

How safe is your setting?

*Protecting children from harm is every nursery's most vital duty, so you need to get health and safety right. **Laura West** offers her advice on ensuring your team's practice is up to scratch...*

There are many areas to think about when focusing on health and safety in your setting. These include a range of potential hazards inside and out that must be kept in mind. While not an exhaustive list, the following highlights some of the most commonly encountered issues...

HAZARDS INDOORS

Food - specifically cross contamination and allergies. Most nurseries have good procedures for the preparation of food and feeding children at mealtimes, but cross contamination is a big risk that people often forget. It can

be overcome by making sure all children are cleaned after mealtimes, removing clothing that is particle covered, and prompt housekeeping, including wiping tables, chairs, placements and in particular floors.

Fire - blocked fire exits and escape routes are a hazard we come across a lot, with the culprits often pushchairs, beds or large toys/activities. Make sure all your fire exits and routes are clearly marked, and that staff and parents are aware of them. Fire-fighting equipment should always be readily available - sometimes we see extinguishers used as coat pegs or door wedges, or hidden behind furniture! Staff training and education is the only way to overcome this.

Trapped fingers - most nurseries use finger guards but if they are not in a good state of repair, they might as well not be used. Have a daily inspection of guards: simply run your hands up and down to make sure they are safe and fit for purpose.

Electrical wires/cords - having a computer or light table in your nursery offers massive educational benefits, but it also carries its own risk in the form of possible strangulation from wires. Make sure where possible that all wires are out of reach and out of sight of

children. If they can be attached to the wall safely or in wire tidies, this should control the risk. Make sure temporary pieces of equipment are placed out of reach after use.

Blind cords - one of the biggest strangulation risks we see. Cords should be of the safety variety, which will snap open when pressure is applied, and must be out of reach of the children. Where possible, use a cleat used to secure the cords.

Medicines - generally speaking nurseries are good at making sure children with long-term medical conditions have medication on site. However, this medication needs to have its expiry dates logged and managed. We regularly see inhalers, auto-injectors and bottled medicines that are past their expiration date, and therefore not effective should they be required.

HAZARDS OUTDOORS

Sandpits - they're great fun and children love to play in them, but beware, so does your local wildlife, e.g. foxes and cats, who may use them as a giant litter box. A well-fitted cover that goes on when the sandpit is not in use by the children will reduce this risk.

CHECK YOUR PRACTICE

NURSERIES NEED TO GUARD AGAINST THESE SIX KEY HEALTH & SAFETY FAILINGS...

- 1 **Lack of understanding of the law.**
- 2 **Poor understanding of what hazards are and what risk is.**
- 3 **Not realising how actions can affect others.**
- 4 **Cutting corners because of time restraints.**
- 5 **Laziness (does everyone change PPE and clean down the nappy-change area after every child?)**
- 6 **Thinking health & safety involves too much paperwork.**



Display ribbons/strings

- they may previously have supported beautiful displays, but over time they fall off and become a slack strangulation risk. Always check the garden and remove any potential hazards. Even if you're planning to replace the display next week, take the ribbons/string down until they're needed.

Fences & gates - most nurseries have very good security at the front door with key codes, intercoms and CCTV; however, this is worthless if you can simply walk round to the garden and let yourself in through the gate, or in some cases, simply lean over low-level fences and pick up a child. Try this yourself: if you can reach your hand over and open a gate, so can a stranger. Fences and gates may need to be higher or additional locks added lower down.

Garden play equipment

- because it's outside, it isn't checked as regularly as that found indoors. Plastic toys will get weathered over time and become brittle, and may develop sharp edges. All equipment should be checked before use as part of your daily routine.

Gardens - growing fruit and vegetables is a great way to help children understand where food comes from. However, both children and staff

allergies need to be taken into account. Strawberries shouldn't be grown in a nursery, and we have in the past also found children with allergies to tomatoes and even mint leaves. Again, full knowledge of all your children's allergies is required - don't plant anything you're unsure of.

RISK ASSESSMENTS

There are five basic steps to writing an effective risk assessment. You must identify the hazard; decide who might be harmed and how; evaluate the risk and decide on precautions; record your findings and implement them; then review your risk assessment and update if necessary.

While bearing these steps in mind, there are also simple things you can do to improve the effectiveness of your assessment and ensure it's fit for purpose.

When writing a risk assessment, involve the people who will carry out the task or activity; they will have more knowledge of what's involved, and two minds are always better than one.

Write your risk assessment clearly and in plain language; avoiding using jargon will help everyone to understand.

Make sure your staff have read and understand the risk assessment and any actions they must take to control the

risk. If staff don't understand fully what it is they are meant to do, risk assessments can cause more harm than good.

If a hazard is a substance or piece of equipment, the best thing to do is to eliminate the hazard altogether. Where this can't be done, choose a less harmful/dangerous version.

Risk controls that require people to do something are always the least reliable and should always be used if there is no other option - e.g. you may provide PPE, but do your staff use it?

Remember, if you have five or more employees, your healthy and safety policy must be written down to comply with the law.

Risk assessments are not about writing pages but about highlighting hazards and clearly stating risk controls you have or need to put in place.

MCW is a family-run business specialising in the streamlining of health and safety and auditing processes in the childcare industry. Visit mcwnss.co.uk for information on its services and training, including IOSH Managing Safely, First Aid and Fire courses and other training.

DID YOU KNOW?

IF YOU SIGN OFF A CHECKLIST WITHOUT ACTUALLY CARRYING OUT THE PHYSICAL CHECKS, IT'S NOT WORTH THE PAPER IT IS WRITTEN ON. THE PERSON WHO HAS SIGNED THE DOCUMENT WILL STILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE IN THE EYES OF THE LAW.



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