



Play and Risk Management Policy

The policy will be reviewed annually and revised where necessary.

Signed H. Simpson Headteacher Date 20/04/26

This policy was endorsed by the Board of Governors at their meeting on

Signed H. Clarke Chair of Governors Date 20/04/26

Date for Review:

Introduction to this Policy

'Play is essential for children's well-being and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the aim is not to eliminate risk but to balance risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool'
(Health and Safety Executive, 2012)¹

Children have rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Those rights are concerned with freedom and protection to access and do the things that make life worth living. Article 31 of the UN Convention acknowledges that all children have a right to play. At Hazel Wood Infant School we recognise that play is an essential part of a happy and healthy childhood. We aim to provide high-quality, enjoyable play experiences for all children across the school. We will do this by providing carefully considered outdoor spaces, play structures and resources that offer a rich choice of accessible play experiences for every child. We will refer to this play policy in all decisions that affect our children's play. We are committed to providing the strategic and operational

¹ Health and Safety Executive (2012) Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a balanced approach, HSE.

behaviours and self-led development has restricted children's freedom to play in both staffed settings and public spaces. The drive to limit liability undermines children's well-being and growth and has significant costs. This includes reductions in physical activity levels, increases in sedentary lifestyles, higher rates of childhood obesity, diabetes, hyperactivity and attention deficits, increases in adolescent mental ill-health, and other long-term health risks.

These long-term risks far outweigh the minor physical risks children encounter in play. If children's freedom to play in public spaces is constrained, school play times become even more essential. To ensure children benefit fully from their play, existing risk-averse practices must change. At Hazel Wood Infant School, we take a balanced approach to risk management — one that loosens adult control while maintaining "safe enough" environments for play. We recognise that play spaces should offer:

- Freedom for children to engage with uncertainty.
- A relaxed atmosphere where adults support play rather than overly manage it.
- Recognition that children's natural risk-taking builds resilience, confidence, and well-being.

By developing fantastic play times for all our children, where they can experience self-directed play, we can compensate them for the loss of time, space and permission for play outside of school and support their growth and development, and mental and physical health.

What is Play and Why is it Important?

Our Children told us:

- Play is fun.
- That they wanted more things to play with.
- They valued staff support when playing and all following the same rules.
- Playtimes were good, but could sometimes be a bit boring we would like new places to play.

The United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child defines play as: *'any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end'*⁶.

Play can be understood as a non-serious, self-directed behaviour, free from external rules and constraints. At its core, play is about joy, freedom, and exploration. It provides a temporary escape from life's complexities. Playing shakes up space, bringing light and

⁶ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2it 013) *General Comment 17 on the Right of the Child to Rest, Leisure, Play, Recreational Activities, Cultural Life and the Arts (art. 31)*, Geneva: United Nations

Providing for Play

So far as is reasonably practicable, we want children in our school to have freedom of movement across the whole school grounds, making the most of the opportunities for play the environment affords. We also recognise the value of different ages and abilities of children mixing and the importance of promoting children's self-regulation of their play. This includes children being allowed to be out of sight for short periods of time, enabling them to make dens, play hide-and-seek-type games, and enjoy a degree of privacy in their play. Importantly, there will be adults on hand to check in on children and offer help or guidance should they need it.

Again, so far as is reasonably practicable, children should be enabled to control what, where, with whom and how they play. To support this, we will use the principle of 'everyone has a right to play', meaning that children have freedom to play in ways that are of value to them, so long as this does not prevent others from doing the same.

To enable full site access, it is also essential that children have access to a change of footwear/wellies and appropriate clothing to enable them to play out in most weathers and continue accessing the field when wet and muddy. To support this, wellies and coats will be made part of the school uniform, and we will be providing suitable storage and other facilities to enable more playing throughout the year.

To further enhance and extend children's opportunities for play, we will develop and maintain our school grounds in ways that maximise their play value. This includes providing children with easy access to a large amount and a wide variety of loose parts - junk materials and natural resources that children can use creatively in their play. Enhancing children's opportunities for play in these ways will support children's enjoyment of school, their learning and creativity, the development of friendships, and, in turn, their sense of well-being and resilience. These benefits of quality play time experiences are also key to the realisation of our school values; Independence, Resilience, Creative, Being a Team Player.

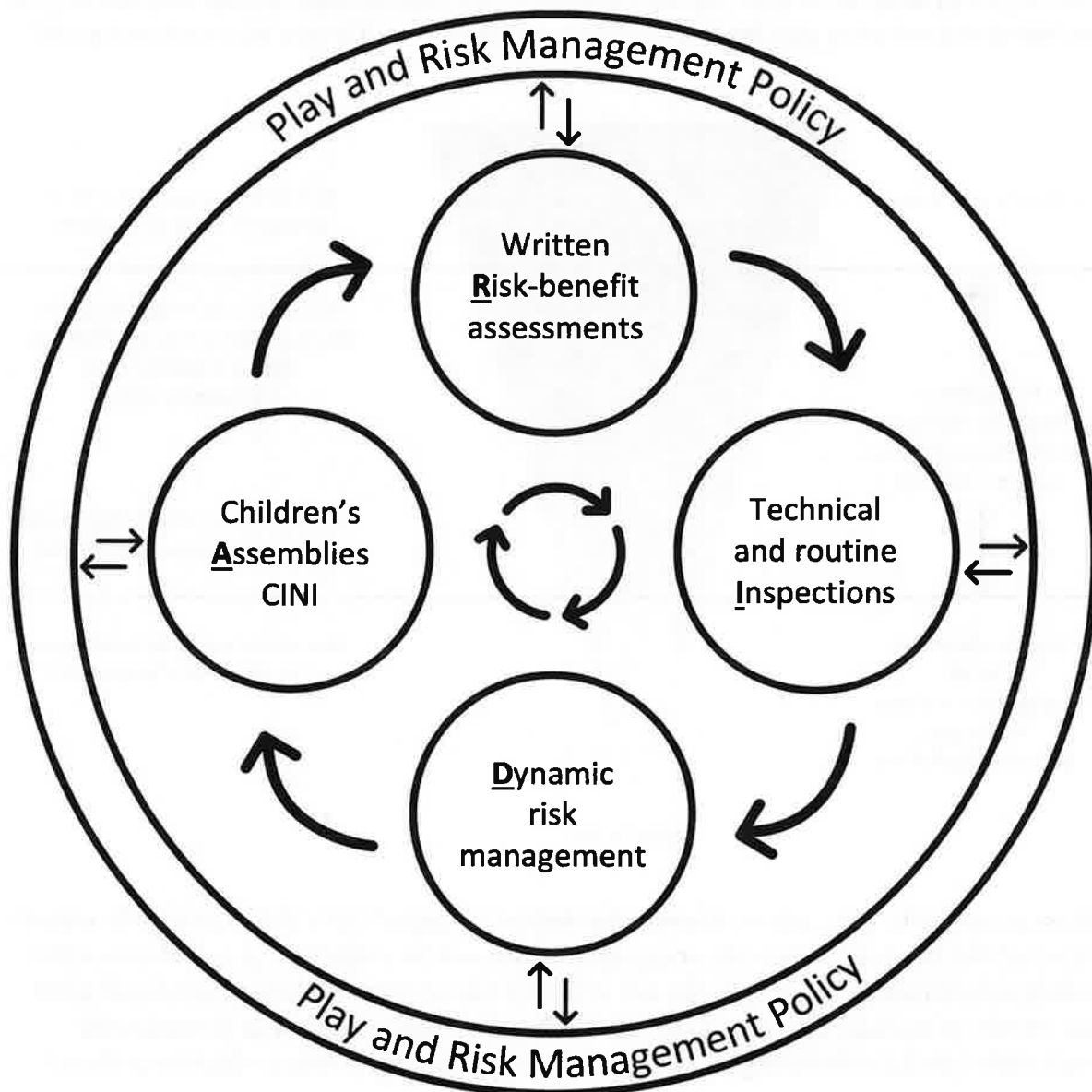
Given the importance of play to children and the school's commitment to upholding children's right to play, children's access to play times will only be restricted if their behaviours present an unreasonable risk to themselves or others. Such action will only be taken when necessary, and careful consideration will be given to how these children can be supported to return to play times.

Taking a Risk-Benefit Approach

Risk refers to the uncertain outcomes of a situation and is often associated with negative consequences. However, risk can also bring positive benefits. For example, balancing along a wall may result in physical injury, but it can also generate pleasure, excitement, self-awareness, confidence, risk perception and management skills, and a sense of achievement.

In the UK, the provision of play opportunities is governed by the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations (1992), and the Occupiers' Liability Acts (1957, 1984). These laws require providers to:

robust systems in place to support good decision-making and the ongoing maintenance of a 'safe enough' environment for play.



Following HSE guidance (see Appendix 1), we recognise that detailed risk-benefit assessments for every scenario are unnecessary, impractical, and time-consuming. Instead, we take a proportionate and balanced approach to risk assessment, ensuring that higher-risk activities receive greater scrutiny but low-risk opportunities (whilst still subject to professional judgement), remain unburdened by excessive paperwork.

We use the Tolerability of Risk Framework⁹ (diagram below) to guide professional judgements about the opportunities we provide, and the level of risk management required. The broadly acceptable region refers to opportunities where the risk is perceived to be low enough to be acceptable to most people without the need for a detailed risk-benefit assessment. For play opportunities that are considered to fall into this lowest region, this

⁹ HSE, 1992

- **Routine play opportunities with heightened levels of risk** - if a play opportunity is regularly occurring (e.g., most days or weeks), it should undergo a written risk-benefit assessment.
- **Novel play opportunities with heightened levels of risk** - when such play opportunities emerge spontaneously, such as something children invent in the moment, a dynamic risk-benefit assessment should be applied.

Our written risk-benefit assessments will be regularly reviewed and updated based on experience, knowledge, and new evidence, ensuring they remain effective and proportionate.

Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment

Children's play is inherently exploratory, flexible, and varied. While playing, children naturally seek uncertainty, which means risks can emerge in the moment. To manage these 'real-time' risks, we adopt a dynamic risk-benefit assessment approach, where staff assess risks as they arise, considering the environment and play context to determine the most appropriate response.

Risk perception is subjective, and individual staff may differ in their tolerance of risk. To support consistency in decision-making, we have adopted guidance on dynamic risk-benefit assessments (see Appendix 4), supporting staff in making balanced and informed choices.

Our approach aims to balance intervention with the benefits of freedom and uncertainty in play. Whenever possible, staff should observe how children navigate risks for themselves before deciding if intervention is necessary. In doing so, staff should consider:

- **Children's self-management of risk** – Have they removed hazards, adjusted their behaviour, or set their own safety rules?
- **Contextual factors** – Are children adapting to different ages and abilities while keeping risks balanced with benefits?
- **Intervention necessity** – If intervention is needed, it should aim to preserve play benefits while reducing the level of risk. Staff should stop activities only in cases of imminent and serious harm.

When staff make a dynamic risk-benefit assessment that enables a higher-risk opportunity, they will reflect on these experiences with peers in team meetings and, where necessary, integrate them into routine risk-benefit assessments or inform staff training and development opportunities.

Good and Bad Hazards

In making risk-benefit decisions, we will use the concept of good and bad hazards, recognising that the type of hazards children should be exposed to depends on what is both reasonable and practicable, and of benefit to children.

overview of the whole site and to offer support in specific areas as necessary. Adults within each zone will communicate via walkie-talkies, and a fixed first aid point will be used for any significant accidents.

The staff involved in supervising playtimes are called our Play Team. The Play Team's role is to facilitate and enhance children's play, enabling all children to play in ways that are of value to them, and encouraging children to assess the risks and benefits of their play behaviours. We will help children maximise the benefits they can gain from playing by training our Play Team to work in accordance with the Playwork Principles (see Appendix 2). These principles will help to guide how supervising staff interact and intervene in children's play.

Ultimately, we strive to facilitate an environment which nurtures children's self-directed play. However, children's play is complex and allowing children freedom is not always an easy thing for adults to do. The Play Team will therefore be provided with regular opportunities to reflect on and develop their practice, as well as what is available in the play environment.

Whole school communication

At Hazel Wood Infant School, we, as an entire staff team, are fully committed to working with children to provide the play experiences that they want and need in their school. We will maintain an open dialogue with children about our play provision, with the aim of further developing their playtime experiences using their voices and ideas as guidance.

Play assemblies are a key aspect of our risk management strategy. This includes meeting with children at least once per half term and discussing with them the play opportunities on offer, the play environment and their play behaviours, as well as our approach to working with play. We use OPAL's C.I.N.I format, which incorporates **Celebrating** children's play, **Informing** children about aspects of our play provision, **Negotiating** with children about aspects of the play offer, and **Innovating** with children about improving our play offer. These assemblies routinely include conversations with children around various aspects of risk management.

As a school, we will also maintain an OPAL working group, which will oversee the implementation of the OPAL Programme, ensuring that all aspects of school life that influence our play times are aligned with the aims and aspirations of this policy. The diagram in Appendix 3 sets out the staffing structure we have in place to support quality play times.