

2. After-School Club Risk in Play: Risk/Benefit Assessment Scenario

An after-school club had been given a thick bouncy gymnastic mattress (now unwanted by a child for whom it had served its purpose) for the children to play with. The playwork team risk/benefit assess the mattress as a piece of play equipment and decide that with general supervision it has great play potential. It is played with inside for the first few days and is mainly used for physical play such as a 'professional wrestling' ring, head-over-heels, hand-stands, cartwheels and the like but also becomes a base for tiggy; a home for 'mummies and daddies'; a magic carpet that flies to the moon and so on. Then two children decide to drag it outside and put it under the branch of a tree that they are able to climb on, in the outside play area. This had not been discussed as a potential but no intervention is made other than a playworker goes outside to observe and carry out ongoing dynamic risk assessment on how children use the mattress in conjunction with the tree. Usually one or two children just climb onto a convenient branch and sit and chat and then jump fairly easily down to the grass. But this time, with the mattress below the two children climb onto the branch and then jump down onto the mattress obviously to test its bounce. Having done this once they climb back up and take it in turns to push themselves off and land in a sitting position. When they have perfected this move, they move onto trying a variety of slightly more difficult manoeuvres – landing in a sitting position and then bouncing up into a standing position; landing on one leg; landing sideways and so on. A small audience of interested children congregate to watch. The playworker has been hovering near to the tree and can tell that the children are competently risk assessing their own moves and is quite happy for them to continue playing in this way. The benefits appear to be outweighing any risks that there may be.

However the other children are interested and a small line forms for them to take turns at having a go at climbing onto the branch and jumping down onto the mattress. They are all having fun but also being very considerate taking it in turns and applauding when someone does a good jump. This all continues in a reasonably safe way for a while but then a little girl who does not usually climb on the tree because of her size comes next and because she cannot manage on her own, her brother fetches a chair out for her (and others) to use to climb onto the branch. She does this successfully and jumps down onto the mattress with great style. The children who are around all applaud her and this causes more small children to join the queue for a go. The playworker moves closer to observe and decide whether intervention is necessary, as she is concerned that the mattress game has become a magnet for children who may not be yet ready for climbing and jumping from the tree. She continues to observe for a few minutes and then a little boy who has been helped onto the branch and is sitting there is too scared to jump and starts crying.

Questions

Chapter 1

- Which Playwork Principles are relevant here?

Chapter 2

- Would this playing fit into a Forest School philosophy? If you are/were a playground supervisor, would this fit into your school playground philosophy and if not, why not?
- Do you see this activity as having a deferred, immediate or an accelerated function?
- Which of Sutton-Smith's play rhetorics would this playing fit into?

Chapter 3

- Do you see a sliding scale of risk-taking amongst the children participating in this activity?
- Do you think that this activity is helping all the participating children to become more resilient? If so what is it that is helping with this? Do you think that the playworker is supporting the playing in an appropriate way? Should s/he intervene differently at any point and if so how and why?

Chapter 4

- How do you think this playworker perceives the children playing jumping from the tree? Are all the children displaying the same types of temperament?

Chapter 5

- How did having a flexible play environment support the children playing in this scenario? Would this sort of flexibility be possible in places where you work or are with children? What are the positives and negatives of this playwork approach to children playing?

Chapter 6

- What are the potential risks and the potential benefits of children climbing onto the branch and jumping onto the mattress in a variety of ways? Would you allow that game to be played? Why or why not? What are the risks that outweigh the benefits?
- Is the playworker carrying out their general duty of care by standing by and observing the children playing without further intervention?

Chapter 7

- How are the children emotionally responding to this play space? Is the presence of a mattress and a chair making a difference?

Chapter 8

- What type of research could be carried out on this scenario in relation to the children's emotions; the affective environment; the playworker's response to the playing children? What have you learnt about yourself from reflecting on this?