

No Fear

Growing up in a risk averse society

TIM GILL



Summary
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No Fear joins the increasingly vigorous debate about the role and nature of childhood in the UK. Over the past 30 years activities that previous generations of children enjoyed without a second thought have been relabelled as troubling or dangerous, and the adults who permit them branded as irresponsible. *No Fear* argues that childhood is being undermined by the growth of risk aversion and its intrusion into every aspect of children's lives. This restricts children's play, limits their freedom of movement, corrodes their relationships with adults and constrains their exploration of physical, social and virtual worlds. *No Fear* focuses on the crucial, yet often neglected, years of childhood between the ages of 5 and 11, when children are beginning to gain a degree of freedom and when they learn many of their social and life skills.

Key points

- We all want to keep children safe – but are we going the right way about it? By bubble wrapping children we stop them developing the skills and resilience they need to protect themselves – while those working with children can become so anxious about risk prevention they lose confidence in their own good judgement.
- Parental fear of letting children play unsupervised is limiting children's freedom, to the detriment of their physical, mental and emotional well-being.
- One of parents' greatest fears is of 'stranger danger' – prompted in part by intense media coverage of cases of child abduction, which can give the incorrect impression that this type of incident is on the increase.
- While Criminal Records Bureau checks can have a useful part to play in protecting children, we should not rely on the system to the detriment of professional judgement.
- Rather than having a nanny state, where regulation and risk aversion dominate the landscape, we need to aspire to a child-friendly society.

- Background
- Case Studies
- Recommendations

Introduction

The shrinking horizons of childhood

There is a widely held view that children grow up faster today. But, in fact, prior to adolescence their lives are far more controlled and overseen than 30 years ago.

- In 1971 eight out of ten children aged seven or eight years went to school on their own. By 1990 this figure had dropped to less than one in ten.
- In 1971 the average seven-year-old made solo trips to their friends or the shops. By 1990 that freedom was withheld until the age of ten.
- Children today spend about four times as much time being looked after by their parents as children did in 1975.
- With the introduction of extended school hours, children may spend more time at school, where in many cases they have less unstructured free time than in the past.

This shrinking of the domain of childhood, which has many causes, is the essential backdrop for any informed discussion about risk and childhood.

The role of risk in childhood

Through encountering risks, children learn how to overcome challenging situations, nurturing their character and fostering a sense of adventure, entrepreneurialism, resilience and self-reliance. However, it is often more difficult to quantify such benefits than to measure adverse outcomes – which creates problems for public policy.

Children value their safety and want adults to help them stay safe. At the same time they also want greater freedom, more things to do and more places to go. We should also acknowledge that they develop a growing understanding of the concept of risk as they approach and pass through adolescence.



Public policy

A more thoughtful approach to risk is beginning to emerge in public policy, and debate on the subject is growing. The Government-appointed Better Regulation Commission has stated in its 2006 report *Risk, Responsibility and Regulation: Whose risk is it anyway* that 'we all share a responsibility for managing risk and ... within the right circumstances, risk can be beneficial and should be encouraged.' The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has been highly critical of petty health and safety concerns.

Focus

No Fear considers a small number of contested issues in a search for underlying themes. The geographical focus is on children in the UK, with a limited look at other developed nations to broaden the perspective. These international comparisons strongly suggest that risk aversion is greater in the UK than in some comparable European countries, though it may be even more acute in the USA.

Playgrounds

The public playground provides a revealing case study of the influence of risk aversion on children's everyday lives. Since the 1970s, concerns about playground safety have led safety agencies, consumer groups and the media to call for ever greater use of safety measures. Yet playing on playgrounds has for decades been statistically at least as safe as many other sport and leisure activities.

- The odds of a child sustaining a playground injury are about one in 16 per year, while the odds of visiting A&E after a playground injury are around one in 200.
- Between 1986 and 1998 there was one child fatality every three or four years as a result of equipment-related playground injuries, including falls. This means that, each year, the odds of a child dying from such a playground accident are less than 30 million to one.

The drive for safety has focused on the installation of safety surfacing.

- Rubber surfacing costs up to 40 per cent of the total capital cost of a playground.
- In the 1990s, £200–£300 million was spent on safety surfacing, which would have saved the lives of one or two children at best. During the same period around 1,300 child pedestrians were killed and 40,000 seriously injured.
- Cost-benefit analyses show that residential traffic calming is at least ten times as effective as playground safety surfacing in preventing accidents to children. So £200–£300 million would have saved far more lives if invested in streets rather than playgrounds.

The uncritical application of safety standards has also diminished the number and quality of playgrounds and may have encouraged a less thoughtful approach to risk.

Recent developments

In the last five years, the playground industry has begun to pursue a more measured and balanced approach to safety. This has resulted in a change in culture, with greater willingness amongst providers to tolerate a degree of risk. More adventurous playgrounds are being built, and safety experts have even proposed the relaxing of some safety standards. This progressive trend, which came about in part because of a fresh look at the evidence and at some fundamental values and principles about children and risk, holds lessons for other arenas of safety.

The spread of risk averse attitudes to childhood

Other domains of childhood where risk aversion is in evidence exemplify some key facets of the wider debate and highlight important public policy issues.

Antisocial behaviour

Adults have always been hostile to low-level misbehaviour by children, but there is a new tendency for the police and other public services to impose formal sanctions for petty misdemeanours. It is crucial to distinguish between minor skirmishes amongst children or between children and adults, and more serious thoughtless or deliberate antisocial acts. The former are, like minor accidents, formative childhood experiences; they do not presage a life of crime or antisocial behaviour, but help children to understand the norms and conventions that shape much of social activity.

Bullying

Bullying is a serious and widespread problem, and the growth in use of mobile phones and social networking websites is opening up new contexts in which it can take place. However, some anti-bullying initiatives show signs of excessive risk aversion in the way that they define the problem. It may be difficult for adults to judge whether or not a particular incident is bullying, and to decide how best to intervene, but blurring the distinction between bullying and less serious conflicts is unhelpful. In an atmosphere of heightened media and public awareness, there is a real danger that adults will overreact and suppress behaviour that, unlike bullying, has a key role in helping children to learn for themselves how to deal with difficult social situations.

Child protection, vetting and contact between children and adults

In the past, those tackling child abuse focused on family, where the vast majority of child abuse takes place. However, the focus has shifted in recent years. The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 is the latest and arguably most risk averse step in this trend.

- The Act places around nine million adults technically under suspicion of abuse: a third of the adult working population.
- The Act for the first time extends mandatory vetting to include over two million volunteers and workers involved in sport and leisure activities, and over 200,000 school governors.
- The annual running cost of the vetting system was £83 million in 2005/6. When the Act comes into effect this is expected to rise.
- The number of cases of child abuse prevented will be tiny in comparison to the abuse that still takes place in domestic settings. The NSPCC estimates that around 79 children a year are being killed by their parents or others in their families.

Although the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check is widely seen as the 'gold standard' that induces public confidence, it is no guarantee that a person is not a threat because much abuse goes unreported and undetected.

Reliance on a technical, bureaucratic procedure may ultimately leave children less well-protected since many agencies will focus on carrying out checks at the expense of other measures, such as training and awareness-raising, that could be more effective in protecting children from abuse.

The new regime is also beginning to have an adverse impact on levels of volunteering and community activity around children.

Fear of strangers

The murder of a child by someone they do not know is among the rarest of crimes, and its emotional power is unsurpassed. A rational look at the statistics is a vital first step in gaining perspective. Perhaps five to seven children a year are killed by strangers. Of these, around two are children of primary school age. These figures have been at their current level for decades.

Excessive fear of strangers reinforces a norm of parenting that equates being a good parent with being a controlling parent. It can also corrode the ties that help communities to be safe and convivial for both adults and children.

Safety messages that warn children never to speak to strangers reinforce the view that it is wrong for adults to initiate social contact with children they don't know, which breeds mistrust and can have damaging consequences.

However, some child safety initiatives have emerged that focus on helping children keep themselves safe, without giving misleading messages about the relative risks.

Online risks

The internet is new territory for creativity, exploration and adventure. Children's mastery of online technology will be

crucial not just for their social and leisure lives and education, but also for their future economic prospects. However, the virtual world also holds potential threats, which come in three forms: online child sexual abuse; violent and/or sexual content; and 'cyberbullying'.

In 2007 the Prime Minister announced a review of the effects of the internet and computer games on children. This review will need to take a balanced approach to risks and benefits, and recognise the increasingly central role that the virtual world has in children's lives. Most children are successfully learning and sharing ways to pursue their interests online, while keeping themselves safe.

Conclusions

All these case studies show that policy and practice are often focused on the goal of reducing adverse outcomes, when there is a manifest need to take into account the benefits of allowing children more freedom to explore, discover, take a degree of responsibility and experience risks for themselves.

Rare, tragic adverse outcomes have a disproportionate influence. Safety initiatives tend to take the form of quick fixes, technical or bureaucratic procedures that work against the exercise of judgement. Little or no consideration is given to possible side-effects. Underpinning and connecting all these tendencies is an assumption of children's vulnerability (or in the case of antisocial behaviour, their villainy) combined with failure to prioritise ways of fostering their resilience and sense of responsibility.

Who is to blame?

For **parents** the collective failure of nerve about risk is an understandable side-effect of wider social and cultural changes. These include growing traffic danger, fear of crime and strangers, a decline in the quality and quantity of accessible outdoor public space, and changing patterns of family life.

For other adults – **teachers, childcare workers, activity leaders** – the effect of these changes is compounded by the fear of being blamed and by the over-regulation and institutionalisation of childhood. Different parents will have different norms and expectations, but professionals and agencies may feel under pressure to accede to the demands of the most risk averse, unless their professional values and objectives give them the confidence to resist this.

The low status of childcare as a profession increases the degree to which children in childcare settings are overprotected.

The media must also accept some responsibility for the rise in risk aversion. Their coverage of horrific crimes and extremely rare tragedies has become more emotive, arguably making it harder for public policy to take a measured approach.

Conclusions

Where people or institutions have succeeded in resisting the push to eliminate risk, it is because they have an explicit philosophy about the role of risk in children's lives. The challenge for public policy is to learn from these. Schools have a major role in resisting the trend to overprotect and intervene, one which is likely to increase as children spend more time within their jurisdiction.

Beyond risk aversion

No Fear has two over-arching recommendations to counter the effects of risk aversion in childhood. First, public policy must take seriously the need to create more child-friendly communities. Second, services and institutions must reject the 'philosophy of protection' in favour of a 'philosophy of resilience'. Research into children's mental health, and also the findings of the 2007 UNICEF international report on children's well-being – which put the UK bottom out of 21 rich nations – are further evidence of the need for action.

Child-friendly communities

No Fear calls for the creation of genuinely child-friendly communities that offer children the opportunity to explore, learn, grow and adapt through their own experiences in their neighbourhoods, crucially beyond home and school. This means:

- providing easy access to welcoming, accessible parks, squares and public spaces.
- prioritising walking, cycling and public transport over the car.
- using city-wide planning to create safer neighbourhoods for children.

Experience from other countries shows that political leadership can lead to dramatic improvements in child-friendliness over the long term. In the 1970s Denmark had

the worst child pedestrian casualty record in Europe. In 1976 the Danish Government passed a law that forced local authorities to protect children from the dangers of motorised traffic. Today Denmark has much higher levels of walking and cycling than the UK, but lower casualty rates.

Children's services: from protection to resilience

Society must also take a more resilient approach to risk, recognising the need for a balance between protection and freedom, and affirming children's ability to recover and learn from adverse outcomes. This means:

- clarity about which kinds of adverse outcome are unacceptable and which, while perhaps unpleasant, are a normal part of childhood.
- recognising the role and value of professional judgement.
- moving away from increasingly detailed safety guidance and procedures.

Conclusion

No Fear is not an unconditional plea for the deregulation of childhood, but a call for proportion and balance. Promoting resilience can be challenging, as it can appear as though children are expected to take charge of their own safety while society evades responsibility. However, unless we accept the need for children to develop the skills and experience to keep themselves safe, adults will feel under ever more pressure to intervene. At worst this could fuel a vicious circle where children's alleged fragility provides the rationale for excessive interference, leading to a loss of experiential learning opportunities that in turn leaves children more vulnerable.

Tackling risk aversion in childhood is just as pressing for public policy as global issues such as prosperity, security and sustainability. Progress on all these issues depends critically upon the children of the future growing up as confident, responsible, resilient citizens: people who feel they have some control over their destinies and are alive to the consequences of their actions. This will only happen if their childhoods include some simple, intuitively important ingredients: frequent, unregulated, self-directed contact with people and places beyond the immediate spheres of family and school, and the chance to learn from their mistakes.

Further information

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