

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL)

How to Guidance

What is OPAL Play?

OPAL play is an external programme that is mentor supported to try and improve areas of school play to improve on the quality, if you go through the official programme. The overall project is to encourage children to play outside with items donated from the local community to encourage exploration and develop risk-based skills.

INTRODUCTION

To assist schools to meet their obligations under the relevant legislation Workforce Health and Safety have created this guidance to ensure that OPAL play is safe so far as is reasonably practicable for the children, while still retaining the risk benefit for pupils to learn and develop their risk understanding in a safe environment.

OPAL play is a work-related activity and as such will fall under the school's accident

incident reporting procedure, unfortunately it is not excluded from these duties as play.

Supervising staff should encourage self-regulation and peer support by the children to manage their own safe play e.g. the reporting of any equipment they break during the session. Help children risk assess themselves - if I have broken an item should I continue playing with it? Make sure any risk assessments are inclusive so that all children can participate safely and meaningfully so as not feel excluded from activities.

OPAL Risk Management:

WES and Workforce H&S Inspections have identified concerns with OPAL play implementation. While the programme's benefits are clear, some schools have used donated items that were not fit for purpose, potentially breaching health and safety legislation.

Legal Requirement

All activities must be risk assessed under health and safety legislation



Risk Assessment Does Not Remove All Risk

Although a risk assessment does ensure safety and a reduction in risk, it will never remove all risk.



Further Guidance

Please refer to the risk assessment guidance on the schools a to z or the hse webpage.



Risk Assessment Template

WCC schools should use the WCC template for opal risk assessments, inline with the risk assessment standard and employers' expectations.



Why We Risk Assess

- Provide safe, suitable equipment
- put reasonable controls in place
- prevent accidents and incidents

Children will still interact with items and activities in the same WAY; we have just reduced risk level.



Review Regularly

Review risk assessments at a minimum of annually or sooner if required.



This could be after:



an incident



change of
equipment
or site



change of
people running
the activity

Donated Items and Environmental Features

A system should be in place to inspect and review all donated items for children to play with, you should consider the following:

Item Condition

Are items in good condition and appropriate for the intended activity?



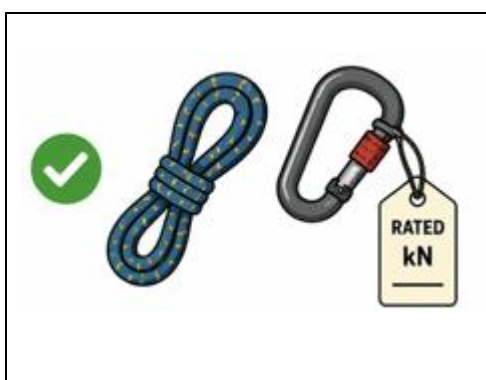
Item Markings

Do items have UKCA, EU, or BS markings?



Rope, Climbing, Support Items

Are ropes, carabiners properly rated and labeled?



Trees

Have trees been inspected for suitability before installing rope swings and has competent advice been sought?



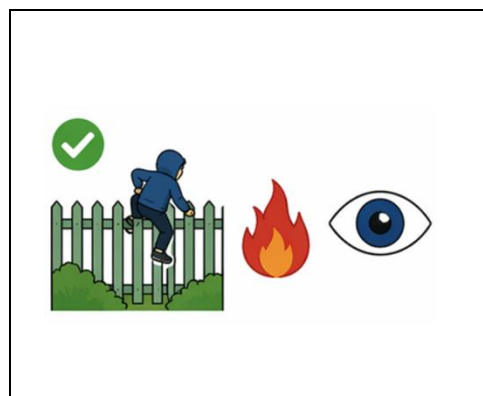
Appropriate Items

Are items like office chairs or car parts appropriate for play? ask what benefit do the items bring to childrens play?



Unwanted Attention

Will the items attract unwanted attention or risk security incidents such as arson, or pupils climbing over the fence.



Item Inspections

You do not necessarily need to record each item inspection, but arrangements for the collection, and introduction of new donated items should be recorded. This could include who collected the item, from whom the item was collected and where is the item usually stored. Then a quick run through of the inspection process, such as looking for faults, markings, and understanding how children will interact with the item and if it is suitable. Any items not suitable should be disposed of through your local waste disposal arrangements. This will demonstrate that each item has gone through a process to ensure the safety of pupils, while still giving the risk benefit to those children.

Acceptable Items

• Tubes
• Buckets, ropes
• Fabric (Sheets, brightly coloured fabric)
• Cardboard boxes
• Chalks
• Tyres
• Old Suitcases
• Dressing up clothes
• Foam sheets
• Wooden pallets, guttering
• Mud kitchens



Unacceptable Items

• Items with sharp edges (broken glass, rusty metal, exposed nails)
• Items that could be easily broken (certain types of plastic, fragile materials)
• Items that could be a choking hazard
• Items that could be used to injure people (chair leg)
• Porous items that are difficult to clean



Environment Preparation:

It is recommended by OPAL to have separate zones across your playground to ensure activities are safely segregated from each other. Ensure you have clearly defined zones for the different types of play, rough and tumble, creative, construction etc. It is important to ensure no tunnels are created and any digging is monitored to prevent deep excavations. Add the zones into your plan for supervision of the areas – they may need more supervision due to the activities and equipment than ‘normal’ play areas.

Inspections of equipment is advised for all types of items provided by employees and OPAL equipment should be no different, how else will you ensure they are suitable and safe? A daily inspection of all OPAL equipment and how they are utilised should be conducted and recorded on a simple checklist a template is available at [appendix 1](#). This will demonstrate that any unsuitable or broken equipment has been removed from the area. This should then be disposed of by following local procedures.

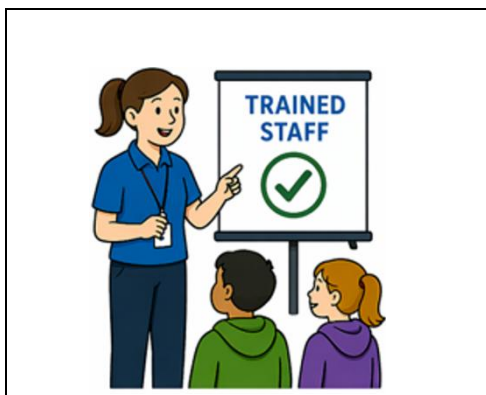
It is recommended that all OPAL equipment is appropriately stored and made secure so that unauthorised use is restricted. Any items deemed unsuitable should be isolated from children’s play areas and labelled to ensure no confusion on use by others such as members of staff.

Schools should also encourage parents to provide suitable clothing for the time of year and weather or investigate providing items that can be borrowed by pupils while on site.

Supervision and Training

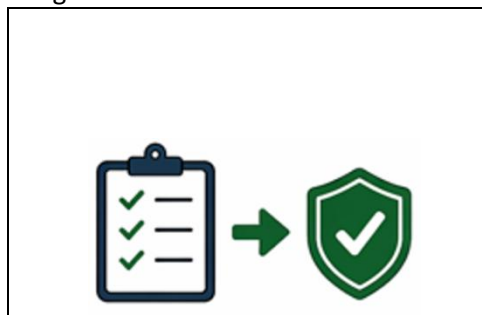
Training

All staff who supervise opal play areas should have received adequate training to ensure suitable supervision is in place.



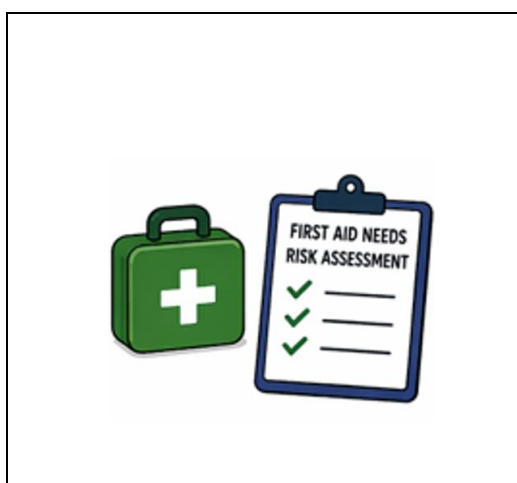
Risk Identification Training

The workforce health and safety service provides risk assessment training that covers indepth aspects around risk management. anyone conducting risk assessments needs to complete this training.



First Aid Needs Assessment

OPAL activities need to be included in your sites first Aid Needs Assessment. wcc have a template for you to use.



Positive Risk Taking

Balance of Benefit

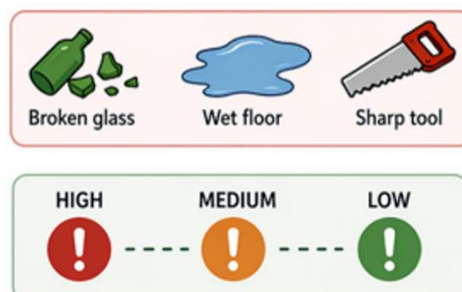
STAFF SHOULD ENCOURAGE PUPILS TO UNDERTAKE POSITIVE RISK TAKING SO THAT STUDENTS CAN UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A HAZARD AND RISK IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.



Hazard And Risk

HAZARD: SOMETHING WITH THE POTENTIAL TO CAUSE HARM.

RISK: THE CHANCE HIGH, MEDIUM, OR LOW OF THAT ITEM CAUSING HARM.



WCC TRAINING COURSES CAN BE FOUND [HERE IN THE SCHOOLS A TO Z](#) TRAINING SECTION.

Emergency Procedures:

Schools should already have emergency procedures in place for various foreseeable incidents. OPAL activities should be no different. Foreseeable incidents with equipment, activities should be planned for and documented so that staff can take sensible actions.

This could include:

- Clear and practiced procedures around accidents and injuries, this should be reported following your employers' internal procedures as well. Any incidents/accidents that meet [RIDDOR](#) requirements will also need to be reported to the HSE, via the H&S team.
- Severe weather such as heat waves, cold spells or heavy rain. An example of such could be a recorded check during a cold spell to see if the area is suitable for play activities and postponing the use until it has thawed.
- Incidents should also be recorded on to the employer's accident reporting system.

In short ensure OPAL links in and has been considered with your current procedures, such as first aid provision and communication methods to raise the alarm and or call for assistance.

Community and Parental Engagement:

Engage parents and the local community in OPAL activities. Use existing feedback and consultation systems to address concerns and gather suggestions.

Consider sending regular updates and a template letter to inform parents about OPAL activities and safety measures.

Further Advice Contact Workforce Health and Safety Team:

Email: healthandsafety@warwickshire.gov.uk

Phone: 01926 476803

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Protective Marking:	Not protectively marked

Appendix 1 OPAL Checklist

OPAL Equipment and Toys Daily Inspection Checklist

Location: _____

Date: _____

Completed by: _____

Weather Conditions: _____

Daily Pre-Use Inspection

Please tick ✓ if satisfactory or X if action required.

Check Item	✓ / X	Comments / Action Required
Pathways and play areas are free from obvious trip hazards		
Equipment and toys are in safe condition and suitable for use		
No broken, sharp, damaged, or splintered items present		
Loose parts (crates, tyres, pipes, pallets, etc.) are stable and safe		
Wheeled items (bikes, scooters, wheelbarrows, trikes) are in good condition		
Handles, pedals, seats, wheels and steering function correctly		
No exposed nails, screws, sharp edges or protrusions		
Ropes, fabrics and den-building materials are free from excessive wear or damage		
Water play equipment is clean and safe to use with fresh water.		
Sand, mud kitchen and digging areas appear safe and free from contamination		
No evidence of animal faeces, litter, broken glass, needles or hazardous substances		

Check Item	✓ / X	Comments / Action Required
Storage areas are tidy and accessible		
Items are not overloaded or stacked unsafely		
Play structures and fixed equipment appear secure and stable		
Any previous defects have been removed from use or repaired		

Defects Identified

Item	Defect	Action Taken

Declaration

I have completed a visual inspection of the OPAL equipment, toys and play environment and have taken appropriate action where defects or hazards were identified.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Guidance for Staff

Remove from use immediately if:

- Broken or damaged equipment could cause injury.
- Sharp edges, splinters, exposed fixings or unstable structures are identified.
- Equipment is contaminated (e.g. animal faeces, broken glass, hazardous waste).
- Defects cannot be controlled safely.

Report defects to: ____ *Insert Staff Members Name* _____

This checklist should take no more than 5 minutes to complete and supports the school's OPAL risk-benefit approach by identifying significant hazards while allowing children access to rewarding play opportunities.