Risk - Benefit Assessment Form

Description of the play opportunity to be considered:

Common but potentially hazardous play behaviours displayed by children during staffed play sessions. This assessment has been conducted to support the dynamic assessment of risk by individual practitioners when working with playing children and recognises that, whilst children's play behaviours can be complex and present themselves in many different forms, the actual ways in which serious harm might occur are likely to be similar across different forms of behaviour. For example, the ways in which injury could occur, and therefore the factors that practitioners need to take into consideration, are likely to be similar whether children are climbing a tree, swinging on a rope or sliding down a mud bank. It has therefore been deemed reasonable to produce one risk-benefit assessment that can be applied to a wide range of behaviours rather than having many different assessments that in practice duplicate one another. The intention is that this approach will better support practitioners in their dynamic assessment of risk by reducing the number of separate paper-based risk-benefit assessments that they need to be aware of and understand.

The assessment highlights the potentially harmful actions that may occur as a result of common play behaviours that children are likely to display, irrespective of the resources provided by adults. Many of these actions only become a concern because adults are present to witness them i.e. it is likely they would happen anyway. However because adults are present while children are playing (which is often due to the fact that they have created provision that brings children together) they inevitably have a duty of care to ensure these behaviours do not put those involved or other people at unreasonable risk of serious physical or emotional harm.

It is important to recognise the limits of this assessment and that it would not necessarily be sufficient for those situations where, through the actions of adults, children are exposed to more risk than they might normally encounter of their own volition, this might include: other adult built play structures (e.g. rope swings), some adult led activities (e.g. fire lighting) or site specific features (e.g. water courses), where further consideration may need to be given to the management of hazards associated with the physical properties of the objects or materials involved. Furthermore, this assessment assumes that each site will have been sufficiently inspected to identify any undesirable hazards and that steps will have been taken to reduce the risks associated with these prior to any play session commencing (so far as is reasonably practicable). Also, whilst this risk-benefit assessment is primarily concerned with managing risks associated with children's playful behavior, and if necessary reducing the immediate risk of harm, it does not address the *consequences* that children may be expected to experience as a result of behavior that staff deem to be unacceptable in the setting.

The particular common play behaviours that are considered in the assessment include: running, climbing, jumping from height, balancing, sliding, swinging, throwing, fighting, constraining, using offensive words & gestures, playing with weapons, burning, eating & drinking, construction & destruction. These behaviours have been identified by a group of experienced playworkers as those which most often cause them concern; however it is likely that the approach described below would also be suitable for other play behaviours not listed above.

Issue to be Considered	Commentary / Discussion	Information Sources / References
Evidence of benefit Consider: • Physical • Emotional • Environmental • Social • Internal to the child/ren • External to the child/ren	**Generic benefits of play relevant to this assessment:** Children have a right to play, as enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This right is often misunderstood or overlooked governments internationally. This concern has been reflected in the United Nation's publication of General Comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts. In it they state *"…the Committee is concerned by the poor recognition given by States to the rights contained in article 31. Poor recognition of their significance in the lives of children results in lack of investment in appropriate provisions, weak or non-existent protective legislation and the invisibility of children in national and local-level planning. In general, where investment is made, it is in the provision of structured and organized activities, but equally important is the need to create time and space for children to engage in spontaneous play, recreation and creativity, and to promote societal attitudes that support and encourage such activity."* They go on to state that: *"Play and recreation facilitate children's capacities to negotiate, regain emotional balance, resolve conflicts and make decisions. Through their involvement in play and recreation, children learn by doing; they explore and experience the world around them; experiment with new ideas, roles and experiences and in so doing, learn to understand and construct their social position within the world." (UN Committee, 2013:3)* There are significant benefits to children being allowed to experience increasing levels of independence, make their own decisions and mistakes, express their emotions, negotiate use of space, resolve conflicts between themselves and discover their own limits. Playing enables individuals to sample their environments and to try out a range of behaviours in a	

	relatively low risk fashion. In play, children deliberately seek to place themselves in uncertain situations where they can improvise responses, drawing on conventional movements alongside novel actions in order to regain control and re-establish a sense of balance (Spinka and others 2001,in Lester and Russell, 2008). This 'training for the unexpected' also applies to developing emotional flexibility through playing with the emotional aspect of being surprised, temporarily disorientated or unbalanced. Playing, because it is understood as behaviour that is not 'for real', provides a relatively safe context in which emotions can be expressed, exercised and modulated without incurring serious loss of control (Spinka and others 2001; Sutton-Smith 2003, in Lester and Russell, 2008). A more informed understanding of the nature of play, which includes the recognition that play is not always 'nice', may lead to responses from adults that support and value the process of playing rather than a confrontational or controlling approach that may actually serve to restrict the benefits of playing. Observations have shown that where adults adopt a more play centered approach, children's play develops more playfully rather than aggressively (Holland 2003; Russell 2006, in Lester and Russell, 2008). As a consequence there are significant benefits for practitioners of not over confronting or controlling the elements of children's play that they feel less comfortable about; ultimately this approach will encourage more playfulness, reduce aggression within the play space and therefore reduce the likelihood of harm occurring. Self-led and peer-led playing can at times be cruel, yet it is the creativity, flexibility, uncertainty, sense of control and 'as if' nature of play that are understood to aid the development of such capacities as emotion regulation and empathy. In addition, the research on resilience, risk and stress (Rutter 2006, in Lester and Russell, 2008) shows that experience of mild stress or adversity has beneficial consequences for brain architecture and neurochemistry, helping to develop coping strategies. Furthermore, the removal of mild stressors and the decrease in variety of environmental cues may have a negative impact on resistance to disease (Yun and others 2005, in Lester and Russell, 2008). Such research calls into question a 'zero tolerance' approach to teasing and conflict in children's play, as does research showing that children tend to argue more with close friends than with others outside their friendship groups (Qualter and Munn 2005, Lester and Russell 2008.)

	Research suggests that the unique design features of play act across a range of health variables: play comprises short, intense periods of activity which involve novel movements, thoughts and behaviours; playing with uncertainty promotes moderate stress, which in turn supports higher variable heart rates and the development of healthy stress response systems; and as a pleasurable experience, play becomes self-rewarding and builds motivation for more play experiences (Burdette and Whitaker 2005; Poulsen and Ziviani 2004 in Lester and Russell, 2008). **Benefits of specific common play behaviours relevant to this assessment:** **Climbing:** Climbing is a natural human behaviour and is closely associated with our evolution from other apes. When exploring and climbing children have opportunities for balancing, scrambling, reaching and pulling, this all helps them to develop physically (London Play, 2010). Through climbing, children are also learning to risk assess for themselves and are learning about their own capabilities. Climbing will give children a sense of confidence and improve self-esteem. **Jumping from height:** The theory of combinatorial flexibility (Bruner 1972, in Lester and Russell, 2008) is never more obvious than when children are jumping from height. The theory states how through play children become adept at combining behaviours from their repertoire to extend experiences and find novel ways of doing things. Children first pluck up the courage to jump, then they may jump off on one foot, with their eyes closed, then spin, even flip. Such experiences are not just about jumping, they are about children becoming adept problem solvers and decision makers. **Balancing:** Balancing is an important locomotor skill. It is very important for humans to be able to safely travel around the environments that they inhabit and also for their development. "Balance is an integral, pre-requisite skill for all physical development" (Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment, accessed 29 August 2015) **Using offensive words & gestures:** Children are like mirrors to the world around them. They play with

	language to make sense of it and for fun. They take what they see and hear and play with it. This includes words and common hand gestures that may be perceived by society as negative. Instead of thinking of swearing as uniformly harmful or morally wrong, more meaningful information about swearing can be obtained by asking what communication goals swearing achieves. Swear words can achieve a number of outcomes, as when used positively for joking or storytelling, stress management, fitting in with the crowd, or as a substitute for physical aggression. Recent work by Stephens et al. shows that swearing is associated with enhanced pain tolerance. This finding suggests swearing has a cathartic effect, which many of us may have personally experienced in frustration or in response to pain." (The Association for Psychological Science website www.psychologicalscience.org accessed on 6/7/15) **Weapons:** Weapons are deep rooted in the human psyche. They are a large part of our past and present, they have shaped civilisations, caused some to grow, others to fall, they have shaped how and what we eat and they are part of many sports and pastimes. In their play, children act out adult life, they pretend to drive cars, wash dishes, drink tea, they pretend to be their favourite footballer, they play out marriages and funerals, and they *pretend* to use weapons as part of their play. From cops and robbers, to cowboys and Indians, toy guns, toy swords, sticks and stones, have all historically been part of children's play. **Throwing:** The skills children need for optimum gross motor development include rolling, reaching, sitting, crawling, walking, climbing, balancing, running, jumping, catching, **throwing** and striking. These fundamental gross motor skills will assist children's lifelong ability to participate in physical activity including sport and other recreational pursuits. (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2009: 3 - 5) **Play Fighting:** Research has shown that play fighting is more about social bonding between friends and not about actual aggression (Smith and others 2002, in Lester & Russell 2008). Adults often misinterpret or are uncomfortable with play fighting due to its resemblance to serious aggression and difficulty recognizing subtle differences between the two. Playful aggression is a common component in socio-dramatic play — typically among boys. If playful aggression is supported, it is highly

	beneficial to child development. The act of pretending to be aggressive is *not* equivalent to being aggressive. Role reversal, cooperation, voluntary engagement, chasing and fleeing, restrained physical contact, smiling and laughing are common characteristics of playful aggression. Within this framework of understanding, play fighting and 'war toys' can be considered components of socio-dramatic play. (Hart and Tannock, 2013) In works by Harlow (1962 in Lester and Russell, 2008) and later works of Blurton & Jones (1972 in Lester and Russell, 2008), rough and tumble play has been characterised by 'positive affect', or the 'play face', high energy behaviours, exaggerated movements, and soft, open handed hits or kicks' (Pellegrini, 2009). There are lots of very subtle social skills at play during rough and tumble. Players must constantly decode messages from fellow players and decipher their intent and whether their intentions are still playful. Furthermore, they must encode their own play signals. In the words of Pellegrini (2009) 'As in any form of social communication, the message sender must send an unambiguous message: that this is play.' So those that partake are becoming more socially competent and they are gaining more emotional intelligence as a result of play fighting. Despite being hard to distinguish (between rough & tumble and real fighting) for the untrained adult eye, studies (Pellegrini, 1998 in Lester and Russell, 2008) have shown that the relationship between engagement in rough & tumble play and subsequent aggression in primary school boys is a negative and non-significant one. Furthermore, rough & tumble is more likely to lead onto continued affiliation of groups than aggression and group segregation (Pellegrini, 1988, in Lester and Russell, 2008). And finally, boys who engage in rough and tumble tend to be popular and have a varied repertoire for solving social problems (Pellegrini, 1989, in Lester and Russell, 2008). So boys (and some girls) who roll around and play fight, not only enjoy it, they also become more socially competent, develop a wide repertoire of responses to problematic situations and even become more popular. All very real immediate benefits, and clearly also beneficial for later adult life. **Constraining:** Children sometimes tie each other up when playing, often as part of games such as cops and robbers. Playing in this way provides excitement and adventure for children. This action also promotes "imagination, proximity to other children, problem solving, learning about balance and disequilibrium." (Spinka et al, 2001, in Lester and Russell, 2008).

	Sliding: Through sliding children may develop key skills such as balance, coordination and agility. They will also have a sense of fun and enjoyment, which could help to improve their overall self-esteem and confidence. “While children experience a range of emotions and experiences in play, it is generally acknowledged there is a prevailing mood of pleasure and enjoyment’ (Burghardt 2005, in Lester and Russell, 2008). By sliding with others children can develop and enhance peer attachments through shared experiences of pleasure and excitement. **Swinging:** Children enjoy the feeling of swinging. By playing on swings children can improve a number of key physical skills such as strength, balance and agility. Fjortoft’s (2004) study of children’s play illustrates the benefits of improved physical fitness, coordination, balance and agility from playing in landscapes that offer challenge and unpredictability. Children will also grow in confidence through using swings; this will in turn enable them to interact with their peers and allow them to form strong relationships. The pleasure gained from taking part in these activities allows children to feel good about themselves and each other (Lester and Russell, 2010). **Burning:** Fire has had an important role in the evolution of the human species. The use, control and manipulation of fire is something that sets humans apart from the rest of the animal kingdom and is therefore one of the things that defines us as human beings. For centuries we have used fire for cooking and heating. Until relatively recently most households had a real open fire and even now our central heating systems are dependant on our ability to control fire. Fire has also been instrumental in the development of modern industry and transport and is therefore something we rely on every single day. The fact is that had we not begun playing with fire all those years ago we would not have achieved what we have today. Fire is something that fascinates us both as children and as adults. For children, playing with fire is an important element in understanding the physical world we inhabit. Adults too are drawn to open fires

	and many of us will have enjoyed staring into the flames on a dark night. Fire is something that can bring people together and is therefore often used as a focus at social gatherings. **Eating & drinking:** is essential to human existence. Experimenting with our senses of taste, touch and smell are a necessary part of our practice of assessing what is safe to consume and what isn't. This is a very beneficial skill for humans to have. It is believed that playing with food may actually help kids overcome a fear of new flavours and eat a more varied diet. Nutritionists have found that kids who liked playing with their food were less likely to have neophobia or tactile sensitivity. (Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, online April 29, 2015.) **Construction & destruction:** "Playing and interacting with tools is a very popular activity with children and young people. Through using tools children may develop and enhance fine motor skills, problem solving, creative thinking and hand eye coordination." (Sutton - Smith, 2003). For many adults, the use of tools is an everyday occurrence either as part of work or DIY; it would therefore seem to make sense that children are given the opportunity to use tools. As play is a process and not necessarily about the end point, destruction is sometimes acceptable (dependent upon the context) and affords benefits for the child if they choose to destroy something that has little or no value.
Identified hazards and potential for harm Consider: • How could harm occur? • Likelihood of harm • Severity of potential harm • Other associated environmental or social risks	**Actions** that are likely to result in harm: **Abrasions:** Harm could occur as a result of children scraping their skin on rough surfaces, particularly when they are moving at speed. The faster children are moving and the rougher the surface the more severe any potential injury is likely to be. This type of injury may be associated with running or the use of wheeled toys like skateboards and go-karts but might also occur from children sliding down a bank and being hurt by an object protruding from the ground. Games involving ropes can also lead to rope burns especially where there are significant forces being applied, for example in Tug of War. Practitioners may feel it necessary to make children aware of potential hazards, remove hazards that

	children are unlikely to be aware of or slow children down if they appear to be out of their control. **Burning:** Creating and controlling fires has been an essential part of human life throughout our evolution and so it is perhaps unsurprising that children are so fascinated by playing with fire. However there are obviously significant risks associated with this behaviour and it is something that other members of the public may be particularly wary of. As a consequence practitioners may require additional guidance and training around facilitating fires but the act of burning might also include playing with candles, using a lens to try and burn different materials, or cooking on a stove. Either way the proximity of children to the heat source will be a key consideration as well as the material that is being burnt, children's level of experience and the degree of care they are taking. Practitioners should prevent children from burning toxic or explosive materials, pay greater attention to children that are less experienced or who appear to be unaware of the associated risks to themselves or others, and encourage children to tie back long hair or remove loose clothing. They should also ensure that there is always a water supply easily at hand should fires get out of control. **Collisions:** The most common risk associated with any space where children play is likely to be a collision of one form or another. For example, this could be as a result of children colliding with each other or with other objects or surfaces. At its most extreme this could result in death from a high fall on to a hard surface or a collision between a child and a moving vehicle. However it might more commonly include children running into one another or a child being hit by a projectile. When considering the likelihood and severity of potential collisions consideration should be given to the number of children within a space, their proximity to one another and their direction and speed of travel (i.e. their 'flow'). In doing this practitioners should be particularly mindful of children banging their heads and be aware of possible signs of concussion. Practitioners need to think about how the space available is used and try to avoid any unnecessary restrictions which may increase the contested nature of that space i.e. result in more children having to play together in a smaller area. Whilst adults should recognise children's ability to negotiate use of space

	between themselves, practitioners should be mindful of reoccurring clashes between children's play frames and if necessary intervene to help children better manage their shared use of space. **Constricting:** Children will often use tying up or trapping as part of their play and may enjoy taking it in turns to constrict one another, for example when play fighting. However attention should be given to whether those involved have done so willingly or if they are being constrained under duress and whether they are able to free themselves from the situation if they choose to (this might be as simple as asking children if they are ok). Practitioners should be particularly mindful of rope or other material being tied around children's necks, which could present a risk of strangulation. There are also increased risks associated with children falling over if their arms are restricted meaning that they cannot break their fall. This could result in serious injury especially if they fall onto a particularly hard surface. In these situations practitioners might stay by the side of children so that they can catch them if they fall and/or encourage them to move towards softer ground. **Falling:** Some of the most common accidents include tripping over objects on the floor, uneven ground or even other people. There is also the potential for children to fall off or out of structures including trees, shipping containers or fixed play equipment. The severity of any potential injury will usually be dependent on the fall height and the impact surface and the likelihood of an accident occurring will usually depend on the competency of the children involved, the stability of the structure they are climbing or standing on and the weather conditions (e.g. is it wet or icy?). However practitioners should also be aware of overcrowding, children jostling to take turns and people potentially being pushed before they are ready to jump. If concerned practitioners could ask children if they feel in control or if necessary ask them to come down to a height that the staff feel more comfortable with. Sometimes children may get themselves into situations where they need guidance or practical support from staff to climb down. Staff can also reduce risks by removing obstacles from the fall zone and/or providing some form of impact absorbing material for children to jump on to, for example a crash mat.

	Wounding: Play fighting or 'rough and tumble' is an important part of children's play that fosters both immediate and deferred benefits. However, real fighting or violence against another person is obviously less desirable and may require a more direct intervention as it could lead to serious harm. Whether fighting is pretend or real can usually be determined through observation of children's body language, facial expressions and language. Consideration should also be given to whether those involved are friends and if there is a history of play fighting or 'falling out' between them. In doing this adults must accept that children will have disagreements and must be allowed the opportunity to resolve these for themselves. Furthermore the involvement of staff can exacerbate a situation and sometimes the quickest way to resolve a dispute is to let it 'play out'. Practitioners should therefore avoid becoming involved in 'petty squabbles' and minor disputes particularly where these are regular occurrences amongst groups of friends. However it is also important to recognise when a situation has ceased to be playful or developed into something more serious and children may look to staff to prevent conflicts getting 'out of hand'. Many objects can potentially be used as weapons but generally speaking, it is the intent behind the objects use (driven by a child's emotional state) that will require careful consideration to determine the risk posed. The severity of potential injury will also be dependant on the physical features of the object, for example, is it heavy or sharp? If there appears to be no intent to harm but staff are still concerned about the type of object being used they could offer an alternative but lower risk "weapon" allowing the play to continue. In doing this consideration should be given to whether the children involved appear to be aware of the potential for the object to cause harm and whether they actually intend to cause harm or if they are in fact purposefully trying to avoid hurting other people. The proximity of the activity to others will also be key, for example, a child swinging a stick like a sword is unlikely to cause harm if nobody is around them but this could present more of a risk if they did the same close to other people. If necessary staff can give verbal warnings, distract those involved with a different activity, take children

	in different directions away from each other or stand between children to prevent them hitting or being hit. In extreme cases staff may have to constrain a child but this should only be done as a last resort and if there is a high risk of them seriously harming themselves or another person. **Damaging:** Damage itself is not necessarily a bad thing if the item being damaged is of little or no value. If a child is feeling angry it is certainly better that they take their frustration out on junk materials rather than another person or expensive equipment. Sometimes the act of destroying an object can be part of the play process and 'smashing stuff up' can be cathartic and fun in itself. However the degree to which this is acceptable to other people is likely to depend on the cost of the materials involved and who owns them. For example, most people would probably tolerate a child ripping up a cardboard box or pulling apart an old computer but few would accept children deliberately damaging vehicles or destroying expensive equipment. Furthermore sometimes the very act of damaging an object may make it more dangerous. For example, a plastic tube may present little risk as a whole, but when damaged may create sharp edges that could present a significant risk of harm, particularly if used in an aggressive manner. This emphasizes the importance of providing resources that have little or no value but also making sure that damaged materials which are no longer of any practical use are disposed of. Staff also need to make sure that if children are 'smashing stuff up' they have plenty of space around them and other people are kept out of the way or at least made aware of the hazards. **Ingesting:** Eating and drinking are obviously normal behaviours, however what the substance is that is ingested will greatly influence the potential for harm to occur. For example, children enjoy collecting berries or seedpods but care should be taken that potentially poisonous plant material is not eaten. Children also love playing with water and may be tempted to drink it, which is not a problem if it is fresh and clean, however staff should try to prevent children from drinking stagnant, discolored or foul smelling water. Animal waste also has the potential to cause harm if ingested. Most commonly this would be cat or dog faeces, which can often plague spaces intended for children's play. Sites should be checked for animal

	waste prior to commencing play sessions and where possible removed safely by staff. Poorly cooked foods can also present a risk to children. Due consideration should be given to all food preparations and anyone intending on preparing and/or cooking food should be competent in food hygiene, particularly if meats are being prepared. **Drowning:** Any situation where there is enough water to cover the mouth and nose of a child presents a potential risk of drowning and in the worse case scenario this could result in death. However, when adequately supervised, the likelihood of this occurring is significantly reduced. Awareness of the existence of water bodies of any sort is vital to subsequently ensure adequate supervision and practitioners may require additional guidance or training to facilitate playing in and around deep water. However generally speaking, the depth of the water will increase the risk associated with it and the faster the flow of water the greater the risk. If children are playing in water then thought should be given to whether they could get out of their depth, the potential presence of hazardous objects under water, the likelihood of banks giving way under foot and how slippery the surfaces are (which could in turn increase the risk of a fall). Practitioners should also consider whether they would be able to make a wade in rescue if necessary. **Offending:** It is important to recognise that children will inevitably play with potentially offensive language and gestures and that name calling, mickey taking, rude words and dirty jokes are a natural part of the banter of children's play. This can be a positive process of bonding between friends but may also support children to come to terms with feelings of embarrasment. However, similar to the difference between play fighting and real fighting, consideration should be given to the intent behind any insults and how those on the receiving end are likely to react; recognizing that the same words can have completely different meanings dependent upon the intention behind their delivery. For example, swear words can be used with either hateful intent or for playfully questioning the actions of another. What different people take offence to can be highly subjective and it is quite possible that offence may be caused even though there was no intent to do so. Some insults will be less socially acceptable than

	others, in particular those associated with an individual's appearance or background, and practitioners should be more active in their discouragment of these. The social impact of causing offence to other members of the public also has the potential to damage the reputation of a project and this may subsequently hamper efforts to advocate for children's play. The principle of everyone having a right to play is particularly pertinent in situations of potential offence. Children may struggle to play if intimidated by the actions or language of others, similarly parents may not allow children to join in if they hear or witness behaviour that they deem to be offensive. Practitioner's judgments should therefore depend on what was said or done, who this was aimed at and who else was present. Interventions may then range from asking children to be more mindful of their language, making them aware of others around them, asking them to distance themselves from others, or reminding children about their responsibilities towards the reputation of the provision and the potential consequences of the project getting a 'bad name'. **Behavioural Modes** of children that may lead to them having a diminished awareness and ability to manage risk for themselves and/or others around them: **Malice**: The intent behind a person's actions will have a significant impact on the risk associated with them and, whilst accidents do indeed happen, if there is an intention to cause harm then harm is much more likely to occur. Malice (as a manifestation of strong primary emotions like anger, jealousy and fear) refers to the 'desire to see others suffer' and is likely to lead to situations where practitioners deem it necessary to make an intervention. However in doing this it is essential that practitioners consider whether children are *actually* being malicious or just pretending i.e. do they *actually* intend to cause harm or are they just playing? This tends to be particularly important when considering interventions associated with play fighting, the use of weapons and potentially offensive language or gestures. **Excitement:** Perceived positive emotional states such as displaying excitement can also lead to potentially hazardous situations. High levels of excitement may mean that children are less aware of what is going on around them and any emerging hazards. Practitioners have previously observed children putting

	themselves at increased risk when 'over-excited' and this has resulted in staff having to intervene to calm children down and make them aware of the hazards around them. **Immersion:** When playing children will hopefully become totally immersed in what they are doing, however there may be times when this again leads to children be less aware of hazards around them. For example, children have been observed walking directly through the zone of a rope swing seemingly unaware of the impending collision. **Inexperience:** The competency and experience of individual children will greatly influence their ability to perform particular activities. Practitioners should be particularly mindful of children who appear less experienced, both in terms of their general competency as players and their knowledge of the particular setting they are in. **Recklessness:** Inexperienced children may be deemed as being reckless if they rush into situations beyond their control. However even highly experienced children may act in a reckless way when trying to show off to others or as a consequence of becoming impatient or over excited. Peer pressure and/or 'dares' are often associated with reckless behavior and may impair children's judgment. Children with very low levels of self-esteem may be particularly likely to disregard their own safety in an attempt to impress others. **Context** specific factors that may increase the likelihood and potential severity of harm: **Culture:** What is deemed to be acceptable or appropriate in any staffed play setting is likely to depend on the culture and history of that organisation and the surrounding community. Some communities may be more tolerant towards children's playful behaviour than others and this is likely to be influenced by people's beliefs, values and previous experiences. For example, people from within a local community that has recently suffered a tragic incident involving children may be more nervous about allowing children out to play and so may expect a higher level of supervision from staff. **Density:** Inevitably the more children playing in any given space the greater the risk of an accident

	occurring. A higher density of children can increase the risk of collisions, heighten tensions between individuals and result in some play behaviours dominating space at the expense of others. Children will inevitably have to play in closer proximity to one another and may find it more difficult to avoid those that they may not get on with. Furthermore overcrowding can be a particular problem around higher risk activities and may result in staff having to regulate turn taking. **Height:** The thrill of being high up is a particular attraction for a significant number of children. It is unlikely that children will jump from a height that they do not feel confident in their ability to do so but there are other factors such as peer pressure that may influence their decisions and of course there is always the possibility that they could fall. The severity of an injury from falling or jumping will depend on the height and the type of landing surface underneath. **Material:** What something is made of will greatly influence the potential for it to cause harm. Some substances are poisonous and ingestion would be harmful. Some are sharp and have the potential to cut or stab. A hit to the head with a hard object is obviously likely to cause more damage than something soft. Some materials are coarse like sandpaper or tarmac and present an increased risk of abrasion. An activity that is acceptable when the surface is dry may become less so if the surface becomes wet. Conversely, surfaces that benefit from being wet in order to facilitate an activity, such as a water slide, may have the potential for friction burns if not enough water is provided. Grass is generally a good impact-absorbing surface but compaction over time can reduce its impact absorbing properties, particularly in areas of high usage. **Proximity:** How close children are to hazard will greatly influence the level of risk associated with it. For example, playing closer to a big drop, a fire, to traffic or a fast flowing river would all increase the risks associated with that behaviour. Proximity could also be a key issue if particular children have a history of conflict between them or the proximity of children's play (particularly those behaviours that may been perceived as less desirable) to others members of the public, and/or their property, may increase the risk of complaints against the service.

	Structure: The structural integrity of an object or feature will influence the level of risk if children are playing under or on it. The greatest risk posed is likely to be associated with some level of structural failure, especially where this is unexpected. This might, for example, include branches breaking off a tree or a den totally collapsing, which could in turn result in children falling or being hit by falling objects. **Weather:** Different types of weather provide different opportunities for playing however the weather conditions can also significantly influence the level of risk associated with children's play. For example, strong winds would make being exposed and up high more dangerous and could increase the risk of objects like branches falling on to people below. Rain might make surfaces more slippery and increase the risk of falls, especially when people are climbing or jumping from height. In very cold weather children might get ill if they are not suitably wrapped up or in very hot weather they may over heat or get sun burnt if not appropriately protected.
Precedents / comparisons and expert views Consider: • Previous experiences of your organisation • Practices of other organisations / individuals • Opinions of experts in relevant professions	**Injury Rates from Staffed Play Provision** Flintshire County Council has over 30 years of experience in supporting a balanced approach to children's play. Despite the Play Department at Flintshire County Council adopting an approach that enables children to play in as many different ways as possible, and therefore allowing children to experience a considerable degree of risk of their own volition, there have been very few serious injuries at these settings. **The Influence of Supervision** The systematic review "What is the Relationship between Risky Outdoor Play and Health in Children?" highlights that supervision reduces the likelihood of harm: *"Research has indicated that higher levels of direct supervision are associated with lower injury rates in children up to 10 years of age".* International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2015) **Pretence or Reality?**

	The following evidence was provided by Ben Tawil, Senior Lecturer in Playwork at Leeds Beckett University and a highly experience playwork practitioner: "The view that thinks by denying children and young people the opportunity to play with the unsavoury aspects of life will in some way protect them from those aspects fails to recognise children as active recipients and reproducers of socio cultural phenomena. In this view, children are naive and innocent, in need of protection and incapable of making distinctions between right and wrong; this view sees children as inactive recipients of normative behaviours, customs and values. This follows a naive behaviourist / social learning or functionalist model of the child and child development and as such is a representation of disproven and outdated theory. Furthermore this view fails to recognise that children are a part of an intricate web of social and cultural influences and are themselves influencers. Shielding children from something in a setting or provision blindly refuses to acknowledge that children are and will be susceptible to a whole host of positive and negative aspects of culture and society through a great many mediums and a refusal to enable children's playful engagement with those themes is to deny children the opportunity to comprehend them. Children are not "blank slates" or inactive participants in their own lives, rather they have agency - the capacity to understand and act upon their own world. As such they embody and enact competency from birth (James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002; Wyness, 2000). Additionally they are active agents, participant in the co-construction of their own lives and cultures (Corsaro, 2005). Play therefore provides a medium through which children first test out that which is systematically related to the real world in a playful state, and as such any repercussions of the experience are lessened because of the virtual reality nature of play; it's pretence and intrinsic motivation taken together create a safe frame for the testing out of social and cultural phenomena. Furthermore this active bodily engagement with themes through play benefits children's holistic development and relational experience because of the exercising of both sensory and perceptual capacities. In short this is the difference for children between 'being told a thing' and being enabled to generate a somewhat real lived experience of that thing in their play, thus

	generating lifeworld material that will exercise both the emotion and the cognitive regulation system. Generating real opportunities to develop empathy, sympathy, to comprehend the emotional expressions of another and to respond appropriately to comprehend, predict, evaluate and to make meaningful behavioural responses as a result of those processes. In their play children reproduce social and cultural phenomena to make sense of them, to come to terms with them, to learn in the safety of a frame their meaning and effect. To have fun with them, making them less scary, less powerful, reducing the adult held serious nature to a non-serious, less real part of children's play culture. In terms of a wish fulfilment perspective play enables children to try out things that in the media may appear exciting and powerful, again in the safety of a frame. These opportunities, rather than increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes for the child, actually reduce the likelihood of children trying them out in more real context with more real apparatus with potentially more serious repercussions."
Options available Consider: • What potential courses of action could be taken (please list your options) • Potential impacts on children's play experiences • Costs associated with safety measures	1. Allow all potentially harmful behaviours to run their course and practitioners do not intervene at all no matter how serious the risk posed. With this option we would be negating our duty of care to the children and endangering their health and wellbeing. It would undermine the Playwork Principles, as it would not '*balance risk with the developmental benefit to the child'.* 2. Do not allow any potentially harmful behaviours to be exhibited at all and instruct all practitioners to intervene and adulterate children's play as soon as any risky behaviours of any sort are displayed. This would damage the play process significantly and deprive children of the opportunity to experience free choice in their play with it all of the benefits highlighted earlier in this assessment. It would also undermine the Playwork Principles, as it would not *'balance the risk with the developmental benefit to the child'.* 3. Take a balanced approach to risk management where practitioners adhere to the Playwork Principles and whenever possible adult interventions balances risk with the developmental benefit

	and wellbeing of children. This would ensure that practitioners "*choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play".* This approach would be based upon practitioner's dynamic assessment of risk based on their knowledge of the emotional states of each child and how this manifests itself in their behaviour in the context of each emerging specific situation.
Risk - benefit judgement Consider: • What is your decision, based upon the above information?	It is important that people recognise: • There is intrinsic value in children experiencing uncertainty and personal challenge through their play. • That children are capable of managing some risk for themselves and that their competency will develop as their experience grows. • Children need to feel free to experience risk of their own volition and they will only be able to do this if adults allow some degree of uncertainty to remain. Whilst it may be possible to develop specific guidelines for the construction of play structures (e.g. rope swings), the same cannot be said for managing the risks associated with children's playful interaction with that structure or any other feature of their environment. Due to the variable and uncertain nature of children's play, it is impossible to produce definitive statements about exactly when practitioners should intervene in any given situation and blanket bans could lead to some highly beneficial scenarios being prevented. The details of each individual situation will be unique and how different people perceive these will be highly subjective. However this paper aims to encourage greater consistency in terms of the ways practitioners think about and therefore react to children's playful behaviour. In doing this it is important to recognise that the assessment has been completed on the premise that children are people in their own right, with their own experiences, thoughts, feelings and cultures, who have some degree of responsibility for their own actions. This fact alone raises questions about the ethics of adults controlling and instructing children in an attempt to socialise them, particularly if those adults are primarily employed to support children's freely chosen and personally directed play. However, it also

	important to be aware of the expectations placed on practitioners and the potentially damaging effects of other people misinterpreting a low intervention approach as reckless or uncaring. Ultimately there are significant benefits for children from being able to control the content and intent of their play and experience a reasonable degree of risk as part of this. Through over zealous interventions, which subsequently limit children's freedom to direct their own behaviour, adults may unintentionally deprive children of the immediate and deferred benefits that are associated with these common play behaviours. This includes the development of resilience, creativity and adaptability, which are all key characteristics necessary for humans to support their own well-being in the unpredictable world that they inhabit. **Given the benefits of children being enabled to play freely, the general rule should be to allow as much as possible so long as it does not overly constrain another person's right to play or put the player or other people at unreasonable risk of serious physical or emotional harm** (this may include bringing the provision into disrepute which might ultimately result in it not being delivered). Whether, and how, to intervene during the play process will be the choice of individual practitioners and their staff teams. This will be based upon their professional judgement as to what they perceive to be reasonable and realistic given the circumstances. However this guidance aims to support practitioner's dynamic assessment of risk by identifying: • **A**ctions that are likely to result in harm • **B**ehavioural Modes[1] of children that may lead to them having a diminished awareness and ability to manage risk for themselves and/or others around them • **C**ontext specific factors that may increase the likelihood and potential severity of harm. For short this may be considered as 'the **ABC** Model'. A more detailed explanation of the factors that may need to be considered within each of these three areas is provided in the appendix of this document but what follows is a summary of the issues practitioners should try to take into account when dynamically

	risk-benefit assessing children's play. **Actions** The potentially harmful actions that practitioners should be particularly mindful of when dynamically assessing risks associated with children's playful behavior include: **abrading, burning, colliding, constricting, falling, wounding, damaging, ingesting, drowning and offending.** So for example, the potential for harm from the common play behaviour of play fighting could actually result from a number of possible actions such as wounding, constricting or offending, and these are the hazards practitioners should be looking out for. **Behavioural Modes** The underlying driver for children's behaviour is inextricably linked to their emotions. Children's emotional states will influence both the play cues that they send out and also the ways in which they respond to play cues from others. It is how these emotions are expressed through each child's actions that can present a risk to the playing child or other people in the vicinity. Whilst it is imperative for practitioners to acknowledge children's capabilities for managing risk, the manner in which children engage with the environment and each other will greatly influence their awareness and ability to manage the associated risks. For example children who are behaving in a **reckless** manner are likely to present a greater risk to themselves and others, than those who are in control and being careful. Similarly over **excitement** or **immersion** in the play process can lead to children being less aware of the hazards around them. The competency of individual children will also be key as well as the degree to which practitioners are aware of this. Children who are **inexperience**d players may be unaware of the associated risks and inadvertently put themselves in situations beyond their control. If a child is unknown to a member of staff then it would be more likely that the practitioner should intervene sooner if they are unsure about that child's competency in a certain area.

	Practitioners should also make efforts to try and understand the intent of children's actions, in particular whether there is any **malice** behind them and whether these actions are 'real' or in fact part of the pretence of playing i.e. are the children involved really intending to cause actual physical or emotional harm. This will again depend on the emotional state of the children involved and so it is important that practitioners try to be aware of and understand how individual children are feeling and how this may affect their behaviour. **Context** The level of risk associated with any particular play behavior can then be greatly influenced by other context specific factors, including: the previous and current **weather** conditions; the **proximity** of children's play to other people, property or other hazards; the number or **density** of children in a space and the 'flow' or movement of children around that space; the types of **materials** involved; the integrity of **structures**; and the severity of any potential fall **height**. ## Planning for Play The above narrative suggests there is much more involved in risk management than just reacting to potentially dangerous situations. It emphasises the importance of making all children feel welcome and secure at the setting, observing them more closely when new to the project, spending time getting to know children and their backgrounds, and perhaps most importantly creating an environment that allows children to play with and express a wide range of emotions in a relatively safe context. Practitioners will also need to think about how the space available is used and try to avoid any unnecessary restrictions on use of space which may increase the contested nature of that space i.e. result in more children having to play together in a smaller area.
Actions required for implementation Consider:	• Ensure staff have received a copy of a briefing paper summarizing this risk-benefit assessment to help inform staff and volunteers about the approach.

• Development of training • Development of guidance • Operating procedures • Policy changes • Inspection regimes	• Ensure all staff and volunteers have read and understood the briefing paper by incorporating it into CPD training. • Ensure all staff and volunteers attend training on dynamic risk-benefit assessment. • Facilitate regular discussions between staff to gather any information that may be pertinent to the ongoing improvement of this assessment and accompanying policies and procedures. • Ensure this assessment is reviewed regularly and updated where necessary based upon recorded accidents, near misses, incidents and comments from staff of their practical experience of its application.

References:

The Association for Psychological Science website [Accessed 6 July 2015 from www.psychologicalscience.org]

Ball, D (2007) *"Risk and the demise of children's play", Chapter 4 in Growing Up with Risk, Thom, B, Sales, R and Pearce JJ (eds).* Bristol: The Policy Press

Ball, D. Gill, T. and Speigal, B., (2012) *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide.* London: National Children's Bureau

Brussoni, M.; Gibbons, R.; Gray, C.; Ishikawa, T.; Sandseter, E.B.H.; Bienenstock, A.; Chabot, G.; Fuselli, P.; Herrington, S.; Janssen, I.; Pickett, W.; Power, M.; Stanger, N.; Sampson, M.; Tremblay, M.S. What is the Relationship between Risky Outdoor Play and Health in Children? A Systematic Review. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2015**, *12*, 6423-6454

Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment CEA, *Developing Fundamental Movement Skills guidance sheet*, Northern Ireland Curriculum, Accessed 29 August 2015 from [http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/foundation_stage/areas_of_learning/physical_development/FMS_Balance.pdf]

Coulthard, H. et al. *Enjoyment of Tactile Play Is Associated with Lower Food Neophobia in Preschool Children*, Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics , Volume 115 , Issue 7 , 1134 - 1140

"Emotions," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*)

Fjørtoft, I (2004). *Landscape as Playscape: The Effects of Natural Environments on Children's Play and Motor Development*. *Children, Youth and Environments* 14(2): 21-44. [Accessed 5 September 2015 from http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/]

Hart JL, Tannock MT. *Young children's play fighting and use of war toys.* Smith PK, topic ed. In: Tremblay RE, Boivin M, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Child Development; 2013:1-6. [Accessed 5 September 2015 from: http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Hart-TannockANGxp1.pdf

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Statement on children's play [Accessed 5 September 2015 from http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playandchallenge]

Lester, S. and Russell, W (2008) *Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice: a review of contemporary perspectives,* London: National Children's Bureau

Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) *Children's right to play: an examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide.* Bernard van Leer Foundation

London Play (2010) *Fallen trees as climbing structures in playgrounds.* London: London Play

Pellegrini, A. D. (2009). *The role of play in human development*. New York: Oxford University Press

Play Wales and PlayEd (2001) *The First Claim…a framework for playwork quality assessment.* Cardiff: Play Wales

Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (2005) Playwork Principles, held in trust as honest brokers for the profession by the Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group. [Accessed on 5 September from: http://www.playwales.org.uk/page.asp?id=50]

Sutton - Smith, B (2003) 'Play as a Parody of Emotional Vulnerability' Westport, Connecticut: Praeger)

United Nations United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013), General Comment 17 on Article 31, Convention on the Rights of the Child. Geneva: UN Committee