



Play Policy (May 2026)

Originally written	January 2024
Date reviewed	18 May 2026
Next review	May 2028

1. Commitment

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that ‘A child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.’

Pickhill Church of England VC Primary school recognises that play is an essential part of a happy and healthy childhood. As a school, we provide consistently high quality, sustainable play opportunities for all children. These inclusive opportunities in play are achieved by offering carefully considered outdoor spaces, equipment and toys that offer a rich choice of accessible play experiences for every child. At Pickhill we are committed to using our school vision and this play policy to guide our planning and actions in providing play opportunities for children. We believe play has a vital role in children’s health, happiness and wellbeing. It creates children who are independent, confident, imaginative, adaptable, social and able to assess risks.

2. Rationale

We believe that all children need opportunities to play that allow them to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment. We believe play provision should be welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, economic or social circumstances, ethnic or cultural background or origin, or individual abilities.

The OPAL Primary Programme rationale is that “... better, more active and creative playtimes can mean happier and healthier children, and having happier, healthier, more active children usually results in a more positive attitude to learning in school, with more effective classroom lessons, less staff time spent resolving unnecessary behavioural problems, fewer playtime accidents, happier staff and a healthier attitude to life.” This aligns to our school values to be inquisitive, kind and resilient. Children will have opportunities to develop their inquisitive minds through their play, develop resilience setting themselves challenges and kindness through team building and play opportunities. Children will have freedom to explore and as a result be more active, more collaborative and more positive both inside and outside the classroom.

3. Definition of Play

Play is defined as a process that is intrinsically motivated, directed by the child and freely chosen by the child. Play has its own value and provides its own purpose. It may or may not involve equipment or other people.

We believe play has many benefits, including:

- Play is critical to children's health and wellbeing, and essential for their physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Play enables children to explore the physical and social environment, as well as different concepts and ideas.
- Play enhances children's self-esteem and their understanding of others through freely chosen social interactions, within peer groups, with individuals, and within groups of different ages, abilities, interests, genders, ethnicities and cultures.
- Play requires ongoing communication and negotiation skills, enabling children to develop a balance between their right to act freely and their responsibilities to others.
- Play enables children to experience a wide range of emotions and develop their ability to cope with these, including sadness and happiness, rejection and acceptance, frustration and achievement, boredom and fascination, fear and confidence.
- Play encourages self-confidence and the ability to make choices, problem solve and to be creative.
- Play maintains children's openness to learning, develops their capabilities and allows them to push the boundaries of what they can achieve.

The Government's Play Strategy defines play as: 'encompassing children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not only for individual children but also for the society in which they live'.

At Pickhill the children and staff think that:

- play allows children to be creative and co-operative
- adults' roles in high quality play is to support children during play and to be responsive to children's invitations and requests. Further to it is important to carry out dynamic risk assessments to weigh up the risk and benefits of play activities and develop the children's risk awareness.
- play may be solitary or social
- play invites investigation and exploration which may test boundaries
- play makes children happy and happy children are healthier children who in turn can learn better
- children have a right to play with a wider range of resources as long as it is safe regardless of age, gender, social or cultural background
- play is something you choose to do and that it is fun!
- enables children to process their experiences of the world

4. Aims

In relation to play our school aims to:

- Ensure play settings provide a varied, challenging and stimulating environment.
- Allow children to take risks and use a common-sense approach to the management of these risks and their benefits.
- Provide opportunities for children to develop their relationships with each other.



- Enable children to develop respect for their surroundings and each other.
- Aid children's physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Provide a range of environments that will encourage children to explore and play imaginatively.
- Provide a range of environments that will support children's learning across the curriculum and learning about the world around them.
- Promote independence and teamwork within children.
- Build emotional and physical resilience.

5. Rights

Our school recognises the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the right to play, recreation and leisure (Article 31) and the right of children to be listened to on matters important to them (Article 12). We acknowledge that we have a duty to take these rights seriously and listen to children's views on their play.

6. Benefit and Risk

'Play is great for children's wellbeing and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.'

Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (Play Safety Forum, 2012)

Pickhill C of E VC Primary School will use the Health and Safety Executive guidance document Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach (September 2012) as the principal value statement informing its approach to managing risk in play. In doing so, the school will adopt a risk-benefit approach as detailed in Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (Play Safety Forum, 2012).

Risk-taking is an essential feature of play provision and of all environments in which children legitimately spend time at play. Play provision aims to offer children the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating, challenging and managed play environment. As outlined in the play sector publication 'Best Play', play provision should aim to 'manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children and young people safe from harm'.

In addition to standard risk-benefit assessments the school will practice dynamic risk management with children, encouraging them to identify and manage risks in an environment where adults are present to support them.

7. Supervision

The law requires that children in school have supervision but for primary school playtimes there are no stated ratios. During the school day there should be one or more adults present outdoors. The school recognises OPAL's three models of supervision: Direct, Remote and Ranging. Except for new children in reception, whose skills and orientation in the school environment need to be assessed, the school does not believe direct supervision is possible or beneficial. Supervisors will use ranging and remote supervision models, so that children can quickly find an adult and adults can patrol large sites to gain an awareness of the kinds of play and levels of risk likely to be emerging.

Our role as play providers is to facilitate the maximum amount of enriching opportunities for children to encounter. They need to learn to develop independence and manage risk for themselves in an environment that is as safe as it needs to be, rather than completely devoid of risk. By using ranging and remote supervision



models, children will be able to take ownership in their own play and develop their skills of resilience and explore inquisitively.

8. The Adult's Role in Play

We, as an entire staff, are fully committed to working with children to provide the play experiences that they want and need in their school. We will have a continuing dialogue with children about the play provision in the playground which will include regular play assemblies, School Council involvement, surveys and other pupil voice outlets. The adult's role will also be to facilitate play and encourage children to assess the risks and benefits of activities within the play setting. The school is working with OPAL (www.outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk) to help guide a strategic approach to developing play at Pickhill. In addition to this the Pickhill Play Team (Appendix 2) will work in collaboration with parents, teachers, teaching assistants, MDSAs and all other staff as well as the children to implement the changes highlighted in this policy.

Teaching assistants and MDSAs, along with out play leaders will take on the role of Play Makers. They will ensure that the broadest possible range of play opportunities are available to children: to observe, reflect and analyse the play that is happening and select a mode of intervention or make a change to the play space if needed. Play Makers ensure that the play space is inclusive – supporting all children to make the most of the opportunities available in their own way.

9. Children's Role in Play

The children will all have access to their own version of the play policy. In it will also include the rights and responsibilities of the children to

- Have ownership of their play and outdoor learning experiences
- Respect and look after each other, their environment, equipment and toys.
- To be aware of sanctions surrounding purposely dangerous or unsafe behaviour
- Ensure that playtimes are fun for everybody

This children's policy will be shared and explained to all children regularly as part of ongoing assemblies, discussions and dialogue in class and with School Council.

9. Equality and diversity

Through providing a rich play offer meeting every child's needs we will ensure all children, regardless of age, gender, race, disability or other special needs, can develop and thrive, build strong relationships and enjoy school.

10. Environment

We believe that a rich play setting should ensure that all children have access to stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable or unnecessary risks and thereby offer children the opportunity to explore for themselves through their freely chosen play.

We will strive to continually improve the quality and diversity of our school's grounds to enhance play. We will use the document 'Best Play' to guide us on what a quality play environment should contain. www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/pubs/bestplay.pdf



At Pickhill we will:

- use the outdoor space as a natural resource for learning and playing, encouraging the children to value natural or found objects for play
- include the children when planning for playing and learning outdoors
- ensure that the outdoor area offers all children the opportunity to investigate, take risks and explore and use their imagination and creativity
- expect the children to respect the outdoor environment and care for living things
- give children the opportunity to manage the space and freedom afforded by the outdoors
- enrich the quality of the environment to maximise variety of play types and increase play value
- ensure that the playground is an integrated area where children can play safely.
- Teach the children their responsibilities with regard to maintaining the quality of their outdoor space, and the equipment available and ensure they take an active part in doing this.
- Promote children's pride for the outdoor space that belongs to them.



Appendix 1

Benefit-Risk Assessment Record Sheet

Risk Assessment Date..... Assessed by.....

	Description of Activity, Principle or Object, who might be at risk and what kind of harm.	Benefit or Utility Or Related Policy	Description of risk management and maintenance agreed	Nominated person	Action date



Appendix 2

Structure of adult roles in practice

OPAL Team

This is the team working directly with OPAL to ensure policy is in place and develop play and outdoor learning at Fairlight. It consists of:

- The Head Teacher
- Play Co-ordinator
- Play Leader
- Caretaker
- Pupil Voice Co-ordinator
- Parent Representative/ Associate Governor

Pickhill Play Team

All adults working at the school are part of the play team and have a responsibility to follow this policy. When on the playground at playtimes staff all should act as Play Makers.

However more specifically at lunch times the following structure exists:

Play Co-ordinator- Mrs L Thompson & Mr J Merriks

(Leads and manages strategy)

Play Leader- Mr D Harper

(Leads and manages playtimes)

Assistant Play Leader- Mrs E Lerigo

(Supports play leader and steps up in their absence)

Play Makers (MDS)

(Support

children's'

play)



Doc 4.0 TEMPLATE Risk-benefit advice and record sheet

OPAL's RAPID approach to risk is an essential part of the OPAL Primary Programme

No school should offer the kinds of play that OPAL promotes without a robust and continually updated RAPID plan.

“Health and safety law in Great Britain has an enduring principle – that those who create risks are best placed to control them, and that they should do so in a reasonable and sensible way.”

Dame Judith Hackitt HSE Chair 2015

- R:** Risk-benefit assessment
- A:** Assemblies focused on playtime
- P:** Policy for play ratified by your governors or equivalent
- I:** Inspections carried out regularly
- D:** Dynamic risk management embraced by all staff

The purpose of **risk-benefit assessments** is to enable you to provide challenge, progression, excitement, creativity and fun in your play environment. They cannot and will not provide complete 'safety' and this is not their purpose. They can help you to think about, predict, and manage the most serious and most likely potential causes of harm.

OPAL's approach follows best practice advice from the Health and Safety Executive, The Play Safety Forum, Zurich Municipal Insurance, and local authority health and safety advisory teams.

OPAL has developed the five-part **R.A.P.I.D. response** (see box above) to managing risk in your school approach to play, which should be followed alongside the guidance on managing loose parts and other more risky play outlined in pack 6 and 6A of your OPAL ePack.

1. Risk-benefit assessment (RBA)

All services supporting children undertake risk assessments. The recommended practice for supporting play provision – and all services where the activity is risky but has benefits – is to make the benefits explicit in the assessment process from the outset. This has been recommended practice for all play provision since 2012.

Your RBA is a judgement tool. It is based on your knowledge and professional judgement balanced with the potential for benefit. Your RBAs should be active documents. They should be reviewed regularly and all children and staff supervising play should be aware of their content and use them to guide their play and practice. Every time a new item or section of play is opened up they should be added to. All changes should be communicated with all children and staff.

Common areas that need standing RBAs are:

- boundaries to dangerous areas
- tree management and tree climbing
- fixed play equipment
- broken loose parts and heavy loose parts
- rope tying (especially at height)
- water use and water features
- use of sharp or heavy tools.

You should carry out a written RBA:

- as part of an annual team site walkabout for any agreed significant risks
- when changes are introduced that have a reasonable chance of significant harm
- when your concerns are raised by more than once by staff
- when you have had serious 'near-miss' incidents or very frequent low-level injuries.

Your assessments should cover risks and hazards deemed to have the potential for unacceptable risk of death or serious injury. A template is provided below. Many others are available. You should adapt or adopt the format that is in usual use in your setting.

2. Assemblies focused on playtime

OPAL play assemblies should be held regularly with children to discuss, inform and negotiate risks that arise during play.

To start, hold assemblies every two weeks, settling to at least once every half term when the children and staff are confident in all aspects of their playtime opportunities and risks.

Assemblies should aim to:

- Celebrate your school's culture of play and children's creativity.
- Inform children of changes, rights, and agreements.
- Negotiate with children on issues such as risk, tidy-up and expected behaviours.
- Innovate around what children are currently playing to deepen children's engagement.

Play assemblies have dual purposes:

- To ensure that all children, staff and parents understand how much respect and regard your school has for the children's play.
- To ensure all children understand the risks and their responsibilities regarding the play opportunities, and that children and staff are involved in agreeing rules and ways of practice.

As part of your health and safety recording, a brief written log must be kept noting risks discussed and how they will be managed. (Log on record sheet template 4.7). Further guidance on play assemblies is outlined in guidance Doc 3.4 and in past #TeaWithOPAL events, which can be accessed via the OPAL schools Slack.

3. Policy for play, ratified by your governors or equivalent

A play policy approved by the governing body and leadership is essential and should form the basis for the understanding of all staff and their decision-making about managing risk in play. A template is included in pack three.

This should include formal adoption of the Health and Safety Executive's guidance (Doc 4.6) and your policy should include a statement on supervision styles (Doc 5.2 GUIDANCE Free range supervision).

4. Inspections carried out regularly

Engineered fixed equipment should have an annual technical inspection by a certified inspector. Ongoing visual inspections should be carried out by a member of staff and a record kept.

In addition, all play team members should be trained to constantly check for and remove hazards as part of their daily practice, with a clear knowledge of what and when to record, as well as appropriate responses.

5. Dynamic risk management and appropriate intervention styles are embraced by all staff

All staff in the playground and those with responsibility for children at play should be aware of the changing nature of the play taking place. They should support children to assess and manage risk as much as possible for themselves, but they should also be vigilant and take action if they think that the risk of serious harm is becoming unacceptably likely. Actions taken by staff when required should balance the reduction of likelihood or severity of harm while preserving as much of the benefit of the play as possible and empowering the children to manage future risk as much as possible.

Dynamic risk management in playwork requires that staff maintain 'relaxed vigilance'. The quality of play will suffer if the adult's attitude is one of hovering, anxious over-attention. There should be an assumption that most play is not dangerous and that children can develop a high degree of competence, given practice, over time. However, staff should also be vigilant, and they should be aware of the kinds of play and resources being used in their patch, who is playing and what the likely risks are.

All play team staff **must** be trained and reminded that active risk management is an essential part of their job using the OPAL online *Playwork Essentials for Primary Schools* course and training book. They should be observant, mobile and attentive at all times.

Most of the time they will not need to intervene but should be ready to:

- **stop the activity or manage the risk** if staff think that *serious harm* (meaning death, life-long debilitating injury or hospitalisation) is imminent or probable.
- **remain vigilant and consider negotiating how to manage the risk with the children** if they think that serious harm is possible but not probable.
- **continue ranging supervision** if serious harm is very unlikely.

It is important that new staff joining the play team are trained to the same level as existing staff.

Remember the law does not require you not to have accidents, but to understand the reasons for the risk you provide and to demonstrate the reasonable steps you have taken to manage those risks.

Example of a risk-benefit assessment. These should be brief and clear.

Risk-benefit assessment date: **Assessed by:**

Description of activity, principle or object, who might be at risk and what kind of harm.	Benefit or utility or related policy	Description of risk management and maintenance agreed	Nominated person	Action date
<p>Large loose parts</p> <p>Falling on children</p> <p>Crushing injuries</p> <p>Heavy lifting</p> <p>Could involve players or bystanders</p>	<p>All those listed in play policy plus – core strength, coordination, cooperation, creativity. Items are essential to a rich play environment.</p>	<p>Agree stacking heights in play assembly.</p> <p>No double size pallets</p> <p>Large dens only in supervised den zone</p>	<p>OPAL lead</p>	

Description of activity, principle or object, who might be at risk and what kind of harm.	Benefit or utility or related policy	Description of risk management and maintenance agreed	Nominated person	Action date
Digging area use of real spades Chopping feet Accidental blows Use as weapon Risk to players and bystanders	All those in play policy – plus Upper body strength Creativity Core strength Enjoyment	Tools not toys training in play assembly Only diggers in the digging zone Only spades, not forks	Play coordinator	
Description of activity, principle or object, who might be at risk and what kind of harm.	Benefit or utility or related policy	Description of risk management and maintenance agreed	Nominated person	Action date

Description of activity, principle or object, who might be at risk and what kind of harm.	Benefit or utility or related policy	Description of risk management and maintenance agreed	Nominated person	Action date

