



Manual handling: a cause for concern?

A recent court case involving a faulty cot prompts Jackie Hyde to outline the approaches you should adopt to protect children, staff and your nursery

In July 2013, a former nursery employee won a legal battle against an early years provider after being left severely disabled by using a faulty cot at one of its nurseries. During the case, it was successfully argued that the employer had infringed its own manual handling policies by requiring the former member of staff to use the defective equipment, despite knowing that she already had a bad back.

The cot had drop-down sides, which should have allowed a baby to be lifted out safely. However, in this case, the mechanism was found to be defective, and medical experts giving evidence at the trial said that leaning over to lift a baby in these conditions had caused a disc prolapse.

Manual handling accidents at work have been a cause of concern for many industries: the Health & Safety Executive calculate that one in 10 major injuries and almost a third of injuries to employees resulting in more than three days off work involve manual handling. An estimated 1.2 million working days are lost in the UK each year as a result. These types of injuries often result in claims against employers and can be costly because of the long-term care implications that were highlighted in this specific case.

So, what should early years employers do to comply with manual handling regulations and minimise the risks for their staff and children?

1. The right equipment

You can minimise risks by using appropriate equipment, such as adjustable cots or hoists to make tasks easier. All equipment should be maintained and serviced according to manufacturers' instructions, and when faults are identified, repairs should be completed quickly or the equipment taken out of use.

2. Risk assessments

Risk assessments should be completed by a competent, suitably trained person, recorded and regularly reviewed. When conducting risk assessments, you should consider the task, the load, the environment and the capability of staff involved. Take particular notice of factors such as awkward or heavy loads, staff with known back problems, cramped work areas and bad posture.

Risk assessments should identify any moving and handling aids or techniques necessary to move a child safely in any situation. Where necessary, they should be completed with input from healthcare professionals or experts such as physiotherapists.

The above factors apply to staff welfare too, and risk assessments regarding their needs should be carefully considered alongside those of the children.

3. Children with disabilities

Children with physical disabilities require different levels of assistance. The nursery should discuss fully with parents the needs of the child, agreeing a manual-handling plan as part of the overall plan of care.

4. Training

Adequate training is vital, and this should be incorporated in the induction. Keep records of training sessions, attendance and content, as you may need to produce them in court if there is a claim. When staff have to lift something, they should be trained always to assess the lift first and to avoid lifting anything that is too heavy or awkward.

5. Record incidents

Encourage your staff to report any manual handling accidents or incidents, including near-misses. Each incident should be recorded and the cause investigated. Change your policies or procedures and introduce additional training, as indicated by the investigation.

In conclusion, all manual-handling activities carry some risk, usually negligible, but the regulations require employers to avoid hazardous manual handling wherever possible. You can achieve this by designing work processes and policies. However, where risks are unavoidable, the regulations require the employer to have suitable manual-handling risk assessments in place and to implement the results of these in order to reduce the level of risks as far as possible. ■

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