



Play and Risk Management Policy

Author	C. Lewis, Assistant Headteacher & Curricular Lead for Play
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Introduction to this Policy

*‘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)¹*

At Georgian Gardens, we believe that play is essential for every child’s wellbeing and development. It’s not just about having fun—it helps children learn important life skills like taking safe risks, making decisions, and building confidence. We follow the advice of the Health and Safety Executive, which reminds us that children need a balance between safety and challenge to grow. Wrapping children in “cotton wool” does not help them learn about the world or themselves.

Every child has the right to play, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31 of this convention recognises play as a fundamental right. At Georgian Gardens, we fully support this right and are committed to providing high-quality, enjoyable play experiences for all our pupils.

We achieve this by carefully designing outdoor spaces, play equipment, and resources that offer a wide variety of play opportunities accessible to every child. Our play policy guides all decisions about how we support and encourage play across the school.

This approach aligns closely with our school values:

Ready: We prepare children to explore and learn through play.

Respectful: We ensure everyone has equal access to play and values the contributions of others.

Safe: We manage risks thoughtfully so children can enjoy challenges confidently.

Kind: We promote caring and positive relationships during play.

Our commitment is also rooted in the Thrive approach, which supports children’s emotional and social development. Through play, children develop resilience, self-regulation, and positive connections with peers and adults.

To make playtimes the best they can be, we have invested in the OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) programme. OPAL provides a proven framework to improve play opportunities and ensure every child has an exciting and fulfilling playtime every day.

We are dedicated to leading and maintaining excellent play provision at Georgian Gardens, helping every child grow, learn, and thrive.

¹ Health and Safety Executive (2012) Children’s Play and Leisure – Promoting a balanced approach, HSE.

Policy Rationale

*‘The opposite of play isn’t work, it’s depression’
(Brian Sutton-Smith, 1997)²*

Sometimes, play is seen as just a fun activity or only valuable when it helps children achieve specific goals adults set. This can lead to adults controlling play too much, expecting it to be “purposeful” all the time. When this happens, children lose the chance to enjoy free, imaginative, and creative play that helps them explore and learn in their own way.

In today’s world, children often have fewer chances for independent play outside of school. Busy roads, fewer safe public spaces, parents working longer hours, and concerns about safety mean children spend less time playing freely in their neighbourhoods. This “cotton-wool culture,” where adults try to protect children from all risks, can limit children’s natural ability to take safe risks, build confidence, and develop resilience.

Our approach is also rooted in the Thrive approach, which supports children’s emotional and social growth. By encouraging self-directed play, we help children develop confidence, resilience, and wellbeing—key skills for life.

We understand that play is essential not just for fun but for children’s physical health, mental wellbeing, and overall development. By providing rich, balanced play opportunities at school, we help make up for the reduced chances children have to play freely outside of school.

What is Play and Why is it Important

Our Children told us:

- That they enjoy play times
- That they wanted more things to play with
- That they would like to play in more places
- They like doing different things at play times. Some enjoyed sitting and talking while others preferred running and climbing
- They know adults are there to help them if/when they need help

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child describes play as any activity that children start, control, and enjoy for its own sake. Play happens naturally whenever children have the chance—it is not something they have to do, but something they choose because it brings them joy and curiosity.

At its heart, play is about freedom, fun, and exploration. It gives children a break from life’s challenges and fills their days with laughter, friendship, adventure, and imagination.

² Sutton-Smith, B. (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Through play, children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. It supports their physical health, emotional wellbeing, and social skills—especially when adults create the right environment to encourage it.

Research shows that play has special qualities that make it unique and important. At Georgian Gardens, we focus on creating play environments and using staff approaches that support and encourage these important qualities of play:

- **Personal control:** Children decide what they want to do and how they want to play.
- **Intrinsic motivation:** Play is driven by joy and curiosity, not rewards or rules.
- **Social connection:** Play helps children develop friendships, cooperation, and empathy.
- **Emotional expression:** Play gives children a safe space to explore and understand their feelings.
- **Flexibility:** Play changes and adapts, helping children become creative and resilient.
- **Imagination:** Children use pretend play to explore ideas and possibilities.
- **Challenge and uncertainty:** Play includes manageable risks that help children build confidence and learn about safety.

This combination of features is like "ordinary magic," helping children:

- Build strong bonds with people and places,
- Manage emotions and cope with stress,
- Develop thinking skills like creativity and problem-solving,
- Find joy and motivation in learning.

The Health and Safety Executive also recognises that play is essential for children's growth. While play isn't risk-free, it teaches children to understand and manage risks, preparing them for life beyond school.

Providing for Play

At Georgian Gardens, we want children to enjoy freedom to move and play across the whole school grounds as much as is reasonably possible. We believe that mixing children of different ages and abilities enriches play and helps them learn important skills like self-regulation—knowing how to manage their own behaviour and play safely. This means children may sometimes be out of sight for short periods while making dens or playing hide and seek. Adults will always be nearby to check in, offer support, or guide when needed, ensuring children feel safe and cared for.

We also believe every child has the right to choose what, where, with whom, and how they play. We follow the principle that everyone has a right to play, meaning children can enjoy play in ways that matter to them, as long as it doesn't stop others from doing the same. This respects our school value of being respectful to each other.

To make sure children can play outside in all weathers and access the field even when it's wet or muddy, we ask that wellies and coats are part of the school uniform. We provide

storage and facilities to keep these items safe and accessible, supporting children to be ready to learn and play every day.

We are committed to developing our school grounds to maximise play opportunities. This includes providing lots of loose parts—natural materials and recycled items—that children can use creatively in their play. These rich play experiences help children enjoy school more, develop creativity, build friendships, and boost their wellbeing and resilience.

Because play is so important, children's access to playtime will only be limited if their behaviour puts themselves or others at serious risk. If this happens, we will always consider carefully how best to support those children to return to safe and happy playtimes as soon as possible.

Taking a Risk-Benefit Approach

Risk means that something uncertain might happen, and sometimes this can lead to accidents or harm. But risk can also bring positive experiences. For example, when a child balances along a wall, they might fall and get hurt—but they also gain pleasure, excitement, self-awareness, confidence, and learn how to judge and manage risks. These are important skills that help children grow.

In the UK, laws like the Health and Safety at Work Act and the Occupiers' Liability Acts guide how schools manage risks. These laws say we must reduce risks as much as reasonably possible and make sure everyone is safe when using the school premises.

However, managing risk in children's play is different from managing risk in workplaces. Instead of trying to remove all risks, the goal is to balance the risks with the benefits of play. The Health and Safety Executive explains that it's about protecting children from serious harm while still letting them enjoy the valuable benefits of play. This doesn't require complicated calculations—just sensible adult judgement.

In 2023, an international standard (ISO 4980:2023) agreed with this balanced approach, calling it a "benefit-risk assessment." This means looking at both the risks and the benefits together when making decisions, considering local situations and how play supports children's physical, social, and emotional development.

At Georgian Gardens, we use this risk-benefit approach to make decisions about play. Our aim is to let children experience the excitement and learning that comes from taking manageable risks while keeping them safe from serious harm. When we decide what risks are reasonable, we think about:

- The benefits of the activity, such as building skills, resilience, and confidence.
- How likely and how serious any harm could be.
- Expert advice, best practises, and examples from other schools.
- How limiting play might reduce the quality and benefits of the experience.

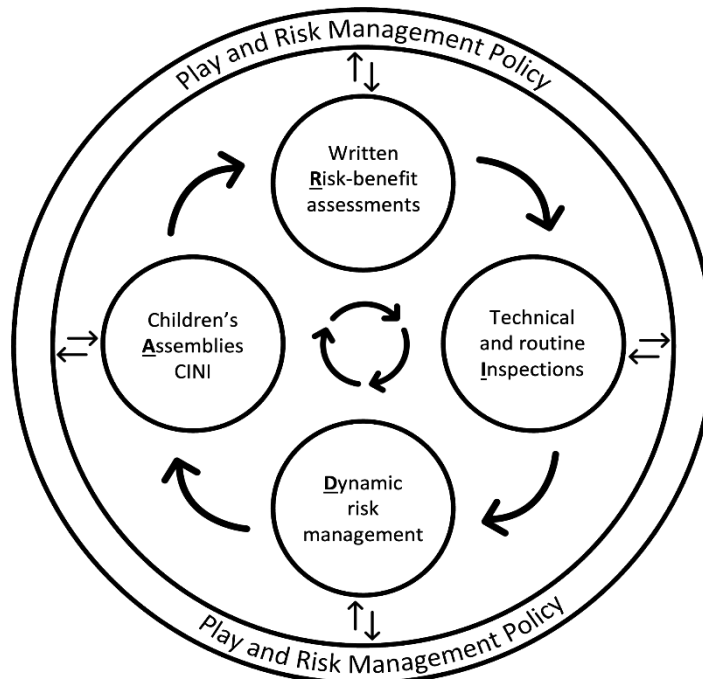
This balanced approach supports our school values:

- **Ready:** Helping children be prepared to take on challenges safely.
- **Respectful:** Valuing children's right to explore and learn through play.
- **Safe:** Ensuring environments are safe enough to allow healthy risk-taking.
- **Kind:** Supporting children's wellbeing and confidence through play.

It also fits with the Thrive approach by giving them opportunities to take risks, learn from experiences, and build resilience.

Strategic Risk Management

Our risk management strategy is an ongoing process informed by OPAL's R.A.P.I.D approach to risk management in play. R.A.P.I.D. stands for Risk-benefit assessments, Assemblies, Policy, Inspections, and Dynamic risk management. These different elements of our risk management strategy work together (as depicted in the diagram below) ensuring we have robust systems in place to support good decision making and the ongoing maintenance of a 'safe enough' environment for play.



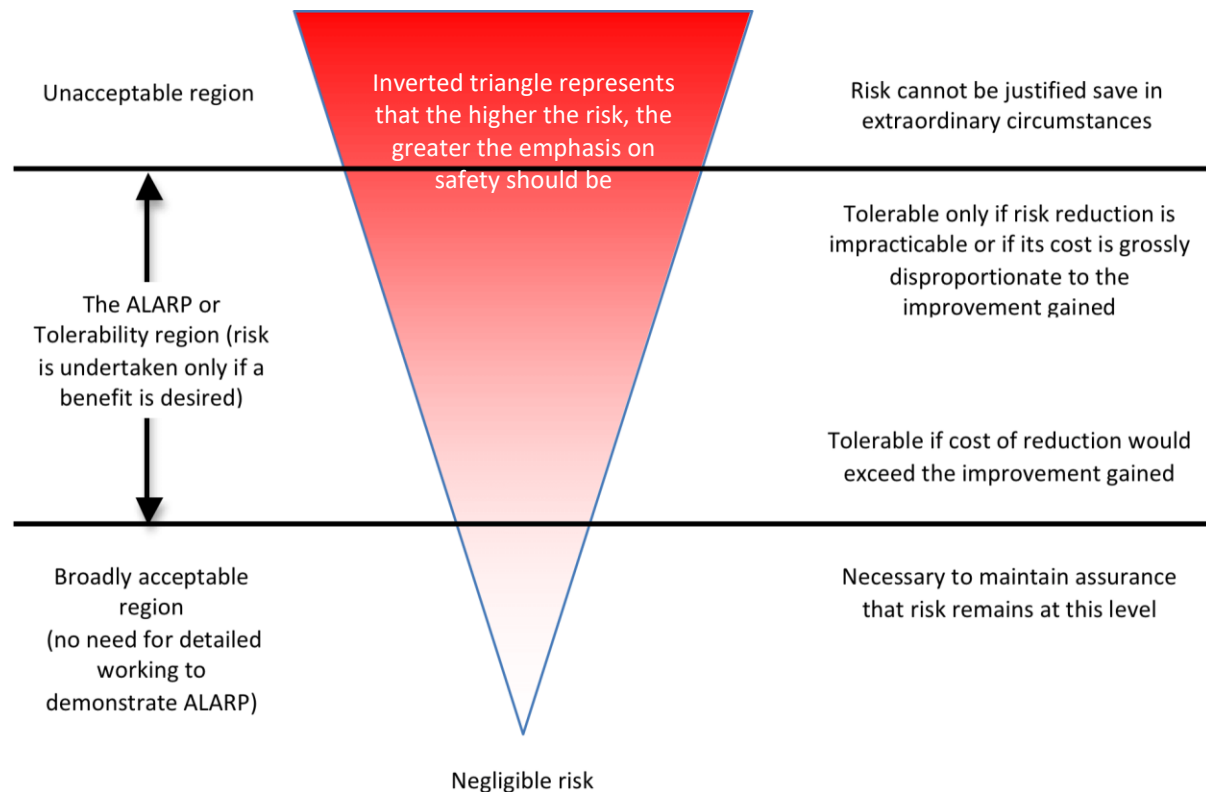
Following guidance from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (Appendix 1), we know that carrying out detailed risk-benefit assessments for every single play activity is not practical or necessary. Instead, we use a balanced and sensible approach to managing risk.

This means that activities with higher risks get more careful attention, while low-risk play opportunities are allowed to happen without lots of paperwork, though staff still use their professional judgement to keep children safe.

We use a tool called the Tolerability of Risk Framework (see below) to help us decide how much risk management is needed for different play activities. This framework shows which

activities are generally safe enough that most people would accept the risk without needing a detailed assessment.

For play activities that fall into this “broadly acceptable” category, this play and risk management policy acts as our overall risk-benefit assessment. The policy considers how children naturally behave during play, the benefits and risks involved, and explains how we manage the everyday play behaviours you can expect in our school’s play areas.



When planning play, if we find any part of the environment or activity that has a higher level of risk than usual, we carry out a detailed risk-benefit assessment. This means we carefully look at the risks and benefits, explain how we make decisions, and decide how to keep risks as low as possible while still allowing children to enjoy the benefits of play. This might include situations where:

- Play structures, site specific features or impact surfaces fall outside of commonly accepted standards (for example the European Standards for Fixed Play Equipment and Impact Attenuating Surfaces)
- Through adults’ actions children are exposed to a greater risk of injury than they might normally encounter of their own volition
- Staff are unsure about the risks involved and how to manage them (the process of completing risk-benefit assessments can aid discussion and provide greater clarity and confidence)
- Staff feel additional justification is required due to concerns about how risks may be perceived by the public.

Sometimes, children create their own risky play that adults haven't planned for. In these cases, we use risk-benefit assessments in two ways:

- **Routine risky play:** If children regularly take part in a certain risky play activity (for example, daily or weekly), we write a formal risk-benefit assessment.
- **New or spontaneous risky play:** If children suddenly invent a new risky play activity, staff make a quick, on-the-spot risk-benefit decision.

We regularly review and update our written risk-benefit assessments based on what we learn, new information, and experience, so they stay helpful and balanced.

Dynamic Risk-Benefit Assessment

Children's play is naturally full of exploration, change, and variety. As they play, children often take on challenges and face uncertain situations, which means risks can come up unexpectedly. To handle these "in the moment" risks, our staff use a flexible approach called dynamic risk-benefit assessment. This means they assess risks as they happen, thinking about the environment and the play situation to decide the best way to respond.

Because everyone sees risk differently, staff might have different comfort levels with risk. To help everyone make fair and balanced decisions, we follow clear guidance on dynamic risk-benefit assessments (see appendix 4). This helps staff make thoughtful choices that keep children safe while allowing them freedom to learn and grow.

Our goal is to balance when to step in and when to let children explore. Staff watch how children handle risks themselves before deciding if they need to intervene. When thinking about this, staff consider:

- **How children manage risk themselves:** Are they avoiding hazards, changing their behaviour, or making their own safety rules?
- **The situation:** Are children adjusting to different ages and abilities, keeping risks and benefits balanced?
- **Whether intervention is really needed:** If staff do need to step in, they aim to keep the benefits of play while reducing risk. Play is only stopped if there is a serious and immediate danger.

When staff decide to allow higher-risk play, they talk about these experiences with their colleagues in team meetings. This helps improve future risk assessments and guides staff training to keep improving how we support safe, exciting play.

Good and Bad Hazards

When making decisions about risks in play, we think about two types of hazards—good hazards and bad hazards—to make sure children have safe and beneficial play experiences.

- **Good Hazards:** These are things or situations where children can usually understand the risks involved. These hazards offer valuable benefits, such as learning and developing new skills. We manage these hazards carefully to keep risks at a reasonable and safe level while allowing children to explore and grow.
- **Bad Hazards:** These are things or situations where children cannot reasonably understand the risks, and the risks don't provide any real benefit. Although it's impossible to remove all risks, we work hard to protect children from hazards that could cause serious harm by using sensible safety measures.

Our goal is to balance safety with the benefits of play, ensuring children can enjoy healthy challenges while being well protected.

Inspection and Maintenance

We conduct regular inspections of the play environment and resources to ensure risks remain at a reasonable and acceptable level. This includes:

- **Daily/weekly site inspections** – visual checks of the play environment, its features, structures and equipment.
- **Routine inspections of play resources** – visual checks of loose parts on an agreed schedule to ensure they are safe enough for use in play
- **Monthly/quarterly site inspections** – more in-depth checks involving closer inspection of moving parts and structural integrity, ground conditions, and natural features that may require attention due to growth or decay.
- **Annual inspections** – formal and thorough inspections of engineered play equipment, self-built structures and tree conditions, often carried out by an external party.

Throughout these inspection processes hazards that are not beneficial to play should be removed, taken out of use, and/or scheduled for repair/maintenance as appropriate.

Supervision of playtimes

At Georgian Gardens we understand the importance of suitable and sufficient supervision during play times. The law requires that children in school are supervised, but for primary school play times there are no stated adult to child ratios, only that there should be one or more adults present when children are playing outdoors.

At Georgian Gardens we will use OPAL's three models of supervision: direct, remote and ranging. In order to allow children to make full use of our school grounds, direct supervision is not always possible or beneficial. Whilst direct supervision may be used for our youngest children starting school, the majority of our playtime supervision will take remote and ranging models. This will mean that children can quickly find an adult, and adults can patrol large areas of the site to gain an awareness of the types of play and levels of risk emerging.

Our school grounds will be divided into supervision zones with an adult patrolling each area. An additional 'floating' member of staff will be present during each playtime to have an overview of the whole site and to offer support in specific areas as necessary. Adults within each zone will communicate via walkie-talkies and a fixed first aid point will be used for any significant accidents. Adults will wear a high visibility vest so they are easily seen by all.

The staff involved in supervising playtimes are called our Play Team. The Play Team's role is to facilitate and enhance children's play, enabling all children to play in ways that are of value to them, and encouraging children to assess the risks and benefits of their play behaviours. We will help children maximize the benefits they can gain from playing by training our Play Team to work in accordance with the Playwork Principles (see appendix 2). These principles will help to guide the ways in which supervising staff interact and intervene in children's play.

Ultimately, we strive to facilitate an environment which nurtures children's self-directed play. However, children's play is complex and allowing children freedom is not always an easy thing for adults to do. The Play Team will therefore be provided with regular opportunities to reflect on and develop their practice, as well as what is available in the play environment.

Whole school communication

At Georgian Gardens, our whole staff team is dedicated to providing the play experiences that children want and need at school. We keep an open conversation with children about play, using their ideas and feedback to improve playtimes. This will be through our Young Governor meetings each week as well as play assemblies.

A key part of how we manage play and risk is through regular play assemblies. At least once every half term, we meet with children to talk about the play opportunities available, the play environment, their play behaviours, and how we support play. We use the OPAL C.I.N.I. approach, which means:

- Celebrating children's play,
- Informing children about our play provision,
- Negotiating with children about play options,
- Innovating with children to make playtimes even better.

These assemblies also include discussions about managing risks in play.

We also have an OPAL working group at school. This team oversees the OPAL programme and makes sure that everything affecting playtimes matches the goals of our play policy. You can see the staffing structure that supports quality playtimes in the diagram in appendix 3.

Appendix 1

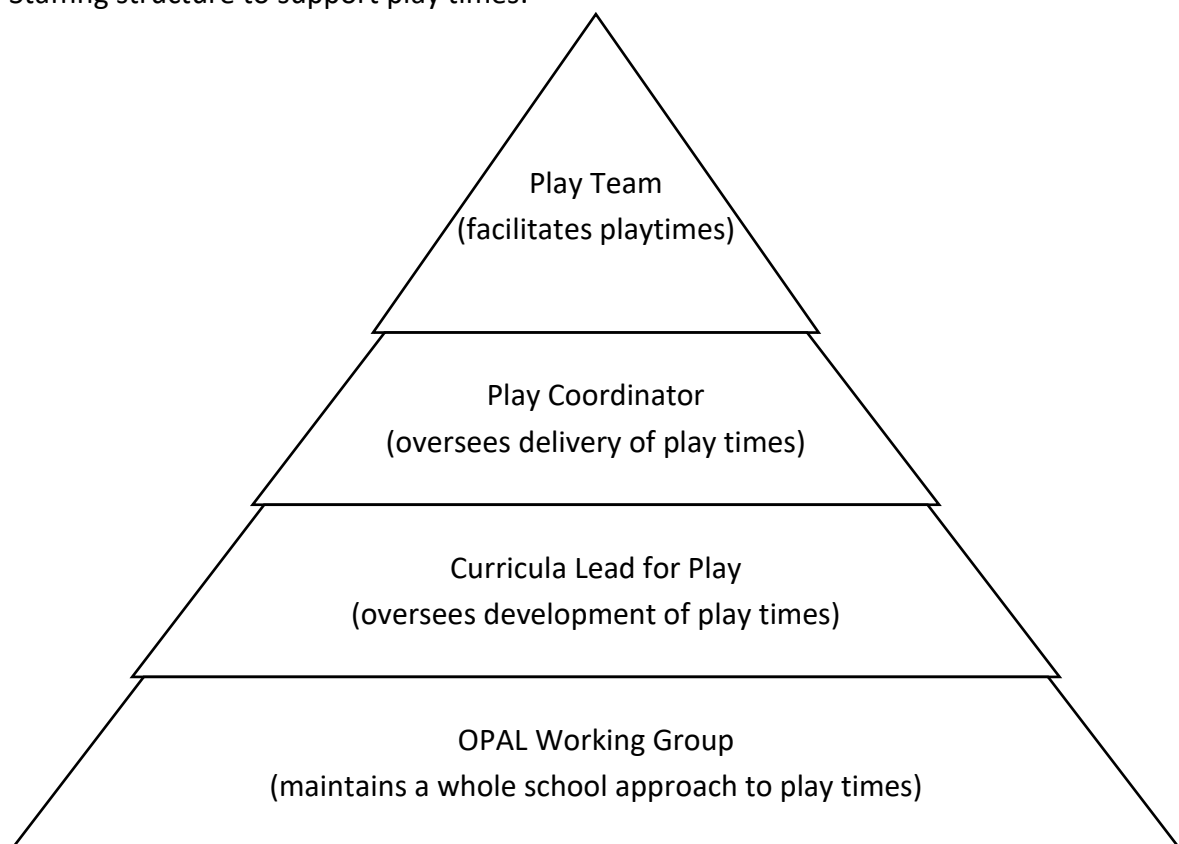
Health & Safety Executive: Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting A Balanced Approach

Appendix 2

The Playwork Principles

Appendix 3

Staffing structure to support play times:



Appendix 4

[Dynamic Risk Benefit Assessment Flow Chart](#)