

Creating Safe Environments: Balancing Developing Risk Competence and Risk Management

As the leader of the program, where do you begin when creating a safe environment? It's helpful to think of safety in the environment in two categories—the “must-haves” and the “optional” safety items.

DETERMINING “MUST-HAVES”

The “must-have” safety requirements are a logical starting place. “Must-haves” are the things that must be incorporated; if they were not present, the program’s ability to keep its doors open would be in jeopardy. For example, state licensing standards are a “must-have” because if your program did not comply, it would lose its license and be forced to close.

Sometimes determining the “must-haves” can be a challenge. Some safety requirements might be tied to funding, such as money linked to a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) or a state preschool grant. These may be “must-haves” or they may not. For example, if your QRIS is linked to achieving a particular score on an assessment tool, there may be some room for how you get to that score within the assessment. Your program may be able to score higher or lower in one or more areas and still achieve your desired rating. In other words, there could be some “wiggle room” within the assessment tool related to safety items. As the director, it is important for you to have a clear understanding of what truly are your program’s “must-haves.”

“OPTIONAL” SAFETY ITEMS

Once you’ve established your “must-have” safety requirements move on to the “optional” safety items. Let your program’s values help guide how safety guidelines are established. Clearly no one wants children to experience serious emotional or physical injuries. And we, as early childhood professionals, do understand that growing up involves some growing pains. Just how much we are willing to let children experience these growing pains will vary from program to program. For example, some programs have a rule in place that teachers should prevent children from building blocks above their waist, neck, head or some other defined height. Can you think of how this rule might have come to be and how it might align with the program’s values? The role of the director is to establish an environment that provides challenge and limits danger. This involves getting teachers, parents, and children on the same page for developing risk competence and risk management.

YOUR ROLE IN CLARIFYING RISK COMPETENCE AND RISK MANAGEMENT

How do you help teachers, parents, and children think about developing risk competence and risk management in alignment with the values of the program? Here are some things to try:

- Consider ways you can create buy-in to the program's philosophy regarding children's developing risk competence and risk management. For example, you might dialog with staff and families about their beliefs about developing risk competence and risk management. Identify those ideas that seem to be shared across the organization.
- Help teachers articulate their beliefs about risk competence and risk management as they relate to decisions in the classroom. (e.g. "I noticed that when the children tried to stack chairs to add a "fort" to their block play, you asked them to stop. Tell me about your thinking when you asked them to stop the activity.") This can go a long way to helping establish trust with teachers and helping teachers establish intentionality in their work.
- Help ensure that teachers have appropriate expectations for children. Teachers need a strong grounding in child development to understand how risk competence and risk management play out in their classrooms. Consider your role in hiring teachers with this grounding and your role in supporting teachers who may need professional development in this area.
- Encourage teachers to observe children and understand each child's capabilities as he or she balances developing risk competence and risk management.
- Have clear written policies and procedures regarding children's safety.