Resource Centre

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Risk assessment

A simple guide to risk assessments for community groups.

Whatever your group does, from organising a street party to running a community building, you have a responsibility to do what you can to make sure people don't get hurt. Doing a risk assessment can help with this.

A guide to risk assessing

What is a risk assessment?

A risk assessment lists the different hazards that people might encounter whilst taking part in activities run by your group, or using equipment or a venue that is looked after by your group.

Your risk assessment will be useful for you if:

- everyone running activities for your group is aware of it and does what it says;
- you keep it up to date; and
- it is realistic (you actually intend to do the things that you write down).

Conducting a risk assessment for your group can seem like a big job, and it's something people often find worrying. However, it doesn't need to be complicated or difficult.

Remember, there is no point just having a risk assessment which goes in a drawer somewhere and never gets looked at. There is also no point in having one that says you won't run any activities that might be hazardous, and then just ignoring it because it is too restrictive.

Common sense risk assessing

People assess risk, and take action to minimise risk, all the time, every day, in all sorts of situations. A lot of the time you don't even notice you're doing it.

- Every time you cross the road, you assess the risk of being hit by a car, and make a decision about when and where to cross, based on minimising this risk.
- If you are taking care of children, you constantly assess the risk that they might injure themselves, and make decisions about what they are and are not allowed to do based on this.
- Even just getting dressed in the morning, you assess the risk of getting very hot or very cold that day, and decide what to wear based on your assessment.

When you are organising activities with your group, you will also already be assessing risk, even if you're not aware that you're doing it.

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For example, if you are running a street party, you will probably have already thought about how to reduce the risk that people get hit by cars at your event. You will have made an assessment that, if you put stalls on a busy road with lots of traffic, people will be in danger of getting run over. You will then have thought about how to minimise this risk. You will probably have decided either to hold your event on the pavement, or to apply to the council to close your street to traffic. You will have done this because it is common sense, without thinking of it as "risk assessment".

More formal risk assessing

When you conduct a risk assessment, you will think about the ways that harm could occur during your activities, and what you will do to reduce the risk of this happening. You will write down your thoughts and your decisions.

Most of the time, these will be the same decisions you would have made anyway, through common sense. However, you may also find that when you sit down to think about it, you identify possible hazards that might not have occurred to you.

The process of "conducting a risk assessment" helps ensure that your group has paid proper attention to reducing risk. Recording your decisions means you can refer to them in future and explain them to others.

Will it stop us from being able to do anything?

Sometimes the idea of doing a risk assessment can make it feel scary to organise anything, in case something goes wrong and someone gets hurt.

Risk assessment is about achieving a balance between a reasonable level of risk, and being able to get on with organising your activities. Remember, no activity is completely free from risk, and doing a risk assessment is not about making your activities risk free.

Instead of trying to make your activities risk free, think about measures you can put in place to reduce risk. In particular, if you think something is particularly dangerous, and you are worried that someone will get hurt, think about what you can change to make it less dangerous.

Think back to the earlier example about crossing the road. Crossing the road will never be completely risk free, but this doesn't mean you decide never to do it. Instead, you do your best to minimise the risk, by looking and listening to see whether any traffic is coming, and crossing when there is space to do so. If you decide that the risk is too high because the traffic is moving too fast and you are likely to get hurt if you walk into the road, you are unlikely to just give up and turn back. Instead, you might decide to change your plans slightly, for example by walking to a pedestrian crossing. This way, you can do the thing you want to do (get to the other side of the road), but more safely than if you had not thought at all about the risk involved.

Imagine your group wants to run a Christmas party with a bouncy castle for children. This is a popular activity and lots of children would really love it. However, if a child falls off the bouncy castle, they could get seriously injured. Because of this, when you do your risk assessment, you might decide to make some changes to your plans to reduce the risk of a child falling off and getting hurt. You might put some soft mats in front of the bouncy castle, and have a maximum number of children who are allowed to use it at one time. This way, the children can still enjoy the bouncy castle, but will be less likely to injure themselves.

Why write it down?

Writing your decisions down can feel unnecessary, especially when they are things you would have done anyway. However, there are a number of reasons why it can be useful to put your decisions into a written risk assessment.

- **Writing a risk assessment helps you to think things through.** Taking the time to sit down and write a risk assessment makes you focus on thinking about what the hazards are, and whether there is anything you could do to decrease their likelihood or severity. It gives you a structure in which to think this through, instead of relying on things just occurring to you. This helps ensure you've thought of the likely hazards, and can also help to give you peace of mind.
- **Having a written risk assessment helps your group to take joint responsibility for risk.** Doing a risk assessment provides an opportunity to discuss hazards and make joint decisions about them. You can then take shared responsibility for these decisions. In the bouncy castle example above, a written risk assessment, agreed by the whole group, sets out how many children are allowed on the bouncy castle at one time. This means that each volunteer who takes a turn supervising the castle can enforce the rule knowing they have the support of the group.
- **Having a written risk assessment saves you from having to make the same decisions again and again.** If a new volunteer takes over running something for your group, having a written risk assessment already in place will mean that they don't have to spend lots of time (and trial and error) learning what the hazards are and how to avoid them. You have already done this work, and they can use your risk assessment to make use of your knowledge and experience.
- **Funders often want you to do a risk assessment.** If you apply for grant funding, your funder may want to see a copy of a risk assessment.
- **It may be difficult to make an insurance claim without a risk assessment.** If you have public or employer's liability insurance, and want to make a claim because there has been an accident, you will probably need to prove that you did everything you could reasonably have done to avoid the accident. Having a written risk assessment can help to provide this evidence. This will only work if you stick to the decisions written in your risk assessment though! There's no point having a risk assessment that says you will put soft mats in front of a bouncy castle if you actually never do this.

What if something happens that we hadn't thought of?

With the best will in the world, you cannot predict everything that might happen. Even if you have a written risk assessment, you must continue to make common sense judgments about danger and hazards as your activity goes on.

For example, you might have thought through how to make your bouncy castle as safe as possible, but then someone spills a bottle of washing up liquid on it, making it very slippery! Common sense would tell you not to let children jump on the castle until it was clean and dry. Later, you could think about whether it was likely to have been a one off event, or whether it might happen again. You might decide to add it to your written risk assessment for the future.

How to conduct a risk assessment

You need to think through each element of your activity/equipment/venue. Think about what could go wrong, and what you are going to do to avoid this. Then write down your decisions, and the reasons you have made them. Make sure you include things that you have already planned to do (e.g. if you are already planning to use soft mats in front of the bouncy castle, you should still include this in the risk assessment).

You may find it useful to write down your thoughts and decisions in a grid which includes what the hazards are and what you will do to avoid them. There is a grid you could use at the end of this guide.

Venue

Risk assessing a venue requires inspecting it thoroughly and working out where and how people could get hurt. Are there loose bits of carpet people could trip on? Could the floor be slippery if wet? Could someone be hurt carrying the tables around? Think about all the things that could cause problems, and what you have done or will do to minimise the risk.

For example, imagine your group is running a community centre. You have noticed that if the tables are stacked incorrectly, they could fall and injure someone. To reduce this risk, you decide to instruct all centre users in how to stack the tables correctly. Once you have decided this, you should make a note of the hazard, and what you will do to avoid it, in your risk assessment.

There is a sample risk assessment of a venue below.

Equipment

If you are risk assessing a specific piece of equipment, you need to think about how it will be used and how people could get hurt using it. Could it be dangerous if it is not well maintained? Could people be hurt if they don't use it correctly? How will you try to ensure these things don't happen?

For example, imagine your group has bought a PA system to use at events. You identify that it is very heavy, and someone could injure themselves trying to lift it. To minimise this risk, you decide to buy a trolley, and make sure all volunteers know that they should use this to move it around. Once you have decided this, you should write down the hazard, and what you have done to minimise it, in your risk assessment.

There is an example risk assessment for a piece of equipment below.

Event / Activity

A risk assessment for an event or activity needs to include:

- The venue where it will be held.
- The equipment that will be used
- The people who will be attending. Do they have any particular needs that might make them more likely to hurt themselves? Do you need to make sure children are supervised? Is there anyone attending that could hurt anyone else?

For example, imagine you are running a children's cycling activity. You identify the following hazards:

If unsupervised, the children could take dangerous risks and potentially harm themselves.

There is one child that sometimes gets angry and has in the past injured other children.

To minimise the risk of harm to the children, you decide to:

Make sure there is at least 1 adult per 6 children, so they can be properly supervised.

Have one adult especially assigned to supporting the child who gets angry, so that they can take part and enjoy the activity while minimising risk to others.

Once you have decided this, you should write it down in your risk assessment.

- The activity itself. In what ways could people be hurt participating in the activity? There is a sample risk assessment of an activity below.

For example, imagine you are running a yoga class. You identify the following hazard:

People with existing back problems could injure themselves if they do something too strenuous.

To minimise the risk of injury, you decide to:

Ask all participants to tell the teacher about any existing injuries, so that the activity is appropriate for the participants.

Once you have decided this, you should write it down in your risk assessment.

Sample risk assessments

Venue

Community hall example risk assessment

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk
Varnished floor	Could be slippery when wet. Somebody could fall over and injure themselves. This could lead to bruises / broken bones / sprains / head injuries / back injuries.	Staff, volunteers, centre users.	Put out a sign warning people when the floor has just been cleaned or something has been spilled. Where possible, clean the floor at the end of the day when there are fewer people around.
Chairs and tables	These can cause clutter and people could trip over or bump into them. They could also fall onto people if they are stacked incorrectly.	Staff, volunteers, centre users.	Clear tables and chairs away before running physical activities such as sports. Ensure all centre user group leaders know how to stack tables and chairs correctly. Put up signs explaining how to stack them correctly.
Electrical appliances	Faulty appliances can cause electrocution, which can cause serious injury and death.	Staff, volunteers, centre users.	Ensure all appliances are checked regularly (at least once a year) by a competent person. Instruct all centre user group leaders, staff and volunteers to check for exposed wires and burn marks on cables or plugs before using appliances.

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk
Outdoor steps and ramps	These are hard, and people could be injured if they trip and fall on them.	Staff, volunteers, centre users.	Have outdoor lighting which is on at all times when the centre is used after dark. Ensure all staff, volunteers and centre user group leaders know that they must keep steps and ramps clear of obstacles at all times.
Hazardous chemicals in cleaning products	Cleaning products contain chemicals that can be harmful if they come into contact with skin or are inhaled.	Staff, vounteers.	All staff and volunteers will be provided with rubber gloves for cleaning. They will also be asked to ensure that the area is well ventilated.
Fire	People could become trapped during a fire, which can be fatal.	Staff, volunteers, centre users.	Smoke alarms are installed in every room. There is a fire alarm alert button by the front entrance and in the hall. Batteries must be replaced as soon as they run out. Smoke alarms must be tested every six months by the caretaker, by pressing the test button on the alarm. All fire exits must be clearly labelled and kept clear and unlocked at all times when the centre is in use. There will be an annual fire drill.

Equipment

Coffee morning kettle example risk assessment

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk
Kettle sides becoming very hot when boiled	Someone could touch the sides and burn their hands	Volunteers	The kettle will only be used in the kitchen, and only by volunteers. The kettle has a rubber handle, which does not heat up.
Hot water being spilled	Scalding	Volunteers, attendees	The kettle must not be carried from the kitchen when it is full of hot water – the water should be poured into cups, teapots or coffee pots before being taken elsewhere. Volunteers should take extra care when carrying hot drinks.
Children pulling hot kettle on themselves	Scalding	Children	Children will not be allowed to use the kettle at any time. The kettle will only be used in the kitchen, where children are not allowed to go.
Damage to electric power cable	Anybody who touches the damaged cable could be electrocuted.	Volunteers, caretaker.	The caretaker will check the full length of the cable, plus plugs and sockets, once a week. This should be noted in the caretaker's records. This should be done when the kettle is unplugged.

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk
Overflowing	Boiling water could land on people, scalding them. Overflowing could also lead to water getting into plug sockets, which can cause electrocution.	Volunteers	The maximum level must be clearly marked on the kettle. If this wears off after time, it should be drawn back on with permanent ink.

Activity

Children's cycling club (in the playground) example risk assessment

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk
Bikes	Bikes need regular maintenance to keep them safe to ride. If the bikes are not in a good state of repair, a child could be injured by falling off, cutting themselves on sharp parts, brakes failing, etc.	Children and volunteers riding the bikes.	Bikes will be serviced every six months by a qualified mechanic. The volunteers running the activity will receive training in making safety checks and making basic adjustments to improve bicycle safety. If a bicycle is unsafe, it will not be used until it has been fixed. A list of safety checks is distributed to all volunteers. All children will be required to wear cycle helmets.
Litter in playground – during activity	Playground could be littered with broken glass, dog mess, litter etc that could cause injury or illness.	Children, volunteers.	Playground to be checked carefully by volunteers before the activity begins, and cleared of any debris.

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk
Cleaning up litter	Hazardous litter could cause injury or illness to volunteers when they are cleaning it up.	Volunteers	Volunteers will receive training in how to safely clear up and dispose of litter, including dog mess and broken glass, and provided with gloves, plastic bags and hand washing facilities.
Slippery ground	Wet ground makes cycling more slippery. Children and volunteers could fall off their bikes and injure themselves.	Children, volunteers.	Activity will stop in heavy rain, snow, sleet or hail. In light rain, children will be asked to cycle more slowly and leave more space between each bike.
Sun	Hot sun can cause sunburn, sunstroke and dehydration.	Children, volunteers.	Children and volunteers will have regular breaks to have a drink in hot weather. Everyone will be encouraged to use suncream and wear long sleeves.
Children being unable to ride	Children may fall off their bikes in the course of learning how to ride.	Children	The activities run will be suitable to the level of the children present. All children will be taught to ride and assessed by a trained volunteer before taking part in general activities. All children will be required to wear cycle helmets.

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk
Abduction	Unknown adults could come into the playground if the gates are left unlocked.	Children	Gates will be kept locked except for at the beginning and end of the activity. At these times, children will be closely supervised by volunteers. No child will be allowed to leave with an adult who is unknown to volunteers, without checking with the child's parent/carer.
Collisions	Children could collide with one another when cycling, causing them to fall off and injure themselves.	Children, volunteers.	All children will cycle in the same direction, unless part of a volunteer run game or activity. Children will be supervised and volunteers will ensure that they do not ride too fast. All children will be required to wear cycle helmets.

Risk assessment template

Risk assessment for:

Conducted by:

Date:

Hazard	What could happen?	Who could be hurt?	Action taken to minimise risk