

Carnarvon Primary School

OPAL Play and Risk Management Policy

2026-2027

Introduction

"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)

Children have rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Article 31 recognises every child's right to rest, leisure and play.

At Carnarvon Primary School, we believe play is essential to children's happiness, health, wellbeing and development. We are committed to providing high-quality play opportunities through carefully designed outdoor spaces, varied resources and inclusive experiences that meet the needs of all children.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) supports the provision of diverse and challenging play environments and recognises that well-managed play spaces may involve opportunities for risk and occasional injury. Safety concerns should not result in environments that are so restrictive that children are denied opportunities to challenge themselves, develop resilience and expand their capabilities (HSE, 2012).

This policy provides a framework for supporting children's right to play whilst managing risks in a balanced and proportionate way. It will guide decisions relating to play, play environments, supervision and risk management across the school.

To support the development of high-quality playtimes, Carnarvon Primary School participates in the OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) programme. OPAL provides an evidence-informed framework for improving children's opportunities for play and ensuring that every child enjoys a rich, rewarding playtime every day.

Policy Rationale

"The opposite of play isn't work, it's depression."
(Brian Sutton-Smith, 1997)

Play is often misunderstood as a trivial activity or valued only when it contributes to adult-defined outcomes. This can lead to play becoming overly structured, supervised and controlled, reducing opportunities for imagination, creativity and self-directed exploration.

Over recent decades, children's opportunities for free play outside school have declined significantly. Increased traffic, changing family lifestyles, concerns about community safety, greater use of childcare and reduced access to outdoor spaces have all limited children's freedom to play independently.

At the same time, a risk-averse culture has developed across much of the UK and North America. Risk is increasingly viewed as something to be eliminated rather than managed, resulting in a "cotton wool" approach to childhood where children are protected from experiences that help them learn judgement, resilience and independence.

Research suggests that restrictions on children's freedom to play can contribute to:

- Reduced physical activity
- Increased sedentary behaviour
- Childhood obesity and diabetes
- Difficulties with attention and concentration
- Reduced independence and resilience
- Increased levels of anxiety and poor mental health

These long-term risks often outweigh the relatively minor injuries that can arise through active play.

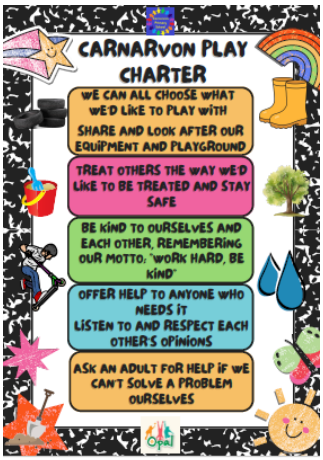
School playtimes therefore play a crucial role in supporting children's development and wellbeing. At Carnarvon, we seek to provide an environment where children can experience:

- Freedom to explore and experiment
- Opportunities to engage with uncertainty and challenge
- Access to a wide variety of play experiences
- Supportive adults who facilitate rather than over-direct play
- Opportunities to develop confidence, resilience and wellbeing

By providing high-quality play opportunities, we aim to compensate for the reduction in children's opportunities to play freely beyond school and support their physical, emotional, social and cognitive development.

What is Play and Why is it Important?

Play Charter



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."

Play is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is undertaken because children enjoy it, not because someone else requires them to do it.

Through play, children explore who they are, make sense of the world around them, develop relationships and experience joy, belonging and achievement. Play enables children to experiment, imagine, take manageable risks and learn from their experiences.

Research identifies several defining characteristics of play:

Personal Control

Children choose their own actions and direct their own experiences. Play has a spontaneous quality that cannot be fully planned by adults.

Intrinsic Motivation

Play is driven by enjoyment, curiosity and personal satisfaction rather than external rewards.

Social Interaction

Play encourages cooperation, communication, empathy and relationship-building.

Emotional Resonance

Play provides opportunities to explore emotions, process experiences and develop emotional regulation.

Flexibility and Variability

Play is dynamic and continually changing, helping children develop creativity and adaptability.

Imagination and Pretence

Children create imagined worlds, scenarios and possibilities, helping them explore ideas and develop thinking skills.

Novelty and Uncertainty

Children actively seek challenge and uncertainty in play, developing resilience, confidence and risk awareness.

Together these characteristics create what researchers describe as an "ordinary magic" that helps children:

- Form attachments to people and places
- Build resilience and wellbeing
- Develop emotional regulation
- Strengthen creativity and problem-solving
- Experience joy, motivation and fulfilment

The Health and Safety Executive also recognises that play supports children to learn about themselves and the world around them, including how to understand and manage risk.

Providing for Play

Where reasonably practicable, children will have access to a wide range of opportunities across the school grounds. We recognise the value of children of different ages and abilities playing together and the importance of promoting self-regulation and independence.

Children may experience opportunities to:

- Build dens
- Create imaginative play spaces
- Engage in social games
- Explore natural environments
- Have short periods of privacy within supervised areas

Adults will remain available to provide support, guidance and intervention where necessary.

Where reasonably practicable, children should be able to decide:

- What they play
- Where they play
- Who they play with
- How they play

Our guiding principle is that **everyone has a right to play**, provided their play does not prevent others from exercising the same right.

To maximise opportunities throughout the year, children are encouraged to have suitable clothing and footwear, including coats and wellies where required. The school will continue developing facilities that support all-weather outdoor play.

We are committed to providing a wide variety of loose parts, recycled materials and natural resources that children can use creatively. These resources encourage imagination, cooperation, creativity, problem-solving, physical activity and enjoyment.

Access to playtime will only be restricted where a child's behaviour presents an unreasonable risk to themselves or others. Any restrictions will be proportionate, temporary and supported by strategies that enable children to return successfully to play.

Taking a Risk-Benefit Approach

Risk refers to uncertain outcomes and is often associated with harm. However, risk can also bring significant developmental benefits.

For example, balancing on a wall may involve the possibility of a fall, but it also provides opportunities to develop coordination, confidence, judgement, perseverance and a sense of achievement.

The provision of play opportunities is governed by:

- Health and Safety at Work Act (1974)
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1992)
- Occupiers' Liability Acts (1957 and 1984)

These require risks to be reduced so far as is reasonably practicable and visitors to be reasonably safe whilst using the premises.

The HSE's position is clear:

"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."

This approach is further supported by ISO 4980:2023 which defines benefit-risk assessment as:

"A form of risk assessment that considers both risks and benefits in parallel when making decisions."

When making decisions about play, we will consider:

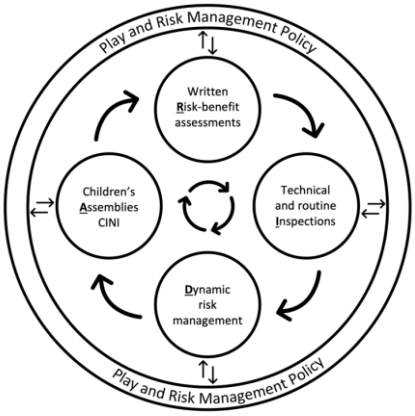
- The benefits of the activity
- The likelihood and severity of harm
- Expert guidance and best practice
- The impact restrictions may have on children's opportunities to play

Our aim is to preserve the developmental benefits of play whilst reducing unreasonable risks.

Strategic Risk Management

Our approach is informed by OPAL's **R.A.P.I.D.** model:

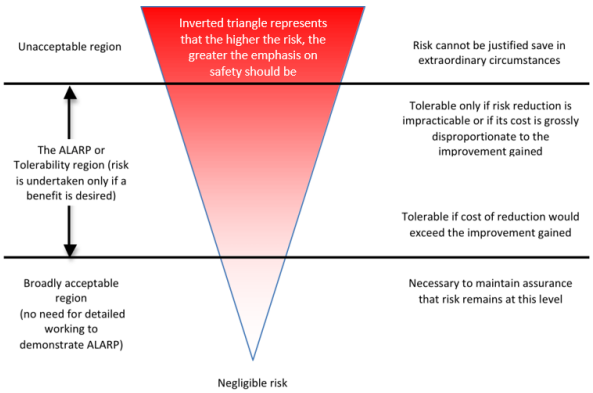
- Risk-Benefit Assessments
- Assemblies
- Policy
- Inspections
- Dynamic Risk Management



These elements work together to ensure that our play environment remains "safe enough" while retaining the challenge and uncertainty that children seek in play.

Following HSE guidance, we adopt a proportionate approach to risk assessment. Detailed written assessments are not required for all play opportunities. Instead, the level of assessment should be proportionate to the level of risk involved.

We use the **Tolerability of Risk Framework** to guide our professional judgement.



For routine play opportunities that fall within the broadly acceptable region, this policy serves as an overarching risk-benefit assessment.

More detailed written assessments will be completed where risks fall beyond this threshold, including where:

- Structures fall outside recognised standards.
- Site features present unusual levels of risk.
- Children are exposed to higher levels of risk through adult actions.
- Staff require greater clarity regarding risk management.
- Additional justification may be needed for public understanding.

Risk-benefit assessments will be reviewed and updated regularly.

Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment

Children's play is flexible, exploratory and unpredictable. Risks may emerge spontaneously during play and require immediate professional judgement.

Staff will therefore use dynamic risk-benefit assessment to consider:

- Children's ability to manage risks themselves
- Whether children have adapted behaviour appropriately
- Ages, abilities and context
- The need for intervention

Where possible, staff should observe first and allow children opportunities to assess and manage risks independently.

Intervention should seek to preserve the benefits of play while reducing the associated risk. Activities should only be stopped where there is an imminent risk of serious harm.

Learning from dynamic risk management will inform future training, discussions and risk-benefit assessments.

Good and Bad Hazards

In making decisions about risk, we distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable hazards.

Acceptable (Good) Hazards

Hazards where:

- The risks can reasonably be recognised by children.
- Meaningful play benefits exist.
- Risks can be managed at reasonable levels.

Unacceptable (Bad) Hazards

Hazards where:

- Children cannot reasonably identify the danger.
- Little or no benefit is gained.
- There is an unreasonable likelihood of serious harm.

We aim to manage good hazards and remove, repair or minimise bad hazards wherever reasonably practicable.

Inspection and Maintenance

Regular inspections help ensure risks remain at reasonable and acceptable levels.

This includes:

Daily/Weekly Inspections

Visual checks of:

- Play spaces
- Play equipment
- Loose parts
- Surfaces and grounds

Monthly/Quarterly Inspections

More detailed inspections of:

- Structural integrity
- Ground conditions
- Natural features
- Moving components

Annual Inspections

Formal inspections of:

- Fixed equipment
- Trees
- Significant structures
- Specialist play features

Any hazards offering little benefit or presenting unreasonable risk will be removed, repaired or taken out of use.

Supervision of Playtimes

Carnarvon recognises the importance of suitable and sufficient supervision while also providing children with freedom during play.

The school uses OPAL's three supervision models:

- Direct supervision
- Remote supervision
- Ranging supervision

For most children, remote and ranging supervision provide the best balance between safety, independence and opportunities for self-directed play.

Play areas are divided into supervision zones and staffed appropriately. A floating member of staff provides additional oversight and support. Staff communicate via walkie-talkies and a designated first aid point is available during playtimes.

The Role of the Play Team

The staff supervising playtimes are known as the **Play Team**.

Their role is to:

- Facilitate and enhance children's play
- Support children's right to play
- Encourage self-regulation and independence
- Help children assess risks and benefits
- Promote inclusion and participation

The Play Team works in accordance with the **Playwork Principles** (Appendix 2), which guide interactions and interventions during play.

Staff are provided with regular opportunities for reflection, training and professional development to ensure continuous improvement in play provision.

Whole-School Communication

Developing high-quality play is a whole-school commitment.

We maintain an ongoing dialogue with children and use their views to shape and improve our play provision.

Play assemblies are an important part of our risk management strategy and take place at least once each half term using OPAL's **C.I.N.I.** model:

- Celebrate
- Inform
- Negotiate
- Innovate

Assemblies provide opportunities to discuss play, risk, responsibilities and new developments.

The school also maintains an OPAL Working Group that oversees implementation of the OPAL programme and ensures school systems remain aligned with this policy.

The staffing structure supporting the development of play is shown in Appendix 3.

Appendices

Appendix 1

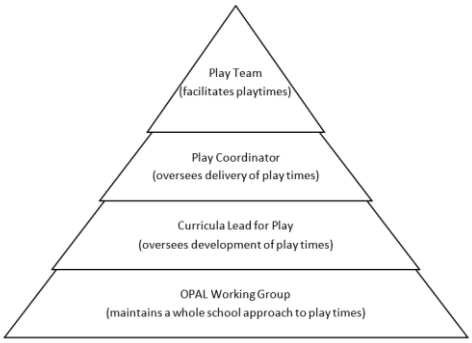
Health & Safety Executive: Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting A Balanced Approach

Appendix 2

The Playwork Principles

Appendix 3

Staffing Structure to Support Playtimes



Appendix 4

Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment Flowchart

Dynamic Risk Benefit Assessment Flow Chart

Reference Sources

- Health and Safety Executive (2012) *Children's Play and Leisure: Promoting a Balanced Approach*
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 31
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.17
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO 4980:2023)
- Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (2005)
- Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) Programme Guidance and Resources.

This policy will be reviewed annually and revised where necessary.

Signed: _____ Headteacher **Date:** _____

Approved by the Governing Board on: _____

Signed: _____ Chair of Governors **Date:** _____

Review Date: _____