

ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS AND STANDARDS (Keeping the Adventure)

As someone who does inspect and risk assess adventure playgrounds I have found that there is much misinformation and misunderstanding about how and what standards should be applied to adventure playgrounds. There is also a lack of knowledge of the guidance which is available.

I very often have to tell adventure playground workers that they can do things they have been told they cannot. For instance they can have fires on their playground and guidance on this is included in the appropriate "standard".

It is always a surprise to me how few playworkers are as competent at lighting a fire (and cooking on it) as I and my friends were in our early teens because we had been on boy scout camps. There you were expected to be able to light a fire using 2 matches only and a hand-sized piece of paper. How many playworkers are trained to be able to do that?

The appropriate guidance for adventure playgrounds is "**Risk and Safety in Play – The law and practice for adventure playgrounds**". This was written in 1997 after considerable consultation with the field and although it is now 15 years old it is still a useful document. It was based on "Towards a Safer Adventure Playground" which was published by National Playing Fields Association in 1980 (and then second edition 1984). I remember it being based on considerable consultation with playworkers throughout the country.

My advice to adventure playground workers is that each adventure playground should have a copy of "Risk and Safety in Play" readily available for reference and that staff should be trained to refer to it for guidance.

It is available as an e-book from:

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"Risk and Safety in Play" refers to the predecessor of BS EN 1176 that was BS 5696. For while it was not strictly applicable, it does contain much useful guidance on avoiding potentially lethal or permanently disabling hazards.

It is, for instance, sensible to avoid gaps which a child's body might slip through but where the head is likely to remain trapped. Avoiding using ropes in a way that is likely to cause strangulation is also included. It is negligent to avoid this advice when it has no or negligible impact on the play value.

Now that BS 5696 has been superseded by EN 1176 it is sensible to take its guidance into account.

Taking it into account is, however, completely different from slavishly abiding by it. The law (the Health and Safety at Work Act) does not lay down guidance but rather a procedure called risk assessment. This encourages an approach where benefits can be taken into account even where accidents have happened. For example every game of football has not been stopped just because a famous footballer died and one nearly died very recently.

One of the problems I have found is that too often playworkers don't know about "Risk and Safety in Play" and so are unable to demonstrate that the guidance they have been given is incorrect.

Secondly, they rarely seek appropriate expert advice when they have had unreasonable restrictions placed on them by their own managers, Ofsted, etc so that they can challenge those restrictions.

Thirdly, when asking for an annual inspection or risk assessment they do not check that the inspector is sufficiently experienced and competent to inspect adventure playgrounds. They may therefore get someone who appears to be protecting their own back rather than giving helpful advice.

Training

Children's Play Advisory Service will be running a training course on how to use guidance and Standards to ensure you have adventurous activities on your playground. If you would be interested in attending this please contact us (details on footer below and on home page).

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