

A CLIENT GUIDE FROM 1STINTHEATRE

Children on Stage.

Best practice for putting on a production with children — and being ready when the council comes to see the show.

When children perform, the local authority may visit the venue — sometimes unannounced — to check that they're safe, well cared for, and properly looked after backstage. That's nothing to worry about: the visit exists to protect your young performers, and a well-prepared show sails through. This guide, written for dance schools and groups performing in hired venues such as school halls and theatres, walks through how to run the children's side of your production to the standard the council expects — the paperwork, the chaperones, the dressing rooms and the fire plan — and finishes with a printable show-week checklist to pin up backstage.

COUNCIL VISITS BROADLY COVER THREE THINGS:

Welfare

Are the children happy, fit, supervised and not overworked?

Facilities

Dressing rooms, fire safety, food, drink, rest and first aid.

Paperwork

The register, parental consents, daily records and your risk assessment.

01

KNOW WHAT'S COMING

The visit — what to expect

The approval was the paperwork; the visit is the reality check. The inspector's job is to see that what you promised the council is actually happening at the venue — by looking, and by talking to everyone involved.

The council's powers

STATUTORY

- Officers of the local authority — or police — can enter without notice wherever children are performing, at any rehearsal, technical or show, and may question anyone
- Keep your approval paperwork and any conditions at the venue, and produce it on request
- If standards aren't met, the council can withdraw children from the performance — and withdraw the approvals your show depends on

What the inspector looks at

BEST PRACTICE

- The children — happy, fit, and not overworked
- A venue walk-round, following the same checklist officers use to approve premises: toilets and washing facilities, dressing rooms, rest areas, areas the public can reach backstage, hazards, fire exits and first aid
- Chaperones — supervision, ratios and their relationship with the children
- Records — the register, parental fitness statements, signing-in sheets and daily record sheets
- Conversation — expect the inspector to talk with you, your chaperones, parents and the children themselves; there's a page of sample questions near the back of this guide

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Maximum children per chaperone

ABTT recommends no more than 8 in many cases

12 HRS

Minimum overnight break between days at the venue

Children (Performances and Activities) Regs 2014

6 DAYS

Maximum consecutive days performing or rehearsing

Children (Performances and Activities) Regs 2014

6 MONTHS

How long records must be kept after the final show

And the council can ask for them at any time

The numbers the inspector knows by heart. Performance hours are also capped by age — see the table in section 07.

Risk assessment & safeguarding

Two things the council — and the venue — will expect to be in place before a single child steps on stage. This is a safeguarding exercise, not a paper one, and these show you've thought it through.

Your risk assessment

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- One per venue and production — written, current, with copies kept at the venue
- Cover the risks specific to children here: stage edges, steps and drops, moving scenery, electrical equipment and cabling, get-in hazards, crowding in corridors, and travel between areas
- For each risk, state what you're doing about it and who is responsible on the day — it may also cap how many children one dressing room can take
- Share it with the venue in advance — the premises manager should ask for it before any performance begins; in a hired hall with no venue team, that duty effectively lands on you

Your safeguarding arrangements

BEST PRACTICE

- A written child protection policy, reviewed every 12 months, with a designated safeguarding lead everyone can name — the council will have asked about these, and the inspector may test them
- Safeguarding training, and proper suitability checks on every adult who cares for the children
- On show night, live it: everyone knows the policy, the signs a child is distressed or fatigued, and exactly who to tell if they have a concern
- Keep a contacts sheet in the binder: the council's child employment team, the local social care emergency duty team, the venue caretaker's mobile, your first aider, the nearest A&E, and police 101

Health & first aid

BEST PRACTICE

- A first aider present at every session — confirm who it is, where the kit is, and what the fire alarm sounds like, before the children arrive
- The register holds each child's emergency contacts, medical issues and additional needs — kept securely, but instantly producible
- Record any injury or illness in the accident book; inform the parent immediately and the local authority within 24 hours
- No unwell child performs — full stop — and warm up properly before physical performances

If a child tells you something worrying

Listen non-judgementally and clarify with open questions — don't investigate, and never promise confidentiality. Inform your designated safeguarding person immediately, record what the child said in their own words with the time and date, and sign it. Reassure the child, and don't discuss it openly.

Chaperones & supervision

Chaperones are the people the inspector will watch most closely. Their job is to act 'in loco parentis' — the care a good parent would reasonably give — and the child is always their first priority.

The rules

STATUTORY

- Children must be supervised at all times by council-approved chaperones — or other suitable persons specifically agreed with the council. Parents helping out on the night are not substitutes for approved chaperones unless that was agreed
- The legal ceiling is 12 children per chaperone; chaperones stay with their children at all times, including the dressing room — separate boys' and girls' rooms means at least two chaperones by definition
- Children on stage must still be in their chaperone's view
- A chaperone may not take on any other role while chaperoning — the person running the show can't also be a chaperone

Before the children arrive

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- Identify every chaperone clearly — badge with name and dressing room number; one room per chaperone, each holding a list of exactly which children they're responsible for; approval cards carried on duty
- Plan additional chaperones where children have disabilities or additional needs
- Brief every chaperone and crew member: fire procedures, code words and assembly points, the never-alone rule, no photographs — and their right to say no to you if a child is tired, unwell or out of hours
- Give each chaperone a plan of the dressing rooms with exit routes marked

On the day

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- Sort the children into their groups on arrival and introduce their chaperones; check lists against the children actually present, with the master copy updated for late changes
- If a child is too tired or being overworked, the chaperone insists they rest or go home — and requires the running order to change if needed
- At the end: a managed collection point — parents wait in the auditorium until called, each child handed only to the pre-nominated adult and crossed off. No stage-door free-for-all, and no child leaves unsupervised

Eight is the working maximum. The law allows 12 children per chaperone — but with a mixed group of ages, ABTT recommends no more than eight. And on duty: child first, licence checked, no photos, never alone with one adult, and an unwell child never performs.

The venue & dressing rooms

School halls weren't built as theatres — so backstage needs deliberate planning. Tell the venue early: exactly how many children, how they'll be grouped by numbers, ages and sex, and that chill-out areas will be needed.

The standards the place must meet

STATUTORY

- Suitable arrangements for meals, rest and recreation — a chill-out area with water and refreshments
- Suitable and sufficient toilets and washing facilities, clean and designated; adequate protection against inclement weather
- Suitable arrangements for the children to dress for the performance or rehearsal

Changing arrangements

STATUTORY

- Separate dressing rooms for boys and girls, and separate from adult dressing rooms — consider separating age groups too
- Children aged five and over change only with children of the same sex; under-fives may share only with other under-fives
- Children must never change where adults other than chaperones are present

Setting up the rooms

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- Every child has a seat — no one perched on tables or standing; costumes stay in the rooms; corridors and escape routes never blocked
- Name list on each room — children plus chaperone — with master copies held centrally, updated for last-minute changes
- Children stay in their allocated areas when not on stage; if numbers are tight, cap room occupancy in your risk assessment
- Using other areas as extra dressing rooms needs the venue's and the council's agreement; rooms in a separate building mean telling the council and fire authority first
- Plan one controlled backstage entrance with a signing-in point — nobody wanders in

Walk the venue with the caretaker — before the first child arrives

- Unlock and check every fire exit; remove security fastenings; learn the alarm sound and how it differs from the security alarm
- Agree explicitly who calls 999 — realistically the caretaker, so nail it down
- Locate the first aid kit; confirm the first aider for every session; heating on, backstage working light safe, stage edges and cable runs managed

Fire safety, effects & evacuation

Children unfamiliar with a venue can't be expected to find their own way out — so the fire plan has to assume they won't, and put adults and information in the right places.

Exits & routes

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- All exits available, with security fastenings removed from exit doors while children are on the premises — including during rehearsals
- Corridors and escape routes never blocked by loose furniture, props or costumes
- You, or a delegated adult, patrol dressing room corridors and exit routes regularly during the event

Information & briefing

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- Every chaperone and crew member briefed on the fire procedures before the children arrive — including code words and assembly points
- A copy of the fire instructions, with an escape route location plan, in every dressing room, changing area and chill-out area

Evacuation during a show

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- The audience follows the instructions of venue staff — or your own front-of-house helpers where there are none — and must not attempt to go backstage to find their child
- Children are evacuated and accounted for by their chaperones, using the dressing room lists, and reunited at the assembly point
- Remind the audience of these arrangements by announcement or notice before the performance — build it into your front-of-house welcome

In an evacuation, **parents stay with the audience** — the fastest way to put children at risk is forty adults heading backstage to find them.

Scenery & special effects

- Scenery brought into the venue must meet the standards of the responsible authority and the venue
- Smoke, haze, dry ice and strobe or rapid flashing are recommended against in children's productions — they can trigger allergies or adverse reactions
- If effects are proposed, full details need separate approval from the council and the venue before the show. With a children's cast, the simple answer is: don't

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NOT EVERY EMERGENCY MEANS GETTING OUT

Lockdown

Fire drills get everyone out of the building; a lockdown keeps everyone safely in. Schools in England are expected to have a practised lockdown procedure — and since your venue is a school, your show should plug into it.

What the school will already have

BEST PRACTICE

- Government guidance on school security advises every school to hold a lockdown procedure and practise it regularly — typically a partial lockdown (threat outside: everyone inside, external doors and gates locked) and a full lockdown (threat inside: stay in rooms, doors secured from within)
- Some schools also plan for 'invacuation' — moving everyone to safer parts of the building rather than out of it
- The school's plan is written for the school day — it won't automatically cover your evening or weekend show, so it needs translating to your event

Agree it at the walk-through

BEST PRACTICE

- Ask the caretaker: what is the lockdown signal, how does it differ from the fire alarm, which rooms are used, and who initiates it out of hours
- Agree what hirers are expected to do, and who calls the police — as with fire, realistically the caretaker, so nail it down
- Write the answers into your risk assessment and your chaperone briefing, alongside the fire procedures

If it happens mid-show

BEST PRACTICE

- Children stay where they are, with their chaperones — dressing rooms make natural lockdown rooms: doors secured, away from windows, calm and quiet
- Chaperones account for every child against their lists, exactly as they would in an evacuation
- Front of house keeps the audience in the hall; nobody is released — children to parents included — until the all-clear

Fire says get out; lockdown says stay put. The chaperone's job is the same in both — know where every child is, and keep them together until the all-clear.

The paperwork

Everything the inspector may ask for, in one ring binder, at the venue for every session.

In the binder, every session

STATUTORY

- Your approval paperwork from the council, with any conditions — plus any individual licences that apply
- The register of every child: name, address, age, emergency contacts, medical issues and additional needs — held securely, produced instantly
- A signed statement of fitness from each child's parent
- The chaperone list, with each person's approval details and expiry
- Dressing room allocation lists; your risk assessment; your child protection policy with the safeguarding lead's name and number; the accident book; the contacts sheet

Records — live, and kept for six months

STATUTORY

- Signing-in/out sheets and a daily record sheet for every performance: arrival and departure times, performance and rehearsal periods, meal and rest breaks — filled in as it happens, not reconstructed later
- Log any night work authorised by the council, any injury or illness at the venue, and any tutoring if a child is privately taught during the run
- Retain everything for six months after the final performance; best practice is also to let each child's home council know they took part, so performance days can be tracked

Fill records in as it happens. A record sheet written up afterwards isn't a meaningful record — and inspectors know the difference.

Age of child	Earliest & latest at the venue	Max time at the venue	Max continuous performance
Birth to 4	7am – 10pm	5 hours	30 minutes
5 to 8	7am – 11pm	8 hours	2.5 hours
9 to school-leaving age	7am – 11pm	9.5 hours	2.5 hours

Plus, for all ages: breaks of at least 15 minutes, including a 45-minute meal break if at the venue 4–8 hours and a further 15 minutes beyond 8; at least 1.5 hours between two same-day shows (45 minutes if at the same venue and the first ran under an hour); a 12-hour gap before the child is back at the venue next day; and no more than six consecutive days. Councils routinely apply this framework as a condition of approval — treat it as the benchmark unless your paperwork says otherwise.

Questions to expect

Inspectors check by observing and by talking — to you, your chaperones, parents and the children themselves. If everyone can answer these without hesitation, you're ready.

To you, as the organiser

BEST PRACTICE

- "Can I see your approval paperwork and its conditions? Who is the named responsible person — are they here?"
- "Show me your register — names, ages, emergency contacts, medical needs — and the signed parental statements of fitness"
- "Who are your chaperones? Which authority approved them, and when do the approvals expire? What are your ratios tonight?"
- "Show me today's signing-in sheets and the record of performance times and breaks — what time did the children arrive, when did they last eat, and when will they leave?"
- "What's in your risk assessment for this venue? Any special effects — and were they approved?"
- "Who's your designated safeguarding lead, and what happens if a child discloses something to a chaperone tonight?"
- "How is each child getting home tonight, and who is collecting them?"

To your chaperones

BEST PRACTICE

- "How many children are you responsible for — can I see your list?"
- "If the alarm sounded right now, what would you do? Where's your assembly point?"
- "Where's the first aid kit, and who's the first aider tonight?"
- "When did your group last have a break — and when do they next eat?"
- "What would you do if one of your children felt unwell before their number?"
- "What would you say if the organiser asked your group to squeeze in one more run-through?"

To the children — a friendly chat, out of your earshot

"Are you enjoying yourself?" · "Are you feeling tired?" · "Do you know who your chaperone is?" · "Have you had a break and something to eat?" · "Do you know what to do if the fire alarm goes off?"

The chat is the test: **happy, confident answers from the children** are the best evidence that the supervision, breaks and briefings on your paperwork are real. And each chaperone should answer for themselves — their own children, their own room, their own escape route.

Show-week checklist

PRODUCTION

VENUE

DATE

Before the first child arrives

DONE BY / INITIALS

- ☐ Approval paperwork checked — organisation, venue and dates match, and the council has the performance details it asked for
- ☐ Binder at the venue, to hand: register, fitness statements, chaperone approvals, risk assessment, safeguarding policy, accident book, contacts sheet
- ☐ Chaperone numbers confirmed; approvals in date; briefing done; badges, lists and room plans issued
- ☐ Venue walk-through with the caretaker: exits unlocked, alarm and lockdown signals known, 999 caller agreed, first aid located
- ☐ Dressing rooms allocated and set up — a seat per child, name lists on doors, corridors clear
- ☐ Fire instructions and escape plans posted in every dressing room and chill-out area

Every session

DONE BY / INITIALS

- ☐ Every child signed in with the time; lists checked against children present; the kids briefed
- ☐ Performance periods, meals and breaks logged live; the clock watched against the age-banded limits
- ☐ Chaperones escort every stage-to-dressing-room transfer; corridors and exits patrolled during the show
- ☐ Front-of-house announcement made: in an evacuation, parents follow the stewards' instructions and do not come backstage
- ☐ Managed collection at the end — each child handed only to the pre-nominated adult, crossed off, signed out with the time
- ☐ Any injury or illness: recorded, parent told immediately, council told within 24 hours

Photocopy freely — run through this with your chaperones before the doors open; it doubles as your pre-show briefing agenda.

Break a leg.

In a hired school hall there's rarely a venue team to fall back on — the binder, the briefing and the walk-through all sit with you. Get those right, and you can meet a council visit with confidence.

The non-negotiables

If the **register**, the **parental fitness statements** or the **live time records** are missing, the inspector has the power to withdraw children from the performance and end your show's approvals on the spot. Those three never leave the binder.

Putting on a show with young performers?

We stage-manage dance shows and school productions week in, week out — lighting, sound, backstage crew and venue setup, with child-performer arrangements built in from the start. Let's make inspection day a non-event.

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