



Covid-19, risk and benefit in play

A statement by Lawrence Waterman OBE, Chairman of the British Safety Council

19 June 2020

“It is wholly appropriate to prepare now to reopen those playgrounds closed as part of the general lockdown nearly three months ago.”

The pandemic, the terrible and challenging experience of trying to deal with the COVID-19 threat and actual health harm in every setting of home, work, travel and leisure, has reminded us all that much of what we do is manage risks. Although it lies at the heart of many organisations, and activities that we are familiar with, from driving a car to carefully handling food in the kitchen, we often take it so much for granted that it becomes invisible. Yet, under the impact of a deadly disease, we are all becoming much more familiar with understanding risk, making appropriate decisions and taking precautions than perhaps ever before. Following my work as Head of Health and Safety for the construction programme for London 2012, I was pleased to be involved in the development of Tumbling Bay on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park which was all about risk, but limited risk as a learning tool that created a super place for children to play.

London Play is an organisation which exists to promote free and adventurous play, and therefore whose very essence is an understanding of risk and the importance of managing it – rather than pretending that it can always be avoided. Adventurous play for children isn't just great fun and immediately enjoyable. It doesn't just bring the immediate benefits of activity, exercise and engagement with other children. Those shrieks of delight relate to the pleasures of energetic play, but they also signal some deep learning about capability, self-reliance, cooperation and the many other benefits that adventure playgrounds provide. The activity has both short-term, reinforcing gifts of enjoyable playtime but also contributes to that difficult to measure but undoubted gain from learning how to manage in the world in a carefully established environment that stretches the participants but limits the risk.

Understanding risk, and being committed to helping children do the same as part of their maturing, is why London Play was established. It is also why it is wholly appropriate to prepare now to reopen those playgrounds closed as part of the general Lockdown nearly 3 months ago. There are risks from the virus that need to be discussed, understood and mitigated – just as there are with the physical play itself – but we know that young children are much less likely to be made seriously ill, and much less likely to infect others. Now that the peak of the infection is behind us, it is time to explore how we can reopen facilities that are important in our children's development.

Physical address: Pearson Street Adventure Playground, 28 Pearson Street, London E2 8EL
Registered address: International House, 64 Nile Street, London N1 7SR

www.londonplay.org.uk : 0203 384 8510 : info@londonplay.org.uk

Patrons: Simon Hughes, Lord Smith of Finsbury, Jon Snow, Stephen Studd, Polly Toynbee
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Children who are themselves very vulnerable because of their health status, or who live in households with family members who are vulnerable, may be the exception – but for most other children, the harm done by delaying the educational experience of adventurous play is beginning to outweigh the risks that arise when they share a playground.

Adults accompanying them will need to maintain distancing and good hygiene, but children can begin again to enjoy the fun and challenge of these facilities with, according to all the available evidence, very little risk. Even that small level of risk may be reduced further if the type of behaviour that is establishing “bubbles” in schools also begins to influence how groups of children use the facilities.

The failure to develop a national plan for opening schools remains a problem, especially when shops and theme parks seem to have been treated as more important. Children’s needs should not be left behind, and the reopening of adventure playgrounds will be both a symbol and a practical contribution to children’s wellbeing. Doing things that are beneficial and have very little risk is what we should be aiming for, and allowing the adults in the lives of children to make those decisions is what we should be encouraging.

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