**PRINCIPLE 3**

**Children’s understanding of risk and cause develops as they mature, and is not like that of adults: we need to take this into account, in supporting them to transition back to school.**For young children, it is not possible for them fully to understand why adults are placing limits on their social contact. They are not cognitively able to appreciate the risks and probabilities involved, and will act impulsively, cued but what they see around them. We do not really want to stop that though, as that curiosity and exploratory behaviour is what drives their learning. So we will need to arrange the environment around them so that they are kept acceptably safe: there can be no absolute guarantee of safety though, even in more normal times.

We looked for a neat table of the ages and stages at which children generally come to an understanding of the issues around risks like the Covid-19 one. Such a table does not seem to exist – the issues are complex, and the research around them is patchy and at an early stage. The two main issues involved are children’s understanding of **probability**, and their behaviour around **risk**. Brief comments on these are made below, with some basic references.

An understanding of **probability** underlies our assessments of risk and our decisions about behaviour. Even tiny babies have some capacity to assess probability – they look surprised if shown a really unlikely outcome. By age 10 children realise there is an association between randomness and fairness. However, they have great difficulty in developing this into a reliable risk assessment outlook – probably because they find it hard to project into the future and imagine all the possible outcomes of a situation (i.e. the ‘sample space’ involved in assessing probabilities for all possible events). A really helpful discussion of this is by Bryant & Nunes (2002) in:
<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Nuffield_CuP_FULL_REPORTv_FINAL.pdf>
It is notable that many adults will never achieve a correct assessment of probabilities, and hence risks, of events. (That is why government needs to listen to science advice before formulating policy.)

The second issue is that of behaviour around **risk**. Young children may try to follow adult directions – although more so when being closely supervised than at other times. As they approach adolescence, there is a noticeable shift towards risk-taking behaviour. This is connected to the development of the brain towards its adult configuration, which is ongoing until the mid-twenties. There is an increase in dopamine release, particularly for boys, which leads to sensation-seeking behaviour. Even adolescents have a ‘limited ability to favour delayed rewards over immediate gains’ (Blincoe, 2015, referenced below).

Evolutionary theorists explain how this greater risk-taking is adaptive, in shaping physical skills and causing natural selection to favour skilful genes. To develop fully, children do need some experience of managing risk – this approach is well-embedded now in early years advice – see, for example:

Managing Risk in Play Provision: a position statement. 2002 reprinted 2008 The Play Safety Forum
<http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/120462/managing-risk-play-safety-forum.pdf>

and

Risk is Essential to Childhood Kate Blincoe 14.10.15 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/14/risk-essential-childhood-children-danger>

The current uncertainty about how schools will start up again with direct teaching is causing massive anxiety (at time of writing, 13.05.20), amongst parents, staff and pupils. This anxiety will only reduce when we have more details about the plan for return, and are able to start planning how to ameliorate the risks and manage the difficulties. Involving the community in the planning, being as transparent as possible, will really help here. Understanding why young people will need help to follow distancing rules will also help – one thing we need to do is to explain things simple, at a level that they (and we) can understand. It is important to note that COVID-19 risks are different from most of the risks we usually support children to manage. The risk will be very low probability for them, but with great seriousness for those impacted by it. Furthermore, they are not able directly to see what the impact is, if they do not follow distancing rules.

**References**

Blincoe, K (2015) Risk is Essential to Childhood <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/14/risk-essential-childhood-children-danger>

Bryant P & Nunes T (2012) Children’s \understanding of \probability: a literature review:
<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Nuffield_CuP_FULL_REPORTv_FINAL.pdf>

The Play Safety Forum (2002 reprinted 2008) Managing Risk in Play Provision: a position statement:
<http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/120462/managing-risk-play-safety-forum.pdf>