

# Risk assess

## What's safe? What's not? Why?

by Roslyn Duffy

### – Situation –

*Standing at a fork in the forest path, the trail guide, in her soft Scottish brogue, advised us to 'risk assess.'*

*On your right, the trail rises steeply. There are ropes to use as handholds. The trail to our left is longer but gradual. Please 'risk assess' and decide which trail is right for you.*

*Within a few minutes several Norwegians, a handful of Americans, and one Nepalese man opted for the right-hand trail. An East Indian woman, after considering her need for a cane, decided that maneuvering less steep terrain would be a more comfortable option, and headed to the left.*

### – Solution –

*'Risk assess!'* The words sound like a verbal stop sign. *Stop! Think! Consider!* My example uses adults, because it is with us, the adults, that 'risk assess' and all of its implications begin. What is my (the adult's) attitude towards risk? How do I handle risk and how do I communicate my attitude to children?

My example came from a nature education conference in Crieff, Scotland, that I attended as part of an international group of educators\* seeking ways to increase children's experiences with nature. But the sub-theme of the conference was risk. The idea is that widespread risk elimination — replacing rough-barked trees for climbing with cookie-cutter climbers, or shiny images of slugs with slimy slugs to touch and track along muddy forest trails, deprives children of opportunities to develop judgment. This, in turn, makes them vulnerable to far greater dangers. Without the ability to recognize and evaluate risk, children may shun risk, thus missing opportunities for growth and skill development, or take unreasonable risks — because they cannot tell the difference between the two. Hence, the need to *'risk assess.'*

#### What does 'risk assess' mean?

Most simply, risk assess means identifying and evaluating risks. *Stop! Notice! Consider!* The more complex part is addressing the risk — *think, plan, prepare, and decide.* All are needed.

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**Step 1:****Stop! notice! consider!**

What 'bad thing' might happen? What is the risk? In the forest hike, ascending a moderate hill with rope handholds was a fairly tame risk for most, but the need for a cane increased that risk level. Grasping handholds with only one hand could result in lost balance, a fall, or injury. Often the risk-assess process halts here. The teacher with the cane could have stopped and turned back. But she continued on because there were less risky options.

**Step 2:****Think. PREVENT. Decide.**

This is the prevention-planning piece. How can the bad thing be prevented? Avoidance — turning back — is sometimes our only response to risk. Going beyond avoidance requires planning.

The rope handholds made the ascent (and risk) manageable, but the alternative trail offered even greater risk reduction. Both represented plans that had been decided upon and implemented to reduce the risk of bad things happening.

**Step 3:****Think. PREPARE. Decide.**

But bad things do happen. Risk, by definition, includes the bad thing inherent in it. Because risk is real, to complete the risk-assess process, we need a 'what if' step.

Let's say a climber slipped and broke an ankle. What then? Is the trail leader trained in first aid? How could outside help be summoned? How quickly would help arrive? Answering these questions completes the risk assessment loop. We are now ready for whatever happens, with specific

prevention plans to reduce risk, as well as response preparations decided upon and put into place to meet all eventualities.

**Automatic 'NO!'**

Jim took his son, Sam, and their five-year-old neighbor Aaron\*\* on a hike. Aaron spotted two turtles sunning on a log beside the path. "Can I catch them?" he asked.

What would you answer? A split-second risk assessment would note that the turtles were in a pond with (for Aaron) waist-high water; and floating about three to four feet from shore. Water poses a drowning danger. We don't want to harm animals. We cannot expose a child to harm. For many of us, an automatic, "No!" (avoidance) would be followed by:

"I don't want you to hurt the turtles";  
"You will get your clothes wet";  
"The water may be cold."

These are all true. But in reality, what are the chances that even the slowest turtle could not out-swim a noisy, splashing five year old? If the turtles do get caught, a lesson in safe handling could be followed by a prompt release. The weather was warm, wet clothes will dry, and cold water is its own natural deterrent.

Jim said, "Sure, go for it." And Aaron did. Aaron got wet. The water was cold. He discovered that turtles are hard to catch. And the turtles paddled to safety.

But Aaron's best lesson of all was that "Go for it" message. It said, "Aaron, you are capable and smart. I trust you to figure this out." And, Aaron did.

**The better message**

Of course, there are times when "No" is necessary. Dangers are real and bad

things do happen. But there are also times when, "Go for it!" is the better message. Our example began with adults, because adults' attitudes play a pivotal role in a child's life experiences. Little risks, even the temporary discomfort of pond-soaked clothes, offer lessons that words could never convey. The result is self-confidence — something avoidance doesn't provide. An even better response to "Can I catch it?" and one that gives both that vote of confidence and invites skill-building, would be "Okay. Risk assess."

**Kids, too**

Risk assessment begins with adults. Safety is always our job. Next we include children in the process. Then, we trust they'll take it from there.

On our hike, the leader showed us a stinging nettle. This plant both stings and causes a rash. Nearby grew dock leaf. A crumpled dock leaf, rubbed over skin exposed to nettles, soothes the sting. She told of one child, a five year old in her class, who began each day's hike by finding and pocketing a dock leaf. His risk assessment led him to take this preventive step and prepared him to help anyone else stung by nettles during the hike.

**Taking risks**

It feels scary to let risk into children's lives, but there is value in giving children opportunities to learn about and manage reasonable risk. To do so means we, too, must take risks. It really does begin with us. Skills, knowledge, and judgment — along with prudent vigilance and avoidance offer the best of both.

Risk assess, then go for it!

\*The conference, "Nurture Through Nature," was associated with the

## Risk Assess

### STEP 1: Stop! notice! consider!

- What is the risk?

### STEP 2: Think. PREVENT. Decide.

- How (besides avoidance) can the risk (bad thing) be prevented?

### STEP 3: Think. PREPARE. Decide.

- What if the bad thing (risk) happens? What is the planned response?
- What preparation is in place? What preparation is needed?

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For more information go to:  
[www.mindstretchers.co.uk](http://www.mindstretchers.co.uk)

\*\* This is a true story based on the experience of one of my former preschool students.

What problems do you experience?  
Send a description, a short word 'snapshot' of the situation.

Each issue, we will address  
your real-life issues.

To assure confidentiality, names of  
those submitting problems  
will not appear.

Elements of several problems  
may be combined for this column.  
Only situations appearing in the  
column receive responses.