

Advice about helmets

As with all risk management decisions the responsibility sits with the school to decide what it, as an organisation, thinks is reasonable. As should be set out in the school's play policy and recommended by the Health and Safety Executive, this decision making process should be based on a risk-benefit approach. The aim being to weigh up both the benefits of an opportunity alongside the potential risks and arrive at a balanced and reasonable way of managing them. In doing so it is important to give consideration to the potential costs of any control measures i.e. what the unintended consequences of any safety measures may be (which may ultimately be worse than the identified risks). In this case, that includes considering the potential downsides, practicalities or associated risks of making children wear helmets when on bikes. It is also important that these risk management decisions are made collectively by the OPAL working group, rather than relying on any one individual to 'carry the can'.

There is a strong case to be made against children having to wear helmets, however, the key issue here is whether the school can demonstrate / evidence that sufficient consideration was given to whether or not helmets should be worn and the reasons why it was decided that this shouldn't be the case. So, the issue of helmets needs to be addressed in your playtime risk-benefit assessment. Again in terms of making that case, the school needs to consider the benefits of children having opportunities to ride bikes and scooters, the likelihood and potential severity of injury, the practicality of enforcing the wearing of helmets, the challenges of making sure children wear well-fitting helmets, the staffing capacity required to do so, what this would mean for the supervision of other play opportunities, how it might change the way in which children engage with this activity, the extent to which wearing helmets might put some children off riding bikes, what children are doing on the bikes and whether this increases the level of risk, and other associated risks that might come from children forgetting to take helmets off and then going to play elsewhere. In making this case, it is important to point out that in the context of the school playground, the risks are not the same as when children are riding bikes on the road with cars around.

There is no legal requirement for helmets to be worn. In terms of guidance to help the school in making its decision, doc 6.9 in the OPAL e-pack identifies some of the potential downsides of helmets. Guidance is also available from [RoSPA \(Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents\)](#). This is largely focussed on road users rather than playing children but is worth reading and concludes that: *'There continues to be much debate regarding the effectiveness of cycle helmets and whether the wearing of them should be made compulsory. RoSPA's position is that we strongly recommend that cyclists wear a cycle helmet. However, it is important to remember that cycle helmets do not prevent crashes from happening. It is therefore vital that through infrastructure improvements, supported by education and training that we reduce the primary risk factors'*, they also add: *'It is of paramount importance that the helmet fits well'*.

In terms of establishing how great the risk of injury is, the 'proof is in the pudding', which emphasises the importance of monitoring the activity and maintaining a record of any injuries. The key question being: how many children have played with bikes/scooters for

how many hours, and in that time how many injuries have there been? If lots of children play with bikes/scooters for lots of hours without serious injury then evidence would suggest the risk of injury is low. However, it again depends on what children are doing with the bikes/scooters, are they getting more adventurous and therefore engaging in a greater degree of risk? If so, it perhaps needs discussion with children and parents with the option that families provide a helmet which their child is then expected to wear.

To conclude. There's a strong case to be made about not wearing helmets but the school needs to evidence its decision making around this issue. If helmets are to be worn there are several practical issues to overcome. Also, like all play activities, if there is an accident it is important that this doesn't result in a knee jerk reaction that sees all children miss out on the benefits of playing with bikes/scooters. There are similar risks involved in children running about and we wouldn't put a stop to that.