



Outdoor Learning Providers: Assessing Risks and Hazards

Introduction to Risk Management and Assessment

"We must not lose sight of the important developmental role of play for children in the pursuit of the unachievable goal of absolute safety"
~ Health and Safety Executive

Risk is essential for the healthy development of children. They need to explore their limits, gain new experiences and develop capacities. It is the outdoor leaders' role to assess and manage risk so children and young people can test and challenge themselves, without exposing them to unacceptable levels of risk.

An acceptable level of risk is subjective to each individual practitioner. What may be acceptable to one person may be unacceptable to another. Therefore before starting considering risk management it is useful to reflect on our individual (and staff team) views on what is an acceptable level of risk.

Hazard and Risk

A **Hazard** is something with the potential to cause harm.

Risk is the combined likelihood of the hazard harming someone and the likely consequences if it did occur. Risk is often judged by levels of harm – e.g. High, Medium or Low, or some formats use a numerical system.

For example a damaged tree that is falling over is a hazard. However it only becomes a risk if it is in a location where people may be working or moving around or under it. The level of risk would then be considered by how likely it is to fall on someone combined with the consequence of it doing so.

Risk Assessment Process

The Health and Safety Executive outline a 5 step method to risk assessment:

- 1) Identify the hazards.
- 2) Decide who may be harmed and how.
- 3) Evaluate the risks and decide the precautions.
- 4) Record your findings and implement them.
- 5) Review your assessment and update if necessary.

There are many different formats for recording Risk Assessments, however they should all cover the 5 steps above. Leaders should check their workplace's policy on risk assessment and check whether a certain format is required to be used.

If the result of an item on a risk assessment comes out high, then the practitioner needs to consider possible control actions to put in place to lower the risk. This may involve addressing the likelihood of the risk or addressing the consequence of the risk.



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Control Actions for addressing Likelihood Control Actions for addressing Consequence

- Operational Procedures – how certain tasks are undertaken e.g., tool use, fire protocol.
- Pre session checks – such as daily risk assessments and equipment safety checks.
- Education and informing – for both adults and learners e.g. how to handle long sticks safely, which plants are poisonous.
- Preparation and training – planning experiences around learners' needs and only introducing them when they are ready e.g. breaking tasks into small chunks and slowly building skills.
- Training group in emergency signals e.g. 'Tools Down' call or '1,2,3 where are you'
- Removal of risk – e.g. tree surgery to remove unstable branch.
- Changing boundary to remove contact with risk – e.g. demarking 'no-go' zones.
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – e.g. safety boots when using tools around the feet.
- Emergency procedures in place, appropriate emergency equipment carried, trained first aiders and means of communication.

As Leaders, our preference is to address the likelihood before the consequence, as this retains the learning potential for the children or young people. However, our risk management will combine elements of both reducing the likelihood and the consequences. It is recommended to involve the children or young people in the risk assessment process at Forest School. This increases understanding of risk management and empowers learners to take responsibility for making decisions to keep themselves and others safe.

Risk assessments should be shared with the entire group (adults and children) in an appropriate way.

Any necessary control actions needed to reduce the level of risk to an acceptable level should be put in place before the programme goes ahead. If, after control actions are put in place, the level of risk still remains unacceptable, the leader will need to reconsider whether the activity or site should be used.

Types of Risk Assessment

It may be appropriate to use a variety of types of risk assessment, depending on need:

- **Site risk assessments** – for the physical site (including access routes).
 - **Activity risk assessments** – for risks associated with the task/experiences that we are introducing into the learning environment.
 - **Individuals risk assessment** – associated with medical or behavioural needs.
 - **Daily risk assessment** – drawing together the conditions and plans for the day.
 - **Dynamic risk assessment** – an ongoing process in the mind as conditions change and communicated with the group as necessary and relevant.
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Site Risk Assessments

Recommended to be done seasonally (as different hazards are apparent in different seasons) on any site being used for sessions or activities. Woodland environments are systematically assessed using the 4 structural layers of the woodland:

- Canopy – mature tree canopy
- Shrub – understory species e.g. holly, hazel, rhododendron
- Field – ground flora level e.g. nettles, bramble, grasses
- Ground – on the ground or underground hazards e.g. holes, carcasses, traps, bodies of water

In addition to the 4 layers 'wild factors', things that pass through the woodland, are also considered:

- Weather conditions
- Insects/animals
- Other users and visitors
- Machinery, equipment, structures
- Noise, litter, pollution
- Access routes to and from the site and boundary features

Activity Risk Assessments

Could be generic for a given age group or client type, and therefore could be used at any site in conjunction with a site risk assessment. They only refer to the risks associated with a particular activity or learning experience. They would consider any equipment used or any behaviour promoted during the activity. Examples:

- Woodland Games
- Tree climbing
- Shelter building and construction
- Fire use and campfire cooking

Individual Risk Assessments

Some individual learners have risk assessments and/or care plans within their own setting due to behavioural or medical needs. Some individuals may not have a risk assessment at their setting but may require one when in an outdoor environment, in which case the Leader could create one in consultation with the setting staff. It is important that all supporting adults are aware of behavioural and medical triggers of specific individuals, and of the procedures required if an incident occurs e.g. de-escalation strategies, emergency medical procedures.

Daily Risk Assessment

On the day of a session the Leader will undertake a site risk assessment to check whether anything has changed since the seasonal site risk assessment. Particular attention to weather conditions should be noted and any actions taken should be recorded. The daily risk assessment could also cross reference to activity risk assessments for those activities that are likely to take place and also individual risk assessments depending on individuals attending the session on the day.



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Dynamic Risk Assessment

Even with careful planning circumstances can change, the Leader will be risk assessing the situation continually. If conditions change, activities may have to change. It is the Leader's responsibility to decide if risk becomes unacceptable and whether any additional control actions must occur. Examples of things that may change:

- Weather conditions – sudden high winds, storms etc.
- Behaviour – may become unsafe or inappropriate. Could alter ratios
- Incidents minor/major
- Staff illness – could alter ratios
- Finding an unexpected hazard
- Children wanting to explore a new area or undertake an unplanned activity
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Being able to dynamically risk assess allows a degree of freedom within the child-led nature of the sessions. If Leaders can make judgements and consider appropriate control actions 'on the spot' it allows the children's learning and investigations to continue uninterrupted. It also models to the children the fundamental thought processes and decision making in appropriate risk assessment and management and is a valuable learning experience.

Contingency Planning

The Practitioner should demonstrate good planning and preparation and needs to have a clear procedure on the conditions when contingency plans will be needed. This procedure needs to be specific to give clear and consistent guidelines to all involved; for example, at what wind speed would you not work under trees, how cold is too cold to work outside? The Leader should consider alternate plans of activities and learning experiences that can occur if circumstances change. The weather particularly can cause a common barrier to Outdoor Learning in the UK. The following factors may be included when planning for contingency:

- Providing enough spare appropriate clothing for the group
- Using a different outdoor space e.g. more shelter spot/not under trees in windy conditions
- Using an indoor space or group shelter
- Changing activities
- Ending session early
- Cancelling session

Accident and Emergency Procedures

In addition to Risk Assessments and contingency plans, Outdoor Leaders should have clear emergency procedures. These procedures should state, step by step actions to take in the event of an emergency or incident. There may be different procedures for different emergencies – major incidents, minor injuries, travel accident, fire procedure, lost child, intruder or unwanted visitor. Most Leaders will have organisational procedures already in place that may need to be adapted to be appropriate for Forest School. A Forest School Leader is expected to have all necessary policies



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and procedures collated in their 'handbook', a working document specific to each Forest School. Some things to consider when creating emergency procedures:

- Do all staff/helpers know what their role is in an emergency?
- Which staff are First Aid trained and to what level?
- What emergency and first aid kit do you carry? Is it in an easily identifiable emergency bag?
- What are the procedures for checking that the emergency equipment is packed and first aid equipment in date?
- Where are the groups' (children's and adults') emergency contact information and medical information kept? Plus any emergency medicines e.g. asthma inhalers, epi-pens? Consent forms?
- Do you know your location? Postcode/grid reference? Where a helicopter could land, where the nearest vehicle access point is?
- What means of communication do you carry? Where is the nearest landline phone?
- Are your staff/helpers trained on what to say to emergency services?
- Are your ratios sufficient for one adult to leave the group (for example to get help)?
- What would happen if it was you (the group leader) that was the casualty?
- How do you record and report incidents?

Compiled by Louise Ambrose, Forest School Norfolk Coordinator – last updated Jan 2010 and last updated Feb 2017