

‘You can’t wrap them up in cotton wool!’ Constructing risk in young people’s access to outdoor play

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Abstract

Policy approaches towards risk in relation to young people’s leisure activities are characterized by uncertainty. While some organizations have sought to emphasize the need to reduce or even eliminate the risk of ‘unintentional injuries’ in outdoor play, others highlight the dangers in excessively restricting young people’s access to the outside world. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with families in the South Wales area, this paper argues that while parents are not in the grips of ‘paranoia’ (Furedi 2001) they are wrestling with competing sets of social expectations, as well as their own rational and emotive judgements. Young people tended to respond to their parents’ concerns by demonstrating their street-wisdom, claiming sanctuary behind the notion of ‘accident’ and asserting their moral right to access the outside world.

Keywords: *Risk, youth, young people, accidents, injury*

Introduction

The identification of risk is increasingly coming to characterize both political debate and social research in relation to children’s and young people’s access to the outdoors. When children are represented in the media, the identification of one or more dangers is rarely far behind. The potential for sex, drugs, Internet grooming, and mobile phone masts to harm children are just some of the recent examples of how risk has become constructed, by many ‘experts,’ when they talk about youth, children, and childhood. However, as the ‘psychometric paradigm’ (Slovic 2000) argues the perception of risk is a highly subjective process, and which of the many possible hazards are identified and prioritized by actors is influenced by a wide variety of social, cultural, and psychological factors. As such, the potential for disagreement over what the principal dangers are, even among experts, is rife. Indeed, such ambivalence is nowhere more visible than in the way professionals talk about children’s accidental injuries. Organizations such as The British Medical Association, for example have even gone so far as to abandon the use of the term ‘accident’ in favour of ‘unintentional injury’ in order to emphasize that what were once seen as random and unavoidable exposures to adversity for children can in fact be monitored, predicted, and prevented (British Medical Association 2001). This has, however, been challenged by organizations which seek to highlight the risks involved in adopting an over-protective and

over-regulatory approach to children's exposure to adversity. The organization Generation Youth Issues, for example, convened their 2005 conference (provocatively titled *Cotton Wool Kids*) in order to impress upon policy makers and practitioners alike the need to 'establish a balance between the freedom and safety necessary for the development of healthy young people' (Generation Youth Issues 2004).

Indeed, a number of experts have also argued that, by attempting to reduce the immediate risks of the outside world, many parents have come to adopt an excessively restrictive approach to their children's access to the outdoors, which has the potential to do serious harm to their long term health and well-being. The Child Accident Prevention Trust, for example, argues that:

There is evidence that parents have become increasingly restrictive when it comes to unsupervised play and transport from school. Such strategies may help reduce the immediate risk of injury to children and young people in the short term. But there is growing concern that there might be long-term costs to a generation of children that have had less opportunity to experience the world, make mistakes—and learn by them (Child Accident Prevention Trust 2002: 2).

The argument that parental regulation of children's outdoor movements is becoming 'excessive' is also finding academic favour amongst sociological studies of childhood. James *et al.* for example, argue that:

Children are arguably more hemmed in by surveillance and social regulation than ever before. In the risk society (Beck 1992) parents increasingly identify the world outside the home as one which their children must be shielded and in relation to which they must devise strategies of risk reduction (James *et al.* 1998: 7).

Furedi (2001) takes the argument one step further, arguing that parents are currently in the grips of 'paranoia' in their attempts to reduce their offspring's exposure to physical harm.

While such arguments may be compelling they are, in many respects, devoid of supporting empirical evidence. There are often stark differences in the way 'expert' and 'lay' populations come to perceive risk and their subsequent responses to it (Williams and Popay 1994, Slovic 2000) and parents' approaches to the regulation of their children are all-too-often assumed, by experts, to be unproblematically excessive. Few studies, however, have actually explored parenting practices or how and why parents may shift between periods of heightened and low-level regulation. Furthermore, research that explores how children and young people respond to their parents' anxieties remains substantially under-developed.

While research is limited in this area it is not completely absent. Kelley *et al.* (1998), Valentine (1997), and Backett-Milburn and colleagues (2000, 2003, 2004) have all made important contributions to research which views parental approaches to risk in relation to their children as being subject to constant negotiation, not least between parents and young people themselves. Indeed, such research tends to show parental decision-making as heavily characterized by uncertainty. Backett-Milburn (2000), for example, argues that:

Keeping children's bodies healthy and well maintained was a major objective for these middle class parents, but how this was accomplished in practice was often unclear and, therefore, contested both between parents themselves and between parents and children (Backett-Milburn 2000: 82).

Valentine (1997) argues a similar point. She found that parents were often heavily susceptible to media warnings concerning the safety of children outside of the family home. However, Valentine also argues that a number of parents in her research reported feeling under pressure from other parents to treat their children as less competent and more vulnerable than they actually perceived them to be.

While such studies offer substantial insights into how parents and children negotiate access to the outside world, parental anxiety over this issue is likely to reach its zenith when their offspring enter and pass through adolescence. Both the medical and social literature has consistently shown, for example, that young people experiment with a number of risky behaviours during the teenage years (Pavis *et al.* 1998, Tuinstra *et al.* 1998, Denscombe 2001a, b). During this stage of transition, while seeking to protect their children, parents are also expected to equip them with the skills and experience necessary for autonomous living, which includes exposure to adversity, an intractable feature of human life.

Despite widespread recognition that the teenage years represent a particularly risky part of the lifecourse, studies focusing on negotiation between parents and older children remain remarkably few and far between. This paper attempts to address this imbalance, exploring some of the factors that can influence how parents and their adolescent and teenage offspring negotiate access to outdoor play. One such factor, the child's potential to incur bodily injury, is a central topic of this paper. Where is the risk of injury located within the spectrum of parents' anxieties? How do they justify either their restriction or granting of access to the outside world and how do young people who may be increasingly pushing for greater autonomy respond?

Method

As part of a PhD research project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 young people (aged 11–15 years) and their parents resident in South Wales after the young person had visited accident and emergency (A&E) as a result of sustaining injuries. These participants were purposely selected from a survey of 300 parents (also part of the research) who presented their children to the participating A&E ward with injuries sustained in non-domestic, non-road traffic settings between December 2003 and April 2004.

Of the 212 successfully completed and returned questionnaires, 133 parents (63%) gave their permission to be contacted about the next phase of the research. These 133 questionnaires were then divided into two categories: 'trips and falls' and 'sports and leisure accidents.' All those sustaining injuries through trips and falls, which were deemed to be somewhat passive exposures to injury risk, were removed from the sampling frame. This was because the study sought to explore how parents and young people accounted for the child's conscious exposure to the risk of injury (Scott and Lyman 1990) after the accident occurred.

From these remaining questionnaires, a purposive sample of parents and young people was obtained. The central criterion for sampling was the extent to which the young person's injuries were incurred as a result of a conscious exposure to the risk of injury, through participation in activities such as skateboarding or horse riding for example. However, the interviews also sought to explore the variety of physical environments in which injury occurs (such as schools, parks, and public playgrounds) as well as to roughly reflect the 70:30 ratio of boys to girls evident in the survey sample.

Families were contacted using a standardized format. Parents who had provided their telephone number at the end of the questionnaire were called to discuss the second phase of

the research and the general format of the interviews. If no phone number was given, parents were contacted via post; no parents, however, responded to this method of contact. When phoning, the researcher asked to speak to the parent who supplied their contact details at the end of the questionnaire, in the majority of cases this was the mother. Once contact was made the researcher explained the nature of the study and what the next phase of the research involved. Parents were informed at this point that there was no obligation on either themselves or their child to take part in the research and that their medical care would not be effected in any way through their participation in the study.

After the initial telephone conversation parents were offered a 'cooling-off period' to consult with their child and decide whether or not they wished to take part. The length of the cooling-off period was left to the parents' discretion. Indeed, some parents felt that time to decide was unnecessary and either arranged a date and time then and there or stated that they did not wish to take part.

Interviews were conducted from February–May 2004 and lasted anything from half an hour to over one and a half hours. Parents and young people were usually interviewed separately, with the majority of interviews taking place in the family home. Parents and young people were asked to comment on the child's recent accident as well as their general use of outdoor leisure spaces. In addition, both parents and young people were asked to work through an interactive, developmental vignette exercise on a laptop computer created with deliberate emphasis on the promotion of child-friendly research techniques. Nine out of the 15 families were from 'managerial and professional' backgrounds (National Statistics 2000). Indeed, almost half of all parents who responded to the survey were located at the top end of the socio-economic spectrum. The majority of the parents interviewed (13) were mothers and majority of young people (11) were boys.

Situating parental anxiety

According to rational-actor approaches to health risk behaviour (see Becker 1974, for example) the adoption of safety practices on the part of individuals is positively related to the level of health risk they perceive to exist. Following this, one could be forgiven for assuming that if parenting practices have become more restrictive in recent years, this is because they perceive the outside world to have become significantly more dangerous. One of the key findings to emerge from the interviews with parents however was that, while some were convinced that the outside world has become more dangerous for children since they themselves were young, these were in the minority. With the exception of traffic the majority of parents felt that many of the hazards children today face were present in their own childhoods. Indeed, some parents felt that young people today are more equipped and educated to cope with such dangers:

Mother: I think their attitudes have changed. But in comparison, I don't think it's any more dangerous. I think they have a little bit . . . If anything they make themselves more aware of what's around them than we did. But I don't think it's any more dangerous.

However, while parents made a clear separation between the awareness of danger and its prevalence the majority felt that they would not, and do not, allow their children the same freedoms as they enjoyed in their youth:

Father: I used to live across in Rumney and we used to walk right down to the sea wall and walk along the sea. We'd be gone all day. We just used to play around. Not getting up

to anything we shouldn't have been getting up to. Do the normal things but um, you can't do it now.

This father's emphasis on both the distance he was allowed to roam and the ability to be away for extended periods of time was consistently expressed by other parents. However, with a couple of exceptions, the majority reported that they specify strict times for their child to return and have a clear preference for them to play close to home. When faced with the apparent contradiction between their perception of the dangers and the level of restrictions they subsequently reported placing upon their children's movements some parents found it difficult to explain their behaviour:

Mother: When I was about fourteen or fifteen I used to spend days on the beach. I wouldn't let my children do that at fourteen or fifteen. The dangers are the same. It's the same sea but I just wouldn't allow it. I'd be absolutely petrified that they'd do something ridiculous and drown or high-jinks. Yet my parents allowed us to go.

In elaborating on the inconsistency in her actions, this mother identifies two important factors: that her assessment of the danger involved is constant ('the dangers are the same') yet her emotional response ('I'd be absolutely petrified') is viewed as substantially different from that of her parents.

If the outside world is not perceived as having become more dangerous for children then why does it conjure up such emotional responses for parents today and not, apparently, for the parents of the past? Emotional states are not innate biological responses but shaped and subsequently learnt through the cultural conditions of the societies in which individuals live. According to Nussbaum (1990), for example, the emotional states of individuals are fundamentally related to their belief systems. People feel anger when they believe themselves to have been wronged in some way. Similarly, fear is experienced when a person believes that a situation is out of his or her control. The association therefore of 'emotion A' to 'belief A' is the product of a complex relationship between psychological feelings and socially determined cultural stances, learned by individuals through processes of enculturation. Following this, the emotional responses of parents are not biologically pre-programmed but are instead shaped and regulated by wider cultural belief systems, themselves a product of everyday social interactions. In order to understand changes in the emotional orientations of parents therefore, we need to look at changes in the wider system of social and cultural relations.

Taking Young and Willmott's famous study of family and kinship in East London in the 1950s as an example, parenting is represented in this text as a collectively shared enterprise. Mothers would frequently be childrearing at the same time as their eldest daughters with the work of parenting often being distributed across a wide range of extended family and community members. Thus, in the communities which Young and Willmott describe the foundations existed from which a strong cultural 'grid' (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982) relating to acceptable parenting practices could be developed. The stronger the parenting grid, the less cultural ground there is for uncertainty to develop and therefore for anxiety to propagate.

In contrast to Young and Willmott's depiction, writers such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991a, b) have argued that since the latter half of the twentieth century responsibility for the management of risk is increasingly becoming a privatized activity, the effects of which are nowhere more likely to be felt than in the sphere of parenting practice. As parenting, and risk management in general, increasingly becomes privatized then by implication the

maintenance of collectively held and coherent sets of parenting practices becomes difficult to sustain. The lack of such collectively agreed and practiced approaches towards children's regulation can be seen therefore to lead to an increase in feelings of uncertainty regarding how to be an effective parent, a loss of 'trust' in the community and an emotive disposition towards heightened regulation. As one mother succinctly argues:

Mother: Parents have just got so much to worry about now because they've got one professional telling them this, somebody else telling them that and some magazine article telling them something else and when your emotions are involved which they are when you're a parent . . . (pause) . . . it's very difficult to take the emotion out of it. It's just too much for some people and making a lot of parents very, very nervous and not enjoying their children.

No risk-free approach to parenting

While the arguments presented thus far clearly resonate with those of Furedi (2001) what is missing from his analysis, and what is subsequently provided here, is an account of how and why parents regulate their dispositions towards excessive regulation themselves. The parents who took part in this study clearly distinguished between a number of different 'risks' in relation to their children's health. Furthermore, they were highly aware of the potential for their decision making to either reduce or exacerbate these hazards.

When asked what concerns them most when their child is outdoors, the risk of accidental injury was far from being at the forefront of these parents' minds. Instead, the 'dread' (Slovic 2000) of their child being intentionally attacked while at play tended to be their primary concern. Instances of physical attack were highly salient to these parents and many were able to re-tell instances of either of their own child's exposure to assault, or that of their friends and relatives. The following is a typical example of such narratives in action:

Mother: Jonny's started going into town now, just started going into town and some of the boys moved away from the group and went to skate again. And some guys came up, I don't know where they were from, and mugged them. Took their phones, their wallets, everything. And Jonny came home and told me, and he wasn't even involved in it. He wasn't even there. But they met with the police and everything and he was absolutely shaken to the hilt.

As the main perpetrators of aggression in these stories were paedophiles, drunks, drug addicts, or crowds of aggressive teenagers the main purpose behind them was to illustrate the danger posed by strangers. Instances where their child had negotiated public spaces successfully and without parental worry tended not to be mentioned at all by parents during the course of the interviews.

Although the risk of assault was a primary source of concern for parents, there was also recognition that excessive restriction of young people's access to the outdoors also carries its own dangers. Indeed, it was in this context that parents drew with remarkable consistency on one specific piece of 'lay' knowledge: 'You can't wrap children up in cotton wool.' The consistent use of this phrase by parents is fascinating and can be interpreted in two ways. First, it can be interpreted as emphasizing the fact that exposure to a certain level of adversity is inevitable and, as such, no amount of parental intervention can remove this intractable feature of living; as the old proverb has it, 'accidents will happen!' A second interpretation of

the phrase however, is that it is morally wrong to protect children from all forms of adversity as this is detrimental to their physical and social development. Indeed, both interpretations were evident in parents' talk, as will become evident.

The warning against wrapping children up in cotton wool is sediment from a previous generation of parents, and is one born out of greater community involvement in parenting. Consider, for example, the following extract from an interview with one mother who draws attention to an inter-generational mesh of cultural 'explanations' (Douglas 1992) regarding risk and protection that exists within her own family:

Mother: But at the end of the day, like my mum says, 'You gotta let go. You can't wrap them up in cotton wool all their lives. You've gotta let'em go. You can't stop everything from happening; it's gonna happen.' You know, I said, 'But I can prevent, try and prevent it' you know, but she's like, 'No you can't! You've gotta let'em go!' You know, it's difficult.

Here the mother highlights how these two competing approaches to risk and protection (one born of the present while the other is born of the past) exist in dialogue with each other. While her favoured approach is based on the emotive urge to protect her child from the physical threats posed by the outside world the approach of her mother is, according to her, rooted in an acceptance of the inevitability of adversity and the need for children to learn through their exposure to it. It was evident in the interviews that the warning not to wrap children up in cotton wool was used by parents to temper the urge to protect their children from the outside world. One parent, for example, used the proverb in order to chastise herself for letting her desire to protect her son interfere with his maturation:

Mother: No, I have wrapped them up in cotton wool. I don't like them going out. I like to know where they are and everything... (later in the interview)... I just thought they needed a bit more time on their own to grow up I suppose. Um, they said, 'Can we go out?' 'Yeah.' They've only been going to town for the last 6 months. I wouldn't let them go to town or anything. I've been dreadful!

What is evident from the widespread use of this folk knowledge therefore is that there is no single and universally accepted cultural stance held by parents in relation to children and risk. Instead, the urge to protect and prevent is tempered, for these parents, by the acknowledgement that children need autonomy in order to make an effective transition into adulthood. If this is the case then one would expect these parents' regulation of their children's movements to fluctuate between heightened and low-level restriction, as these competing cultural stances battle it out throughout the course of everyday life. Furthermore, and as was made apparent in the interviews, it was possible for parents to incorporate both sets of cultural orientations towards risk within their child rearing practices.

Reducing the risk of contingencies

How then, did these parents achieve a balance between their urge to protect their offspring from the risk of injury and their desire not to wrap their children up in cotton wool? Parents reported using a variety of techniques to achieve this, which encompassed both organized leisure pursuits as well as general recreation. The key theme running through all is that children are given the freedom to engage with a tolerable amount of physical risk so long as strategies are put in place which reduce the risk of contingencies occurring.

Following Hendry *et al.* (1993) young people's outdoor leisure activities can be broadly divided into two groups: organized and casual. With regards the former, parents often talked about the positive aspects of activities such as rugby, football, and martial arts in terms of developing teamwork, discipline, and physical health. Many of the parents were fully aware of the risk of injury contained within these activities yet they reported allowing, and often at times actively encouraging, their children to do such activities. While this was the case, they also identified a number of ways in which they sought to reduce the risk of contingencies occurring; in other words, while their child might sustain minor injuries, the risk of them suffering more serious adversity is kept to a minimum.

One of the ways parents reported doing this was by ensuring that the activity was organized and supervised by appropriate, skilled adults who would be on hand to adequately respond to any injury or potential emergency:

Mother: Um, but it (the skate park) is open so it's safe. There's lots of people there. My restrictions there are more about stranger danger than anything else. In the skate park, I think my concerns about him injuring himself are higher because of the ramps and because maybe, in a 3 hour period that he goes for, there could be another dozen to maybe twenty people there and they're going very fast. So the likelihood of them having an accident is quite high. So I suppose from a physical point of view it's worse for him to go to the skate park than it is to be in the street. But that's not much fun just skating up and down the street.

What is interesting in this mother's approach is that she describes this adult-run, organized skate park as safe even though she feels the risk of physical injury is high. Indeed, earlier in the interview she reported that her child's recent hospital visit was as a result of sustaining injuries in this park. Safety, for her, appears to be grounded in the proximity of adults to the child and the extent to which he can be monitored, even though she reports placing additional restrictions on her child in order to reduce 'stranger danger.' The relatively high risk of accidents is constructed by her as a fair exchange for allowing her child the freedom to play and develop without being wrapped in cotton wool.

A further means by which parents sought to reduce the risk of contingency in their children's organized leisure activities was by 'plugging the gaps' in the organizer's risk management practices:

Mother: I mean, they don't actually push in the scrums in rugby here, in Wales but they do but not in England, and we play English schools at rugby. Because it's private, we do play English schools. Um, and the risk of a neck injury when you're not trained to push in the scrum you know, is huge. And yet the only first aid kit the rugby coach has is a band-aid and a bit of antiseptic. You know? They don't carry neck braces. And the only thing that would do any use to somebody with a potential spinal column injury is a neck brace. You know? I've actually got some in the boot of my car because I know that's the only thing that could possibly be a life saving thing.

Here the mother acknowledges that she is letting her son partake in an activity that contains a high risk of accidental injury. However, when she highlights the area of the sport where the potential for serious injury is present she illustrates how she effectively plugs the gap in the schools practices by bringing neck braces to the game.

With regards less supervised forms of recreation parents tended to voice many more concerns, especially parents of younger children. As such, they frequently reported trying to

decide when was the appropriate time for their child to start engaging in activities such as 'going into town.' This decision was often not portrayed as straightforward and a wide range of factors appeared to influence it, from the maturity and character of the child to the practices of other parents. However, as with organized sporting and leisure activities, parents reported a number of ways of insulating this risky activity within a protective boundary of safety. The principal of these practices was the purchasing and use of mobile phones. With one exception, all the parents interviewed had supplied their child with a mobile phone and would frequently keep it topped up with an 'emergency fiver.'

Bauman (2003) describes the mobile phone as a form of 'virtual proximity'; as a means of ensuring closeness to others when geographical distance prohibits physical contact. The majority of parents conceptualized the mobile phone in similar terms and felt that by having a phone their child could easily contact them should anything go wrong, which substantially reduced the anxiety they felt when their child was away from home. A number of parents, for example, reported that if their child had not returned at the specified time, they could call in order to ascertain their whereabouts, and occasionally administer an initial disciplinary ear bashing. Thus, the consistent use of mobile phones suggests that that new technologies were successfully utilized by these parents in their attempts to find a balance between their desire to know what their child is doing and their acknowledgement that unsupervised recreation is an important part of their child's development.

In short, practices such as these, far from constituting evidence of parental paranoia, represent in many ways an effective means of achieving some sense of balance between the competing approaches to risk and parenting previously discussed. In this sense, these parental strategies in relation to assault and injury prevention highlight both the complexities of parenting in the twenty-first century as well as the ways in which parents are not the passive recipients of cultural messages but interact and negotiate with a plurality of risk orientations every time their child exits the front door.

Performing responsibility: Young people's talk about risk and injury

In addition to their parents, young people were asked to describe to the researcher in their own words the events leading up to their recent accident and hospital visit, as well as being encouraged to talk about their leisure behaviour generally. What was evident throughout these discussions was their desire to demonstrate that they took seriously the immediate risks to their safety and well-being. This is hardly surprising given the context in which the interviews were conducted. Furthermore, and as Green (1997a) and Green and Hart (1998) have previously argued, taking responsibility for risk management and its consequences are fundamental means through which young people can perform a socially competent identity. What was interesting to see from these interviews, however, were the variety of techniques through which young people sought to demonstrate their competency and respond to their parents' concerns. In relation to their recent injury, for example, these young people drew heavily on the social construction of accidents as being those events that are outside the realms of predictability, what Green (1997b) describes as the 'accidents happen' discourse. Consider the following two examples:

Interviewer: So would you say what you were doing was dangerous?

Young Person: No, it's just . . . It wasn't dangerous, just an accident.

Interviewer: So would you say it's quite dangerous or not?

Young Person: Not too dangerous because there's nothing too dangerous you could do there, at that skate-park. I was on the ramp and it just happened.

Here, both young people deny that their exposure to danger was reckless by emphasizing the inevitability of accidents. By using the accidents happen discourse they highlight the fact that the injury was not something which they deliberately invited. In addition to this, the desire on the part of these young people to represent themselves as adopting a responsible approach to the risk of physical injury was made visible in a number of ways. For example, a number of young people highlighted that although their favoured leisure activities may contain a high probability of incurring minor injury they actively avoid aspects of the pursuit that increase the possibility of a serious accident happening. One of the ways they sought to do this was by demonstrating that their 'risk thermostat' (Adams 1995) is set within acceptable adult limits. This was principally achieved by asserting that they do not attempt risky manoeuvres that are above their level of technical ability:

Young Person: That boy doing a back-flip, I wouldn't try that at all, not on blades, no way. I'd try stuff but not the really big... cos I've seen them do front flips and stuff on BMX and I wouldn't try that at all. BMX's I'll go up and down the ramps but not do any tricks cos I'm not that good [laughs].

A further way in which young people demonstrated competency was by showing their skills in effectively responding to injuries when they occur, either by not aggravating the injury any further or reporting the accident to the appropriate adult in order to seek help. Take, for example, the following extract from a young person describing her leisure time in the 'Caliegh,' an area of woodland her mother is less than enamoured with her spending time in:

Young Person: Whoever's out, whoever's the oldest is in charge. Like one of the kids, we were down in this forest area and boys were throwing rocks into the forest. They didn't realise we were in there. And one hit him on the head and cracked his head open. So of course Jason took charge because he was the oldest and then it was me, so I had to go back. I had to run back to his house and get his mum and tell'em while Jason dealt with Steven.

In using her story to outline the hierarchy of authority that exists in her peer group based on age, which is a well-established marker of maturity and responsibility, this young person demonstrates her ability to manage and respond to injury. According to her, when the accident happened this well-oiled machine sprung instantly into action, dealing with both the child's injury and summoning appropriate help.

Blessed are the street-wise

The effective ability to recognize and respond to the dangers presented by strangers is what parents frequently described as being 'streetwise,' the demonstration of which was often a crucial factor in these parents' decision to grant their children access to public space. Take, for example, the following quote from a mother when asked to explain why her son enjoys more outdoor freedom than her daughter:

Mother: Well I think it depends on the actual child now. See, cos my son... He was more streetwise than she is so he could go out and you know, be out with his friends and out skateboarding or doing whatever he was doing. But I mean, she's not so streetwise as what he was.

Being streetwise carries with it many advantages for the young person as through this they are able to claim access to public space and the independence to play and enjoy their recreation unsupervised. As such, young people who took part in this study often used the interview in order to assert their street-wisdom. One of the ways they did this was by showing their internalization of adult safety messages concerning stranger-danger and 'no-go' areas. Not only did they seek to demonstrate both the knowledge and acceptance of these messages, they also sought to show that they know how to effectively reduce the risk of attack. Consider how the following young person immediately seeks to reassert her street-wisdom after it has been challenged by her mother's comments:

Mother: Like I couldn't let her go a whole day, just going off willy-nilly where ever she felt like being. I'd be like, you know, panicking.

Young Person: I go straight away, two o'clock and I don't say that much cos I don't trust strangers.

Thus, when the mother mentions that she restricts her child's movements the young person responds by claiming a streetwise identity, reassuring her mother in an attempt to gain greater autonomy. She does this by using the interviewer to demonstrate her knowledge of the safety message and her adherence to it.

Responding to their parents' fears and concerns with reassurances of safety was a common theme in many of the interviews with young people. The following extract from an interview with a teenage boy describing his mother's concern over the behaviour of other teenagers at a local skate park illustrates this point:

Young Person: Well, once I went up there (the skate park) when I got my new bike for my birthday. My mum sent me up there about seven o'clock in the morning and there was some people carving, most of them carve stuff into the ramps. And mum didn't really like that. The kid had like an army knife or something. He only looked about fourteen, fifteen. I don't think she really agreed with that. But it's next to a leisure centre so if anything goes on then really it's all on CCTV.

Although the mother was not present at this interview, the young person demonstrates his ability to respond to her concerns by drawing attention to the safety aspects of the situation, namely, the presence of CCTV. The presence of CCTV in this context could protect him from any acts of aggression the other teenagers might pose but would also serve, if required, as evidence that he did not participate in this illicit activity.

Accusations of over-protection

Young people also drew attention to instances of over-protective and over-restrictive practices on the part of their parents in order to assert their moral right to access unsupervised leisure spaces. Age was a principal source of evidence when advancing the charge of over-protectiveness against parents. Take, for example, this young person's response to his mother's concerns for his safety:

Young Person: I'm trying to save up to buy a pair of skates. I know my mum'll be concerned if I start using skates. Like, 'wear a helmet!' [laughs].
(Later in the interview)

Interviewer: And yeah you were saying if you buy some in-line skates and stuff, that would make your mum worried about safety?

Young Person: Yeah probably, yeah. She'll probably borrow a car, go over there and watch me like. Be there spying on me and that. 'Mum, I'm fourteen! Stop it!'

Here, the young person makes reference to his age in order to assert that he *should* be left to his leisure activity without being 'spied on'; that he is of an age where it is morally and culturally appropriate for him to have unsupervised access to public space and that his mother would be behaving inappropriately if she sought to obstruct it.

The surveillance of the young person's leisure by stealth was also a consistent factor in assertions of over-protectiveness. As well as the direct approach, however, some young people showed evidence of using far more subtle techniques in order to drive this point home to their parents. The response of one young person to her mother's re-telling the story of the young person's first unsupervised trip to the cinema illustrates the use of such techniques:

Mother: Oh yes, I dropped them off in town and went skatty because there was supposed to be four of them and only one of them was there by that time. So you sort of go round and round the block, unbeknown to them. Go round and round the block watching everybody else turn up until there were four of them, until there were five of them, now there's six of them, now I can leave.

Young Person: Didn't you see me wave like, the ninth time you went round?

Interviewer: Right, and did you know? You were saying about driving round to check how many people had arrived, did you know that at the time?

Young Person: What that she went past like twenty times? Oh yeah. You see the white car and you thought, 'I know that car.' And it goes past again and your mum's looking at you like this through the window you know? Ah, I'll play with her now. So we pushed some of them round the corner to hide them. She just kept going round and round and round [laughs].

Not only does this young person assert that the attempts at supervision by stealth were ineffective and ultimately discovered, she also draws attention to the over-the-top nature of her mother's concern and playfully ridicules it, stating that she played on her anxiety to make the point that she should be left alone to enjoy her leisure time unhindered by parental supervision.

Discussion

Furedi (2001) argues that paranoia has come to dominate parental decision-making and by abandoning their anxieties parents will be taking firm steps on the road to becoming 'good' care-givers. This study was based on a desire to explore the nature of parents' anxieties as well as how their children may respond to them. In doing so, the research sought to situate parents' concerns regarding the risk of accidental injury within the wider context of parenting practices and the spectrum of their risk concerns. This revealed that the parents in this study are not in the grips of paranoia but are instead actively attempting to wrestle with competing sets of cultural orientations regarding the health and well being of their children. Much of the anxiety parents reported experiencing stems from the development of an increasingly privatized approach to parenting. However, the interviews also revealed that the ways in which parents talked about risk contained sediment from a previous generation of

parents, who perhaps tended to see the immediate outside world in far less hostile terms. Thus, although parents deeply feared the risk of their child being attacked by strangers, they also feared the damage excessive restriction would do to their offspring's social and physical development.

The interaction between these competing approaches to parenting is central in understanding why, as identified by writers such as Valentine (1997) and Backett-Milburn (2000), parents' approaches to risk and restriction are not static but are instead continuously shifting. This is because no one approach was seen by parents as being risk-free. As such, the urge to restrict access to the outdoors in order to reduce the risk of assault was often tempered by the desire not to wrap their children up in cotton wool.

In relation to injury prevention, while parents were concerned about the risk of injury this was often seen as being offset by the advantages participation in outdoor recreation brings. Action to prevent their children from incurring any and all forms of accidental injury tended to be seen by these parents as evidence of wrapping children up in cotton wool and therefore something to be actively discouraged. As such, their primary focus was not the elimination of accidents but the adequate monitoring of the risk of injury and the establishing of appropriate contingencies for responding to accidents when they occur. In this respect, this paper argues that these parents are already achieving 'a balance between the freedom and safety necessary for the development of healthy young people' (Generation Youth Issues 2004). Furthermore, and considering the fact that the parents taking part in this research were interviewed because their child had visited hospital as a result of recent injury, that they maintained a balanced approach towards the risks inherent in physical leisure activities is perhaps further evidence of a distinct lack of paranoia on their part. In short, these are 'good' parents not because they 'abandon' their anxieties but because they find practical solutions to competing cultural viewpoints.

While parents framed the need for their child to access the outside world in terms of their future social development, young people tended to present themselves as being socially competent already and, as such, capable of managing physical risk. Such findings resonate with previous studies of young people's accident stories (Green 1997a, Green and Hart 1998). This paper, however, demonstrates the array of techniques through which these young people sought to do this, such as their performances of street wisdom, their use of the accidents happen discourse, and their accusations of over-protectiveness. This would indicate that the young people interviewed for this study were well aware of the areas of ambivalence in relation to their parents' decision-making and were effectively equipped with an arsenal of negotiation techniques in order to be gain greater access to the outside world. Further studies, however, are very much needed which explore the application of these techniques in 'real time,' over the dinner table or when friends come round to call for example, if we are to arrive at a fuller understanding of how access to the outside world is continuously renegotiated between parents and their children.

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