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Lessons of the great unknown

An educational expert on how adventure holidays teach kids to cope with risk.

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We live in a world in which more and more things are viewed as risky: food, drink, trains, aeroplanes, roads, sex, other people. And nowhere is this culture of fear more evident than in schools.

As a frequent visitor to schools, I am routinely confronted with security cameras, swipe cards and intercoms before even entering the building. Once inside, I find that many trainee and newly qualified teachers are so overcome with anxiety at potential risks that they adapt their lessons or even seek to avoid whole areas of the curriculum; gymnastics, design/technology, science, outdoor activities, all cause apoplexy. Many, given the choice, would steer clear of all of these activities. The children might not learn very much, and they might be bored to tears, but at least they would be safe.

Of course, schools are bound by law to be concerned with children's safety. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's motto, 'That which does not kill me makes me strong', is catchy, but it makes poor childcare advice. But the culture of fear has rarely resulted in reasonable policies and accurate information. In fact, reactions are likely to prove more harmful to children's development and education than the risk from which they are being protected.

For example, in the early 1980s the TV programme *That's Life* ran a series of stories on the risks of school playground surfaces causing head injuries, showing films of china plates smashing on the floor. But children's heads have little in common with china plates, and serious head injuries from falls do not appear at all in the statistics on playground injuries.

When a 15-year-old boy tragically drowned in a pond in 2000, a national newspaper launched a campaign, backed by politicians and other public figures, urging parents to fill in their garden ponds. It is indeed true, as TV presenter Esther Rantzen solemnly put it, that 'toddlers can die in the shallowest of water'. But should one accident lead us to abolish water from children's experiences?

Meanwhile, UK chief inspector of schools David Bell recently caused fury when he claimed that children are missing out on potentially life-changing activities because of schools' concerns that they will end up in court if things go wrong. Outdoor and adventurous activities, part of the physical education curriculum, are disappearing from schools across the country.

Some schools point to disasters like that which occurred at Stainforth Beck in Yorkshire a few years ago, when two young people died. Teaching unions claimed that the public outcry following the incident was another case of 'blame culture' gone mad, and one union has advised its members not to participate in future outdoor trips. But what is overlooked is that, in this specific case, the expedition leaders made fundamental mistakes. Schoolchildren should not have been led into a fast-running stream. Outdoor activities were not responsible for the turn of events - error of judgement was.

Writing shortly after the incident, London *Times* journalist Libby Purves suggested that events at Stainforth Beck might actually strengthen the case for quality outdoor and adventurous activities:

'Enough came out of the inquest to make onlookers feel angry at the sheer geographical illiteracy displayed by the party leaders. If future action makes it clear, publicly, that this is an aberration from what is normal and expected of schools and teachers, then there is a better chance that parents in the future will allow their children on outdoor adventures.... If there is blame it must be placed on the right shoulders, if only to underline the value and dignity of the many, many teachers and instructors who do know what they are doing.' (1)

Researchers and policymakers are only just beginning to recognise the damaging consequences of the culture of fear on the quality of children's lives. For fear of possible dangers from an unpredictable and hostile world, parents restrict their children's freedom to be outdoors, to play without adult supervision, and to do the sorts of things that many of us took for granted as we were growing up. A report published by the Children's Play Council claimed that children had become virtual prisoners in their own homes.

There is mounting evidence that increasing numbers of children are being denied the freedom to move around their local environment. For example, 30 years ago, almost all schoolchildren were free to walk to school unaccompanied; now, most are not. There has also been a reduction in the proportion of children of all ages allowed by their parents to cross roads, cycle, go out after dark, and access leisure facilities by themselves. Even in the years between 1990 and 1998, there has been a significant reduction in 10- and 11-year olds who walk to school, and an increase in those who are driven (despite the fact that these are primary school pupils who usually live close to their school).

Evidence suggests that a major contributory factor is parental fears. And these fears transfer to their children, who come to view the outside world, and especially other people, as menacing and best avoided. 'I feel safe when I'm sitting in my house at night by the fire with my family', said one 10-year-old girl from Scotland. Another 13-year-old boy said: 'The further away you are, like, there's a lot more things that could happen to you, like, on the way... But if you're local, just around the estate and you get hurt you can just go along to your home.'

There is a danger that adult preoccupation with risk can remove experiences that are important in children's social and psychological development. Research carried out in Scotland showed that children's playtime has been reduced by an hour each day. It is during play that children learn to test their limits, make decisions, play different roles and imagine different possibilities. Children are much more creative when adults are not interfering or monitoring their behaviour. One study found that adult participation reduced children's experimentation and willingness to make mistakes.

An overcautious approach makes for dull environments. Such environments present too little challenge for children, and some children respond by looking for other opportunities for adventure, sometimes with much greater risk of personal injury.

No environment will ever be completely safe and risk-free, and even well-supervised children manage to hurt themselves. But by speculating on what can possibly go wrong rather than on what children might learn from experiences, we are in danger of creating anxiety in some children and recklessness in others. Children who are fearful will not be able to learn, and those who are overconfident will be unable to make sensible judgements about risk, because their learning environment has become sanitised and over-managed.

This is why the threat to outdoor and adventure activities is so disturbing. Aside from the obvious benefits of taking children into the countryside - the greater awareness of the natural world and our place within it - outdoor and adventurous activities are ideal vehicles for many of the types of challenges and learning opportunities that are necessary for their development. These activities are physically active, and depend upon shared understanding, cooperation and trust. They also force children to draw upon their inner resources to

address real problems, presenting children with challenges and perceived risks, and providing a framework for coming to terms with them.

Anxieties over children's safety and wellbeing are understandable, and it is only right that parents and teachers are mindful of potential dangers. But children need to be able to take acceptable risks in an environment that allows them to extend their abilities and confidence. If children are deprived of these experiences they will not learn to handle the risks that they are certain to meet as they make their way through life.

The Harrogate coroner presiding over the Stainforth Beck case spoke of the 'exhilarating experiences' of outdoor adventure, and of the need for all children, especially those from cities, to encounter and learn from the outdoors. Much the same could be said for risk experiences in general.

Richard Bailey is professor of education at Canterbury Christ Church University College. He has written numerous books and articles on education and child development, and is the author of recent reports on children's physical development for the World Health Organisation, the United Nations and the International Olympic Committee.

(1) Libby Purves, *The Times*, 12 March 2002

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