



Doc 5.2 GUIDANCE

Free range supervision

This guidance note was originally developed in partnership with the Schools' Health and Safety team at South Gloucestershire Council and has been adapted and updated for schools in the OPAL Primary Programme.

OPAL schools aim to maximise the use of their site for free-range play. This must be done with consideration to health and safety requirements and evidence that this has been done must be available; this is covered by OPAL's five-point RAPID process, which all OPAL schools must adopt.

This guidance note aims to assist schools by identifying what must be considered when opening your whole school site for play.

1. Policy

Children and young people need to enjoy their childhoods as well as grow up prepared for adult life. In relation to concerns about overprotective health and safety regimes, both the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Ofsted advocate a sensible and balanced risk-benefit approach to ensure children have the freedom to explore childhood and learn how to identify and manage risk with growing independence and competence.

All OPAL schools should produce and publish a play policy as part of their RAPID approach – see template Doc 3.1. This should be done early in the programme and be ratified by the school's governors/local advisory board.

2. Legislation

The relevant legislation is the Health and Safety at Work Act, which requires that the employer ensures the health, safety and welfare of persons at work and those affected by the work. The HSE no longer regards free play as a work activity. It is therefore not governed by the rules covering safety and reporting of accidents at work. However, it is still covered by the broader 'duty of care', and so providers must demonstrate their procedures are reasonable in the context of their responsibility for care and wellbeing.

Examples of documents and practices that would be useful in demonstrating 'duty of care' are a published play policy, delivery of assemblies to pupils and making a record of dialogue and decision making around risky play, a written risk-benefit assessment, technical report on fixed equipment (eg annual ROSPA report) plus process for checking loose parts, and a play training record for staff. These are all steps of the RAPID process – see supporting documents pack three of the ePack.

3. Risk-benefit assessment

All OPAL schools produce a written risk benefit assessment (RBA) for play, highlighting benefits of play activities and resources, identifying significant risks arising, and outlining mitigation steps to reduce significant risks whilst retaining benefits of play (see template Doc 4.0). Actions identified must then be introduced to pupils and supervising staff and the RBA document must be reviewed regularly, when a new play zone is opened, or revised when it is no longer felt to be valid.

The decisions made in your RBA should be communicated with the pupils and supervising staff, eg through assemblies, training and sharing of documents.



4. Definitions

The following are the definitions for terms used in the document and some more detailed explanation where appropriate.

Free-range play

Free-range play is where pupils are given permission to use and explore the school grounds or at least part of them without direct supervision.

Level of supervision

The number of supervisors (competent adults) undertaking supervision indicated as a ratio to number of pupils being supervised.

Type of supervision

OPAL recommends that a paragraph on the school's intended supervision styles is included in its play policy:

<p>Direct</p> <p>This is where the supervisor(s) will be able to see all areas of play, and be nearby, around a maximum of 20 metres away.</p> <p>Some play features in these areas, such as playhouses or planting, may offer semi-hidden opportunities. This will be most common in nursery and reception classes.</p>	<p>Remote</p> <p>This is where a supervisor or supervisors are located at a relatively static location at a good vantage point some distance from an activity, eg supervisor on the playground and activity 20 metres or more away, or supervisor in the middle of a flat school field.</p> <p>This style is widely used in other countries and its purpose is for an adult to be present to respond rapidly to an accident or serious behaviour incident.</p>	<p>Ranging</p> <p>This is where the supervisor moves around the play area, usually on a set course/ schedule.</p> <p>The distance from pupils therefore differs but can be 20 metres or more away. On a large site, supervisors should have zones so that they know which parts of the site they are covering, and they should modify their attention based on the kinds of play and their judgement about areas of highest risk.</p>
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Supervisor

This is the competent adult providing the supervision and can be a play team member, teacher, teaching assistant, lunchtime supervisor or a volunteer. In each case they will have been assessed as competent to provide the supervision necessary and been trained in what is acceptable practice, what to do if unacceptable risks occur and what to do in case of accidents.



5. Issues to be considered (risk-benefit assessment process)

5.1 Is free-range play to be progressed?

The initial consideration is whether the school leadership wishes to progress free-range play. To be effective, free-range play needs to be supported by the schools' senior leadership team.

In addition to getting the school leadership's commitment, it is also sensible to consider your parent community. It is advised that parents are notified if the school leadership decides to progress free-range play so that the entire school community is aware and committed to it. This can be done via your new play policy and supporting communications. Most parents are supportive of the development of free-range play in a managed environment but may need reassurance that risks have been considered.

5.2 Are the school grounds suitable for use as a free-range play area?

Survey your school grounds and produce a detailed plan. The plan should:

- ! Identify the boundaries to the site**
Detail on what the boundary consists of and any weak points in it must be included. Damaged hedges and open fencing are a security issue in respect of pupils wishing to leave the site without authority. Identify if there are issues with neighbours to the grounds having unauthorised access or dumping hazardous materials. These issues will need remedying.
- ! Identify plants and trees**
The different plants and trees around the site need to be marked on the plan. Information required is the type, particularly important to confirm whether poisonous or not, whether any have berries or fruit which pupils might eat and then, if edible, whether pupils will be allowed to, and if any have thorns. Also consider whether children would be able to climb the tree or get into hedges etc, and if this will be allowed. Photographs are an effective way of better identifying the plants referred to and these can be added to the plan. You do not need to remove every nettle or bramble, but it is important to have up-to-date site knowledge that will inform RBA decisions and site maintenance planning.
- ! Identify hidden areas**
Some sites have blind corners, dips in the ground or areas which, due to planting, cannot be seen from all points. This does not mean they cannot be used but this information will help decide on the location of supervisors and model of supervision.
- ! Consider if there are any areas that pupils are not allowed**
There will probably be few, but some schools have uncovered ponds in conservation areas, or site storage areas that pupils should only access under direct supervision or not at all. Out-of-bounds areas should be restricted due to significant risk – review areas that are out of bounds for other reasons eg restricted by age, invitation only, 'special use' areas.
- ! Identify fixed items for use by pupils at play**
This will be fixed play equipment, seating, pagodas and sports equipment, eg basketball hoops.

NB: The plan is the basic information gathering phase of the risk-benefit assessment process.

Once the above information is available, a decision will be made on whether all or some of the grounds can be used.



5.3 What age of pupils can play safely?

Having identified what the site contains and having decided that the school grounds can be used for free-range play, a judgement will then need to be made on the age of pupils for which the free-range play is suitable.

This decision should be made by someone who appreciates how pupils play, eg experienced teachers, members of the OPAL working group. When they do this, they should also start to consider what rules might be necessary, eg no climbing trees with branches hanging over boundary fences or those above concrete planters, no throwing stones at one another, etc. These rules will be necessary to ensure a consistent approach by the supervisors and will be included in your RAPID steps.

A suitable age for free-range play depends on the awareness of risks and physical ability of the pupils. For example, a junior-aged pupil should be aware not to eat poisonous berries, but a younger child may eat them.

The following advice is given, however, it should not be viewed as absolute but will hopefully provide a reference point.

! For reception pupils (under 5)

No free-range play until the staff have good knowledge of the children and their capabilities. Direct supervision of new EYFS pupils in reception classes in September term one is appropriate as the children do not yet know the school site or staff, and the staff do not yet know the pupils. Some schools choose to gradually increase reception pupils' footprint for play as the year progresses and the children's knowledge and skills increase.

! For infant-aged pupils (KS1) and junior aged pupils (KS2)

In general terms any of the spaces identified as acceptable for free-range play should be available to them as should most materials. Pupils tend to have a mix of fixed play equipment, while use of natural and fabricated materials is to be encouraged. Some heavier loose materials like rocks, pallets and planks etc, may be challenging for younger pupils as they will be more difficult for them to carry or manipulate. This may change as children become more skilled and competent. Play assemblies, written RBA and dynamic risk assessment practice by staff should be in place to help balance risks and benefits.

Having decided on what areas are able to be used and by the ages of pupils who will use them, schools then need to consider the level of supervision required.

5.4 What type of supervision is required to support free-range play?

Primary schools in England often use 'rule of thumb' recommendations for playground supervision ratios eg one competent adult per 75 junior aged pupils, one competent adult per 30 infant aged pupils. However, under UK law, there is no recommended ratio for how many adults should supervise play, nor is there any guidance to what form supervision should take. This is left to the discretion of the school leadership team.

NB: As a minimum, there must be at least one member of supervisory staff outside when the children are at play.

What schools need to decide is how to supervise the free-range play. The following gives an indication of the factors to be considered for each of the types of supervision that could be used in respect of:

! 5.4.1 - Remote supervision

This will be where staff are situated in places where they can see most of the play area and the activities taking place. This is the best option where there are limited activities on the school grounds but may not be suitable where there are several hidden areas. In practice, it may mean having more adult supervisors at certain points around the grounds as this means that pupils can choose to play close to an adult or be more adventurous depending on what they want. However, it does mean that if any incidents occur a member of staff should notice quickly and respond.

! 5.4.2 - Ranging

This will be where adults are tasked with walking a given route on a timed basis, eg circulate the field every five minutes or so. Although the route would be known it would be approximate and would allow staff to divert to check on remote spaces, while at the same time pupils will know an adult will not be far away should they need support.

! 5.4.3 - A combination of remote and ranging supervision

This will involve having some fixed points of supervision and some staff walking around. This would be the preferred option for most schools where the grounds are substantial or there are hidden points.

5.5 What is required to ensure supervisors are competent to supervise free-range play?

In most cases competence will be based on the person having a level of authority with the pupils, combined with instruction/training on where they are expected to be, how they are expected to supervise, what is acceptable interaction with the pupils and what to do in the case of accidents/incidents, which will include behaviour issues.

This will require training to be provided for the supervisors as a group as it is essential that consistency is applied in respect of what is allowed and disallowed. This means that the risk-benefit assessment needs to be discussed and rules established. These rules must also be discussed and made clear to the pupils through play assemblies and dialogue on the playground.

Staff should be aware of the benefits of free-range play and of their role in deciding how to balance these benefits against the risk of possible harm.



6. Introduce the practice and review

Having established all five elements of your RAPID process, it is now a case of introducing the changes. This is best done slowly so that you have a chance to review the practice and the rules. This could be by allowing one year group at a time to exercise free-range play, or one class at a time, thus allowing an opportunity to see how accurate your initial assessment was.

7. Conclusion

The use of school sites for free-range play is encouraged as it allows pupils to experience a level of risk in a managed environment in line with current government, health and safety and local authority policies. It is accepted that injuries will occur, but the majority of these will be minor and happen in a place where support can quickly be obtained. OPAL schools must have evidence that their RAPID process is in place, demonstrating that they are making reasonable and appropriate efforts to balance risk and benefits arising in play.

Further information for play team members and supervisors – see the **Playwork Essentials booklet** (doc 5.1); Risk benefit assessment (page 31) and Ranging supervision of play (p.34), including ‘Heads up Playwork’.