



Key messages

- Actively listen to and observe children.
- Be vigilant.
- Constantly assess risks.
- Share concerns.
- Keep the setting clean, safe and secure.
- Update training regularly.
- Maintain relevant documentation.
- Ensure premises, equipment and materials are appropriate for the children attending the setting.
- Foster children's curiosity, drives and adventurous spirits; help them to recognise boundaries; teach them how to make choices, assess risks, and keep themselves safe.

What Keeping Safe means

Keeping Safe relates to children's physical and psychological well-being. The central aim of the 2004 Children Act and the Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, which preceded the Act, is to improve outcomes for every child and to narrow the gap between those who thrive and those who do not. The five intended outcomes for all children are:

- being healthy (good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle);
- staying safe (being protected from harm and neglect);
- enjoying and achieving (leading a full life and developing skills for adulthood);
- making a positive contribution (participating in community life and society and avoiding anti-social or offending behaviour);
- economic well-being (not being hampered from achieving one's full potential by economic disadvantage).

The implementation paper *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* embodies the vision of the 2004 Children Act and promotes the development of integrated services through children's centres, extended schools, better support for parents, better-qualified staff and targeted support embedded within universal services.

According to Ofsted (2005), for those working with children in their earliest years, 'staying safe' relates to ensuring children have security, stability and care, and that they are protected from accidental injury, discrimination, all forms of abuse and neglect, bullying and anti-social behaviour.

It is not possible to consider every conceivable danger for children as each context and child is unique. Instead the emphasis should be on the ability for practitioners to assess risks and to help children learn to assess those risks for themselves.

Children's physical safety could be threatened by falls, drownings, poisonings, burns, choking or injury from cars or in cars. Injury could also arise from sources such as animals; electrical equipment such as irons, paper shredders, freezers and washing machines; adults smoking; rubbish bins; dens and play sites; other children; internet chat rooms. Similarly, psychological harm can be inflicted through sustained insensitive or cruel treatment by familiar carers or by the child witnessing domestic violence against a family member. Similar harm can be suffered by young children whose families are endangered by threatening gangs or community violence.

It is essential that practitioners evaluate the procedures, practices and relationships in their own settings, but it is also important to cultivate trusting relationships with children and their parents. The bonds formed will not only be beneficial in terms of the support and openness they offer, but they will also mean that, should a suspicion arise about the possible ill-treatment of a child, they will feel able to encourage the child and family members to talk to them about any signs they have observed.

Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that parents themselves may have deep concerns about aspects of safety within the setting. They may feel that certain play activities, such as climbing trees, or failure by staff to check outside play spaces for hazards such as discarded hypodermic needles, or even the use of sharply-pointed pencils by older children, constitute risks. Frequent changes of staffing or inappropriate expectations by parents may add to these anxieties.

Keeping Safe means freedom from physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect, accidental injury, discrimination, bullying or anti-social behaviour. It requires both the people in the setting and the environment itself to offer a safe, familiar context for children to develop, explore and learn, while encouraging curiosity, adventure and independence. One aspect of this development is the growing ability for children to understand rules and to modify their behaviour. Carers have the responsibility to lay the groundwork for children to cope alone, by being responsive and dependable, and respecting some children's need for transitional objects, such as special toys, blankets or a dummy, while they develop sufficiently for self-regulation to become established.

In its document *Managing Risk in Play Provision*, the Play Safety Forum sets out a position statement arguing that:

'In any human activity, there is an element of risk. Three factors are central to determining whether or not the level of risk is acceptable or tolerable:

- the likelihood of coming to harm;
- the severity of that harm;
- the benefits, rewards or outcomes of the activity.

Judgements about the acceptability of risk are made on the basis of a risk assessment. Risk assessment and management are not mechanistic processes. They crucially involve making judgements... based on an understanding of the balance between risks and benefits. ...Risks that are acceptable in one community may be unacceptable in another, and policies should take this into account.'

(Play Safety Forum, 2002, p.2)

For example, a group of visiting early childhood care and education practitioners from another country were privately shocked by what they interpreted as lax hygiene (such as lack of sterilising older nursery children's drinking cups) in British nurseries but their British counterparts, while appreciating the visitors' generosity, were equally privately shocked when they distributed small gifts which included beads to children as young as two years old.

Why Keeping Safe is important

Keeping Safe is an important principle, not simply because the law requires it, but because young children are vulnerable, being relatively small and physically weak, dependent on others for their needs and for their protection. When we take on the care of a child we are accountable for that child's safety and healthy development. Human life is fragile but it is also an adventure and so, while maintaining continuous risk assessment, practitioners must remember children's natural curiosity and their drive to explore, to learn about their world and to test themselves and their abilities.

Our national laws as well as international conventions recognise both children's strength and competence, and their vulnerability. So underpinning the principle Keeping Safe are the Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 2, 6 and 8), and the 1989 and 2004 Children Acts.

Awareness of the different aspects of Keeping Safe means that the adults not only protect the children in their setting, they also foster the children's awareness of their own responsibility in keeping themselves safe and their sensitivity to the safety of other children.

Effective practice in relation to Keeping Safe

In successful settings the adults will be alert to potential hazards. The children will be well-supervised in a clean, well-kept environment, where they are secure (both physically and emotionally) and can play with stimulating, safe, appropriate materials and equipment, with appropriate staff.

There are three main aspects to Keeping Safe: Being safe and protected; Discovering boundaries; and Making choices. Each of these entails thinking through implications for individual children and for staff planning, reflection and action.

Being safe and protected

Partnerships with parents are essential and both children and their parents will feel safer and more secure if they are made welcome at the setting. Maintaining regular, informal contact with parents helps to develop strong partnerships between all those involved in keeping children safe.

Parents are also more likely to feel confident about a setting which shares its policies about safety, including those concerned with child protection procedures. They will want to know that those policies are clear, comprehensive and frequently reviewed, with the involvement of parents, that policies are acted on in practice, and that staff regularly update their training on safety.

Parents will feel happier when they know that practitioners keep written records of any existing injuries, and any that are sustained during play, which are noted in an accident book and are also reported to parents. Such reports would include how the injury was dealt with and any further action necessary. Parents will also be reassured that they can have access to and contribute to their children's ongoing

record, or profile, particularly sharing information about children's psychological security, emotional responses and contentment at the setting, as well as their development and interests. Importantly, parents and practitioners will need to share insights when a child shows anxiety or stress.

All practitioners need to be especially vigilant about:

- minimising risk at all times through ongoing risk assessments and immediate action;
- ensuring the setting has appropriate fire equipment (such as a fire blanket, alarms, smoke detectors, and extinguishers) which is checked regularly;
- having appropriate safety equipment such as gates, electricity sockets which are either inaccessible to children or have socket covers, flooring which has a safety or non-slip finish, fire-guards where necessary;
- checking entrances and exits are secure so that unsupervised children cannot leave, nor unauthorised persons gain access to, the setting;
- maintaining up-to-date knowledge of health and safety and child protection regulations and guidelines;
- ensuring babies and young children are able to sleep safely and comfortably according to their own rhythms and that they are frequently monitored;
- using knowledge gained from observations and interactions with individual children to inform the way in which they are helped to make choices and risk assessments appropriate to their own interests and stages of development;
- promoting children's ability to deal with unwanted touch as they get older and to feel secure about disclosing to trusted adults;
- ensuring that children learn about fire safety and practise fire drills regularly;
- knowing when individual children are taking medication and following guidelines if asked to administer it at the setting;
- evaluating whether space indoors and outdoors is effectively organised and monitored for safety and that children understand and are happy with that organisation;
- maintaining appropriate adult:child ratios.

Additionally, those in positions of management need to:

- evaluate how adults are deployed to ensure children are always well supervised;
- ensure that all adults are aware of their responsibilities and are able to manage risk assessment and children's risk-taking effectively;
- be certain that there is a system for ensuring the safety of the children and the premises at all times and that, as necessary, parents and visitors are made aware of these. Systems would include how the identity of people entering the setting is to be checked, the use of a visitors' book, how inappropriate attitudes are to be challenged, how food hygiene is ensured, and so on. Where the setting is in shared premises, such as a church hall, children's safety should be ensured, preferably through sole use of all relevant areas;
- ensure, in group settings, that the designated Health and Safety Officer for the setting knows about relevant legislation; that a senior member of the team has been designated the Named Person

with responsibility for child protection procedures and liaison and that this person ensures child protection concerns are dealt with promptly, appropriately and sensitively;

- keep checks that risk assessment documentation is properly maintained and that all staff, including new colleagues, know about the safety policies and practices that are in place, about child protection signs and symptoms, and who is the Named Person (the Department of Health booklet *What To Do If You're Worried a Child is Being Abused* and any local authority guidance, plus the setting's policy would be useful, basic resources);
- ensure unsuitable adults do not gain access to children in the setting;
- be sure each member of a team is clear about who is authorised to collect an individual child and, where necessary, any procedures such as special code words used for extra protection;
- take care that, where appropriate, knowledge of individual children's medical conditions are shared with all staff, so that any necessary action or special provision is ensured;
- gain parents' written consent to take children on outings, especially those involving the use of a vehicle, and ensure that all accompanying adults have information that would be necessary if an emergency occurred (such as parents' telephone numbers).

In addition, the Childcare Act 2006 requires that records are kept with details about each child, together with information about the premises and every practitioner.

The key to effective practice lies in developing trusting relationships which have to be built up with children, colleagues, parents and other professionals. Listen to what children tell you, and act on non-verbal signals from children, especially from those who are unable to voice their anxieties about their experience, and always take action to follow up any concerns, even if these prove to be groundless.

Similarly, ensuring other adults feel their voices will be heard and action taken where necessary helps build that trust as well as improving safety in the setting. Sharing concerns about Keeping Safe with parents, encouraging their collaboration and involvement, enriches the pool of experience and expertise. It is important that parents feel supported by friendly, trusted allies rather than belittled by challenges to their child-rearing approaches (for example, being helped to see that biting a biter may simply confirm that more powerful people can do harm, rather than advocating a gentle, consistent refusal to accept this behaviour).

Likewise, relationships between practitioners and other professionals, such as social workers and health visitors, can strengthen the ability of the setting to fulfil its role in keeping young children safe, since these workers come into the setting with a different perspective and role from that of practitioners. Discussions about safety issues with these colleagues can sometimes reveal otherwise unnoticed gaps in a setting's risk assessments.

Discovering boundaries

Most children who join a new setting quickly observe what goes on there and absorb the rules, whether or not the adults have made these explicit. Even in settings where staff risk assessments have ensured the safety of the environment, it is important for children to know what is and is not permissible behaviour, and what boundaries help them in keeping safe. For example, there may be rules about: bullying, excluding or making cruel remarks about other children, breaking toys deliberately, leaving taps running, using an apron for messy activities and so on. One aspect of young children's learning that is crucial during the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is that of respect for others (and this is part of Keeping Safe) focusing on boundaries about how we treat other people, our interdependence, and how we help keep each other safe.

Each child comes to a setting with individual interests and abilities, irrespective of their stage of development. They will already have their own understandings about their families, their places in those families, and how the people they live with treat them and others. Practitioners can learn about, respect and celebrate that diversity, and help each child make sense of the setting, by getting to know the family. Parents are generally the people who know a child best and they can tell practitioners what their children do at home, what they are familiar with, capable of, and find challenging. These interactions are crucial when settling a child in and giving them opportunities to safely and securely bond with a key person.

Children's growing independence can be fostered through sensitive encouragement to build on existing relationships and increase their circle of trusted friends. However, while the idea of 'stranger danger' remains pervasive, practitioners need to know that young children are not capable of defining 'stranger' and they are generally very trusting. This sets a dilemma for parents and practitioners alike. In trying to ensure children's movements are both bounded and monitored, one does not wish to frighten them into fearing everyone they do not know, nor, as the evidence tells us, does this prevent abuse. Far more children are abused by familiar adults than are abducted, so teaching children they have a right to express their feelings and views about everything, including being touched in ways that distress them, is an important part of their development.

To help children stay safe and to learn how they themselves can take a lead in Keeping Safe, practitioners need to have agreed, and then demonstrate, clear and consistent boundaries, whether physical, social or emotional, and have reasonable yet challenging expectations to help children develop as independent, as well as interdependent, people.

Making choices

Babies and young children will want to follow their own 'lines of enquiry', especially in an appropriately stimulating environment where there are other children and adults who interest them too. Similarly, they will have their own daily rhythms (for example, when they need to sleep, what rituals help them get to sleep). These rhythms will change over time and therefore children need adults who can provide safely and flexibly for those rhythms. They need adults who will respectfully help them with the things they cannot quite manage and do things they cannot do for themselves.

Children enjoy opportunities to access resources independently, so ensuring they can make these choices safely will promote their development. Making collaborative risk assessments about equipment, through shared talk with adults and other children, promotes understandings of safe behaviour as well as cognitive and social development. Aspects of the setting which contribute to this learning include having an outdoor play area that is secure, has a safety surface and sturdy outdoor apparatus that can be used all year round, as well as a wide range of safe, good quality resources for both indoors and outdoors. Additionally, practitioners need to ensure that the premises themselves and all equipment is checked regularly for safety, cleanliness and the state of its repair.

Above all, for children to be able to make choices, practitioners need to create a child-friendly environment where children can explore and take risks while being appropriately supervised, so that, once mobile, children can move freely, address the challenges they set themselves, while Keeping Safe.

Keeping Safe and developmental stages

Babies and young children rely on trusted adults to keep them safe. Given sensitive, warm and loving care, interactions and play, babies will come to know that they, and what they do, matter. This foundation provides the bedrock on which they develop through childhood and adulthood as resilient human beings.

We know that children in the EYFS age group can, for example, drown in very shallow water, cannot assess the speed of vehicles, cannot differentiate between sweets and pills or recognise poisonous

berries and drinks, nor understand why they must be fastened into an appropriate car seat. They are not aware that if they stand in the way of other children on swings, slides or wheeled toys they could be knocked over and hurt, and so on. These are aspects of our complex world that they will learn during their lives. Young children are highly competent learners so we can help them acquire skills which will eventually help them keep themselves safe in such situations. For now, the responsibility for their safety lies with the adults who take care of them.

Birth–11 months

Babies and young children have no sense of danger: they learn about dangerous situations by looking at the faces and reactions of the people they know and trust. While some babies may have begun to stand and walk in this phase, most that are mobile will be rolling or crawling. They will usually gain control of their eyes, necks and hands in this first year and they will be able to express their desires through increasingly defined signs and vocalisations. Dangers become increasingly possible as babies explore their environment through touch and taste, as well as smell, sight and hearing.

8–20 months

Even in this age group babies and young children have no sense of danger. They are likely to have become very mobile during this phase and will be beginning to want to assert their own wills.

16–26 months

It is usually during this phase that children's awareness of other minds and the reconfiguring of their brains takes place. They are likely to have begun to use language to express themselves and influence others and they are working out what makes the familiar people in their lives 'tick'. They may test boundaries and attempt physical feats that defy their carers' advice, as part of their growing independence.

22–36 months

Children's imaginations will have become much more vivid by now. They learn about dangerous situations from stories and some will have fears that may manifest themselves in play and in nightmares. Others may need protection from trying out exploits seen on television and in films. At the same time, practitioners and parents are faced with the increasingly difficult task of helping children understand the dangers in the world and to assess risk, while at the same time reassuring rather than alarming them.

30–50 months

Each successive phase builds on and incorporates preceding phases – but it must be remembered that children will sometimes regress and behave as they did when younger, especially when they are tired or upset. So it is important to maintain vigilance, even as children seem more capable and knowledgeable. During this phase other children who are their friends will have become part of the group of familiar people who are central to their happiness. They will be more secure emotionally if those friends move on to primary school with them after this phase.

40–60+ months

During this phase children will have become adept at both gross and fine motor control. They may need reminding about climbing, riding and balancing, safely, and having regard for the safety of others. They will be skilled tool users, and yet will need to be reminded about safe use of hammers, saws, knives, ropes and other potentially dangerous materials.

Adult: child ratios at this stage mean that children in this phase need to be supported in taking a little more responsibility for themselves and building on earlier teaching about risk assessment. They will need help from their parents, friends and their new teachers and teaching assistants to cope emotionally in the larger context of the primary school. Practitioners will need to assess risk in their own setting, for example, whether children in the Reception year would benefit from a separate play area from the rest of the school, or whether mixing with older children, indoors or out, will not only be safe but have positive effects on their learning.

How Keeping Safe relates to specific areas of Learning and Development

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Having someone to whom they are special, who cares for, respects, provides emotional support for and loves them, and who provides a safe, secure context is essential for young children's development. Being acknowledged and affirmed by important people in their lives leads to secure attachments and to children gaining confidence and inner strength. They will want to explore, physically, socially and emotionally, and become as independent as possible. Observing children and planning how to enable this for all children is an important adult responsibility. Positive role models among the adults and other children with whom they share their lives help them to be resilient, capable, sociable and strong. Through these relationships and modelling, they will learn to love and care for themselves and other people as family and friends, and to love and care for the world they inhabit.

Communication, Language and Literacy

Actively listening to babies and young children encourages them to express themselves, to voice their desires and fears, likes and dislikes. Attentive conversations with babies and young children that involve treating them as if they understand what is being said, even before they know the language used, together with relevant facial and bodily expressions to assist the flow of meaning, help them develop their communication and social skills. This acts as a model for their later interactions with both adults and children. Children are keen to know what is meant by print they see around them and this will include safety notices they see in your setting and in the world at large. Sometimes children will write their own warning notices during play activities.

Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy

Problem solving skills are developed when young children need to carry out risk assessments. They will assiduously help with counting children when on outings and so on and will discuss topics such as how high a tower of large bricks can be before it becomes a safety hazard.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

Children acquire a range of skills, knowledge and attitudes related to Knowledge and Understanding of the World in many ways. As babies they acutely observe their surroundings and the people who inhabit their world and how they behave; they learn by exploring that world through their senses. Young children learn by acting as if they are asking the question: 'What does this do?' and having carried out some exploration, 'What can I do with this?'. The objects and events they explore will include other people, the environment, other creatures, materials, toys and equipment. They therefore need settings in which they can play and explore safely and where they are encouraged to predict possible outcomes of their own actions, as in risk assessments.

Physical Development

Physical development may be seen as the most important in relation to Keeping Safe, and clearly children's physical safety and protection from physical harm is a major responsibility for practitioners.

It is also one where risk assessments by adults, and in time with the children themselves, are crucial, because young children need to be active, to use space and equipment in progressively challenging ways, in order to gain confidence, learn and develop.

Creative Development

Using and adapting stories, music and dance, talking with children about their drawings and paintings, and observing children's dramatic play are all important aspects of Keeping Safe. They can be used to enhance children's feelings of competence, confidence and strength. During the creative process children often express and reveal their preoccupations, fears and concerns, and adults should be alert to any anxieties displayed. They should act appropriately by listening to children, talking with colleagues and parents and taking supportive action to dispel any concerns the child may have. In some cases simply reassuring a child may well be enough to make them feel comfortable.

However, there is some evidence that in relaxing situations that are not obviously connected with the ongoing events, issues about the way the child has been treated may be revealed and lead to concerns about child abuse. Such concerns must always be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. Adults should be trained in responding sensitively to any concerns expressed verbally or non-verbally by the child.

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Further resources

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