



From **The Overprotected Kid**

A preoccupation with safety has stripped childhood of independence, risk taking, and discovery—without making it safer. A new kind of playground points to a better solution.

Hanna Rosin, *The Atlantic*, April 2014 Issue

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If a 10-year-old lit a fire at an American playground, someone would call the police and the kid would be taken for counseling. At the Land, spontaneous fires are a frequent occurrence. The park is staffed by professionally trained “playworkers,” who keep a close eye on the kids but don’t intervene all that much. Claire Griffiths, the manager of the Land, describes her job as “loitering with intent.” Although the playworkers almost never stop the kids from what they’re doing, before the playground had even opened they’d filled binders with “risk benefits assessments” for nearly every activity. (In the two years since it opened, no one has been injured outside of the occasional scraped knee.) Here’s the list of benefits for fire: “It can be a social experience to sit around with friends, make friends, to sing songs to dance around, to stare at, it can be a co-operative experience where everyone has jobs. It can be something to experiment with, to take risks, to test its properties, its heat, its power, to re-live our evolutionary past.” The risks? “Burns from fire or fire pit” and “children accidentally burning each other with flaming cardboard or wood.” In this case, the benefits win, because a playworker is always nearby, watching for impending accidents but otherwise letting the children figure out lessons about fire on their own.

“I’m gonna put this cardboard box in the fire,” one of the boys says.

“You know that will make a lot of smoke,” says Griffiths.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” he answers, and in goes the box. Smoke instantly fills the air and burns our eyes. The other boys sitting around the fire cough, duck their heads, and curse him out. In my playground set, we would call this “natural consequences,” although we rarely have the nerve to let even much tamer scenarios than this one play out. By contrast, the custom at the Land is for parents not to intervene. In fact, it’s for parents not to come at all. The dozens of kids who passed through the playground on the day I visited came and went on their own. In seven hours, aside from Griffiths and the other playworkers, I saw only two adults: Dylan’s nana, who walked him over because he’s only 5, and Steve Hughes, who runs a local fishing-tackle shop and came by to lend some tools.

Griffiths started selling local families on the proposed playground in 2006. She talked about the health and developmental benefits of freer outdoor play, and explained that the playground would look messy but be fenced in. But mostly she made an appeal rooted in nostalgia. She explained some of the things kids might be able to do and then asked the parents to remember their own childhoods. “Ahh, did you ever used to do that?” she would ask. This is how she would win them over. Hughes moved to the neighborhood after the Land was already open, but when he stopped by, I asked how he would have answered that question. “When I was a kid, we didn’t have all the rules about health and safety,” he said. “I used to go swimming in the Dee, which is one of the most dangerous rivers around. If my parents had found out, they would have grounded me for life. But back then we would get up to all sorts of mischief.”

LIKE MOST PARENTS MY AGE, I have memories of childhood so different from the way my children are growing up that sometimes I think I might be making them up, or at least exaggerating them. I grew up on a block of nearly identical six-story apartment buildings in Queens, New York. In my elementary-school years, my friends and I spent a lot of afternoons playing cops and robbers in two interconnected apartment garages, after we discovered a door between them that we could pry open. Once, when I was about 9, my friend Kim and I “locked” a bunch of younger kids in an imaginary



jail behind a low gate. Then Kim and I got hungry and walked over to Alba’s pizzeria a few blocks away and forgot all about them. When we got back an hour later, they were still standing in the same spot. They never hopped over the gate, even though they easily could have; their parents never came looking for them, and no one expected them to. A couple of them were pretty upset, but back then, the code between kids ruled. We’d told them they were in jail, so they stayed in jail until we let them out. A parent’s opinion on their term of incarceration would have been irrelevant.

I used to puzzle over a particular statistic that routinely comes up in articles about time use: even though women work vastly more hours now than they did in the 1970s, mothers—and fathers—of all income levels spend much more time with their children than they used to. This seemed impossible to me until recently, when I began to think about my own life. My mother didn’t work all that much when I was younger, but she didn’t spend vast amounts of time with me, either. She didn’t arrange my playdates or drive me to swimming lessons or introduce me to cool music she liked. On weekdays after school she just expected me to show up for dinner; on weekends I barely saw her at all. I, on the other hand, might easily spend every waking Saturday hour with one if not all three of my children, taking one to a soccer game, the second to a theater program, the third to a friend’s house, or just hanging out with them at home. When my daughter was about 10, my husband suddenly realized that in her whole life, she had probably not spent more than 10 minutes unsupervised by an adult. Not 10 minutes in 10 years.

It’s hard to absorb how much childhood norms have shifted in just one generation. Actions that would have been considered paranoid in the ’70s—walking third-graders to school, forbidding your kid to play ball in the street, going down the slide with your child in your lap—are now routine. In fact, they are the markers of good, responsible parenting. One very thorough study of “children’s independent mobility,” conducted in urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods in the U.K., shows that in 1971, 80 percent of third-graders walked to school alone. By 1990, that measure had dropped

to 9 percent, and now it’s even lower. When you ask parents why they are more protective than their parents were, they might answer that the world is more dangerous than it was when they were growing up. But this isn’t true, or at least not in the way that we think. For example, parents now routinely tell their children never to talk to strangers, even though all available evidence suggests that children have about the same (very slim) chance of being abducted by a stranger as they did a generation ago. Maybe the real question is, how did these fears come to have such a hold over us? And what have our children lost—and gained—as we’ve succumbed to them?

IN 1978, a toddler named Frank Nelson made his way to the top of a 12-foot slide in Hamlin Park in Chicago, with his mother, Debra, a few steps behind him. The structure, installed three years earlier, was known as a “tornado slide” because it twisted on the way down, but the boy never made it that far. He fell through the gap between the handrail and the steps and landed on his head on the asphalt. A year later, his parents sued the Chicago Park District and the two companies that had manufactured and installed the slide. Frank had fractured his skull in the fall and suffered permanent brain damage. He was paralyzed on his left side and had speech and vision problems. His attorneys noted that he was forced to wear a helmet all the time to protect his fragile skull.

The Nelsons’ was one of a number of lawsuits of that era that fueled a backlash against potentially dangerous playground equipment.

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It is no longer easy to find a playground that has an element of surprise, no matter how far you travel. Kids can find the same slides at the same heights and angles as the ones in their own neighborhood, with many of the same accessories. I live in Washington, D.C., near a section of Rock Creek Park, and during my first year in the neighborhood, a remote corner of the park dead-ended into what our neighbors called the forgotten playground. The slide had wooden steps, and was at such a steep angle that kids had



to practice controlling their speed so they wouldn't land too hard on the dirt. More glorious, a freestanding tree house perched about 12 feet off the ground, where the neighborhood kids would gather and sort themselves into the pack hierarchies I remember from my childhood—little kids on the ground “cooking” while the bigger kids dominated the high shelter. But in 2003, nearly a year after I moved in, the park service tore down the tree house and replaced all the old equipment with a prefab playground set on rubber flooring. Now the playground can hold only a toddler's attention, and not for very long. The kids seem to spend most of their time in the sandbox; maybe they like it because the neighbors have turned it into a mini adventure playground, dropping off an odd mixing spoon or colander or broken-down toy car.

In recent years, Joe Frost, Sweeney's old partner in the safety crusade, has become concerned that maybe we have gone too far. In a 2006 paper, he gives the example of two parents who sued when their child fell over a stump in a small redwood forest that was part of a playground. They had a basis for the lawsuit. After all, the latest safety handbook advises designers to “look out for tripping hazards, like exposed concrete footings, tree stumps, and rocks.” But adults have come to the mistaken view “that children must somehow be sheltered from all risks of injury,” Frost writes. “In the real world, life is filled with risks—financial, physical, emotional, social—and reasonable risks are essential for children's healthy development.”

At the core of the safety obsession is a view of children that is the exact opposite of Lady Allen's, “an idea that children are too fragile or unintelligent to assess the risk of any given situation,” argues Tim Gill, the author of *No Fear*, a critique of our risk-averse society. “Now our working assumption is that children cannot be trusted to find their way around tricky physical or social and emotional situations.”

What's lost amid all this protection? In the mid-1990s, Norway passed a law that required playgrounds to meet certain safety standards. Ellen Sandseter, a professor of early-childhood education at Queen Maud University College in Trondheim, had just had her

first child, and she watched as one by one the playgrounds in her neighborhood were transformed into sterile, boring places. Sandseter had written her master's dissertation on young teens and their need for sensation and risk; she'd noticed that if they couldn't feed that desire in some socially acceptable way, some would turn to more-reckless behavior. She wondered whether a similar dynamic might take hold among younger kids as playgrounds started to become safer and less interesting.

Sandseter began observing and interviewing children on playgrounds in Norway. In 2011, she published her results in a paper called “Children's Risky Play From an Evolutionary Perspective: The Anti-Phobic Effects of Thrilling Experiences.” Children, she concluded, have a sensory need to taste danger and excitement; this doesn't mean that what they do has to actually be dangerous, only that they *feel* they are taking a great risk. That scares them, but then they overcome the fear. In the paper, Sandseter identifies six kinds of risky play: (1) Exploring heights, or getting the “bird's perspective,” as she calls it—“high enough to evoke the sensation of fear.” (2) Handling dangerous tools—using sharp scissors or knives, or heavy hammers that at first seem unmanageable but that kids learn to master. (3) Being near dangerous elements—playing near vast bodies of water, or near a fire, so kids are aware that there is danger nearby. (4) Rough-and-tumble play—wrestling, play-fighting—so kids learn to negotiate aggression and cooperation. (5) Speed—cycling or skiing at a pace that feels too fast. (6) Exploring on one's own.

This last one Sandseter describes as “the most important for the children.” She told me, “When they are left alone and can take full responsibility for their actions, and the consequences of their decisions, it's a thrilling experience.”

To gauge the effects of losing these experiences, Sandseter turns to evolutionary psychology. Children are born with the instinct to take risks in play, because historically, learning to negotiate risk has been crucial to survival; in another era, they would have had to learn to



run from some danger, defend themselves from others, be independent. Even today, growing up is a process of managing fears and learning to arrive at sound decisions. By engaging in risky play, children are effectively subjecting themselves to a form of exposure therapy, in which they force themselves to do the thing they're afraid of in order to overcome their fear. But if they never go through that process, the fear can turn into a phobia. Paradoxically, Sandseter writes, "our fear of children being harmed," mostly in minor ways, "may result in more fearful children and increased levels of psychopathology." She cites a study showing that children who injured themselves falling from heights when they were between 5 and 9 years old are less likely to be afraid of heights at age 18. "Risky play with great heights will provide a desensitizing or habituating experience," she writes.

We might accept a few more phobias in our children in exchange for fewer injuries. But the final irony is that our close attention to safety has not in fact made a tremendous difference in the number of accidents children have. According to the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System, which monitors hospital visits, the frequency of emergency-room visits related to playground equipment, including home equipment, in 1980 was 156,000, or one visit per 1,452 Americans. In 2012, it was 271,475, or one per 1,156 Americans. The number of deaths hasn't changed much either. From 2001 through 2008, the Consumer Product Safety Commission reported 100 deaths associated with playground equipment—an average of 13 a year, or 10 fewer than were reported in 1980. Head injuries, runaway motorcycles, a fatal fall onto a rock—most of the horrors Sweeney and Frost described all those years ago turn out to be freakishly rare, unexpected tragedies that no amount of safety-proofing can prevent.

Even rubber surfacing doesn't seem to have made much of a difference in the real world. David Ball, a professor of risk management at Middlesex University, analyzed U.K. injury statistics and found that as in the U.S., there was no clear trend over time. "The advent of all these special surfaces for playgrounds has

contributed very little, if anything at all, to the safety of children," he told me. Ball has found some evidence that long-bone injuries, which are far more common than head injuries, are actually increasing. The best theory for that is "risk compensation"—kids don't worry as much about falling on rubber, so they're not as careful, and end up hurting themselves more often. The problem, says Ball, is that "we have come to think of accidents as preventable and not a natural part of life."

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