

Understanding Risk

WARNING. Do not read while operating heavy machinery. As with all advice, consult your physician, parents, or religious adviser prior to modifying your daily routine. Edges of this leaflet may cause paper cuts.



HOW TO STOP WORRYING ABOUT THE WRONG THINGS

We live longer and more safely than any other generation before us but we often think that we are surrounded by frightful dangers. In the United Kingdom, usage of the term "at risk" in newspapers increased ninefold between 1994 and 2000.¹

Our fears have been increased by food scares such as BSE. Poorly researched articles in the media about ordinary household products have given rise to concerns about "gender-bender" substances, even though these substances occur naturally in peas, beans, sprouts and celery. When it comes to the highly sensitive question of child safety, sensational media coverage of rare events such as child abduction has the undesirable effect of trapping countless children in their own homes, as parents don't allow them out. Yet children must learn that life has risks.

As we grow up we learn to assess risks and how to deal with them. For example, we all are aware that driving a car can be dangerous but we take the risk because a car is so convenient. Many people have a fear of flying but cars are in fact much more dangerous. Because so many Americans refused to fly and instead drove their cars in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the act of terrorism led to more than 1,200 extra traffic deaths, in effect prolonging and magnifying the scope of the terrorists' act.²

We tend to focus on the "darker" side of risk – seeing the uncertainty, the possibility of failure, of injury. As parents and teachers, however, it is important to acknowledge the positive aspects of risk as well – the possibility of discovering that one is adventurous, daring, brave, strong, confident and successful.³

If you make an environment hazard free it becomes challenge free and then 'children have less experience in making decisions on their own, less opportunity to assess their own personal frontiers and less opportunity to gain confidence and self-esteem through coping independently'.³ Children who are physically confident feel more competent in general and have more positive social status not only during early childhood, but through middle childhood and adolescence.

WHY CHILDREN TAKE RISKS

Every child occasionally does things that seem to invite accidents. Although parents may find such behaviour nerve-racking, for children of all ages it is a necessary step toward developing skills and self-confidence. Through risk taking, children come to understand their own strengths and limitations and, at the same time, gain valuable knowledge about the outside world.

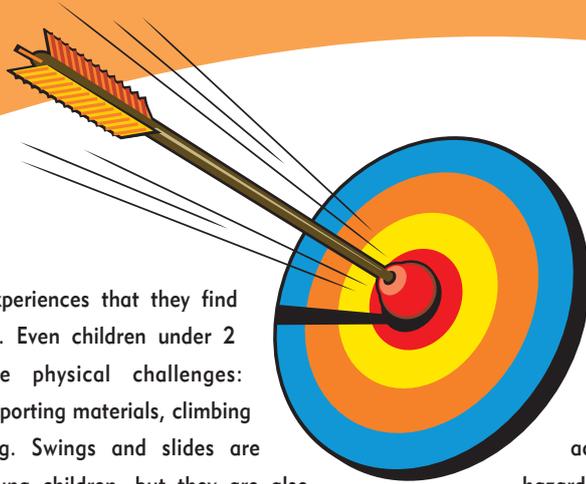
The reason young children may often be blind to danger is that their motor skills are usually more advanced than their powers of perception and logic. A two-year-old who climbs a stepladder to reach for something on a shelf hasn't developed the ability to judge distances in order to negotiate the climb down, or the ability to foresee the upcoming problem. Similarly, a five-year-old may have enough coordination to ride a two-wheeler, but will lack the judgement to know whether there is time to make it across the road as an oncoming car approaches.

At around 15 to 18 months, boys and girls become increasingly able to engage in activities such as climbing, reaching and balancing, which they may not regard as risky. However, these activities help prepare them for risk taking later on.

¹ L.Lee. 2004. *100 most dangerous things in everyday life*. New York: Broadway/Random House.

² M. Sivak & M.J. Flannagan. 2003. Flying and driving after September 11. *American Scientist*, Jan.Feb.

³ A. Stephenson. 2003. Physical risk-taking: Dangerous or endangered? *Early Years*, vol. 23, pages 35-43.



Children often seek experiences that they find “scary” or challenging. Even children under 2 take on considerable physical challenges: negotiating steps, transporting materials, climbing onto a swing, running. Swings and slides are popular with these young children, but they are also sources of potentially “scary” experiences, as children summon the nerve to come down independently and then experiment with different ways of descending.

If intervention is needed, it is best to do it as calmly as possible. If a parent reveals too much anxiety, the child may get the idea that fear is necessary because danger is everywhere. This could undermine confidence or inhibit the child from trying something new or difficult in the future.

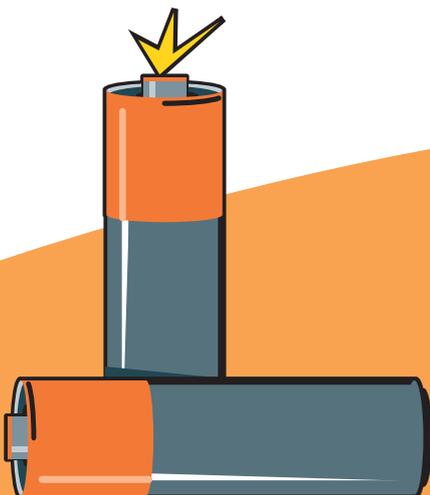
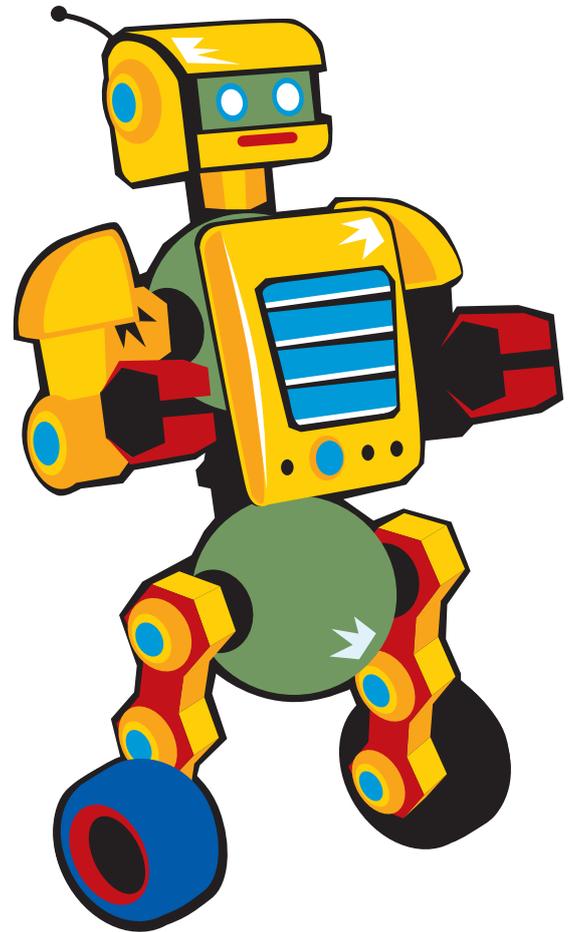
Parents need to respect risk taking as developmentally normal and, at the same time, monitor it for safety. When they do assert control, they should do so in an encouraging manner. For example, rather than forbidding a four-year-old to play on a metal playground slide because it's too tall, a mother might stand by the ladder to watch the child climb up, followed by a reminder to slide down feet first.

Similarly, if the child should have an accident and gets a scrape or bruise, the best thing for parents to do is not make too much of it. In the long run, a parent's anxiety doesn't help to soothe a child; it only increases the likelihood that the child will feel anxious, too.

‘Too often the concern to remove all hazards from a playground can inadvertently also lead to the removal of all opportunities for risk-taking’.⁴ There is a need to balance the requirement for safety with

the need to provide children with physical challenge. What is challenging for one child may be a hazard for another. Both in the planning of play spaces, and in the day-to-day supervision of them, it is important to distinguish clearly between activities that have an acceptable element of risk and others that present real hazard.

4 A. Stephenson. 2003. Physical risk-taking: Dangerous or endangered? *Early Years*, vol. 23, page 35.



SAFETY ALWAYS TOP PRIORITY

TOY SAFETY

Fortunately the safety record for toys in the U.K. is excellent. International toy safety standards identify potential hazards and build in safety features to protect children, especially babies and toddlers. There are various symbols that appear on toy packaging that are important to be aware of. Toys bearing the Lion Mark have been made to the highest standards currently in force in Britain and throughout the European Union.



SYMBOLS AND TOY SAFETY INFORMATION

Every toy must carry a CE mark to indicate that it has been made in conformity with the essential safety requirements of the European Toy Safety directive. It is an enforcement mark (not a sign of quality or safety) and ensures free movement of toys across Europe.



The Lion Mark was developed in 1988 by the BTHA to act as a consumer symbol denoting safety and quality. The Lion Mark also indicates adherence to the BTHA Code of Practice which includes rules covering toy advertising and counterfeiting.

Unlike the CE Mark, therefore, the Lion Mark is truly a consumer symbol. It means that consumers can be certain that a toy which bears the Lion Mark is safe and conforms to all relevant safety information.



This pictogram first appeared on toys in 1995 and means "Warning - do not give the toy to children less than three years, nor allow them to play with it." Details of the hazard will be given, e.g. "because of small parts".

This symbol will gradually replace the current warning "not suitable for children under 3 years", which has often been confused with age advice - discretionary guidelines used by the manufacturer to help the buyer match the product with a child's age, interest and ability.



WHAT SHOULD I DO?

- Look for the EU and LION MARK symbols.
- Heed the age labels on toys.
- Check for small parts, loose fur and ripped seams and sharp edges.
- Since the most serious play equipment injuries are from falls, make sure you have an impact-absorbing surface underneath, such as sand or wood chips.
- Always read and follow the instructions and warnings that accompany toys.

So while it is good to ensure your children's toys are safe, it is probably just as important to keep in mind common everyday risks, such as:

- Keep harmful products out of reach – painkillers, bleach, weed killers – i.e. in a locked cupboard.
- Beware of hot water – drinks or bath water, which can scald.
- Keep matches out of reach until you can teach children how to use them safely. Lighting a birthday candle with your supervision is a good way to start.
- Install a smoke alarm.
- Never leave a baby unattended in the bath.
- Install safety gates, window locks.
- Use child seats and cycle helmets correctly; keep to the speed limit.

- No matter how safety conscious you are, remember that toys on landings and stairs cause more accidents than the toys themselves.

- Take care of yourself

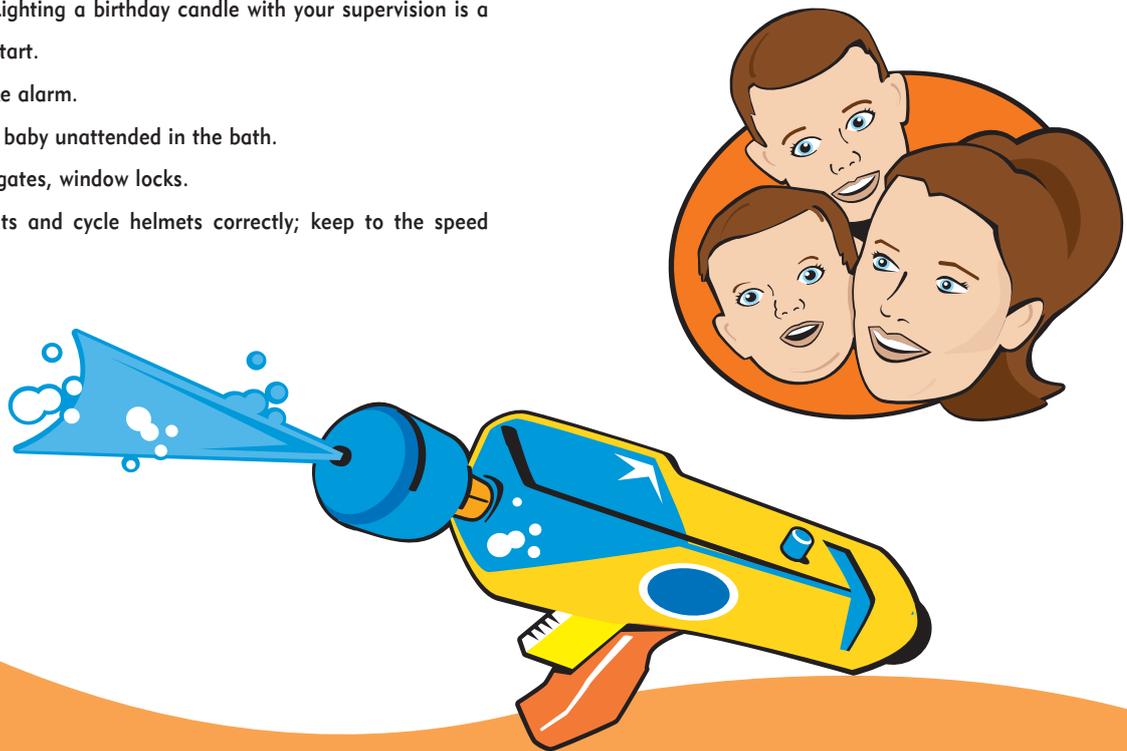
All parents are concerned to keep children safe, but we often neglect ourselves. By eating healthily, exercising regularly and avoiding too much alcohol or smoking in front of children, we not only help ourselves but set a good example for our children.

For those who want to know more about the safety of toys, which toys are appropriate for children of different ages and information on child safety in general:

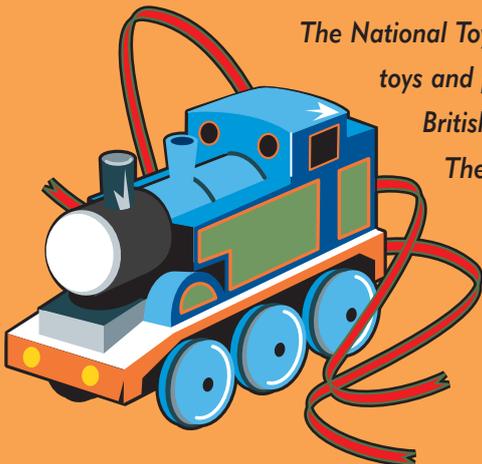
www.btha.co.uk

www.capt.org.uk

www.dti.gov.uk/homesafetynetwork



The National Toy Council is concerned with child welfare and promoting a sensible attitude towards toys and play. Its members include representatives of the Child Accident Prevention Trust, British Toy & Hobby Association, National Association of Toy & Leisure libraries, The Trading Standards Institute, BBC Worldwide, Kidscape, national press, academics, retailers and toy safety experts.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

BTHA, 80 Camberwell Road, London SE5 0EG

See all of the National Toy Council's leaflets on the internet at www.btha.co.uk

