



PlayAction Guide

CHILD PROTECTION IN A PLAY SETTING



WHAT IS CHILD PROTECTION AWARENESS?

Those who operate activities and facilities for children and young people are asked to accept a tremendous responsibility when they receive into their care the safety and wellbeing the lives of the young. Many organisations will have e.g. Health & Safety Policies and Procedures, Equal Opportunities Policies, Disabled Access Policies and Practices. What has surprised Fair Play for Children is both the large number of workers, paid and voluntary, who are not aware of their organisations' child protection procedures - whether they exist, and if they do, where to find them and what they are. Yet such Policies and Practices would seem to be axiomatic for organisations serving the needs of the young.

Child Protection Awareness is the first requirement - this needs to start from the management level of any project, and consists of two basic elements:

- the safety of the operating environment, including physical aspects, suitability of those working with children
- responding to concerns raised by or about children and young people using the facility.

Managements therefore need to understand fully what they are asking their workers, paid and voluntary, to undertake from a child protection perspective.

Fair Play for Children's advice is that a first step, therefore, is for managements to accept ownership of the issue of child protection - this will incorporate acceptance that the organisation needs a Child Protection Policy, and that this Policy can only be effective through its being properly communicated to and understood by those working directly with children and young people who use the facility.

CHILD PROTECTION - ADOPTING A POLICY

Formulating a Child Protection Policy is an important role of any children's activity management. It will cover:

- Recruitment, Training and Induction
- Suitability of Workers, paid and voluntary
- The needs of especially vulnerable children and young people
- Suitability and nature of physical play environment
- Mechanisms for Reporting Concerns
- How Children's Concerns and Expressions of Need Are Perceived and Responded To.

Fair Play for Children has published **A Model Child Protection Policy**, details of availability on the final page of this Fact Sheet. It covers in considerable detail the foregoing issues, drawing on the experience e.g. of its model project, policies drawn up by other organisations etc. Fair Play recommends that child-protection policies are reviewed at least every two years at management level.

RECRUITMENT, TRAINING AND INDUCTION

The impression given to applicants for paid and voluntary positions which afford substantial access to children concerning child protection awareness and practices is crucial. If it is clear that the organisation takes



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this matter seriously from recruitment onwards, and that it permeates the whole rationale of a project, from that stage throughout employment/ volunteering, the applicant will know that the organisation has adopted a "Safe and Alert" attitude. Managements will need to ensure that the induction process impresses on the playworker the vital importance of acting within the child protection policy of the project, and the induction process will need to signpost clearly the steps to be taken e.g. where a worker has a concern about a child, or where a child says or does something which might be a form of "disclosure".

SUITABILITY OF WORKERS

In recent years it has become rather fashionable to underplay the importance of checking the suitability of people who wish to work with children and young people. Part of the rationale is that police checks, for example, may lull managements and workers into a sense of false security about a person. "S/He's been checked, so that's OK, we don't need to do any more about child protection." This is an understandable caution - s/he may not have been caught, or s/he may have started to abuse after joining a project. The necessity to reduce the opportunities for abuse to occur within a project or because of its enabling access to children and young people is the key issue. But, within that reduction of opportunity strategy, of course police checks are an important element of that strategy. At least one knows of the applicant thes/he has not been convicted thus far. In some years of operating within a national pilot for police checks, Fair Play processed over 4,000 applications - we have not yet had one sex offender or other such unsuitable person apply. There is a caveat, and that is, "so far as we know" which leads onto the issue of asking a crucial question "Is this applicant who s/he says s/he is?" Fair Play has some advice about identification - that applicants should produce e.g. a birth certificate or passport or other suitable document to firmly identify.



Police checks are not all - we also advocate social services checks, medical and personal references - more details are given in our publication Child Protection in a Playwork Setting.

THE NEEDS OF ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Such children and young people may include those with a communication problem, with learning disabilities, those who live in a residential homes setting, those whose home and personal lives are creating severe emotional pressures, and even children and young people whose desire to excel in e.g. a sport or an art makes them vulnerable through their talent to plausible people. The individual child and the setting both need to be taken into account. Where projects are adopting an inclusive play approach - i.e. an attitude to try to accommodate all abilities - the child protection issues must be carefully weighed in terms of ensuring the right resources are in place. For example, if a child who does not communicate by normal speech is present regularly, is there someone who can "speak"/"Listen" in terms appropriate to that child's experience?

SUITABILITY AND NATURE OF PHYSICAL PLAY ENVIRONMENT

When a management is considering to operate an activity, the layout of the activity premises and site needs to be considered in terms of children's safety, including from a child protection viewpoint. Therefore, not only should a **risk assessment** include consideration of any physical risks, but Fair Play suggests a **child protection audit** - that is, the site, buildings, disposition of rooms is looked at in terms of child protection concerns. For example, how many rooms, how large, what activities are proposed, what will be the disposition of workers, how will they be supervised, are there characteristics of the site which could afford inappropriate opportunity? This may affect the staffing ratio very profoundly.



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REPORTING CONCERNS

The one thing any management wants to avoid is the situation where they are criticised because, although workers had concerns, there were no clear and identified channels through which this could occur. From time to time, anyone working with children and young people may be told things by them, overhear conversations between children, observe behaviour or changes of behaviour, perceive what appears to be inappropriate behaviour (with an eye to age etc), or have concerns raised in other ways. Managements need to be sure that their workers (paid and voluntary) know to whom and how they must relate their concerns. Often this will be a senior staff member or someone from the management. That person will need to have a clear mandate as to when to relate concerns onwards from the project e.g. to social services, the police etc.

It is very important that adequate records of concerns, incidents, accidents are kept, including for child protection reasons. Again signposting to such mechanisms is most crucial.

HOW CHILDREN'S CONCERNS AND EXPRESSIONS OF NEED ARE PERCEIVED AND RESPONDED TO

Disclosures by children about e.g. strangers are rare. So the likelihood of a child complaining e.g. about someone within a project is rare, especially where there is a sound and well-observed child protection policy in being. More commonly, children may reveal issues giving cause for concern that all is not right in family terms.

Young people attend other facilities, often sporting, and there is the possibility that they may talk about what happens there. Play workers may find themselves the recipients of confidences precisely because we operate in ways which engender children's confidence.



The Play worker needs to appreciate, as most do, that children communicate their worries, concerns etc in a multitude of ways - in fact, direct verbal expression is less likely e.g. than ... behaviour changes or activity giving cause for concern, perhaps a piece of art work which gives rise to some thought, "inappropriate" activity or knowledge beyond a child's years, flinching when a hand or arm is raised innocently as if scared of being struck, unusual depression, unexplained bruising burns cuts injuries etc.

Above all, children and young people who are in need or trouble always deserve and need someone who will **LISTEN**, who will not make judgements, who will not make false promises about keeping a secret when this is not possible, and who will not reject what they are saying as untrue. A troubled child or young person will need to be reassured that their needs are being put first, not being put second fiddle to other concerns. The Play worker is in a unique position in terms of sympathetic environment and of TRUST.

CRIMINAL RECORDS CHECKS

Fair Play advocates: **CRIMINAL RECORDS CHECKS** on anyone wishing to work in situations of substantial access to children and young people under 16. The current situation is that:

1. Those statutory, voluntary and commercial organisations running child-care activities where under-8s are present in sessions which last more than 2 hours a day and for more than 5 days in a year, must be registered by Ofsted (through its Child Care Registration units), which will mean they will be subject to Criminal Records checks, Social Services checks and other forms of vetting.



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2. Those working in the statutory youth service will be checked by their local authority employers.
3. Those who work with children aged 8 and over in child care settings where there are no under 8s present will, from 2003, be liable to have to produce a **Certificate of Suitability** issued by Ofsted. This is a new requirement, details of which are not at the time of publication finalised. The Certificate will, however, involve a Criminal Records check.
4. Those working with children in non-child care settings (sports, junior clubs, arts and drama groups, and many others) can gain access to Criminal Records checks either by registering with the **Criminal Records Bureau (CRB)** or, as in the case of many not able or willing to do this, by submitting requests for such checks via a CRB Umbrella Body such as Fair Play for Children. This process also ensures checks are made against the Protection of Children Act List (POCAL) which is a legal requirement if employing a childcare worker and is also open to others employing people working with children and young people.

Fair Play also believes that, where volunteers and staff are working with children, they should be checked against Social Services records for details of previous involvement with children and young people (including child-minding, childcare activities, fostering and children taken into care). This only occurs presently where children are in a childcare setting and thus liable to registration by Ofsted.

FAIR PLAY FOR CHILDREN'S CHILD PROTECTION IN PLAY PROGRAMME



Fair Play's Programme has been devised over several years at the request of its membership to help them devise appropriate policies and practices and to share information, ideas etc.

It consists of:

- * **Child Protection in a Playwork Setting** [£10, £7 members] - 60 pages of advice, information, good practice, publications list etc
- * a **Model Child Protection Policy** [contact Fair Play for price details] for helping groups formulate their own policies [also to be on Fair Play's Web Site]
- * **Criminal Records Checks** via the national scheme
- * **Training events**, content and costs tailored to needs and means
- * **an Information and Advisory Service**
- * **A model project**, one of Fair Play's member organisations

which has been developing good practice for evaluation and development

FURTHER INFORMATION

Fair Play for Children: Fair Play, Freepost, Bognor Regis PO21 1YZ, Tel: 0845-330 7635, e-mail: fairplay@arunet.co.uk Web Site: www.arunet.co.uk/fairplay/
Contact for details of Training, Publications, advice, Criminal Records checks etc. Fair Play's pack (above) has an extensive reading list and other organisations' details.

Ofsted Childcare Registration National Advisory Line: 0870-601 4771

Also, Local **Social Services** will have advice and information on good practice in child protection in their areas. See your local telephone directory under your local authority - this will either be your City, Unitary or County Council.