



# The 'OS&H ripple effect'

RoSPA's partnership consultant **Roger Bibbings** considers how an unseen 'safety ripple effect' helps employees keep themselves and their families safe outside the workplace.

**Although they have reduced in the last few years, negative stories about 'elf and safety gone mad' continue to appear in the popular press and elsewhere. The result is a sense, often among the less well informed, that health and safety regulation is a 'burden on business' and also that it generally gets in the way of people living their lives and having fun.**

The reality, however, is somewhat different. Occupational safety and health (OS&H) is actually a national success story and is now one of the most developed areas of safety in the UK. It is supported by law that is generally proportionate to risk and it is almost universally embraced as 'good for people and good for business' by organisations representing employers and employees and also by other bodies such as insurers, professional bodies and so on.

While there is still much to be done to make high health and safety standards a reality in all workplaces, UK OS&H has helped to make Britain one of the safest countries in the world to work in. And far from being responsible for encouraging excessive risk aversion, what is not so well appreciated is that it also has a wider and very positive safety effect in society outside work.

Although focused primarily on providing

protection for working age people while they are in the workplace (and also for the nearby public), good management of health and safety by organisations (underpinned by a strong 'health and safety culture') can also help to support safety across all stages of life, not least by being an arena in which working people learn – specifically and in general – about the importance of:

- 1) recognising hazards** (things that can cause harm;
- 2) assessing risks** (judging probabilities of harm and severity of possible outcomes); and
- 3) choosing the right preventive and/or protective measures** to stay safe.

In this respect, the world of work, through the provision of H&S training, briefing, accident and incident reporting and investigation and so on – is a massive educational arena, not just for helping people to work safely but influencing the way in which they make choices and decisions about everyday (and often quite mundane) safety issues, whether at home, travelling or at play.

Every year in the UK there are 14,000 deaths from accidents and over 700,000 injuries that are life-changing, the vast majority of which occur in home and leisure settings. The cost

to society is estimated to be over £150 billion annually. Yet, investigation shows that the vast majority of these tragedies are very easily preventable, usually by the adoption of relatively simple preventive or protective measures. Accidental injury affects the very young, the frail elderly and the socially disadvantaged disproportionately and yet it still remains a poor cousin in the wider public health agenda.

RoSPA campaigns to promote a 'whole life' approach to safety, seeking to assure freedom from serious accidental injury from early years onwards. It seeks to promote and support many kinds of initiative to achieve this result.

Although the overall scourge of accidents is massive and can certainly be reduced dramatically – particularly if the right public health programmes are put in place – every day the vast majority of such tragedies which could happen are undoubtedly being stopped in their tracks by people taking the right steps to stay safe. This 'hidden hand of safety' is working away all the time largely unnoticed. But how does it actually come about and how is it sustained?

The answer, of course, is complex. Many factors are at work. But of all these factors, OS&H is actually a bigger part of the mix than is generally realised – because, far from





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turning the UK population into a nation of ‘snowflakes’, it is in reality making a largely unrecognised contribution to what helps to keep families safe.

What tends to be overlooked by its critics is that, on a daily basis, OS&H impacts over 30 million adults, a high proportion of whom will be parents and/or carers and who in these roles are key family safety influencers. Through an unseen ‘safety ripple effect’, their OS&H awareness and knowledge is also helping them to keep them, their children and their frail elderly dependents safe too, but for the most part in ways that are not immediately obvious. Yet if this positive connection between workplace safety and safety outside work is to be firmly established, it needs to be properly researched and examined rigorously.

The question, therefore, is precisely to what extent and precisely how does routine OS&H practice – particularly workers undergoing health and safety training and/or being exposed to a positive safety culture while at work – encourage and support safety and accident prevention outside the workplace? For example, if one were to compare ‘matched pairs’ of families differentiated only by past exposure of one of more adult members to occupational safety training, it ought to be possible to discern significant variations in things such as: their awareness of common household hazards; their knowledge and understanding of related precautions; the consistency with which they adopt such measures; and the rate of child/elderly injury rates in the households concerned.

Are safety trained workers, for example, more likely to: use PPE when doing DIY; install child stair gates and childproof locks; put medicines and dangerous chemicals out of reach of young children; and so on?

If this is indeed the case, how big is this ‘safety ripple effect’? Where is it most pronounced? How does it work? What barriers, if any, inhibit its size and impact? Can it be enhanced? If so, how, when, where and by how much?

Research to better understand the ‘safety ripple effect’ might be undertaken by a combination of survey methods and interviews. It could look at a number of common household safety scenarios. (It

might also be repeated in relation to road safety awareness, behaviours and outcomes.)

Qualitative interview and focus group research methods might be used to establish exactly how OS&H attitudes, knowledge and skills transfer to the home environment, and also to what extent differences in safety practices and safety outcomes in different households were a function of other factors such as level of income, general level of education or deprivation generally.

Research as suggested here could also help to establish if and how the ‘OS&H ripple effect’ could be made stronger and more

effective, and in so doing, what more could be done via the workplace to enhance this, for example, by adjusting OS&H training to include non-O&SH content and examples, and by specific programmes on off-the-job safety topics. On the face of it there is a strong business case here since about 10 per cent of all lost staff time is due to accidents outside working hours. But more generally the results of such research could be used to show how investment by employers in occupational safety and health is actually returning a bigger dividend to the nation as a whole than is generally realised.

### Examples that show how workplace OS&H can and does protect people across all stages of life:

- **Infants:** Workplace safety training makes parents more aware of the importance of taking the right precautions in every setting, including to prevent accidents affecting infants and toddlers. Safety conscious businesses can distribute safety information and invite local accident prevention specialists into the workplace to talk to parents and other carers.
- **Young children:** The same is true in relation to the safety of young children. Safety professionals can also go into schools to talk about safety. Businesses that employ parents realise that accidents to children are a source of staff lost time and also badly affect morale and efficiency.
- **Teenagers:** Teenagers can be introduced to importance of health and safety as part of preparation for work and as part of training, for example via initiatives like the LOCHER project ([www.safetygroupsuk.org.uk/campaigns/locher](http://www.safetygroupsuk.org.uk/campaigns/locher)). As with helping younger children, there is much that safety conscious businesses can do to enable their safety professionals to talk to teenagers about safety in many different contexts, from safety on the sports field to safer driving.
- **Adults:** There are 31.5million adults at work in the UK employed in businesses of all kinds. By learning about key aspects of health and safety at induction into their job roles and throughout their careers, workers develop attitudes, knowledge and skills that enable them not just to stay safe in the workplace but in other contexts too. About 10 per cent of staff absence from work is due to accidental injury (mostly off-the-job), so employers have a strong incentive to provide safety information and training in ways that enable their staff to take key workplace safety messages away with them to help keep themselves and their family members safe in the home, on the road or at leisure.
- **The elderly:** As with helping parents to care safely for infants, so businesses can also provide ‘carry-out’ messages, knowledge and skills which those working age people who are also carers can use successfully to keep elderly relatives and other older people safe.