

No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society Into the Clearings, county Durham, Feb 2012

Hello, and thank you so much for inviting me here.

[Note: I start with a play memories exercise: I ask people to remember their favourite place to play as a child, and then to turn to the person next to them and share this memory. Then I call people back to order, and ask 2 questions: was your favourite place out of doors? And was it out of sight of adults? I can practically guarantee that for anyone over about 25, their favourite childhood place to play will be somewhere natural (or at least a little bit 'wild') and out of sight of adults - a place where they can have adventures and share secrets.]

Let's leave our own childhoods behind us, and fast forward to the children of the United Kingdom at the start of the 21st century.

We've all heard the stories:

The school that banned pupils from playing kiss chase and tag, because of staff concerns that playtimes were becoming too rough.

The school that banned parents from sports day, in the belief that this was required by child protection procedures.

My last anecdote is courtesy of the Willow Park Housing Trust in Manchester. In 2006 it wrote a letter to Michelle Mann about her son Ben, stating that (I quote) 'Willow Park has received a complaint about anti-social behaviour perpetrated by your son Ben and his friends, who have been playing football and causing a disturbance,' and it added that 'it takes all complaints seriously.' Clearly it does, because Ben Mann, the cause of the disturbance and the perpetrator of the act, was just three years old.

Childhood in the UK is becoming colonised by risk aversion. Activities and experiences that previous generations of children enjoyed without a second thought have been relabelled as troubling or dangerous, while the adults who still permit them are branded as irresponsible.

At the extreme we seem unable to cope with any adverse outcomes whatsoever, no matter how trivial or improbable. Adult anxieties typically focus on children's vulnerability. But they can also portray children not as victims but as villains. In each case, what we are doing is recasting normal childhood experiences as something more sinister.

Perhaps you are thinking that the reason for these changes is that society itself has changed. Certainly, the days when most parents felt able to let their children roam free are long gone. Hold that thought for now, and instead ask yourself another question: why are the memories you just shared so universal? Why do the experiences feel so resonant to us?

The answer is simple: from the earliest age, we have an urge to get to grips with the world on our own terms: to get the hang of being a human being.

But we grown-ups have gotten confused about the very nature of childhood and the adult role in shaping it, so we have a big problem about risk in children's everyday lives.

I will argue that we in the UK are falling prey to what I call a zero risk approach to childhood. Our growing anxiety about harm *to* children, and harm *by* children, is taking us 180 degrees away from the kind of childhood that best nurtures children and that best serves the interests of the rest of us.

I will conclude that we need to reintroduce something like the kinds of everyday adventures that epitomised our own childhoods. Experiences that are in danger of vanishing altogether from the lives of today's children. Crucially, we need to revisit and revise the way we think about children and childhood.

I'm going to take a closer look at the problem by focusing on a single topic area or case study of risk aversion: playgrounds.

But before I examine my case study, I want come back to that question about how childhood has been changing in recent years. People say that children today grow up faster than they used to. This view may reflect children's engagement with adult culture, and their adoption of adult attitudes, mannerisms and styles. But as a statement about their everyday freedoms, nothing could be further from the truth. For the past thirty years or more, childhood prior to adolescence has been marked by shrinking freedom of action for children, and growing adult control and oversight.

Academic studies show this picture is true. In 1971, 80 per cent of seven and eight year olds went to school on their own. By 1990 just nine per cent did.

The overall effect is that the kind of everyday adventures with friends, peers and adults that feature so prominently in the childhood memories of older generations are disappearing from the lives of children today. This drop largely cuts across socio-economic, cultural and gender divides.

As for the causes of this decline, let me say straight off that I *don't* just blame the parents. Most parents are well aware that part of their job is to help their children prepare for life as an autonomous adult. However, it is vital to realise that different parents have their 'risk thermostats' set at different levels, just like everyone else.

So yes, apparently some parents feel the need for kneepads for their babies. But others want their children to learn how to look after themselves as they grow up – like these parents, the Schonrocks, who were in the news earlier this summer when their school tried to ban their children from cycling to school. Whatever you think of the Schonrocks' position, there's one thing you cannot argue with: they are fighting back against this idea that being a good parent means being a controlling parent. And they are not alone. I suspect that a move to a philosophy of resilience will be supported by many parents – perhaps even the silent majority.

So the job of bringing up a child inevitably involves a gradual transfer of power. And the fact is that a host of social and cultural changes have made this transfer of power more difficult. These societal changes – which I explore in more detail in my book *No Fear* - have radically altered the norms of good parenting for parents of children up to their teenage years. Children are expected to be under the active care of a responsible adult.

So to sum up, it is crucial that we realise how much more controlled and constrained children's lives are today. And so, having sketched this context, I want to turn to my case study of risk aversion: that most emblematic of childhood territories, the playground.

Over the last 30 years or so public playgrounds in the UK have become overrun by the pursuit of risk elimination. All too often tame equipment, wall-to-wall safety surfacing, dog-proof fencing and a sterile, unchallenging ambience are fitted as standard, as I hope my slides demonstrate.

But perhaps you need more convincing that there's a problem. After all, children do have accidents on playgrounds, and occasionally they are serious ones, so isn't it better to be safe than sorry?

So let's start with the extent of the problem. We know quite a lot about playground accidents. I will spare you the statistics, but they suggest that playing on playgrounds has for decades been a comparatively safe activity.

The amount of money being spent on safety – and in particular, on safer surfacing - gives perhaps the best proof that playgrounds have become infected by risk aversion. The amounts are not small. Add up the sums and we have spent perhaps £300 million of public funds in the last decade on a measure that might have saved at the very most, one or two lives over that 10-year period.

What is more, the jury is out on how effective surfacing is. You might think it is obvious that it would help. Yet the real-world evidence is mixed, with at best a modest reduction in the most serious of head injuries – which are incredibly rare.

There is also growing evidence of unintended consequences – in other words, side effects. Studies have suggested an increased risk of broken bones with hi-tech rubber surfaces, compared even to hard surfaces.

One key question we need to ask – but rarely do – is what else could we have done with the money? What – to use some economic jargon – are the opportunity costs? In the UK up to 40 per cent of the capital cost of a playground goes on hi-tech rubber safety surfacing. Put it another way: without this expense, we could get almost twice as many playgrounds for our money. The same amount spent on tried and tested traffic calming measures would probably have saved ten times as many lives.

Why have playgrounds become so risk averse? To answer this, I want to revive another childhood memory, of the BBC TV programme *That's Life*. I'm sure some of you here will remember it: a generous helping of stories of everyday life – skateboarding ducks, talking Yorkshire terriers, erotically shaped root vegetables, that kind of thing. But let's not forget: for much of its 21-year run, the programme was a national institution. Around 20 years ago it ran a campaign to force playground providers to install safety surfacing. In one episode the programme sets out to 'prove' just how well safety surfacing works through the device of dropping china plates onto first, the studio floor and second, some rubber matting - with predictable results.

I cannot think of a better image to depict our confusion about childhood. The clear message from the programme is that children are irredeemably vulnerable, and that our role as adults

is to protect them at all costs. As I argue in my book *No Fear*, this vision of children as in some absolute sense incompetent lies at the heart of all zero-risk approaches.

The programme also gives us a lesson from history. It shows that the origins of our pursuit of the zero risk childhood have nothing to do with either of those two alleged curses of modern life, the compensation culture or the nanny state – though it is true that these can make things worse. The simple fact is that neither of these was in existence at the time the programme was broadcast back in 1989.

I hope you can see in my case study how the pursuit of the zero risk childhood has led us to close down childhood experience. This when, as we saw, the domain of childhood is shrinking dramatically.

With more time, I could have looked at other case studies of excessive risk aversion, including: vetting and safeguarding; outdoor education; touching and physical contact; photography of children; the virtual world; school trips; use of tools; bullying; rough and tumble play – the list is long.

So to final part of my talk, and the crucial question. How do we resist the false logic of the zero risk childhood and offer children a better diet of experience: one with more opportunities to nurture their sense of responsibility and self-reliance, from the earliest possible age?

Here's what I believe that we must do. Schools, playground providers, nurseries, childcare - all services for children need to revisit their value systems, and move from what might be called a philosophy of protection to a philosophy of resilience. We must see that a key part of our job is to help children learn how to bounce back from the everyday ups and downs of life. And so must all those who oversee and regulate these services.

Let me give you an example of what I mean when I talk about the shift from a philosophy of protection to a philosophy of resilience. It concerns the topic of my first case study. In fact, I didn't tell the whole story of playground safety, and it is a story that looks like it might have a happier ending.

To help tell this story, here are some slides of some of recent public play spaces in the UK.

I hope you agree they look rather different to the ones I showed you earlier. How has this come about? Can it really be true that playgrounds are becoming more exciting, challenging and adventurous places? The answer, I believe, is yes. And the reason is that some years ago, those of us concerned with playgrounds realised that a preoccupation with safety at all costs was taking us in totally the wrong direction. So the Play Safety Forum – the sector's safety experts – went back to first principles and had a long hard look at what playgrounds were for in the first place. We argued that a more balanced approach to risk was urgently needed. What's more, we got support from a virtual roll call of safety agencies, including the government's own Health & Safety Executive. This work has been the catalyst for a sea change in professional attitudes about play safety.

The climate around play safety is, I believe, continuing to improve. In 2008 the Government published a guide to managing risk in play provision, which I co-wrote.

And it's ripping up all the old rules. Instead of conducting risk assessments, providers will be encouraged to carry out risk-benefit assessments. This simple yet far-reaching shift means that for the first time, providers will be able to take into account the **benefits** of giving children the chance to experience a given risk, and to include these views in their decisions. In case you think this is asking people to break the law, or put themselves out on a limb, let me reassure you, as one of the authors: the guide has also been endorsed by the Health & Safety Executive.

This idea of weighing up risks and benefits is implicit in much of what we would call good practice. I could see it in some of the project reports. For instance, at Battle Hill Primary [more here]. While at Ivy Road, [More here]. Just as we have done in the play sector, some working in early years have been making this balancing act explicit. One example is the educational consultancy Mindstretchers – who I guess some of you know. Only Mindstretchers do not call them risk-benefit assessments, they call it benefit-risk assessments. Or BRAs for short. People who have met Claire Warden may spot her personality coming through there!

I would like to show a couple of minutes of video footage that illustrates how to put into practice a philosophy of resilience. It is from a forest school session run by Bayonne Nursery in London.

[DVD footage here]

I am pleased to say that the idea of risk-benefit assessment has recently reached some elevated positions. The Coalition Government's Health and Safety review, published in October 2010, came out strongly in support of risk-benefit assessment, stating that it is the way ahead in play and leisure contexts.

Then of course there was Dame Claire Tickell's Review, where 'being willing to have a go' was proposed as one of her revised early learning goals.

What's more, the review also called for a relaxation around the requirement for written risk assessments. And I note that the Government response to the consultation also said that bad weather was not a good reason for stopping outdoor play, and will be removing the clause that implied that it was.

What does all this mean for the relationship between services and parents? You remember my observation earlier, about how parents are on a spectrum when it comes to risk. I suspect that a move to a philosophy of resilience will be supported by many parents – perhaps even the silent majority. In any case, the take-home message here is that you cannot set your bar at the level of the most anxious parent. In the nicest possible way, you need to be assertive with the fearful ones. Of course, confrontation is not helpful, but they should not be allowed to think that they have a veto on what you offer to children.

One way for your setting or service to explore these issues is to revisit your mission statement. It is striking to note how many mission statements talk of creating 'a safe and secure environment for children'. Given that opening gambit, is it any wonder that some parents feel confused if their child comes home with a sprained ankle or a bruised ego? Or that they are nervous at the prospect of children having adventures in the woods?

Summing things up: as we have seen, the climate around risk and childhood has begun to change for the better. One further clear example of this is the vetting and safeguarding regime, where the Government has unveiled plans for a system that is ‘scaled back to common sense levels.’ There have been some precedent-setting legal judgements too – for instance around playground safety, and outdoor activities – that show the courts are taking a sensible view.

The time is right to move beyond unproductive debates about the ‘blame culture’ and instead to build momentum behind the idea of expanding the horizons of childhood.

I do not like to end on a downbeat note, but there is a big ‘but’ to all of this. I mentioned during my warm-up that not everyone gives the same answers to my childhood memory questions as you.

This is not scientific, but I reckon that the odd ones out are people under the age of about 25. While as a group they are equally positive about being out of doors, a fair few of this age group do *not* say their favourite place to play was out of sight of adults. I find this worrying.

When I was researching my book, I interviewed some parents and professionals, and asked them about their childhoods, just as I asked you right at the beginning of this talk. Most told me how when they were young, their parents would often simply give their children a packed lunch and a bottle of pop, and usher them out of the door on the weekend or during the holidays, the only words of warning being ‘don’t come home before tea time.’ These days, such a parenting style would be seen as bordering on neglectful. But of course it wasn’t, and it isn’t. These parents meant well by their children. And let’s not forget – the technique had benefits for them too, no doubt grateful the kids were out of their hair for a while.

This is why I am quite genuine when I leave you with this final thought: perhaps, in rethinking our attitudes to childhood, the approach we grown-ups have to revive is that shown by previous generations of parents: the lost art of benign neglect. Thank you.

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