear of litigation and prosecution has been blown out of proportion.'

14. Play providers are expected to deal with risk responsibly, sensibly and proportionately. In practice, serious accidents of any kind are very unlikely. On the rare occasions when things go wrong, it is important to know how to respond to the incident properly and to conduct a balanced, transparent review.

15. In the case of the most serious failures of duty, prosecution rightly remains a possibility, and cannot be entirely ruled out. However, this possibility does not mean that play providers should eliminate even the most trivial of risks. Provided sensible and proportionate steps have been taken, it is highly unlikely there would be any breach of health and safety law involved, or that it would be in the public interest to bring a prosecution.

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Appendix 2- Free range supervision guidance

OPAL schools aim to maximise the use of their site for free-range play. This must be done with consideration to health and safety requirements and evidence that this has been done must be available, this is covered by OPAL's five-point RAPID process, which all OPAL schools must adopt. This guidance note aims to assist schools by identifying what must be considered when opening your whole school site for play.

1. Policy

Children and young people need to enjoy their childhoods as well as grow up prepared for adult life. In relation to concerns about overprotective health and safety regimes, both the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Ofsted advocate a sensible and balanced risk-benefit approach to ensure children have the freedom to explore childhood and learn how to identify and manage risk with growing independence and competence. All OPAL schools should produce and publish a play policy as part of their RAPID approach. This should be done early in the programme and be ratified by the school's governors/local advisory board.

2. Legislation

The relevant legislation is the Health and Safety at Work Act, which requires that the employer ensures the health, safety and welfare of persons at work and those affected by the work. The HSE no longer regards free play as a work activity. It is therefore not governed by the rules covering safety and reporting of accidents at work. However, it is still covered by the broader 'duty of care', and so providers must demonstrate their procedures are reasonable in the context of their responsibility for care and wellbeing. Examples of documents and practices that would be useful in demonstrating 'duty of care' are a published play policy, delivery of assemblies to pupils and making a record of dialogue and decision making around risky play, a written risk-benefit assessment, technical report on fixed equipment (eg annual ROSPA report) plus process for checking loose parts, and a play training record for staff. These are all steps of the RAPID process

3. Risk-benefit assessment

All OPAL schools produce a written risk benefit assessment (RBA) for play, highlighting benefits of play activities and resources, identifying significant risks arising, and outlining mitigation steps to reduce significant risks whilst retaining benefits of play. Actions identified must then be introduced to pupils and supervising staff and the RBA document must be reviewed regularly, when a new play zone is opened, or revised when it is no longer felt to be valid. The decisions made in your RBA should be communicated with the pupils and supervising staff, eg through assemblies, training and sharing of documents.

4. Definitions

The following are the definitions for terms used in the document and some more detailed explanation where appropriate.

Free-range play

Free-range play is where pupils are given permission to use and explore the school grounds or at least part of them without direct supervision.

Level of supervision

The number of supervisors (competent adults) undertaking supervision indicated as a ratio to number of pupils being supervised.

Type of supervision

OPAL recommends that a paragraph on the school's intended supervision styles is included in its play policy:

Supervisor

This is the competent adult providing the supervision and can be a play team member, teacher, teaching assistant, lunchtime supervisor or a volunteer. In each case they will have been assessed as competent to provide the supervision necessary and been trained in what is acceptable practice, what to do if unacceptable risks occur and what to do in case of accidents.

Direct

This is where the supervisor(s) will be able to see all areas of play, and be nearby, around a maximum of 20 metres away. Some play features in these areas, such as playhouses or planting, may offer semi-hidden opportunities. This will be most common in nursery and reception classes.

Remote

This is where a supervisor or supervisors are located at a relatively static location at a good vantage point some distance from an activity, e.g. supervisor on the playground and activity 20 metres or more away, or supervisor in the middle of a flat school field. This style is widely used in other countries and its purpose is for an adult to be present to respond rapidly to an accident or serious behaviour incident.

Ranging

This is where the supervisor moves around the play area, usually on a set course/schedule. The distance from pupils therefore differs but can be 20 metres or more away. On a large site, supervisors should have zones so that they know which parts of the site they are covering, and they should modify their attention based on the kinds of play and their judgement about areas of highest risk.

5. Issues to be considered (risk-benefit assessment process)

5.1 Is free-range play to be progressed?

The initial consideration is whether the school leadership wishes to progress free-range play. To be effective, free-range play needs to be supported by the schools' senior leadership team. In addition to getting the school leadership's commitment, it is also sensible to consider your parent community. It is advised that parents are notified if the school leadership decides to

progress free-range play so that the entire school community is aware and committed to it. This can be done via your new play policy and supporting communications. Most parents are supportive of the development of free-range play in a managed environment but may need reassurance that risks have been considered.

5.2 Are the school grounds suitable for use as a free-range play area?

Survey your school grounds and produce a detailed plan. The plan should:

Identify the boundaries to the site

Detail on what the boundary consists of and any weak points in it must be included. Damaged hedges and open fencing are a security issue in respect of pupils wishing to leave the site without authority.

Identify if there are issues with neighbours to the grounds having unauthorised access or dumping hazardous materials. These issues will need remedying.

Identify plants and trees

The different plants and trees around the site need to be marked on the plan. Information required is the type, particularly important to confirm whether poisonous or not, whether any have berries or fruit which pupils might eat and then, if edible, whether pupils will be allowed to, and if any have thorns. Also consider whether children would be able to climb the tree or get into hedges etc, and if this will be allowed. Photographs are an effective way of better identifying the plants referred to and these can be added to the plan. You do not need to remove every nettle or bramble, but it is important to have up-to-date site knowledge that will inform RBA decisions and site maintenance planning.

Identify hidden areas

Some sites have blind corners, dips in the ground or areas which, due to planting, cannot be seen from all points. This does not mean they cannot be used but this information will help decide on the location of supervisors and model of supervision. Consider if there are any areas that pupils are not allowed. There will probably be few, but some schools have uncovered ponds in conservation areas, or site storage areas that pupils should only access under direct supervision or not at all. Out-of-bounds areas should be restricted due to significant risk – review areas that are out of bounds for other reasons eg restricted by age, invitation only, ‘special use’ areas.

Identify fixed items for use by pupils at play

This will be fixed play equipment, seating, pagodas and sports equipment, eg basketball hoops. NB: The plan is the basic information gathering phase of the risk-benefit assessment process. Once the above information is available, a decision will be made on whether all or some of the grounds can be used.

5.3 What age of pupils can play safely?

Having identified what the site contains and having decided that the school grounds can be used for free-range play, a judgement will then need to be made on the age of pupils for which the free-range play is suitable.

This decision should be made by someone who appreciates how pupils play, e.g. experienced teachers, members of the OPAL working group. When they do this, they should also start to consider what rules might be necessary, eg no climbing trees with branches hanging over boundary fences or those above concrete planters, no throwing stones at one another, etc. These rules will be necessary to ensure a consistent approach by the supervisors and will be included in your RAPID steps.

A suitable age for free-range play depends on the awareness of risks and physical ability of the pupils. For example, a junior-aged pupil should be aware not to eat poisonous berries, but a younger child may eat them.

The following advice is given, however, it should not be viewed as absolute but will hopefully provide a reference point.

For reception pupils (under 5)

No free-range play until the staff have good knowledge of the children and their capabilities. Direct supervision of new EYFS pupils in reception classes in September term one is appropriate as the children do not yet know the school site or staff, and the staff do not yet know the pupils. Some schools choose to gradually increase reception pupils' footprint for play as the year progresses and the children's knowledge and skills increase.

For infant-aged pupils (KS1) and junior aged pupils (KS2)

In general terms any of the spaces identified as acceptable for free-range play should be available to them as should most materials. Pupils tend to have a mix of fixed play equipment, while use of natural and fabricated materials is to be encouraged. Some heavier loose materials like rocks, pallets and planks etc, may be challenging for younger pupils as they will be more difficult for them to carry or manipulate. This may change as children become more skilled and competent. Play assemblies, written RBA and dynamic risk assessment practice by staff should be in place to help balance risks and benefits. Having decided on what areas are able to be used and by the ages of pupils who will use them, schools then need to consider the level of supervision required.

5.4 What type of supervision is required to support free-range play?

Primary schools in England often use 'rule of thumb' recommendations for playground supervision ratios eg one competent adult per 75 junior aged pupils, one competent adult per 30 infant aged pupils. However, under UK law, there is no recommended ratio for how many adults should supervise play, nor is there any guidance to what form supervision should take. This is left to the discretion of the school leadership team.

NB: As a minimum, there must be at least one member of supervisory staff outside when the children are at play.

What schools need to decide is how to supervise the free-range play. The following gives an indication of the factors to be considered for each of the types of supervision that could be used in respect of:

5.4.1 - Remote supervision

This will be where staff are situated in places where they can see most of the play area and the activities taking place. This is the best option where there are limited activities on the



school grounds but may not be suitable where there are several hidden areas. In practice, it may mean having more adult supervisors at certain points around the grounds as this means that pupils can choose to play close to an adult or be more adventurous depending on what they want. However, it does mean that if any incidents occur a member of staff should notice quickly and respond.

5.4.2 - Ranging

This will be where adults are tasked with walking a given route on a timed basis, eg circulate the field every five minutes or so. Although the route would be known it would be approximate and would allow staff to divert to check on remote spaces, while at the same time pupils will know an adult will not be far away should they need support.

5.4.3 - A combination of remote and ranging supervision

This will involve having some fixed points of supervision and some staff walking around. This would be the preferred option for most schools where the grounds are substantial or there are hidden points.

5.5 What is required to ensure supervisors are competent to supervise free-range play?

In most cases competence will be based on the person having a level of authority with the pupils, combined with instruction/training on where they are expected to be, how they are expected to supervise, what is acceptable interaction with the pupils and what to do in the case of accidents/incidents, which will include behaviour issues. This will require training to be provided for the supervisors as a group as it is essential that consistency is applied in respect of what is allowed and disallowed. This means that the risk-benefit assessment needs to be discussed and rules established. These rules must also be discussed and made clear to the pupils through play assemblies and dialogue on the playground. Staff should be aware of the benefits of free-range play and of their role in deciding how to balance these benefits against the risk of possible harm.

6. Introduce the practice and review

Having established all five elements of your RAPID process, it is now a case of introducing the changes. This is best done slowly so that you have a chance to review the practice and the rules. This could be by allowing one year group at a time to exercise free-range play, or one class at a time, thus allowing an opportunity to see how accurate your initial assessment was.

7. Conclusion

The use of school sites for free-range play is encouraged as it allows pupils to experience a level of risk in a managed environment in line with current government, health and safety and local authority policies. It is accepted that injuries will occur, but the majority of these will be minor and happen in a place where support can quickly be obtained. OPAL schools must have evidence that their RAPID process is in place, demonstrating that they are making reasonable and appropriate efforts to balance risk and benefits arising in play.

