

Guidance on Tree Climbing for Forest School Leaders

Children can gain great benefit from undertaking 'risky' activities. This guidance will hopefully help you provide the children in your charge with enjoyable, exciting activities in a managed learning environment.

Bear in mind:

- Tree climbing can be vertical/ horizontal or a combination. What 'tree climbing' you do will depend on the site, trees, children etc.
- All activities need to be Risk Assessed. This document will hopefully be of help when writing your risk assessments & managing risk on a day to day basis.
- Involve the children in the risk management/ safety process. With some guidance the children may come to the conclusions outlined in this document thus taking more ownership of their health & safety. Older age groups (e.g. Years 5/6 up) could be involved in 'spotting' for each other with adult supervision.

Considerations

Permission

Check with your insurers that you are covered for this type of activity. Also ensure that the children's parents/ carers are aware that tree climbing may take place & that you have signed consent to that effect. Give the parents an accurate description of the activity so they know it's controlled etc and not more extreme than it is! Preferably show them the trees & area in question.

Dedicated tree

Only trees identified as suitable for climbing (bearing in mind the considerations below) should be used to help maintain & ensure the health & safety of all.

Clear instruction

Children & adults should have a clear understanding of when children are allowed to climb trees & the rules that apply. It doesn't have to be an activity that takes place at every session.

Test branches

As part of the pre-session safety sweep, branches should be tested for strength & the tree checked to ensure both are sound.

Conditions on the day

If conditions aren't suitable (e.g. branches wet or slippery), don't run the activity.

Spotter

A 'spotter' is a competent adult who will be present at the tree when young people/ children are climbing. The spotter must supervise the climbing being next to the tree & be focussed on that activity & the climber. They should not be required to undertake any other duty whilst they are spotting. They should be close enough to reach the child if needed and standing on stable, flat ground.

Climb to their own ability

The spotter should allow the children to climb to their own ability (e.g. not helping them up every branch). The child

thus remains in control of how far they climb. This also allows the child to make tangible progress: a child lacking in confidence who spends weeks trying to reach the lowest branch will be thrilled when they climb that branch for the first time.

1 at a time
3 points of contact
Bare hands

Only one child climbs at a time

The climber should always have 3 points in contact with the tree (2 feet, 1 hand or 2 hands, 1 foot) when climbing

To ensure good grip, hand contact should be skin on wood thus gloves removed

Secure/ remove loose or baggy clothing

To avoid snagging

Suitable footwear

Flat, secure footwear (e.g. wellies or boots in the winter, trainers in the summer) should be worn

Remove rings
1.5 metres or adult's chest height

To avoid injuries to fingers

We suggest that children should climb up to an approximate limit of their feet being 1.5m off the ground or at the chest height of the spotter, whichever is the shorter.

Ground conditions

The area underneath the tree/branch to be climbed should be free from obstacles that could cause injury in the event of a fall (e.g. exposed tree roots, rocks) or that could prevent the spotter from reaching the child whilst they are climbing.

Dawn Bagley
Project Co-ordinator Forest School
Early Years (Children, Young People & Families)
Warwickshire County Council
E: dawnbagley@warwickshire.gov.uk
Ph: 01926 742231