



# Risk and play:

Play providers' experience and views on adventurous play

Paul Greatorex  
Leisure and the Environment (LandE)  
July 2008

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Review and analysis of survey findings</b>	<b>6</b>
4.1	Introduction – the play providers	6
4.2	Risk and challenge in play: key findings	6
4.3	Sufficiency of challenging play opportunities	7
4.4	Trends in play provision involving risk (focus groups)	8
4.5	Challenge and risk in play: the benefits	8
4.6	Reasons and rationale for risk in play	11
4.7	Limits of risk in play provision	12
4.8	Barriers to challenging play that involves risk	13
4.9	Providing more opportunities for challenging play	17
<b>5</b>	<b>Concluding remarks</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Glossary of terms</b>	<b>21</b>

# 1. Introduction

This report was produced to coincide with Playday 2008. Playday is coordinated by Play England, working in partnership with Play Wales, Play Scotland and PlayBoard Northern Ireland. Playday is a national campaign, now in its 21st year, which celebrates children's right to play with thousands of children and young people out to play at locally organised events. The focus of this year's Playday is risk in play.

To explore the campaign theme, Play England commissioned Leisure and the Environment (LandE) to carry out qualitative research with a wide variety of play providers across the UK. This report explains how the research was carried out and summarises its main findings.

The aim was to find out the views of play providers on a range of issues, including whether there are sufficient opportunities for children to experience risk in play, and if such opportunities are increasing, decreasing or remaining the same. It also explored what holds play providers back from giving children more opportunities to experience risk in play, and what can be done to improve children's opportunities to experience risk in play.

This qualitative study is intended to complement a wider body of research that has been commissioned to inform the campaign.

'Risk in play is a valued experience for children and should not be left out of a child's life. It helps them make judgements and gives them valuable life skills in the process taking into account all children and their age and stage of development.'

## 2. Executive summary

The researchers carried out qualitative research with a wide variety of play providers across the UK, using a survey and focus groups.

### **Key issues**

The vast majority of providers (92 per cent) thought that, in general, there were not enough play opportunities that allow children to test and challenge themselves and that involve a level of risk. However, almost all of the play providers recognised clear benefits to children in experiencing play opportunities that are challenging to them yet involve an element of risk.

Only 60 per cent thought that their own organisation did not provide sufficient play opportunities of this kind, and 95 per cent of play providers said that, in their planning, they tried to balance the benefits of providing challenging play opportunities against the potential risk of harm. Most felt that it was acceptable for children to be exposed to the risk of minor and easily recovered injuries such as bruises, grazes or sprains. Over half said that there are occasions when they assess that the benefits to children of providing carefully planned, challenging play opportunities outweighed exposure to a risk of more serious injury.

There was a strong perception that, across the country, opportunities for children to test and challenge themselves in play involving a level of risk had decreased over the last 10 years. However, when it came to their own services, although one third of providers did feel that such opportunities had decreased, more than a third thought they were providing more challenging activities.

### **Barriers to providing more challenging play**

The play providers who participated in the research said that the five factors that were most prevalent in limiting the extent to which they could offer play involving risk and challenge were:

1. The providers' fear of litigation in relation to possible accidents (74 per cent)
2. Insufficient resources to provide more challenging play opportunities (71 per cent)
3. Over-cautious assessments of risk and danger by insurers and health and safety officers (54 per cent)
4. The registration, regulation and inspection process involved in providing play opportunities (43 per cent)
5. Strict adherence to the Health and Safety at Work Act (42 per cent).

**'Our restrictions come from outside the organisation – funders, public perception.'**

### **Providing more challenging play opportunities**

In order to increase play opportunities involving challenge and risk, the play providers – who came from a wide range of backgrounds, including local authorities and the voluntary and private sectors – identified five measures that they would prioritise, in this order:

1. Publicity campaigns to achieve a more realistic appreciation of risk in play and promoting the benefits to children of self-assessing risk (58 per cent)
2. Better design and planning of play areas to provide more challenging play opportunities (44 per cent)
3. Training for playworkers in delivering adventurous and challenging play (42 per cent)
4. Additional resources to provide more challenging play opportunities (41 per cent)
5. Training for senior managers, insurers, and health and safety officers in relation to risk and play (35 per cent).

The Playday campaign appears well timed, since those who are working in the field clearly recognise the need for children to have opportunities for play that is challenging and involves risk, and have identified publicity and promotional campaigns as being one of the most important mechanisms for bringing about positive change.

**‘Relax about children's vulnerability. Increase confidence and decrease suspicion.’**



### 3. Methodology

The research evidence has been gathered using two main approaches. The first was a **survey of play providers** representing a broad spectrum of different kinds of play provision. These included: staffed adventure playgrounds; children's centres; play centres; open access youth clubs; unsupervised playgrounds; and other unsupervised open access play spaces.

Play England, Play Wales, Play Scotland and PlayBoard Northern Ireland worked with the researchers to identify play providers. The play providers were from local authorities and parish councils, the voluntary and community sector, and from the commercial and private sectors. The aim was to obtain representation from around the UK, covering urban and rural areas as well as a variety of demographic profiles in terms of deprivation, health and so on.

The survey consisted of a short questionnaire emailed directly to the play providers.

The second method was to establish four **focus groups** throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, for in-depth, face-to-face discussions with a range of play providers. The groups were hosted by Play England, Play Wales, Play Scotland and PlayBoard Northern Ireland.

The findings from both approaches were analysed and the main points are provided in this report.

## 4. Review and analysis of survey findings

### 4.1 Introduction – the play providers

A total of 144 questionnaires were received. The respondents came from across the four countries of the UK, and just under 90 per cent came from local authority or voluntary/community sector providers, in roughly equal numbers of each. The respondents represented a wide range of different kinds of play opportunities, and broadly reflected the levels of different kinds of play services widely provided across the UK.

### 4.2 Risk and challenge in play: key findings

Play providers were asked their views of play opportunities that involve risk and challenge, both in children's lives generally and in relation to the services they provide themselves.

The vast majority of providers (92 per cent) thought that, in general, there were not enough play opportunities that allowed children to test and challenge themselves and that involve a level of risk. In addition, 60 per cent thought that their own organisation did not provide sufficient play opportunities of this kind.

With reference to their own work, 95 per cent said that, in their planning, they took account of the need to balance the benefits of providing opportunities for challenging play against the potential risk of harm, and 97 per cent thought it acceptable for children to be exposed to the risk of minor and easily healed injuries such as bruises grazes or sprains. Over half (55 per cent) said there were occasions when they judged the benefits to children of carefully planned, challenging play opportunities to outweigh exposure to risk of more serious injury.

Over three-quarters of respondents (78 per cent) thought that, in general, opportunities for children to test and challenge themselves in play that involves a level of risk had decreased over the past 10 years. However, in relation to services they provide themselves, only 30 per cent of play providers thought opportunities had decreased, and 38 per cent felt that the opportunities they provided had actually increased.

In relation to their own work, play providers report that they are providing more beneficial play opportunities involving risk and challenge than they perceive as being available to children elsewhere in society. They clearly take the view that such play provision is valuable to children.

### 4.3 Sufficiency of challenging play opportunities

In the focus groups, participants were asked to place themselves on an 'attitude line' between these two statements:

- 'In our play provision, children have all the opportunities they need to take risks.'

And

- 'In our play provision, children never get the chance to take risks in their play.'

The participants then explained why they had placed themselves in that particular position.

No one placed themselves at either extreme of the line, which meant that they all allowed some degree of risk in their play, but no one thought they could provide all the opportunities for risk that children need. In general, most placed themselves nearer the 'never get the chance to take risks' end. This included preschool providers and providers of fixed equipment playgrounds. Both sets emphasised that their respective regulatory frameworks (which tended to reduce risk through the design or planning of play provision) made it quite difficult to introduce challenging play involving risk.

Respondents in Northern Ireland tended to position themselves nearer to the 'no risk' end than people in other places, and they expressed the view that regulation generally was tighter there than in the rest of the UK. They also felt that the litigation culture was more widespread, with the result that providers were more risk averse. The availability of free legal aid for litigants was thought to be a factor. Often, out-of-court settlements were made and some thought that defending a test case in relation to an unreasonable claim would be beneficial.

The providers of staffed play provision for school age children tended to be nearer to the 'have all the opportunities they need' end, thanks to well trained staff. Even so, litigation from parents was a factor that reduced opportunities for challenge and risk below the level that the providers think would be more beneficial to the children. The nature of the work and the client group greatly influenced the level of risk that was deemed to be acceptable.

In Scotland, some thought that it was not necessarily their role to provide challenging play involving a high degree of risk, or that such provision was not really possible, since any adult involvement removed key elements of this kind of risk.



#### **4.4 Trends in play provision involving risk (focus groups)**

In the focus groups, the play providers described trends in their own provision of play involving risk and challenge.

For fixed equipment playgrounds, staffed play provision and preschool play provision, they felt that the situation had not significantly changed: in other words, opportunities had neither increased nor decreased. However, over a much longer timeframe – say 20 years – play involving challenge and risk had probably decreased.

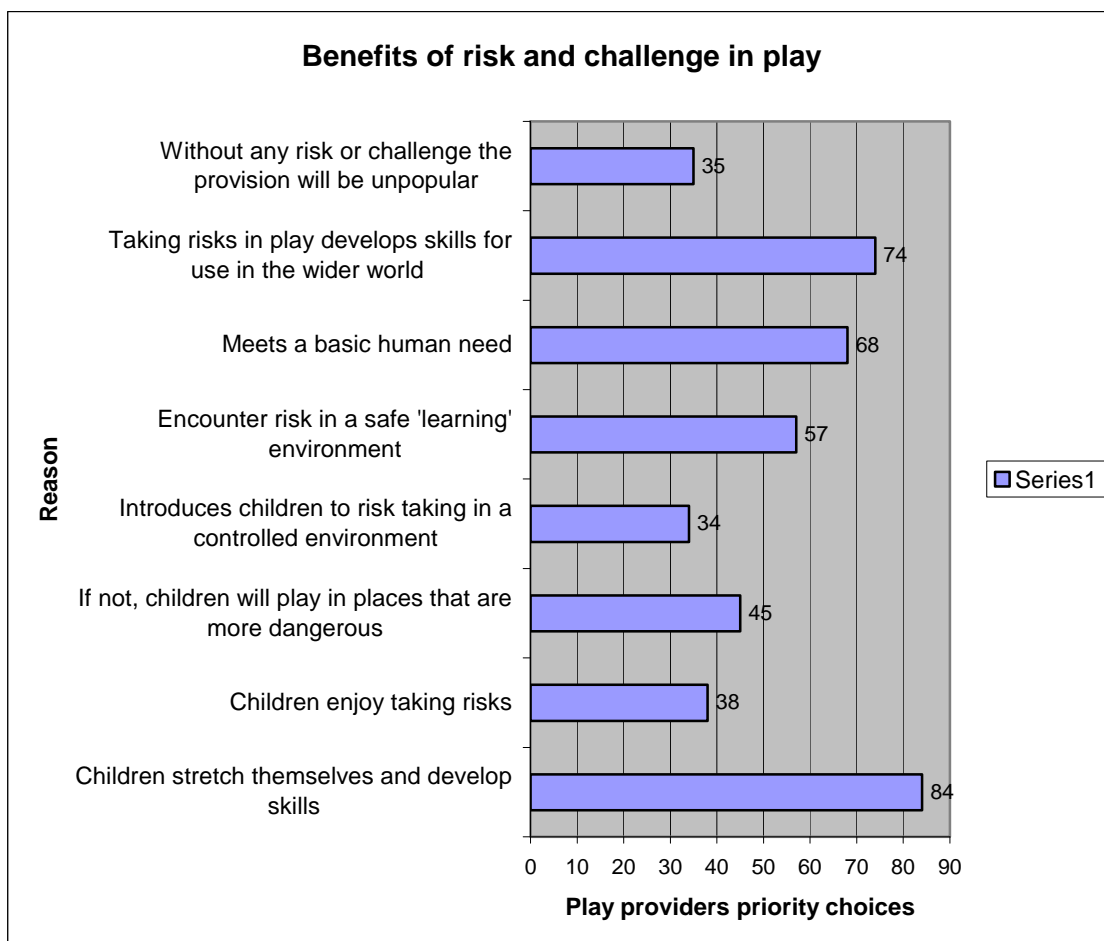
There was considerable confidence that the climate was changing. Providers felt that, with the adoption of play strategies, the Play Safety Forum's statement on risk and other changes, the number of more challenging play opportunities would be likely to rise in the future. However, they also felt that increasingly stringent regulatory frameworks might militate against this.

In recognition of the preferences of local children and young people, many local communities are now pushing specifically for play and youth facilities that offer more challenge. There is a trend towards more child-led play schemes, and this is conducive to introducing a greater level of acceptable risk and challenge. There was also felt to be a trend towards more innovative play design, as well as a better understanding of children's developmental needs among people who have influence over play opportunities.

#### **4.5 Challenge and risk in play: the benefits**

Almost all (99 per cent) of respondents agreed that there were clear benefits for children in experiencing play opportunities that are challenging to them and involve an element of risk.

We asked providers to highlight why they thought risk in play was important and beneficial.



The three most common reasons given by respondents were that it allows children to stretch themselves and to test and develop their abilities (65 per cent); taking risks in play develops skills for use in the wider world (55 per cent); and it satisfies a basic human need and gives children the chance to learn about the real consequences of risk-taking (50 per cent).

Some individual respondents made additional comments. One said that risk in play is a valued experience for children, and should not be left out of children’s lives. It helps them make judgements and gives them valuable life skills, taking into account all children and their age and stage of development. Another said that risks are not just physical, but that emotional risk-taking is just as important. Access to risk should not always be 'organised' – it often happens through unsupervised play.

### Focus group observations

To draw out what is meant by risk in play, we did an exercise in which the play providers reflected on their own childhood experiences of taking risks in play. There were a number of common factors. For example, there was little adult supervision in their risk-taking play, and many of the risky play activities were outdoors, away from home and often in the natural environment. They often involved imagination and creativity, and gave them a sense of independence, since they could roam freely,

though there was often some form of informal community oversight of play activities.

Most of the risks they remembered were physical and most involved play that was self-directed, unplanned and did not require much equipment. It was free and often involved simple tools, using what was available in locations close to home, such as building sites.

Many of them said that, as children, they were not really aware of the risks, and tended to think that accidents always happened to someone else. They liked taking risks in social play with friends, and had a sense of fear or excitement from doing something adults might not know about. There was a risk of significant injury – or even death – but they did not remember anyone being seriously injured. However, they remembered the risk of losing face with their friends.

The focus groups discussed the benefits of play that involved risk-taking. These included acquiring new skills, developing independence and a sense of freedom, learning to make decisions, improved health and wellbeing, a sense of achievement and raised self-esteem. It helped them develop social skills, and strengthened friendship bonds and their abilities to work as a team. It also enabled them to explore the local environment.

The groups felt that such play had enabled them to learn more about themselves and their capabilities, to become more self-reliant, and to judge what was a reasonable level of risk. They developed negotiating skills and other means of resolving conflicts between peers. It was also a context in which they could learn from their peers about acceptable behaviour, and from older children about social rules.

They talked about their enjoyment of risky play (sometimes after the event) and the happy memories they had of it in later life. It gave them informal contact with the community and with adults, including their parents, and was a chance to build relationships. They learnt to look out for others and developed a sense of responsibility, emotional strength, and an understanding of their role in a group, as well as perseverance in overcoming obstacles and fears. The participants said that they valued being able to do what children are good at naturally and most enjoy – playing with imagination and creativity.

The majority of participants in all the groups believed that the significant benefits of providing challenge in play outweighed the potential risks required to provide those challenges, even when the risks were quite high.

#### **4.6 Reasons and rationale for risk in play**

Just over half (55 per cent) of the play providers said that, in their play provision, there are occasions when they calculate that the benefits to children of carefully planned, challenging play opportunities outweigh the risk of serious injury.

They gave diverse examples, along with a variety of rationales for their judgements. Many of the examples involved quite significant levels of risk, but all these providers appeared to have a sound method of assessing the risks in order to minimise them, and had clear reasons for feeling that the benefits outweighed the small possibility of harm.

The providers gave a number of examples of types of play where the benefits outweigh the risk of serious injury. These include outdoor play sessions, such as building fires and making dens. Fires could be used for cooking and as a focus around which children and young people could gather. They also mentioned climbing trees and making tree swings, playing in rivers and streams, rolling down banks in an inflatable wheel or on a wheeled trolley. Other such activities included bouncy castles and small electric go-carts at park events, and off-site adventurous activities, such as abseiling, high ropes and adventure playgrounds (though these may be too expensive to run all the time). One provider mentioned plans to create a play area within an outcrop of rock, with an exposed small rock face, a challenging drop and a slide back down.

Play providers gave many different reasons and rationales for providing risky play opportunities. They felt that as long as the risk assessment is thorough, and the activity is controlled, the benefits outweigh the risks. For instance, allowing children to paddle in puddles or play with water creates a risk of drowning. However, the risk is low, even though the potential injury is severe – so in a controlled environment, every child could safely play with water.

Well managed outdoor play and activities, such as rock climbing and water sports, are very low risk, as the statistics show, despite people's perception of the danger of such activities. Wet or windy play, for example, can be risky due to external factors such as weather. If such factors make conditions for play dangerous, plans can be changed or adapted. With actions and staff in place to minimise the risk, the benefits to the child far outweigh the dangers of the play opportunity. Such actions include making children aware of the risks involved in play.

Where there are risks related to an activity such as a trip to an adventure centre, robust assessments and health and safety procedures will minimise those risks.

#### 4.7 Limits of risk in play provision

The focus groups discussed what level of risk was deemed acceptable in providing challenging play opportunities, and how this could be determined by reference to the play providers' own experience of what was sometimes judged to be 'too risky'. The table below illustrates some of the dilemmas that members of the groups faced in their work.

<b>Play opportunities that can be/are deemed to be 'too risky'</b>	<b>Why can these be too risky, and how to judge/assess risk?</b>
Rough and tumble play that goes too far	Children can get carried away and cause injury or distress – needs careful 'dynamic' playworker risk assessment.
Playground games such as Red Rover (similar to British Bulldog)	Litigation if child injured – needs careful 'dynamic' playworker risk assessment.
Water slide play where child slips and is injured	Accident, even though 'dynamic' risk assessment determined activity to be reasonable. Litigation resulted in out-of-court settlement due to financial risk to organisation, despite the provider being confident that they were not at fault.
Monkey bars and 'spinning disk' play equipment – removed from play areas	Deemed too risky by insurers, health and safety standards and so on, but thought to be overcautious. Took view that planning out challenge is likely to result in children playing somewhere more dangerous and being more likely to injure themselves.
Skateboarding where child fell and was injured	Needs careful 'dynamic' playworker risk assessment as well as initial formal written risk assessment. Accident, but provider confident of not being at fault.

The groups had lively, interesting and, at times, philosophical discussions about the limits of acceptable risk in play. The key feeling was that this depended on the character and ability of each individual child and, therefore, that uniform guidance would be inappropriate. It was paramount that risk and challenge should be introduced in the context of children's personal development. Thus an activity might be viewed as too risky if it helped promote confidence without a child having the necessary competence or understanding of the situation.

In supervised play, it was felt to be very important for playworkers to understand not just the character and ability of each child, but also the abilities of the staff, as this can be a major constraint on the introduction of more challenging play opportunities. This is particularly true where status, pay and training suppress the inclination to take initiatives.

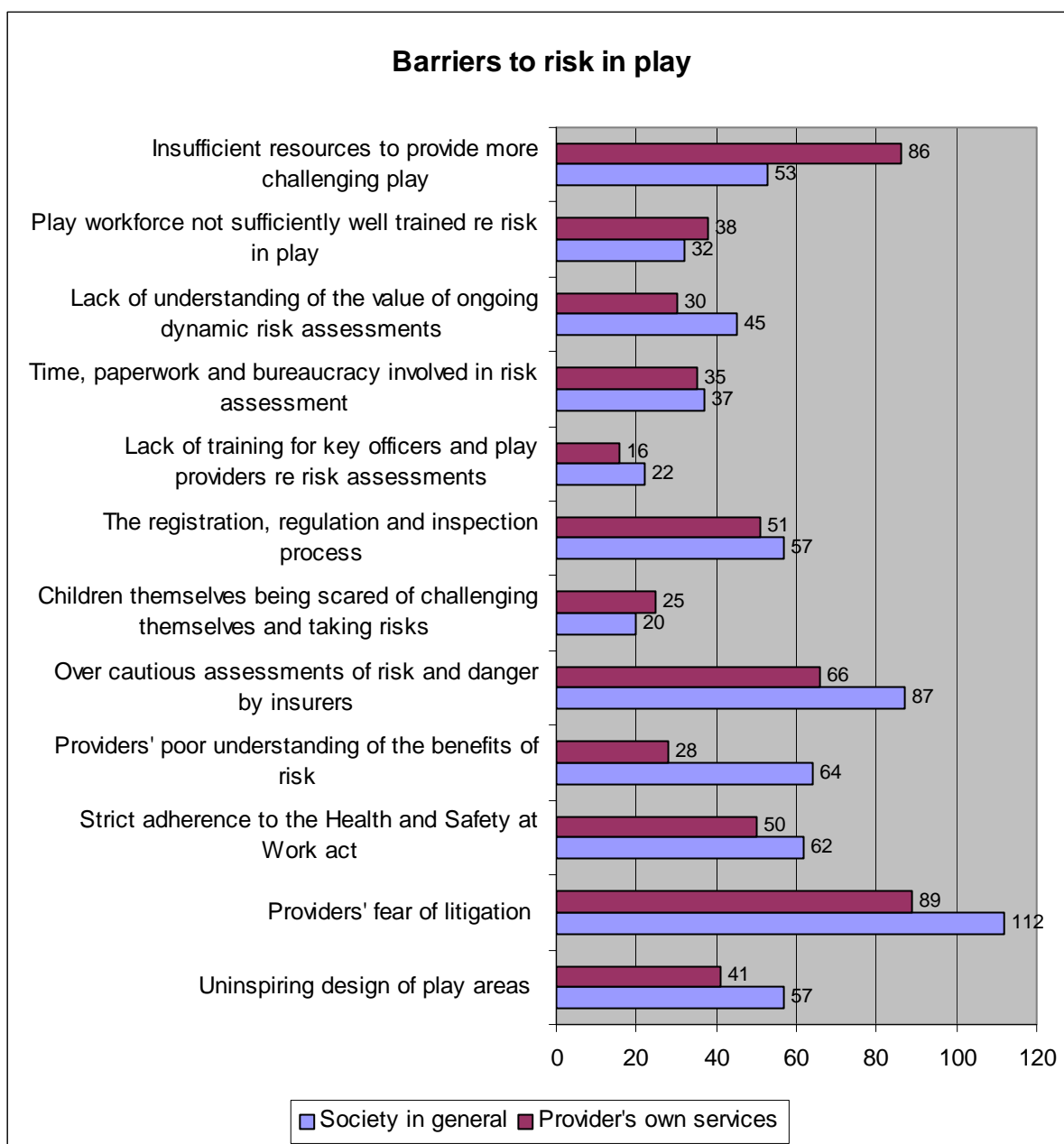
It is essential to understand the attitudes of parents and the wider local community to risk and challenge in play. It may be that there is a

prevailing culture that does not recognise that children can acceptably and gainfully take risks in play.

The discussions pointed to a need for risk assessment to be dynamic and alert to a constantly changing set of issues. However, it was also important for risk to be assessed against the corresponding benefits, and some providers had developed useful systems of risk/benefit analysis.

#### 4.8 Barriers to challenging play that involves risk

Play providers were asked about the barriers that exist to children experiencing risk and challenge, both in general and in relation to the services they provide themselves.





The five most prevalent factors limiting children's experience of risk and challenge in play overall, were thought to be:

1. The providers' fear of litigation in relation to possible accidents (86 per cent)
2. Over-cautious assessments of risk and danger by insurers and health and safety officers (68 per cent)
3. Providers' limited understanding of the benefits for children of providing risk and challenge in play (52 per cent)
4. Strict adherence to the Health and Safety at Work Act (50 per cent)
5. The registration, regulation and inspection process involved in providing play opportunities (47 per cent).

The five factors that respondents felt to be most prevalent in limiting the extent to which they offered opportunities for risk and challenge in their own play provision were:

1. Providers' fear of litigation in relation to possible accidents (74 per cent)
2. Insufficient resources to provide more challenging play opportunities (71 per cent)
3. Over-cautious assessments of risk and danger by insurers and health and safety officers (54 per cent)
4. The registration, regulation and inspection process involved in providing play opportunities (43 per cent)
5. Strict adherence to the Health and Safety at Work Act (42 per cent).

The play providers highlighted fear of litigation as the primary barrier to more risk and challenge in play, both with reference to their own provision, and for play opportunities in general.<sup>1</sup> They felt that over-cautious assessments of risk and danger by insurers and health and safety officers were a significant problem both for themselves and even more so in general. They said that a lack of resources was a major problem for themselves as providers but saw this as less as a problem in general.

A significant number of respondents also said that parental attitudes and fears for their children's safety, mostly in relation to 'stranger danger', traffic and being generally over-cautious about any risks in play, were major barriers to providing risky and challenging play. They felt this to be equally true for both play opportunities in general and for the play providers' own services.

The participants suggested a number of other factors limiting play opportunities. In general, they felt that taking risks and overcoming

---

<sup>1</sup> The focus groups indicated that, while providers were aware of the facts regarding the low level of injuries and actual court cases, this was still a major concern. Many actually thought that settling such incidents out of court (as happens in most cases) was detrimental, since unreasonable settlements were often made to litigants who they felt had weak cases. The general view was that more cases should go to court as test cases but that organisations were reluctant to follow this route because they were afraid of bad publicity.

challenge in physical play environments is increasingly outside children's experience and that we rarely ask children what they see as 'challenging' and 'risky' with a view to meeting their needs by providing for such play in as natural and 'undesigned' a way as possible. They talked of living in a risk-averse society, where media scare stories constantly warn parents of the so-called dangers of letting children out to play, and of parents, in turn, transferring their own (often unfounded) fears on to their children.

Everyday play is not just about providers, they said. It should also be about public space. Along with parents' anxiety about allowing children out to play, went a more general fear of young people congregating in a particular area and such groups of young people being associated with anti-social behaviour.

In terms of their own services, the play providers gave a range of other reasons for restrictions on challenging and risky play. They described insurers requesting written details of every activity provided, and then refusing to cover certain activities. Some said that staff lacked the motivation to provide more challenging play environments, or that there were no employed playworkers and no funding available for any playworkers. In the voluntary sector, where many of the staff are volunteers who also have full-time jobs, there are limited opportunities and resources for training.

Respondents felt there was an inherited history of uninspiring play facilities and that, although we are now breaking the mould, this can only be done at one facility at a time. They also said that they could engage with more children during a play session if those children were allowed to cross busy roads, to range further from their homes and to play in areas where they are currently seen as a nuisance.

### **Focus group observations**

The focus group discussions noted a large number of significant constraints on creating the challenging play opportunities that the participants would like to provide. These included the stance taken by insurance companies and the attitudes of legal and health and safety officers within organisations, as well as the nature of health and safety regulations themselves. They said that Ofsted and other inspectors were inconsistent but had a tendency to want to plan out risk.

Added to these factors were the staff and organisations' fears of litigation, and a lack of confidence among playworkers, which makes them wary of introducing challenging play opportunities. Parents, too, can be worried about allowing their children to take risks. These fears were passed on to the children themselves, and were exacerbated by media coverage of accidents, which also makes play providers wary of receiving bad publicity in an atmosphere of hysteria about 'stranger danger'.

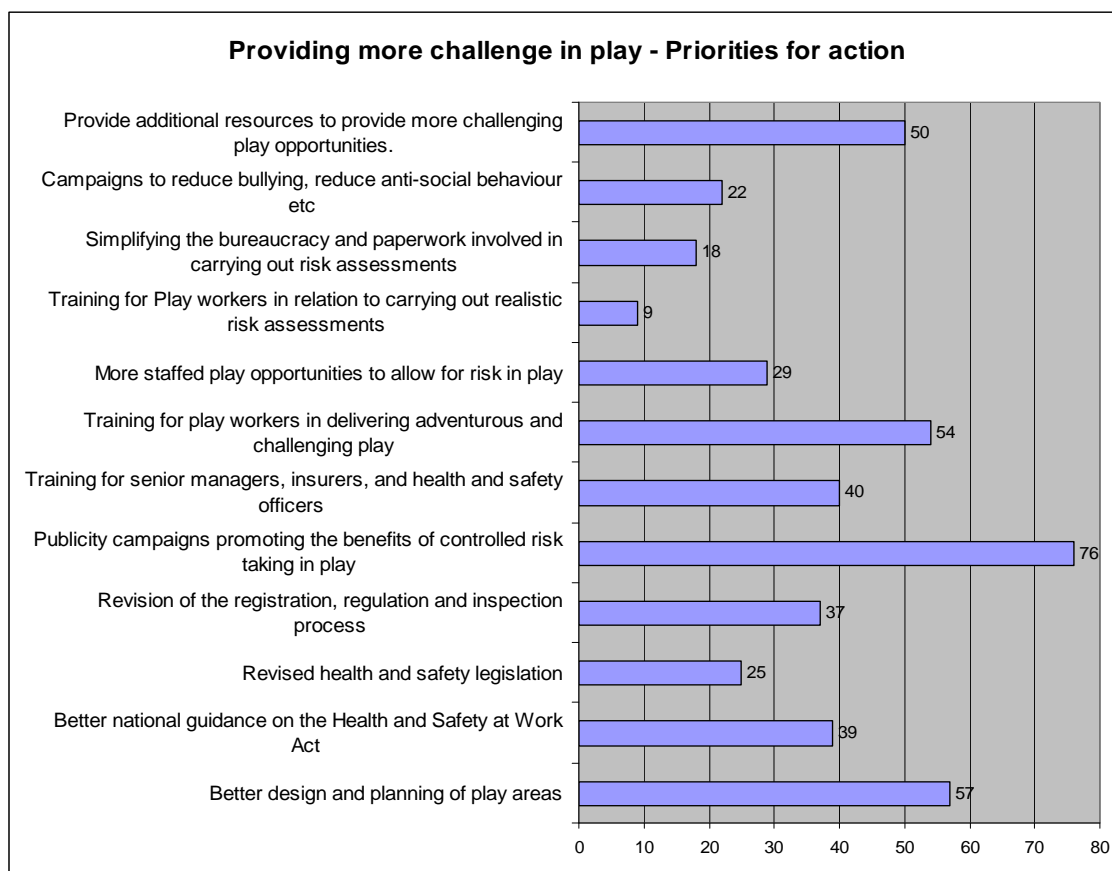
The participants cited a lack of resources to provide more challenging play, and instead, the provision of 'ultra-safe' activities, such as television and computer games (though these also include risk). This was affected by the focus of child protection agencies and a fear of being charged with 'irresponsibility' when allowing elements of risk in play.

On a wider scale, they felt hampered by a lack of strategic planning of play provision and by the regulations relating to the design of play spaces, which resulted in unimaginative fixed play equipment facilities. Some mentioned the particular regulatory framework in Northern Ireland. They said that professionals in other organisations – such as fire officers – did not always understand the benefits of risk in play, and that corporations and local authorities had policies and practices, which meant they tended to play safe.

In a situation where adults and children are worried about dangers from traffic, where there is a feeling that people's sense of community has declined, and the wider community seems less tolerant of children and young people than previously, they felt that children's opportunities to roam any distance from their homes and explore their localities have declined.

## 4.9 Providing more opportunities for challenging play

We asked play providers to prioritise measures that could improve children's opportunities to experience challenging play opportunities.



The five top priorities for most providers were:

1. Publicity campaigns to achieve a more realistic appreciation of risk in play and to promote the benefits to children of assessing risk themselves (58 per cent)
2. Better design and planning of play areas to provide more challenging play opportunities (44 per cent)
3. Training for play workers in delivering adventurous and challenging play (42 per cent)
4. Additional resources for more challenging play opportunities (41 per cent)
5. Training for senior managers, insurers, and health and safety officers in relation to risk and play (35 per cent).

Their three lowest priorities were: training for playworkers in carrying out realistic risk assessments (7 per cent); simplifying the bureaucracy and paperwork involved in carrying out risk assessments (14 per cent); and

campaigns to reduce bullying and anti-social behaviour, and to encourage play as contributing to social cohesion (17 per cent).

It is notable that playworkers do not generally prioritise a need for more training for themselves in relation to risk assessment or associated procedures, which suggests that such processes are well established and understood. Their clear priority is to publicise and promote the value of challenging and risky play more widely, and to provide more opportunities for risk and challenge through better design and training of those involved in provision.

Other suggestions for promoting an acceptance of more challenging and risky play included education about litigation and its real implications for providers, and using the media to counteract the messages that exaggerate the social and environmental risks to children and young people, and to publicise successful examples around the country. Providers would like to change the culture in which a fear of being sued is such a strong factor in decision-making about whether or not to provide challenging activities.

The providers wanted to see much more work in the areas of planning and transport policy to improve the communities we live in, to get both adults and children outside their homes and back into our public spaces. This should be backed by revenue resources to support the new capital resources available, in terms of maintenance and play opportunities. They felt that play strategies should include links with partners, to develop a joint understanding of inclusion within play, with advice and guidance from children, young people, parents and specialist services.

Finally, the play providers were asked to say what else they thought was important about the issue of challenging play.

### **Focus group observations**

The discussions of what measures could help play providers introduce more opportunities for challenging play – which they all wished to do – highlighted a wide range of possible actions. These included researching children's own views on risk, and ensuring that emotional, as well as physical, risk is considered in the provision of play opportunities. Along with this, there was a need to build children's own confidence and sense of independence in relation to risk-taking. One suggestion was to introduce a 'contract' with parents, which would clarify their acceptance of risk and challenge and illustrate that it is an essential part of play.

On the provision for play opportunities, it was felt that more park keepers, play rangers, and staffed play services, including adventure playgrounds, would help promote challenging play. Creating a generally more child-friendly public environment and reviewing the use of outdoor play/open spaces to achieve a wider spread of opportunities for challenging play could be supported by incorporating improved oversight and 'secured by design' type principles into the design of play areas.

This would enable providers to retain spontaneity in play and be aware of the negative impact of too much organisation and control.

Training was seen as important. This applied to both informal publicity and promotion to parents and the wider community of the benefits of challenging and risky play, and to formal training and education for playworkers, insurers, health and safety officers, senior managers, planners and the judiciary. Insurance companies also needed to review their position on risk and play.

An understanding of the positive benefits of risk should be built into early years training (Early Years Foundation Stage). Part of this process would be to raise the awareness and status of playworkers by improving their salary levels and providing greater protection for them when accidents do happen.

Participants felt there was a need to counter media campaigns to offset some of the detrimental and false information propagated about the risks of allowing children out of the house and to challenge widespread misconceptions about 'stranger danger'. Winning successful test cases would be better than repeatedly settling litigation out of court.

At a broader level, it was felt important that local authorities adopt play strategies that promote challenge and risk in play, for example, by adopting the Play Safety Forum statement on risk. Also, there was a plea to establish more local ownership and control of the play 'curriculum' to allow more decisions at a local level and to encourage diversity of provision. The overall goal was to change attitudes and develop more tolerant communities that accept children's right to play in public areas.

Finally, it was felt important to changing the regulatory frameworks so that they recognise the benefits of challenging play. In Northern Ireland in particular, there was a call to adopt and implement the National Play Policy Framework as well as to identify a clear 'home' for play within the government structures, as they felt this is not currently clear.



## 5. Concluding remarks

The research has demonstrated that play providers overwhelmingly believe that challenging play that involves risk is of great benefit to children. They think that there are too few such opportunities both in the wider society and in their own provision. There was very little variation in the findings and attitudes across the UK in this respect.

Play providers tend to be very frustrated about the culture of litigation, health and safety regulations, a lack of understanding of the benefits of risk and challenging play, and a widespread failure to recognise their professionalism and experience in managing risk and challenge in play.

It is clear, however, that play providers perceive a change in attitudes to risk and play, and they are quite positive about the potential for more challenging play opportunities in the future.

The play providers identified a number of other priorities to promote change, including improved design and planning of play areas, training for playworkers in delivering adventurous and challenging play, the provision of additional resources, and training for senior managers, insurers, and health and safety officers in relation to risk and play.

The Playday campaign therefore appears well timed, since play providers have identified publicity and promotional campaigns as being one of the most important mechanisms for bringing about positive change.

Leisure and the Environment (LandE)  
June 2008

‘Play gives children a ‘bank’ of skills and experiences that equips them for life.’

## 6. Glossary of terms

### **Adventure playground**

An open access play setting staffed by trained playworkers where children can find materials and support to build and adapt their play space.

### **Fixed play equipment**

Manufactured play equipment, which is secured in the ground, such as slides, swings, climbing frames and springy chickens.

### **Play area/space**

A free and accessible space that provides unrestricted opportunities for play and informal recreation for children and young people.

### **Play provision**

A designated place, service or facility where children's play rights and needs are the first priority, and which have play as the principle function.

### **Play space**

A place that is designated primarily for children's play, including playgrounds and recreation grounds.

### **Play value**

The range and quality of play opportunities and experience offered by a play environment.

### **Playworker**

Playworkers support and facilitate play and leisure facilities.

### **Secured by Design**

Secured by Design is a UK Police initiative supporting the principles of 'designing out crime by use of effective crime prevention and security standards for a range of applications'.

### **Staffed play provision**

Staffed facilities where children's play rights and needs are the first priority, such as adventure playgrounds, play centres, holiday play schemes, play buses and play ranger services.



Playday is coordinated by Play England, working in partnership with Play Wales, Play Scotland and PlayBoard Northern Ireland.

**Playday**  
8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE  
**Telephone:** +44 (0)20 7843 6300  
**Fax:** +44 7843 6349  
**Web:** [www.playday.org.uk](http://www.playday.org.uk)  
**Email:** [playday@ncb.org.uk](mailto:playday@ncb.org.uk)