



National
Guidance

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Indirect Supervision of Younger Children

OEAP National Guidance document [4.2a "Group Management and Supervision"](#) describes three types of supervision:

- **Direct Supervision**, where participants stay within sight and contact of a Leader;
- **Indirect Supervision**, where participants may operate away from the direct control of a leader but within clearly set boundaries, and where direct supervision can be quickly re-established if necessary;
- **Remote Supervision**, where participants operate well away from leaders, and where direct supervision could take some time to re-establish.

Direct supervision is necessary where safety demands it, but it can be stifling to learning because it limits one of the great advantages of outdoor learning and off-site visits: the ability of the participants to explore and to manage their own experience.

Indirect supervision is entirely appropriate to younger children, as Visit Leaders can set boundaries and deploy their leadership team following consideration of the SAGE variables: Staff, Activity, Group, Environment (see OEAP National Guidance document [1b "Foundations"](#) for more information).

Indirect and remote supervision lie on a continuum, and the line between them is not clearly defined. As participants develop their competence and confidence, the geographical boundaries used and, therefore, the length of time it may take to respond to an issue and re-establish direct supervision, may be increased. The decision to move to more remote supervision should be based on the key judgement that the participants are capable of operating independently in the particular environment, and are able to respond appropriately to any foreseeable emergency, including summoning help and coping safely until help arrives. Truly remote supervision is not common with young children, but is possible given the right conditions and preparation.

A Tale of Two Visits

A group of 6/7-year-old primary school pupils visited a local church. The children walked in pairs, in a crocodile with the class teacher at the front and accompanying adults interspersed in the middle and the back. Many of the children were clearly captivated by different things – the architecture of the church, the side chapel dedicated to a local army regiment, the various memorial plaques, the stained glass windows – but they were required to stay in crocodile, move at the pace of the leader and directed where to look.

Another group of children, the same age, had a different experience at the same venue. On a pre-visit their leader had noted that the church was a well-controlled environment. It had one open entrance and a small café in one corner. It had three principal aisles giving an easy circulation of people. Sight lines were such that with a couple of adults placed at key points the whole church was within sight. The children were briefed on the recall signal, which would bring them back to the main entrance, and on what to do if they had a problem. They were given some ideas of things they might find interesting and some questions to find the answers to. They were briefed on how to behave in a church so as not to upset other visitors, and told how much time they had to explore. The Visit Leader placed one adult at the entrance and another in a corner of the church where they could see each other and most of the building. Other leaders roamed the church engaging with the children. All leaders knew a simple set of hand signals to communicate with each other and the Visit Leader was at the end of the building for the best overview. The children explored the church individually, in pairs or in small groups, as they chose. They looked at things that interested them and asked questions.

The planning and preparation for these two visits was identical in terms of time and leader effort, but the learning outcomes were of a markedly different quality. One was a sterile, adult-led walk where the children had little opportunity to engage in what interested them. The other was a rich, personal exploration of a fascinating space with an opportunity to engage, question, discuss and imagine. The same visit but two different types of leadership.

The crocodile of children in pairs, with adults at front, middle and back was entirely appropriate for the walk from school to the church, but not for exploration of the venue in terms of quality of learning.

Appropriate Supervision and Risk-Benefit Analysis

Using a risk-benefit approach, where you seek to maximise the benefits while ensuring the risks are managed, makes it easier to identify what is and is not appropriate. In the tale above, the second group of children gained far more benefit from the visit, but the risks were no greater, just managed differently.

So, for example: you want your group of 9/10-year-olds to visit a market while on a trip to France, or to do a village/town study during a residential in the UK. You choose a market or an area of the village/town with easily defined boundaries and no major traffic hazards. You split the children into small groups who know to stay together. Each group has a card (in the local language) explaining who they are and giving an emergency contact number. They are shown the geographical boundaries within which they can roam and the meeting-point where there will always be a leader and where they are to meet by a certain time. Some leaders sit at the local café (the meeting point) while the others walk round the area. This is a sensible balance between risk and benefit – the educational benefits are clear and powerful while the risks are appropriately managed.

Introducing Indirect Supervision

One technique for introducing both children and leaders to indirect supervision can be described as 'star' supervision. For example:

1. On a visit to the local park, the Visit Leader chooses a base in an obvious central point, and sends out small groups of children to a specific point (perhaps to collect something or find an orienteering marker) and then return, before being sent to a different point, and so on (thus operating in a star pattern).
2. During a village study, the teacher sends small groups of children to a particular part of the village and then they return, before being sent to the next location.

As competence and confidence increases, the number of points to visit each time can become greater. The time between check-ins with the Visit Leader becomes greater, and perhaps the number of children per group reduces. Eventually children become capable of being set off in groups to enjoy the experience of independent learning while the leaders have the confidence to wait, in readiness to deal with any problems but also to utilise the rewards of providing a much richer learning experience.

Changing Between Supervision Types

Usually, a visit will be most effectively supervised by moving between direct and indirect supervision as the situation and learning opportunities dictate. A few practical 'rules of thumb' might be:

- any transport or transition between activities or venues requires direct supervision and careful headcounts;
- rich and diverse environments, where different individuals will be drawn to different things, lend themselves to indirect supervision in order to maximise the learning benefits they offer (e.g., museums, galleries, historic sites, woodlands, parks);
- visits where a planned learning outcome requires everyone to experience the same thing suit direct supervision (e.g., a theatre performance or viewing a particular artifact), but combining a period of direct supervision to control one aspect of the visit with a period of indirect supervision to allow personal exploration may be more effective and enjoyable;
- environmental hazards beyond the competence of the participants require direct supervision (examples might be farm visits or water hazards).

For example – a day trip to the seaside begins with direct supervision to ensure everyone gets on the coach safely. On arrival at the venue, direct supervision gets everyone off the coach and briefed on the first activity – perhaps a study of the local high street. Indirect supervision then applies until that activity is concluded. Direct supervision is re-established (everyone checked and accounted for) during the walk across town to the museum. In the museum indirect supervision is used. Direct supervision is then applied for the walk to the beach, for the beach activities and paddling, and for the return coach journey.

Moving Towards Remote Supervision

As supervision becomes more remote, participants need to be more capable of independence. Independence is a function of maturity (not age), experience, confidence and competence. The culture within the child's family as well as the establishment and the local community are also relevant. If the norm for your establishment is that children walk or cycle to school independently and regularly roam the local area in their free time, then they are well prepared for a more

indirect or remote level of supervision. On the other hand, if the norm for your establishment is that children are delivered to school by parents and not allowed out of the home environment outside school time, these children are ill-equipped to be indirectly supervised without progressive experience of visits over time.

To develop children's independence and move towards increasingly indirect or even remote supervision, establishments can progressively develop children's skills in, for example, road crossing and traffic awareness, problem solving, what to do in an emergency, simple first aid, etc.

Establishments can work with parents and the local community to develop children's independence. The reality is that the more children operate independently in their own community, and the greater the number of children involved, the safer they are in doing so and the more skills they will have to operate safely, independently, and with confidence in other environments.

