

## Important notes

All schools must undertake an assessment of the risks related to the regular and occasional activities that take place within the school. These activities include those involving teaching and non-teaching staff, children, parents and other visitors to the school.

We firmly believe that the current demand for risk assessment documents should not be seen as another piece of bureaucratic nonsense instituted by a government with nothing better to do. Such a view leads either to an ignoring of risks, or the generation of a set of documents which are formally adopted by the school or college but then shelved and ignored. If members of the school don't know what the documents say then the documents lose their value.

The whole point of having written risk assessment documents is that they clearly present an analysis of the school at work, and the correct mode of operation in certain circumstances. The benefits of such an approach are numerous, not least including:

- **A clear statement that this primary school takes its responsibilities for the well being of children, staff and visitors seriously.** If, sadly, an accident does happen there may well be an enquiry. If during the course of that enquiry it becomes clear that the school had well-written risk assessment documents in place, of which all staff were well aware, and which were acted upon, then the enquiry is much more likely to find in favour of the school. If the school is reduced to saying, "we always take great care" but has no policies in place which explain how that statement is translated into practice, then those enquiring into the school's approach are far less likely to find in favour of the school.
- **The generation of a hierarchy of risks.** This allows the school to ascertain which risks are so serious that money should be spent on reducing them, and which ones can be left.
- **Compliance with the law.** Risk assessment documents acknowledge the numerous laws and directives which relate to the everyday activities of school life. Undertaking the risk assessments brings home to staff the need to abide by these laws and directives. Failure to comply can lead to fines, imprisonment, civil action, and debarment from work with children.
- **A recognition that not all risks have to be dealt with.** Inherent in the risk assessment approach to schooling is the view that some risks are so trivial that one does not have to consider them. This view is often not clearly understood by all members of staff.
- **Better education.** Risk assessment documents can ensure that teachers and others in school do follow best practice at all times when working with children. Risks are everywhere in life, and being involved in a risk assessment at work can lead to a greater understanding of the risks involved in other aspects of life.
- **Reduction of accidents.** Most accidents can be avoided if a proper risk assessment is undertaken and the results implemented. It is no longer acceptable in any walk of life to wait for an accident to happen, and then take steps to stop it happening again. The government and the public at large now demand action to ensure that more serious accidents in schools are not allowed to happen.
- **Improvement of conditions for administrators and teachers and others in the school.** Just as children deserve a good education, so teachers and administrators deserve reasonable working conditions. Again this problem is only confronted by the development

of policies which specifically look at the work place of teachers and administrators and the issues that arise from the use of a particular building.

This volume covers a large variety of situations and not every one will be applicable to every primary school. But schools are places where the unexpected can happen. Children, by their very nature do unexpected things. It may be that the children in your school are reminded regularly not to run in the corridors, but that in itself is no guarantee that they will always proceed at walking pace. We now have to consider what might happen, as well as what we have told children should happen. We cannot cover every possibility in our risk assessment, but we certainly should aim to cover likely scenarios.

### **Making risk assessment benefit the school**

For any risk assessment policies to work properly the policies need to be developed and shared by those whom they affect. This book should therefore be seen as a starting point – a set of policies, documents and ideas which will, in some cases, be applicable directly, but which in many cases will need to be developed step by step and integrated into the work of all those involved in the school.

To make this happen everyone needs to be involved, not just in reading the risk assessments but in helping to evolve them for the specific requirements of your primary school.

To enable this to work this book is supplied as a photocopy master and as a text on CD. The CD files may be run through any standard word processor for use within the school.

We hope that you find this volume helpful.

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# Part I: General Principles

## 1. The Risk and the Hazard

A *risk* is the likelihood of an event occurring which will allow a hazard to be manifested.

A *hazard* is the potential to cause harm.

Thus a hazard exists only as a possibility – but if the risk of an event occurring that will allow the hazard to be manifested is reduced, then the existence of the hazard may not be of major concern. All stairways are a hazard – there is always the potential for falling down them and breaking a leg. A barrier at the top and bottom of the stairway which effectively stops anyone using the stairway reduces the risk of anyone breaking a leg because the number of people using the stairway will now drop to zero. But the hazard of the stairway still exists.

Thus the school might have in a chemistry laboratory some acid which, if touched, could be extremely harmful. This is the hazard. The risk of a child touching the acid is reduced if:

- The door is kept locked when no teacher is present
- The windows contain unbreakable glass, or have bars over them, to stop a break in
- The acid is not stored in the lab but somewhere else where children are never present.

In all cases the hazard of the acid is the same, but the risk is reduced.

Similarly a flammable liquid presents a fire hazard but the risk of this occurring can be low if it is stored correctly. The risk only becomes high in specific circumstances. If these circumstances are highly unlikely to occur then the risk assessment can quite reasonably assert that the risk is low and no further action is needed, even though the hazard remains.

This consideration of the risk and the hazard as two separate concepts emphasises the fact that in risk assessment we are concerned very much with the real world. We are not concerned with events that might perhaps happen once in a lifetime (which is how analyses tend to develop if we are only considering hazards), but with events that are likely given the surrounding circumstances.

## 2. Consequences of events

In considering hazards and risks we are reminded that we are concerned with the consequences of events, and the potential consequences from an event must be incorporated into an evaluation.

Most consequences of events are restricted to a single individual. If a teacher is required to lift a computer monitor the consequences in terms of a back strain are limited to that teacher. But some situations can give rise to an event which affects a number of people within the immediate vicinity. At its most extreme an event could endanger a large number of individuals beyond the immediate area. The collapse of the floor of a school hall on the first floor of a building could endanger the lives of those in the hall and those in rooms below. The resultant shock waves and damage to support structures could endanger the lives of everyone in the rest of the building.