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COTTON WOOL KIDS?

Making sense of 'Child Safety'

Should teachers take children on foreign trips? Should parents allow their children to walk to school or play out at night? Should all adults who want to volunteer their time to work with children be vetted before we allow them to do so? Are strangers a danger? And what about grooming on the internet?

Today the question of child safety is at the forefront of most of the relationships and activities we carry out with children. But how 'at risk' are children and young people?

Concerns about child safety have led to many changes in the way teachers teach, parents look after their children and play workers think about 'safe' play. But to what extent are these changes assisting, or limiting the development of children and young people themselves? And what impact is the constant concern about 'child safety' having upon adults and society as a whole?

Safety has always been an issue for those involved in teaching, working with and looking after children. But today the question needs to be asked: Has child safety gone too far?

On the 20th September 2005, Generation Youth Issues the youth research group, organised the *Cotton Wool Kids* conference in an attempt to answer these questions. This bulletin has been published in the hope that some of the more problematic aspects of child safety can be challenged. The speeches from some of the academics who spoke at the *Cotton Wool Kids* conference are reprinted here. If you would like to find out more about these issues or the work of Generation please get in touch ■

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FRANK FUREDI has recently been described as the most influential sociologist in Britain. He is author of *Therapy Culture*, *Culture of Fear* and *Paranoid Parenting* and is currently researching issues of risk, childhood and parenting.

MAKING SENSE OF

Keeping children safe from harm has been a concern for adults in society for centuries. However, today 'child safety' impacts on the world of adults and children in a way never seen before. With the emergence of what has been called 'paranoid parenting', and a 'culture of litigation', child safety has become an increasing concern and organising principle for how adults and institutions relate to young people. But why has this developed and what are the negative effects on the lives of children?

Two internationally renowned academics *Christina Hoff Sommers* and first *Frank Furedi* address this question.

Cultivating suspicion

In one sense I should not be at this conference, because my brief as an academic has always been to examine society-wide processes rather than look at children. The reason I wrote *Paranoid Parenting* back in 2001 was that my experience as an older father with a new baby made me alarmed about what was happening to children and how the role of adulthood had become estranged from children in general.

I had more or less decided that after a year or so I would go back to my other areas of interest and leave children behind.

Unfortunately since I wrote *Paranoid Parenting* the situation has got much worse. Many of the things you could still do with children in 2001 you can no longer do today; many of the things that people used to laugh at as being very earnest and over the top and eccentric are today seen as common sense when it comes to children.

I remember for example about two or three years ago I was doing a BBC Scotland programme, and was debating with some child protection individual.

The reason I was brought to Scotland was because one of your local authorities had, in their wisdom, just decided to ban parents from videoing their children's nativity play. I argued that this was crazy but was also only the beginning of a trend. At the time everyone who phoned me said, 'Frank you're wrong, how can you say this, this is not going to happen, this is just some local authority, we are far too common-sensical to go along that road'. And yet today, in 2005, this has become common sense and if you look at most local authorities, not just in Scotland but in England; parents cannot take pictures of their children playing football. When I take my kid to play football, the first thing that happens before the tackles begin is that the head coach says, sorry folks nobody can take a picture of any children because that's the law and the only time we can allow pictures or videos is once a year when we give out medals and the cup. And if I go to my local authority swimming pool in Faversham, a big sign tells me that I must not be there with a camera. In fact the message is a gentle hint that if you are an 'unaccompanied adult', they would rather you were twenty miles away from their swimming pool.

CHILD SAFETY

Over the last few years I have made a list of things that children can no longer do. For example, children in many local authorities in England are no longer allowed to go swimming on their own. The game of conkers is also being banned in a number of places in the UK, and the list of regulations appears to be growing almost by the day. It is not an exaggeration to argue that we are creating a new security state around children.

Increasingly anybody who has anything to do with children is going to have a sort of security vetting. For example, my wife runs a charity in reproductive health and provides abortion and contraceptive advice around the country. When she became chief executive she had to go to the police and get checked out because occasionally a teenager comes

What happens under these circumstances is that you transmit alarmist messages which are often subliminal, that promote the idea to parents that they have to be wary of those who look after their children. The police checks themselves create a framework of suspicion, and this is something that a safety certificate from the state does little to overcome. What you are doing is formalising a relationship between professionals who work with children, and parents. You are altering the relationship between them and between the worker and the child.

These relationships are today being developed around a sentiment of distrust. Sitting around a dinner table and talking to parents who have children, half of them talk about the youth workers or football coaches in ways

The first reason is what I call the crisis of adult identity. One of the things we have seen in the last twenty to twenty five years is a major crisis in what it means to be an adult.

We are supposed to be grown up mature individuals but it seems that today part and parcel of the adult identity is a struggle with the very idea of being a 'grown up'. Adulthood is no longer given any positive valuation. In fact, the best thing you could say to an adult person is 'you don't look your age'. The idea being that if you did look your age that would be a horror – it might drive you to suicide. In fact I cannot think of any aspect of adulthood that we can discuss that has positive credentials. Just about everything that adults do is negative.

Men my age walk down the street in t-shirts advertising the latest rock band or spend time playing games on their Game Boy. Today it is difficult to come to terms with the fact there is something good and desirable in being mature, knowing your strengths and knowing your weaknesses. We are at a stage where we are very uncomfortable with being adults. But we are not just uncomfortable, we are suspicious of adults. Adulthood is increasingly rehashed as negative. Every time you see a Hollywood film the adults are the idiots and the children are the clever ones. It is very difficult to see adults depicted and portrayed in a sensitive way. The image of adults is that on balance they are not very nice people, not very sensitive people.

We also view adults as a risk to children. If we did not think that adults were a risk to children why would we need to have security clearance for them? Just think about it, do we really think hundreds of thousands of adults are potential paedophiles, that they are potential abusers? Because if we do we have the most profoundly misanthropic culture in the world. To genuinely believe that adults cannot help but abuse children represents a profoundly negative understanding of what humanity is really all about. But actually that is what we think because the message that we get time and time again is 'do not trust adults'.

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to the clinic and she had to be vetted to make sure she was the right type of person to be around a child. If my wife is going to be vetted, someone who rarely deals with children, then what happens if you are a teacher or if you are running a sports club or a youth club, and what about adults in the community who want to help out with children's activities?

This process is helping to formalise once informal relationships. The one thing I have learned as a sociologist is that the minute you begin to formalise informal relations between people, the minute you begin to give clearance and say that this person is OK but we haven't checked that person; the minute you create the anticipation and the expectation that teachers and adults need to have some security vetting, you alter the relationship between teacher and student. You alter the relationship between a nursery worker and the babies and mothers.

that would have been unthinkable five, 10 or 15 years ago. They are looking at them not as people who are giving up their weekends for their kids, but as potential dangers to the wellbeing of their children.

Unfortunately things have become worse in the last five years and in the next ten years it will be even worse as the dynamic is towards more rules and limits to children's freedom, more illiberal, intolerant laws relating to childcare, greater mistrust being fuelled against adults, greater professionalisation of child care, greater suspicion being directed against adults, and a whole range of new laws coming in to create an even greater climate of fear as far as children are concerned.

Once 'child safety' becomes the basis of our dealings with youngsters, then they can never be too safe. You can never protect a child enough; there is always something somewhere that needs to be made safer. You will always imagine a threat lurking out there.

Why is this happening? Why are we going down this route? There are two important forces at work. The first point is related to adults and the second to children.

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The very first lecture my five year old boy got in school was from an NSPCC person who came to the school and gave a talk about stranger danger. I actually think that is horrific. You may think that this is very enlightened and children might learn all these 'skills', but actually what you are doing is taking adult fears and adult insecurity and recycling them in the imaginations of five and six year olds.

We are creating a world of witch hunts and adult insecurities, a world where adults become so estranged from children that they are no longer in a position to do anything for them. In British society we are now in a situation where we are so much not part of children's lives, that when kids are in trouble we look the other way, we look at our shoes. We feel awkward, no longer sure if we should be involved in children's lives.

I remember it happened to me, when a couple of us fathers were in the swimming pool with our children. A bunch of children were swimming about in front of me and one little girl, five or six years old, was half-drowning. I went over and reached down to rescue her – but all the time I'm thinking to myself, how will this be interpreted, what will they think. And if I am thinking this, what do other people feel?

Other people's children are becoming a no-go area for adults. Their care is entirely the responsibility of two people, their mum and dad. There is a danger that is far worse than paedophiles, far worse than traffic, far worse than bullying and far worse than drugs. The biggest danger to children is when adults absolve themselves of the responsibility of looking after them.

Every civilised community in the world – every good 'community' in the world – is based on having a joint responsibility for the upbringing of children. If you go to the Docklands in London or other places where there are no children, there is no community. Communities are developed from the bringing up of children.

The biggest danger in society today is the loss of adult solidarity, which means you only ever have two people looking after a child.

The second point is that we've also redefined the meaning of what a child is. Today a child, unlike at any other time, is defined by their vulnerability. In the 1970s there were a few articles about the 'vulnerable child'; in the 80s this started to rise and in the 90s it was everywhere. When you ask the question today, vulnerable to what, the only answer is vulnerable to everything. This has become the defining feature of a child's existence.

The thing that's really irritating me at the minute is kids football. There was a recent article in the *Observer* talking about the risks involved with community football. They had this expert, Professor Derek Fraser, who says that real progress has been made in terms of safety issues in football, but then says, like all academics, '...the challenge for football remains daunting. The task of making football safe for children should not be underestimated'. This is the message that's being promoted. The first thing that comes into my mind when listening to this is that my parents used to send me outside to play by myself, that's what they did, that's what everyone did. Today, if we take Derek's under-

standing, just allowing children to play football is a daunting task.

What is peer pressure? Basically peer pressure is saying to your mates, go on, you do it. And you sometimes do pretty silly things, but that's called having friends. But once children are 'vulnerable', their friends and relationships are transformed into this problematic 'peer pressure'.

The process of problematising children and young people has continued to spiral – you start in public with the problem of drugs and bullying, and then soon another problem of 'vulnerability' is discovered when we start to look indoors. For example, we now get indoor helmets being advertised in case a child slips on the kitchen floor. When you ask the guy in the shop about these helmets, he looks at you as if to say you are a bad parent for not realising the dangers of children not wearing a helmet! This is already a reality in America, but these developments are also happening in the UK. Once we have this framework of children's vulnerability, dangers exist everywhere, such as paedophiles on the internet.

You've got to remember, that the minute you consider child protection and child safety

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standing, just allowing children to play football is a daunting task.

Part of this concern stems from some research that has found that 60 or 70 adults who work with kids in football are understood to be potential abusers. But if we take these 60 or 70 people, out of the millions of kids who play football and the millions of adults who are involved in youth football, then the chances of your child being abused are practically nil. But once you've got this one report you know there will be other reports coming out, and there will be more reports after those and you'll have a wave of concern about the vulnerability of young people involved in sport. I can predict sport will be the next area to be destroyed by the child protection industry.

If we start with the idea of vulnerability, then any experience that children and young people have is potentially dangerous. So, for example, now if you go from primary school to high school, someone has to hold your hand and mediate this process, something that in the past we were all expected to do. Look at the idea of peer pressure, for example.

in its own right, it has a significant dynamic and the human imagination has no boundaries. So we go on a continual quest for safety which discovers new risks and in the process of doing this, we actually make adults and young people more insecure and more anxious. By the time they're 18 or 19, young people arrive at universities chaperoned by their parents. By the time they finish university they'll probably go back to the safety of their parents' home, and they'll be playing computer games at home till they're 35! | **FRANK FUREDI**

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One nation under therapy

In a satirical article in the *Wall Street Journal*, an editor tallied the number of Americans allegedly suffering from some kind of emotional disorder. He had sent away for the literature of dozens of advocacy agencies and mental health organizations. Then he did the maths. 'If you believe these statistics, he said, 77 percent of America's adult population is a mess... And we haven't even thrown in alien abductees and road ragers.' The editor worried that the country may soon be declared officially nuts.

In our recent book *One Nation Under Therapy*, my co-author, psychiatrist, Dr. Sally Satel and I offer a more hopeful view of American society. We point out that there is no evidence that large swathes of the population are in psychological free-fall. On the contrary, we find most Americans – young and old – 'are surprisingly sane'. And, dare we say it, even happy. Last fall, for example, the Gallup Poll released results of its annual mental health survey. When asked how they would describe their own mental health or emotional well-being, 88 percent replied excellent or good. This is consistent with findings of the National Opinion Research Centre at the University of Chicago that show approximately 90 percent of Americans describe themselves as happy with their lives.

My co-author and I are not suggesting that everyone is brimming with joy or possessed of an abiding sense of well-being. The great 18th century German writer Johann Goethe reportedly said, 'We do not have to visit a madhouse to find disordered minds; our planet is the mental institution of the universe'. This is putting it too strongly. Nevertheless, it is true that most human beings are mildly neurotic, often self-defeating, anxious, or sad. These traits are characteristic of the human condition; they are not pathological. And they are certainly not new.

Nevertheless, the gloom sayers have successfully promoted and spread the belief that average Americans are emotionally under-developed and psychically frail, requiring the ministrations of many mental health professionals to cope with life's vicissitudes.

The crisis-writers both reflect and promote a contemporary doctrine that we call 'therapism'. Therapism rests on several assumptions:

- 1) That vulnerability and fragility, not strength and resiliency, characterize the human psyche.
- 2) That suffering is a pathology in need of a cure.
- 3) That uninhibited emotional openness is essential to mental health.

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Therapism fosters the belief that a diffident, vulnerable, emotionally apprehensive public requires a vast array of therapists, self-esteem educators, grief counsellors, workshopers, healers and traumatologists to guide it through the trials of everyday life.

We roundly reject all these assumptions.

Therapism is a beguiling philosophy because it appears to be kind, sensitive and enlightened. But, as I shall try to show, too often therapism leads to consequences that are unkind, insensitive and benighted. On the other hand, modern forms of stoicism offer a happier, more effective and psychologically sound life philosophy for both children and adults.

I will focus on two primary functions of therapism

- 1) the thesis of fragility and
- 2) the idea that emotional self-awareness and expression is critical to mental health.

My main focus will be on children. Most of what I say is based on examples and research from the United States. But, I have little doubt that it is relevant to the United Kingdom. In fact, my co-author and I pilfered the term 'therapism' from the British writer, Fay Weldon. This is an era of therapism, she told an interviewer with dismay, a drive towards the belief that talk is all we need.

Whence came the idea that children are in crisis and need talk deeply and expansively about their feelings? For more than a decade, various experts and popular writers have been promoting the proposition of a national mental health crisis. Daniel Goleman, author of the bestselling 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence*, described a nation in the grip of surging rage and despair. His book was short on data, but rich in anecdote. He sold more than a million copies and created a national movement to improve the emotional self-awareness of Americans, especially children. At about the same time, Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia*, alarmed American mothers with her apocalyptic vision of adolescent girls. Again, she offered lots of stories of disturbed girls from her clinical practice but little if any real evidence.

Not to be outdone, Harvard psychologist

William Pollack soon followed (in 1998) with a book entitled *Real Boys* that claimed adolescent boys, including those who appear to be healthy, are tragically anguished. He referred to them as young Hamlets [who] succumb to an inner state of Denmark. But then, in 1999, feminist author Susan Faludi, another veteran of the best-seller lists, called attention to the devastating emotional problems of yet another group of fragile Americans: adult males. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male*, Faludi contended that American men cannot live up to the conventional stoic ideal of manliness and so, en masse, they lose their sense of self. No wonder men are in such agony, she says.

So now we all know that our children are in crisis and our adults are quietly desperate. But reliable studies gainsay such alleged knowledge. I noted two such studies above, but to cite just one more: The Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan (in 2000) polled a scientifically selected sample of three thousand high school seniors on the question: Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say you are

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«« very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy? Slightly more than 87 percent of students responded that they were pretty happy or very happy. If Americans are crashing, burning, despairing, in agony – they do not seem to know it.

Because of the tendency to regard normal children as psychologically at risk, many parents and educators are taking unprecedented measures to protect them from stress and duress. Schoolyard games that encourage competition are under a cloud. Many schools now discourage or prohibit competitive games such as tag or dodge ball. The rationale – too many hurt feelings. In May 2002, for example, the principal of a California Elementary sent a newsletter to parents informing them that children could no longer play tag during the lunch recess. As she explained, 'In this game, there is a "victim" or "It," which creates a self-esteem issue.'

The National Education Association distributes a teachers guide that suggests an anxiety-reducing version of tag, where nobody is ever out. It is called Circle of Friends. The National PTA recommends a co-operative alternative to the fiercely competitive 'tug of war' called 'tug of peace.'

This movement against stressful games gained momentum after the publication of a 1994 article in a journal sponsored by the National Association for Sports and Physical Education, which represents nearly eighteen thousand gym teachers and physical education professors. In the article, the author consigned not only dodge ball but all elimination games including musical chairs to the Hall of Shame. Which games, then, are now regarded as safe and affirming beside Circle of Friends and Tug of Peace? Juggling is highly recommended. In a game like juggling there is no threat of elimination. But experts warn teachers to be judicious in their choice of juggling objects. A former member of The Presidents Council on Youth Fitness and Sports suggests using silken scarves rather than, say, uncooperative tennis balls that lead to frustration and anxiety. Scarves, he told the *Los Angeles Times*, are soft, nonthreatening, and float down slowly.

Anthony Pelligrini is a professor of early childhood education at the University of Minnesota. He is an expert on children's play and a strong believer in the value of rough and tumble play for children and has a lot of research (and common sense) to back it up. I asked him about the national movement against games like dodge ball and tag. It is ridiculous, he said. He deplores the growing consensus among educators that competitive

games hurt feelings. He pointed to the absence of any theoretical or empirical basis for the new protectiveness.

The hyper-solicitude is not only in the playground. You may or may not be aware that in the United States, purple is replacing red as the colour of choice for teachers for correcting papers. Why, you may ask? It seems that educators worry that emphatic red corrections on a homework assignment or test can be stressful, demeaning – even 'frightening' for a young person.

Are schoolchildren really so upset by corrections in primary red? There is no evidence for that. And simple common sense suggests that if they are protected from frank criticism written in 'harsh' colours kids are being gravely shortchanged. In the global economy that awaits them, young Americans will be competing with other young people from all parts of the world whose teachers do not hesitate to use red pens. The new protectiveness goes far beyond blacklisting dodgeball and red pens.

In her recent book, *The Language Police*,

The idea that kids can cope with only the blandest of stories is preposterous. Staples like Little Red Riding Hood, delight children despite (or because of) their ghoulish aspects. Kids love to hear ghost stories on Halloween and to ride roller coasters, screaming as they hurtle down the inclines. Young people are not helped by being wrapped in cotton wool and deprived of the vigorous, happy pastimes and intellectual challenges. Commenting on Diane Ravitch's findings, Jonathan Yardley, the book critic at the *Washington Post*, wrote, 'a child with a rare disease may have to be put in a bubble, but putting the entire American system of elementary and secondary education into one borders on insanity'.

Now a word about the merits of another principle of therapism: that uninhibited emotional openness and self-awareness is essential to mental health. I will begin with a story about my son, who went on a camping trip in the desert with his high school class. During the trip, a sensitivity educator paid a visit and led the students through some

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education historian Diane Ravitch describes how sensitivity and bias committees in publishing houses, as well as government education departments, routinely expunge from textbooks and standardised tests all mention of potentially distressing topics. Two major publishing companies specifically interdict references to rats, mice, roaches, snakes, lice, typhoons, blizzards and peanuts. (The latter could upset children with allergies.) The State of California requires that all instructional materials promote individual development and self-esteem and instil in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage [and] develop a feeling of self-worth.

Because California is one of the largest markets in the country, textbook publishers marketing to other states tailor their books to its specifications.

What happens when social studies textbooks aim at boosting self-esteem and providing the student with a positive experience? Gilbert Sewall, director of the American Textbook Council, an organisation dedicated to improving history and civics education, aptly sums up the effects: Students and teachers alike are sedated by textbook happy talk.

'emotional literacy' exercises. The teens were told to walk into the desert until they were completely alone. The counsellor, supplied them with a pencil, paper, matches, and a candle and instructed them to absorb the quiet calm of the desert, to record their feelings, and to find themselves.

The students scattered into the desert, but several (mostly boys, but some girls too) quickly became bored and sought one another's company. They threw the pencils and paper into a pile, and used the candles and matches to start a little bonfire. The kids enjoyed it; the sensitivity counsellor was horrified. Later in the evening, the students sat in a circle to share their reflections. When one of them talked about the haunting loneliness of the desert; others could barely suppress laughter, causing further distress to the trainer.

Should we be worried about my son and his bonfire companions? Daniel Goleman certainly would be. As I noted earlier, he is the author of *Emotional Intelligence* and he has become a secular apostle of the credo that continuous monitoring of one's feelings is healthful and liberating. He champions classroom exercises that encourage children to talk at length and in depth about their emotions. In fact, he has endorsed what is known as the Self Science curriculum. Versions of it have found their way into most American classrooms. In a typical Self Science exercise, when the teacher calls the roll, the students do not say 'here', but take the opportunity to identify their feelings at that moment. Goleman, the Self-scientists, and others who promote affective education across the board take it for granted that open emotional self-expression is necessarily a good thing for children. But what if it is not?

In a report called *Is Repression Adaptive?* a team of psychologists studied a group of high school students, dividing them into three types: repressors (those who block self-doubt and suppress unsettling thoughts), sensitisers (those keenly aware of their emotional states; they endlessly scrutinize themselves, their motives, their conflicts), and 'intermediates.' The students were then asked to evaluate themselves and others using these distinctions; so were their teachers. The repressors were rated as less anxious, more confident, and more successful academically and socially. 'In our day-to-day behaviour it may be good not to be so emotional,' said the researchers. The moods of repressed people may be more balanced.

These results suggest that the concerted efforts to turn healthy repressors into highly aware sensitisers could well be injurious to them. Conscientious school officials should be very leery of feelings exercises, and curricula that demand that students bare their souls. Unfortunately, many educators are devoutly committed to therapism.

There are indeed many who sincerely believe that therapism in the schools is a benign, constructive influence that comforts children, calming their fears and enhancing their feelings of self-acceptance. The evidence, however, does not bear this out. The good intentions or dedication of the therapeutic educators and the crisis-writers is not in question. But their common sense is. With few exceptions, our children are mentally and emotionally sound. They relish the challenge of high expectations. They can cope with red pens, tug of war, dodge ball and tag. They can handle being 'it.' | **CHRISTINA HOFF SOMMERS**

DAN LLOYD qualified as a barrister in 1996 and has taught public law in-house at University College, London. He is a contributor to the book *Compensation Culture: Do we blame and claim too much?*

LITIGATION LIMITATIONS

Risk management has developed as an influential practice in most institutions and especially those in charge of children and young people. Often regarded as a practical and positive approach to ensuring health and safety, concern has emerged about the overly cautious and limiting effects that this may have on children's lives. Here *Sarah Thomson*, *Kate Abley* and first *Dan Lloyd* examine some of the issues surrounding *Litigations & Limitations*.

Compensation Culture

I am going to try and give a broader context to some of the themes that have been developed by other speakers as well as talking specifically about how compensation culture has impacted on children's lives.

I hope to address three questions. Firstly, what is the compensation culture and does it exist? Secondly, if it does exist what impact does it have on our daily lives? Finally, I will focus a little on the Government's Compensation Bill.

But I want to start off by talking about a recent case in the USA which neatly sums up everything that is wrong with the law today. A claimant in America, let's call him Wayne, bought a large Winnibago style mobile home and took it out onto the highway. After driving for a couple of hours Wayne decided he needed a break and wanted to have some coffee. Rather than stopping the vehicle in the way that any ordinary person would, Wayne decided to enable the auto-pilot and hop into the back to make himself a coffee.

Thirty seconds later, the inevitable happened as Wayne found himself in the middle of a car crash of his very own making.

Wayne was understandably upset at losing his Mobile Home as a write off so he decided to sue the manufacturer. Wayne successfully claimed damages from the manufacturer on the grounds that the manufacturer had failed to place a sufficiently clear warning label on the steering column that explained to Wayne that auto-pilot did not include auto-steer. Wayne won over \$2million in damages.

This case neatly illustrates the separation that has taken place in American law between action and responsibility. The case indicates the changing relationship between individual responsibility and corporate or state responsibility. In the past a case like this would not have succeeded.

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««« Now however, given the idea that someone else is always to blame for your accidents, these cases become possible. Could it happen here? It already is happening here because the same separation between responsibility and action that has taken root in American law is also taking root here.

WHAT IS THE COMPENSATION CULTURE AND DOES IT EXIST?

The debate on compensation culture in the UK is very narrowly focused around questions of costs and has not taken on board the broader problems that the separation of action from responsibility has brought about.

On one side of the debate we have reports from bodies such as the TUC that deny the existence of the compensation culture and claim on the contrary that there is not enough compensation for individuals who have suffered personal injury as a result of others' negligence. There is a certain irony here in that the TUC are at the forefront of creating new types of claims and new classes of claimants. You will find this viewpoint backed up by the likes of George Monbiot, writing in the *Guardian*, who claims that compensation culture is a good thing if it forces companies and public authorities into behaving more ethically and in a more caring manner.

On the other side of the debate we find reports from august bodies such as the Institute of Actuaries, the CBI, and the Association of British Insurers, all proclaiming and complaining about the existence of the compensation culture. These reports all focus narrowly on the question of how much compensation culture costs the UK economy. They don't however focus enough on the consequences of this 'culture' itself.

The separation between action and responsibility that has taken root in law also has terrible social consequences that can be seen clearly in the worst excesses of the compensation culture. Neither side in the debate up until now has really understood or taken on board the socially corrosive consequences of the compensation culture as it already exists in the UK today.

In one sense the TUC is right to deny the existence of the compensation culture, in that the actual number of claims brought before the courts has been steadily declining for the last twenty years. According to the official judicial statistics there has been an absolute decline in the number of claims made and a big rise in the number of disputes that are now resolved through alternative dispute resolution. However, it is not the number of cases brought that is important when we talk about compensation culture. What is important is the very real fear of litigation and the effects that fear has on a wide range of professional behaviours.

WHAT DOES THE FEAR OF LITIGATION MEAN FOR US IN OUR DAILY LIVES?

On public life it is this fear of being sued that has had a serious impact in the delivery of public services. As the fear of litigation exercises the imaginations of all sorts of professionals in the public sector, we can see modified behaviours becoming the norm, behaviours which in the past would have been seen as odd.

It is most clearly expressed in the National Health Service. The NHS is currently facing record contingent liability levels. Something in the order of £8 billion is currently set aside

A couple of years ago my girlfriend received an NHS appointment card through the post for an upcoming visit to the hospital. On the back of the appointment card was an advert for Claims Direct, kindly informing my girlfriend that should her doctor cause her injury through negligence she could always sue them for damages! This became a cause for national debate in the newspapers, not my girlfriend, but the widespread practice of allowing such adverts to appear. But instead of just outlawing it the government recommended a code of practice be introduced regulating the content of such adverts on appointment cards. This is another illustration of how far the compensation culture now interferes in the doctor / patient relationship. In the particular case of my girlfriend it was literally her, the doctor and Claims Direct all in the room together.

A not dissimilar picture now also prevails in the education sphere. For the financial year ending March 2005 schools coughed up £200 million in compensation across a wide variety of claims. No doubt the figure for next year will be higher still. Also think about what impact that figure will have on the public liability insurance premiums that schools will now have to pay. To put the figure of £200 million into context: that would pay for 8000 extra teachers.

How many lives has the compensation culture cost as a result of defensive medicine?

for the National Health Service Litigation Authority. This by any measure is an extremely large amount of money and represents a huge increase on the contingent liability the NHS faced a couple of years ago of only £3.9 billion!

It is not surprising in this context to find that many doctors, according to recent surveys, have indicated that their fear of litigation has inevitably had an impact on the way they practise medicine and given rise to what we now call defensive medicine. According to surveys carried out by the Medical Defence Union, nearly half of its members had either been sued in the past or were currently facing legal proceedings. Most feared that they would face legal proceedings at some point in their career and a large percentage indicated that these fears had changed how they practised medicine. How many lives has the compensation culture cost as a result of defensive medicine?

One case above all other illustrates how the compensation culture now operates against schools and is effectively restricting the scope of activities in which schools can engage their children. It is the case of Tom Dowling, who as a young child tragically contracted *E. coli* on a school field trip to a farm in St Albans, and as a result suffered catastrophic brain damage.

However, when it came to claiming compensation, rather than suing the farm it was decided to go after Tom's school and his local education authority (LEA). This makes sense as it is more likely that the LEA will have the

The principal area where there has been an increase in claims is in bullying. Unfortunately there have been virtually no cases yet litigated before the courts. This is presumably because LEAs and their insurers

School trips are now routinely cancelled or not planned at all as the fear of the risk of harm to children outweighs all the benefits that such trips can bring.

resources to be able to meet a damages award made against it whereas the farm would in all likelihood have been facing bankruptcy. However, by suing the school and the LEA, the school was placed in the invidious position of knowing that such school trips could have disastrous consequences. Since then many Headmasters openly talk about the dangers of school trips and justify not taking their children on school trips by reference to cases such as the tragic Tom Dowling. School trips are now routinely cancelled or not planned at all as the fear of the risk of harm to children outweighs all the benefits that such trips can bring.

are desperate to keep these cases out of the courts for fear of a precedent being set and being used against them. In many cases we have claims being brought by former pupils in their 20's who up to ten years after the bullying has taken place, decide to sue the LEA for failing to protect them against the 'bully' in the past. The argument is then extended by such claimants to say that I now need compensation because I haven't been able to get a job because I was bullied at school.

The pity is that there have been precious few opportunities to test these arguments out in a court of law. Instead such claims get reduced to a game of numbers. Once the case

The compensation culture is about taking resources away from schools and encouraging schools to give their charges a less challenging education. It effectively stops schools today from being able to give children the all rounded education they need for the future. It encourages teachers to play it safe and not provide environments in which children are able to develop. We should let schools get back to doing what they do best and that is educating our children.

The compensation culture has also taken root in many other areas of public life. Some of the most notorious claims have been brought by members of the military against the MOD. One soldier won nearly £400,000 in compensation from the MOD because he suffered frostbite while on training manoeuvres in Canada. Another soldier recently won more than £350,000 in compensation against the MOD for negligent treatment of warts! But the most challenging case has been brought by a veteran of the first Gulf war who claimed compensation from the army because his employer failed to provide a safe working environment.

As long as the separation between action and responsibility in law goes unchallenged, we can expect the compensation culture to continue.

reaches the insurer who will be paying any damages awarded, the case is no longer about the merits of the arguments put forward. It is about settling the case the cheapest way possible, and that rarely involves going to court. So millions of pounds gets awarded in compensation to the so called victims of bullying but who gets to say that money could be better spent educating the youth of today than compensating the failures of yesterday?

In conclusion, we should know that the Government is introducing a compensation bill. The bill will limit the liability of the NHS by capping the amount that can be paid out in damages in medical negligence cases. I personally applaud the intervention of parliament into the compensation culture and think that the whole area should benefit from some parliamentary scrutiny. However, one Government Bill will not turn the situation around. It will take a lot longer to undo the harm that has already been done. More specifically, as long as the separation between action and responsibility in law goes unchallenged, we can expect the compensation culture to continue unchallenged. We will be seeing more cases that stretch our credulity, more defensive behaviours by professionals in the public sector and more resources going towards compensation rather than towards the provision of much needed public services. | **DAN LLOYD**

SARAH THOMSON has research interests in surveillance, risk and litigation and how these impact on children's lives. She is currently a lecturer in Educational Studies at the University of Keele.

Risky play:

making sense of child safety practices in school playgrounds: Issues and problems of risk management and its impact on children, school staff and playtime

Currently, primary school playground/playtime risk management demonstrates some hypersensitivity towards children's playtime safety. There is a heightened awareness towards what might be considered 'risky' play in the playground. In order to obviate these concerns, teachers and others limit the amount of spontaneous play and freedom children have at playtime; more and more activities are being adult-directed and monitored; an atmosphere of adult caution, concern and regulation prevails. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, teachers and others are concerned about limiting and reducing the amount of risk and injury to children. Secondly, they are driven by a need to protect themselves and their institution from accusations of negligence.

FEAR OF LITIGATION

Uppermost in the minds of many of those responsible for the supervision of playtime, is the fear of litigation. Local Education Authorities, headteachers and staff are made aware, almost on a daily basis, about the consequence of negligent actions. Therefore, headteachers and teachers feel that they have to protect themselves and their institution in relation to accusations about children's playtime injuries. In 1984, the Law Society allowed lawyers to recruit clients through the medium of television advertising. The area of personal negligence was identified as a profitable way of generating income both for legal firms managing claims and for individuals making the claims. The compensation culture grew rapidly during the late 1990s. The umbrella of protection constructed by the school therefore is not only intended to safeguard the children, but also to shield the staff and the school from accusations of negligence and potential litigious action.

A Mori poll in 2000 revealed that 57% of parents said that 'if their child suffered personal injury at school that they felt to be the fault of the school or school staff, then they would consider seeking compensation from the school' (with only 15% saying they would never consider doing this). Parents are more aware of their legal rights and are far more prepared

Children's use of skipping ropes often concerns lunchtime supervisors because girls tie their legs together for three-legged races, fall over and hurt themselves, or wrap the ropes around their necks whilst pretending the ropes are reins. Games of conkers are banned because they are considered as dangerous and the conkers deemed an offensive weapon.

**Why can't we trust our children to work out their own risks?
Fully rounded adults will not be produced in a risk-free environment.**

to go to litigation if something happens at school that they don't like and see the school as responsible for causing. Teachers therefore, feel that they can't let children just play anything nowadays. Therefore, a system of protection from litigation and accusation has to be instituted by the school staff.

IF IN DOUBT, BAN IT.

These concerns and responsibilities, within a playground context, culminate in teachers and others responding with an 'if in doubt, ban it' approach at playtime. They do this to limit the risk of children's injuries and limit accusations of negligence. This over-cautious approach quite often results in the arbitrary banning of many playground games. Forbidden in many schools is the game of British Bulldogs, which is seen as a violent game leading to accidents and injuries.

I always observed that most of the participants of this game expected to crash into each other from time to time (that was half the fun) and seemed to accept it quite happily and in some anticipation.

PRESCRIPTIVE AGENCIES AND RISK MANAGEMENT AT SCHOOL

However, schools do have to consider risk management. Undoubtedly, school sites require a risk assessment evaluation and this is one of the Health and Safety Act, 1974 'duties of care' requirements, detailed in Regulation 3 of the management regulations. It is the headteacher's and designated health and safety school governor's responsibility to decide whether the degree of danger is such that a piece of playground equipment should cease to be used, or that a school trip should not be organised. All teachers have a 'duty of care' for all students inside and outside the classroom. Teachers are regularly made aware by the media and bureaucratic agencies about their accountability and liability to prosecution should anything go wrong.

PROBLEMS WITH LIMITING RISKY PLAY AND WRAPPING KIDS IN COTTON WOOL AT PLAYTIME

The strategies that have been developed to protect the occupants of the primary school playground from a variety of risks have created a framework of control that is a real constraint on children's playtime and limits their ability to cope with future life experiences.

KATE ABLEY is a former teacher and now children's campaigner. She is author of *Swings and Roundabouts*, a study of the impact child safety has on the development of children.

In an over-protected playground, children cannot experience the bumps, bruises and scabs that act as the trophies of playtime. What is wrong with sustaining small injuries? We inflict dentistry and injections on small children. Small accidents and hurts are part of daily life. Accidents teach children how to do something better next time. They teach them to manage pain and emotional reactions such as crying and bravery. The school playground is one of the areas where children can learn to cope with the risk and hazards of play/daily life. School playgrounds cannot be risk free; play is not a risk free activity. Not taking risks and learning about the consequences makes children less human. Being daring, dangerous and experimental, together with the knowledge that we know what we are doing and how to manage the consequences is what separates us from other life species. If we wrap children in a blanket of caution, we (s)mother them to such an extent that their boundaries of play are not extended and their sense of adventure, freedom and ingenuity is curtailed. Why can't we trust our children to work out their own risks? Fully rounded adults will not be produced in a risk-free environment. The primary school playgrounds of yesteryear used to be an environment that tempered the need for safety with the need for children's first experience of free play and independence.

Is it possible that teachers no longer see playtime as a benign process because it has a series of unfortunate consequences? Could the effects of the compensation culture and the demands of external prescriptive agencies form a framework of control in which the freedom of play and the search for fun and risk has no part; where the child's choice of activity no longer prevails because the demands of legislation and litigation create a straight jacket of cotton wool? Certainly, the management of normal incidents in the playground means that teachers now often face a continual dilemma, one where children's choice of pastime must be regulated for both the teachers' and the pupils' protection. However, managing risk at school should be about striking a balance for both those who are managed (children) and those who are responsible for the management (teachers). | **SARAH THOMSON**

'The right kind of nonsense.'

Traditional Nonsense Rhyme

As I was going up the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish that man would go away.

This is how I have felt about the research I have been doing on and off for the past 6 years. The research has looked at litigation and outdoor play injuries. It included a review of 99 years of outdoor play litigation in Scottish and English Courts, interviews with play providers in Central Scotland, the North of England, the West of

- › Because the injured people are children, their injuries are mostly minor (a broken arm being the most common serious injury) and because they have no earnings, the amount of money that can be awarded is very small. It is therefore more expensive to win a case than to settle. Cases are fought to stop a suspected floodgate of claims.
- › According to the Health and Safety Executive Report published in 2002, between 1988 and 1998 there were between 48 and 54 outdoor play injuries in England and Wales relating to playgrounds and resulting in a trip to hospital. Prior to

Around half of local authority revenue budgets for play are spent on activities and resources associated with risk management.

England and the South of England, an insurance company, a play equipment manufacturer and a leading safety organisation.

- Research results so far. (not published):
- › In courts, there have been 24 reported cases relating to personal injury of under 18 year olds out of doors in the whole of England and Scotland since 1900.
 - › In terms of claims and out of court settlements in the local authorities that I studied in 2001, there were between 0 and 4 claims per year and they had made between 0 and 5 settlements in the previous 7 years. These figures are not representative because one local authority was home to two of the big 'no win, no fee' companies that were knocking on doors in the 1990s. Local authority policy now is to fight every case but avoid going to court. They do this through Risk Management Practice. The companies concerned have either gone bust or scaled back their operations since then. The major local authority Insurance Company does not keep figures on outdoor play injuries because they are an insubstantial part of their business.

1988 the figures were about the same. About one death occurred per year, mainly due to coat toggles and scarves.

- › The report cites children's behaviour as the most common cause of injury.

My research has shown that parental behaviour accounts for some injuries to under 7s – so supervision is not always a fail safe. Suffice to say that children will tend to have accidents while they are learning physical skills, but this rarely results in serious injury.

To sum up. Very few children sustain injuries in public playgrounds or in outdoor play generally. If they do, their parents are highly unlikely to sue and if they do sue, they usually drop the case.

What I did find was a litigation management industry of insurance companies, risk assessors, risk managers, training courses, procedures, guidelines, policies and forms. Local authority structures are built around risk management and my rough estimate would be that around half of local authority revenue budgets for play are spent on activities and resources associated with risk management. It is almost as if we are living in a nonsense rhyme.

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I will assume that most people are familiar with the inspections and accident reports involved in risk management procedures and ignore the detail here.

I am in the process of making sense of this ridiculous state of affairs. This is a brief, and as yet not fully researched, ontology:

There are four factors identified so far.

1] Central and Local Government Policy

Late 1970s. Republicans in the North of Ireland, disillusioned with the struggle but still very much opposed to British rule, begin a campaign of litigation for trips and falls on the streets of Belfast. This resulted in the tightening up of traffic and roads maintenance programmes across UK through Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. This was the first example of risk management. Insurance companies saw the potential cost savings for their clients and started encouraging local authorities to use this system in all areas where a duty of care might exist.

In 1979 the local authority cuts begin and Trade Unions look for ways to hold onto their members' jobs. One third of the local membership of the Health and Safety Executive is made up of Trade Unions. Health and Safety becomes popular among employees in local authorities.

These two factors explain the mechanics within local authorities but do not explain the wider concern about children that has made play safety such a hot potato.

2] Consumer Safety in the Environment.

1980s. A consumer programme ran a series of features showing plates dropping off climbing frames onto tarmac. These are equated to children's skulls and safety surfacing becomes the sign of a safe playground (it isn't by the way). Safety surfacing is made part of the new European Safety Standards in 1999. It costs the earth and has little proven benefit.

In 1999 the car is established as the biggest killer and 'maimer' of children. Road Safety campaigns are underfunded while 'kill your speed' advertising becomes prevalent.

3] Abuse 1983. Jasmine Beckford was killed by her father in Brent. In 1987, Kimberly Clark was killed by her stepfather in Greenwich. There followed a series of Child Abuse enquiries in which social workers in predominantly 'Labour Lefty' local authorities were accused of putting ideology before child safety and allowing children to die as a result.

In 1987, the Cleveland sex abuse furore heightened concern about how some adults hurt children and others fail them. Using a physical test, now found fallible, doctors removed 27 children from their homes. The result of these scandals was the Children Act 1989. One cannot underestimate the effect this had on professionals working with children. The level of suspicion against parents and suspicion against each other weakened trust to a very great extent. In the 1990s, stranger danger was the next big scare and made children going out alone almost a sign that their parents were negligent.

4] Education 1988. The National Curriculum was introduced. The implication was that standards had slipped because of modern teaching methods. Teachers had placed ideology before results and couldn't be trusted to teach without prescriptive guidance. Increasingly, parental involvement became a mainstream policy.

In 1997, 'Education, Education, Education' meant parents moved from being 'involved' to becoming 'partners'. Books, programmes and newspapers all pick up on the new role of parents as teachers. The idea of 'free time' for children was fading away.

CONSEQUENCE

Free time (one dare not call it leisure) is now supervised, structured, subject to professionalised parenting, expensive and organised for most children. There are lots of good things about present day childhood—more car trips to castles and museums, more toys, books and clothes. I am very much pro-materialism for children. However, children have very little time to themselves and increasingly find it difficult to play without guidance.

After 1984 the number of children playing out unsupervised by parents are highly likely to have fallen and yet accident and death rates have remained steady.

Parents don't trust professionals to teach or keep kids safe and they don't trust play areas unless the parents are on the climbing frame too. 'Youth worker' is a byword for potential paedophile. The feeling is mutual, youth workers and teachers don't trust parents. We don't trust children to be sociable, sensible or constructive with their time unless we are watching and preferably directing what they do.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS.

- Fear and mistrust cannot be designed away. Good road and play design is necessary but not sufficient. Adults have a duty to be rational about how they protect and nurture children.
- Risk management is not the answer to the problem. It is a defence against something that does not exist in the play sector. It has helped local authorities feel safe against litigation, but it helped to create and sustain the myth that play is dangerous. In a rational world, resources could be better spent.
- Play can promote social people if it is unsupervised and unstructured by adults. Independent, critical and confident individuals need space and time.

To end, I would like to propose a radical idea. Perhaps we might consider promoting play, sport and outdoor activities not because they prevent something or promote something else.

We adults have a social responsibility to make rational and purposeful actions, seriously and with 'reasonable foresight'. Children don't. Is it so naive to think that adults could promote play without a hidden social agenda, but simply as fun? Probably.

Not everything in a child's life has to make sense.

On the Ning Nang Nong SPIKE MILLIGAN

*On the Ning Nang Nong
Where the Cows go Bong!
And the Monkeys all say Bool!
Theres a Nang Nong Ning
Where the trees go Ping!
And the tea pots Jibber Jabber Joo
On the Nong Ning Nang
All the Mice go Clang!
And you just cant catch em when they do!
So its Ning Nang Nong!
Cows go Bong!
Nong Nang Ning!
Trees go Ping!
Nong Ning Nang!
The mice go Clang!
What a noisy place to belong, Is the Ning Nang Ning Nang Nong!*

KATE ABLEY

SIMON KNIGHT is a Project Manager of a Community Youth Project and director of Generation Youth Issues. He is currently researching historical patterns of childhood play and freedom.

FREEDOM & SAFETY IN AN ANXIOUS AGE

Today 'play' is rarely promoted without the prefix 'safe', while the internet is increasingly seen as a potential danger to young people. So what are the risks that children face when unsupervised and how can we balance the desire for freedom with concern about safety? Below *Simon Knight* introduces the theme of freedom and safety in an anxious age which is then developed by *Tim Gill*.

The danger of safety



The issue of play and children's free time is very useful in showing how things have changed in society and how much more relaxed society was about children in the past. Many things have improved for children, but the issue of freedom appears to be highly problematic today.

I am currently carrying out research on the changing patterns of childhood freedoms during the 20th Century. My research involves interviewing older people about what they got up to and were allowed to do. I now have well over 100 half-hour taped interviews. And it seems that there certainly have been dramatic changes. A few examples of the people I have interviewed include:

IAN Born: 1940 – 'I started school when I was four and had to walk a mile and a half there and a mile and a half back. Then we moved to Penpont and I had to walk two and a half miles there and back. I'd be six then.'

CATRIONA Born: 1954 – 'When we were about nine, we'd take babies for walks. We'd take any babies in the village. Sometimes we took them for very, very long walks. We went away up to the hill and imagine that the mother would be quite anxious by the time we got back.'

HARRY Born: 1953 – 'There was places you wouldn't go. Like don't go to such and such, the back loch, and you wouldn't, it was dangerous. Don't go to the loch in the park, on the islands. Of course you did that from as early as you

could. You got a big boy to hire you a boat, then he jumped off and you took it away! Ay everybody did that, with the old guy shouting, 'Bring that boat back', and you'd go to the islands because that's where the fun was.'

JOHN Born: 1936 – 'Sir Alex Ferguson played with my brother. We were all at the same school but he was five years behind us. My brother was a year ahead of Alex at school. There was a lot of ex-Rangers played in my brother's year. In those days there was more people watch amateur football than they did go to watch professional. Cause that was the great thing, they wanted to encourage kids. Those fifty pitches on a Saturday, you'd have the fifty pitches full. That'd be twenty two people there and I bet there'd be a hundred people round every pitch. That'd be parents watching and scouts.'

In 1973 a report from the Dept of Environment called 'Children at Play' had no separate section on unsupervised play. All play was perceived in that way, there was no need to conceptualise the importance of unsupervised play.

I spoke at a conference a couple of years ago where I came across quite a refreshing approach towards the *targets* that accompany grant funding. Workers who had received funding for an adventure play ground and were having to monitor its success, were counting the number of sticking plasters they had to give out. The more the better!

SOME QUESTIONS I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO ADDRESS IN RELATION TO THE ISSUE OF 'FREEPLAY' ARE:

There seems to be a growing acceptance among play professionals of the importance of physical risk during play, but there is still a perceived problem today with exposing children to emotional risks such as bullying. A question to consider might be, 'Just because we can't see the injuries, does that make them more serious?'

If we create 'safe' areas for play, what does that mean for all the other places that children use to play? Do they become illegitimate?

How do we artificially move children out of their comfort zone, into adventure, when they aren't necessarily willing?

Risk assessments. We need to carry out risk assessments on play areas, but how much do they encourage 'defensive' play and youth work. In today's context can there ever be a rational response to danger?

In their classic text on play, Iona and Peter Opie say, 'Nothing extinguishes self organised play more effectively than action to promote it'. But does this put us between a rock and hard place? | **SIMON KNIGHT**

TIM GILL is a writer and consultant on childhood, with an interest in children's play and free time. Tim was director of the Children's Play Council from 1997 to 2004 and has led the first ever government sponsored review of children's play. www.rethinkingchildhood.com

Everyday morality & childhood freedoms

I want to look at how children and young people learn about the complex, implicit set of rules, codes and conventions that underpin the interactions all of us have with one another and that collectively makes up what I shall call 'everyday morality'. I shall argue that children need freedom and licence to properly get to grips with everyday morality, and that adults need to have a much more sophisticated approach to all this than they do at the moment. That approach needs to be way more sophisticated than is implied in phrases such as 'zero tolerance'. And it needs to recognise the value of the kind of everyday neighbourhood contact between children and adults. I have no doubt these are in serious if not terminal decline in many villages, towns and cities.

I would have thought that the value of giving children a taste of freedom was self-evident. But there is a moral panic going on around children's behaviour. Sometimes it appears as if politicians and the media are falling over themselves in the rush to damn children: as if the only game in town is how much more we grown-ups should be intervening in every aspect of children's lives. In such a climate it is more important than ever to seek out the truths from our own childhood experiences and memories.

One of the ways that children's play is distinctive and special is that it is children's taste of freedom. Choice, freedom and self-direction are at the heart of what we mean by play.

This freedom is not, of course, absolute. One problem for adults is that children's play is not always about nice, warm-glow things like building sandcastles, climbing to the top of the spacenet or making chocolate chip cookies. Sometimes it is about destroying someone else's sandcastles, fighting for the right to get to the top of the net or stealing those cookies.

Children can be selfish, competitive, rude and nasty when they play, as well as sympathetic, cooperative, respectful and nice. Play involves all the emotions, not just the ones we normally see as positive. When children play, what they choose to do is nearly always important, but is not always very pretty.

In plain English: children can be pretty horrible to each other and to adults. They always have been and they always will be.

Crucially, children's horribleness is quite different to grown-up horribleness, though it may sometimes look very similar. It is not just nastiness in a different outfit (which may or may not be a hood). It is one expression of an important childhood learning process.

When we talk about children's social and moral development, this dry, academic-sounding term embraces a vast and complex world of cues, responses, rules, conventions, emotions, understandings, beliefs and desires. And it points to an equally vast range of life skills. Here are some:

- › Being able to express your feelings and to recognise and appreciate the feelings of others;
- › Knowing when you are being invited to join in a game and when you are being discouraged;

- › Knowing the difference between mock anger and real anger, and between play fighting and real fighting (I'll come back to this);
- › Learning who you can trust and how far you can trust them;
- › Learning about loyalty – to friends, to family, to other people and groups – and about how far loyalty can justify actions that might harm or hurt those outside your circle;
- › Judging when it's ok to take up a dare or challenge from someone and when it's a bad idea;
- › Learning how to respond to, and where appropriate resist, peer pressure;
- › Learning how to leave a situation when it becomes too unpleasant or dangerous.

You could not hope to teach children such an impressive set of social skills – they are too complex, too subtle. If they were a college course it would have to be at least an A-level – or should that be a Higher – if not a degree. Yet amazingly, most children acquire them simply through their play and social encounters, with little input from adults.

But... children will only learn these skills if they are given the chance to practice them.

Children's horribleness is quite different to grown-up horribleness, though it may sometimes look very similar. It is not just nastiness in a different outfit.

- › Working out when to stand up for yourself and argue with someone you disagree with, and when it's better to back off;
- › Knowing how to work together to achieve a common goal;
- › Sorting out conflicts with others;
- › Understanding what counts as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in different groups and contexts, and why;
- › Dealing with criticism, ridicule and the abuse of power;

A lot. And much of what looks to adults like bad behaviour is simply children practicing, getting the hang of all these skills. So if we stop children from being able to meet with their friends and peers, or if we watch them so closely and jump in so often that they never have the chance to see social situations through, we will severely limit their ability to pick up all these skills.

So, to the big question: how should adults intervene in the development of children's everyday moral competencies? Although I don't want to give you a manual, I do want to offer three principles. You may disagree with them, but I hope at least they will make you think.

First, adults should aim to help children to have a degree of moral self-reliance: in other words, to be able to make moral decisions for themselves: to make their own way through the moral mazes they encounter, rather than unquestioningly follow the rules and prescriptions of others.

My second principle is that adults should aim to help children and young people to appreciate the consequences of their actions. While this may be a comfortable position for parents and teachers, it is something with which those who work with children and young people – playworkers and youth workers, perhaps – may have more of a problem. For many it smacks of moralising, of imposing one's own moral values on children. In particular, it goes against the idea of the playworker as a resource for the playing child. I think that helping children and young people to appreciate the consequences of their actions is a vital part of good play or youth work. But more importantly for the theme of this conference, children are hardly likely to come to a rich appreciation of the consequences of their actions if they are denied the space and time to follow through their social and moral intentions and understandings.

My third principle – and one I'm going to explore in some detail – is that adults should be clear about why they are doing what they are doing, and how it might affect children. This is where things get complicated. Children see adults as role models and gain much of their understandings about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour from their observations of parents, relatives and other significant adults around them.

The position for adults is complicated by the fact that in many circumstances it is hard to tell exactly what is going on in children's play behaviour. Psychologists have known for years that adults are bad and children are good at telling the difference between play fighting and real fighting. The lead-in to the episode, the protagonists' body language, their personalities and emotional state: all these things feed into making a decision about whether a given encounter is silly or

I am not for a moment saying that children should be left unsupported on the basis that bullying toughens them up. What I am saying is that children should be encouraged and supported in learning how to make their own judgements about what would help them deal with difficult situations. Part of this involves getting children to ask themselves the question 'what can I do by myself?' and to come up with some helpful answers. Apart from anything else, this acknowledges

The messages that adults give to children about their ability to handle difficult situations can have a powerful influence on children's self-reliance.

serious. These decisions are genuinely difficult, and are simply not reducible to a checklist or policy document. Adults need to get better at making judgements about this kind of thing.

The messages that adults give to children about their ability to handle difficult situations can have a powerful influence on children's moral – and for that matter social – self-reliance. This is why I worry about approaches to bullying that suggest or imply that children should always tell adults whenever anyone does something unpleasant to them. Giving children the message that bullying is something they will never be able to deal with on their own, and that they always have to get an adult to sort things out, is not going to help them on the road – the sometimes-painful road – to learning how to look after themselves in the face of hostility or threats. I want to be very clear here. I am not saying that adults should always tell children they can overcome bullying or violence without any help. I am not saying that children shouldn't be told that it's ok to ask for help if they feel they need it.

children's own deeply held wishes and views on the subject. But there will always be occasions when they cannot 'sort it out amongst themselves', or where it would be wrong even to suggest they do.

Perhaps most important of all, we need much more reflection and discussion – between staff, children and parents – about all this stuff. One final clarification about what I'm saying – or more accurately, what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that free play is the only thing children and young people need to nurture their moral and social development. To use a dietary analogy: everyone agrees that fruit and vegetables are a key part of a healthy diet, but very few would conclude that we should all be fruitarians. Of course, children need clear, consistent messages about standards of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. But they also need to be given room to explore – and occasionally to fail to live up to – those standards. Only then will they fully understand and appreciate them, and grow up as socially literate, morally self-reliant people: people who have proper respect – to use an overworked, poorly understood but indispensable word – for the needs, wishes and rights of both others and themselves. | **TIM GILL**

The Manifesto Club

FOR A GROWN-UP ATTITUDE TO CHILDREN – AND EVERYTHING ELSE

The Manifesto Club is a new political initiative set up by a group of individuals based in London, with a view to formulating a positive alternative to what we see as an increasingly restrictive and misanthropic culture. As a starting point, we invite all those who believe in fulfilling the human potential to join us in discussing a draft manifesto we have published online. **The Manifesto Club** website also serves as a hub for various campaigns and research projects initiated in the spirit of the manifesto; one important example is challenging today's culture of suspicion, especially with regards to relations between adults and children.

We are undertaking research on this issue with a view to campaigning against excessive vetting procedures and restrictive codes that make adults afraid to put a plaster on a child's knee. We hope to involve parents, teachers and other concerned professionals in this. If you are interested in becoming involved, contact the convenor of **The Manifesto Club**,

Josie Appleton at info@manifestoclub.com.

For further details, see: www.manifestoclub.com



PLAY SCOTLAND STATEMENT

Play Scotland is calling for Scotland to be a designated Child Friendly Country.

Play Scotland wants

- > All School Playgrounds to offer a Positive Play Experience
- > To Reclaim Playspace in parks, open spaces and local streets with Play Rangers
- > A Playwork Education and Training Strategy to develop a Professional Playwork workforce
- > £18M dedicated Lottery funding for Play as promised in 2001

Should you require further information on this please contact us at the address below.

Midlothian Innovation Centre, Pentlandsfield, Roslin EH25 9RE

Telephone 0131 440 9070

Email: info@playscotland.org

Web: www.playscotland.org