

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the second edition of *The Busker's Guide to Risk* – and for those of you who are used to these little books by now, I'm sure you'll agree with me that starting off with a few jokes is not at all out of keeping...so here goes...

Have you heard the one about the children who were banned from making daisy chains in case they ate them?

Or the school that stopped doing egg and spoon races in case a child dropped an egg and then turned out to be allergic to it?

Or what about the children who weren't allowed to play with cardboard boxes because they were a fire risk? (The boxes, that is, not the children...although any day now...!)



Risk – it's all a bit of a laugh really, isn't it?!

And there's more...(as that famous comedian used to say!)... Children who are not allowed to touch each other in the school playground in case it leads to a fight, children who can't play with toilet rolls in case

they catch some sort of dreadful disease from them, children who are not allowed to play conkers without wearing some sort of NASA-approved protective eye furniture, children who are stopped from digging in the nursery garden because of the risk of e-coli, children who have elastic taken away in case they strangle each other with it...and don't even get me started on the subject of microwaving eggboxes...

Laugh out loud? Well, I would – if any of those were actually jokes – you know, like those urban myths that get passed around and exaggerated with every re-telling... But here's the punchline – they're not. All of those seemingly ludicrous things have really happened – to children whom you and I know, up and down the UK, in a neighbourhood near you – all in the name of *health and safety*.

But come off it, I hear you cry, this stuff is all ludicrous – where's your sense of humour gone, Shelly? Surely when those sort of headlines turn up, those of us who work in children's play can all laugh heartily at the fact that the world's gone mad and *those people* who are making those daft decisions really do need their heads testing – after all, we know better – don't we?

Well, yes, most of the time. And yes – sort of. Or maybe yes – in theory, but... And that little three-letter word is where all the trouble starts...*but*. And so for me, that's where the laughing stops. Because, folks, this is now getting serious. Deadly serious – and I really do mean that.

You see (and forgive me for stating the blindingly obvious here, but I do hope you'll agree that it really can't be said too many times), children need risk in their lives. Because if children don't experience risk, then they don't learn how to make decisions about risk. And if they don't learn how to make decisions about risk, then they can't take responsibility for those decisions. And if they don't know how to take responsibility... well, you can fill in your own punchline here – me, I'm off before that generation rules the world!

Don't ask me to prove any of this here, by the way. Not to say that it can't be done – it's just that you won't get academic research in a *Busker's Guide* (shame on you for even wondering!). But I'm confident enough of what I've said in the above paragraph to stand up and be counted. Even my grandmother, whose only knowledge of childhood theory comes from her own experience of having had children, grandchildren and, now, great-grandchildren, often talks about how her great-grandchildren aren't allowed to do things in the school playground any more and how this can't be good for them.

So if my grandmother knows this, and I know it – and, let's face it, we sort of all know it *really*, don't we – why do we, as professionals who work with children, sometimes struggle to do something about it?

Well, one of the reasons is because we're scared. We're scared of taking the risk that, by letting children take risks, something awful might happen – to the

children, and also, if we're absolutely honest with ourselves, to us.

Those of us who have worked with children for a while now have seen adult fear about children taking risks in their play far outstrip the fear actually experienced by children as they climb trees, light fires and randomly wave sticks in the air (often surrounded by a slightly threatening posse of adults all crying *Don't do that, you'll poke somebody's eye out!*). Fear of children hurting themselves or each other, fear about *what the parents will say* when Johnny comes home with a gash in his knee, fear of legislation and fear of litigation are all given far too often as excuses for not letting children play.



But there is also another fear that we adults need to bring out into the light and give a good old airing – a fear which is so insidious that it often remains unspoken when any discussion about risk takes place. It's the fear that says *what if...* and sticks in the back of our heads as a terrifying possibility that might one day become a reality; it's the fear that says *not me!* and lodges in the front of our heads to prevent us from taking any action; it's the fear of *them*, those nameless, faceless authorities who tell us how it should be and what will happen to us down dark alleyways if it isn't...

You know *them* – well, actually, you probably don't. I say this because, when I ask on training courses, nobody seems to know who *they* are – despite everybody knowing about *them* and what *they* think... *They* are the people who say that children can't play with eggboxes, *they* are the ones who say that children must not play out in the snow, *they* make us give children 20-minute lectures on the dangers of playing outside so that when they do finally get into the 'environmental area' they are too scared witless to do anything that might be classed as vaguely interesting or enjoyable...

And yet we still don't know who *they* are...*they* have no names. Now that is scary.

But the point is (and this is truly terrifying – be afraid, be very afraid...), *they* don't actually have to exist in order to take the blame. Just the fact that *they* might be out there is usually enough to scare us all into clamping down on all those really fun – but ever

so slightly potentially dangerous – things that children might want to do when playing. *They* is the term we usually use when we want to put the blame for not allowing children to take risks at someone else's (very securely locked and firmly bolted) door.

In other words, it's the fear of taking responsibility that prevents us from taking responsibility for risk. It's funny (or is it?) that in a culture where adults currently moan about children and young people being unable to take responsibility, we adults model so brilliantly how not to take responsibility when it comes to risk in play. There is a tendency to adopt not so much the precautionary principle as the nuclear method – stop children doing anything that might possibly involve any level of risk and then they won't get hurt and we won't get sued. Bad news for lawyers, no doubt – but even worse news for children.

Because what we adults who work in children's play need to get to grips with is that it's not up to *them* (those mysterious shadowy figures who might do something unspeakable to us if so much as one hair on Johnny's precious head is harmed) to make decisions about what levels of risk are acceptable for the children we work with – it's down to us. We need to do that stand up and be counted thing – face down those demons about what could, might, possibly happen one day in a very specific set of circumstances, and focus instead on how to take responsibility for allowing children to play as freely as possible in our

settings – which means playing in a way which will inevitably involve taking risks.

The good news is that, as the Further Reading section shows, a lot more has been written about the importance of children being able to take risks in their play since the first edition of this book was published in 2008. Later in the same year, the 2002 version of *Managing Risk in Play Provision* was revised, with a further edition published in 2012 (see the Further Reading section). Endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the 2008 version of *Managing Risk in Play Provision* introduced the phrase 'risk–benefit assessment' to describe the process of weighing up the benefits of play against the risk of serious harm coming to children. In the first edition of this *Busker's Guide to Risk* I used the phrase *risk benefit analysis* to describe the process of assessing risk against play value, which had seemed to convince participants on training courses to think about the benefits of waving sticks around, rather than just proceeding straight to an automatic ban! However, now that the phrase *risk–benefit assessment* is widely recognised as part of the overall risk assessment process in play settings, I've changed 'risk benefit analysis' to 'risk–benefit assessment' in this second edition. (By the way, *Managing Risk in Play Provision* briefly mentions *dynamic risk assessment* to describe a process which I called *speed-of-light risk assessment* in the first edition

of this book, but I think *speed-of-light risk assessment* has more of a *Busker's* ring to it, so I've kept it in this one!)

The other phrase that has turned up since the first edition is *risky play*. Now that's not something you'll find in this edition for two reasons. First of all, because, as we'll talk about later on, all play can be risky for some children on some level at some time in some circumstances, so really *risky play* is just play (as we know it in *Busker's Guides*, anyway). And second, what some adults mean by *risky play* is a form of adult-organised activity, perhaps better described as *adventurous play*. Providing activities can of course have many benefits for children, but it's not something that we playwork people do an awful lot of – we generally leave it up to the kids to decide how they play, rather than organise specific activities for specific purposes. So this second edition doesn't do *risky play*, it does *risk in play* instead.

Maybe at the time of going to print with this second edition of *The Busker's Guide to Risk*, risk is no longer the four-letter word that it once was in some settings – and for that we should be grateful. However, the battle against those demons I mentioned earlier isn't won yet. Well-meaning adults are still spending their weekends microwaving bits of cardboard so that children can play with them safely, and children are still being prevented from running in school playgrounds

(honestly, I ask you – what else are self-respecting eight-year-olds supposed to do in playgrounds?!).

So, what do we need to go into battle against those demons? Well, a deep commitment to the importance of play in children's lives for a start, plus a bit of courage. We also need knowledge – and the confidence to use it.

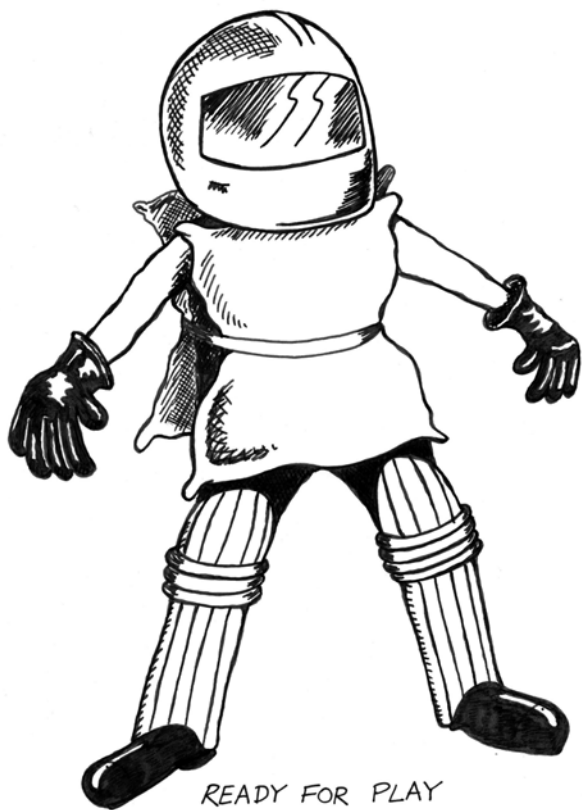
So – *The Busker's Guide to Risk*, anybody? Could be a bit of a giggle...

Shelly Newstead

PS It's a convention in *Busker's Guides* that we don't normally use quotes from other sources – but given that this one is such an important topic with legislation to boot, it's probably better that you get the legal bits straight from the horse's mouth as it were! So anything that appears in 'quotation marks' comes from *Risk assessment: A Brief Guide to Controlling Risks in the Workplace* from the HSE, which replaced *Five Steps to Risk Assessment* (on which the first edition of this book was based) in 2014. In case you don't already have *Risk Assessment: A Brief Guide to Controlling Risks in the Workplace*, it can be downloaded for free from the HSE website – download it, devour it and learn to love it...!

PPS It's become a bit of a tradition with our *Busker's Guides* readers that they get in touch to tell us what they thought of the one they just read, how they

used it, or even tell us some funny stories about things that have happened in their setting (which sometimes end up as cartoons in other *Busker's Guides!*). If you'd like to join in the conversation you'd be very welcome – get in touch at info@commonthreads.org.uk.



READY FOR PLAY