

Childhood freedoms and adult fears Growing up in a risk-averse society

Talk for King Alfred School

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I guess everyone has their favourite examples of excessive risk aversion. Indeed health and safety madness has become one of those third-millennium topics of emails and water-cooler chat, alongside such things as reality TV and the lives, loves and injuries of professional footballers. My favourites – all genuine – include bans on playing conkers, egg boxes & toilet rolls, and even making daisy chains.

Of course these are extreme cases, which is why we hear about them. But they are important, because they are the most serious symptoms of a much wider malaise. So my aim tonight is to look at why we're going so wrong. I'm going to examine what's leading well-meaning people not only to make decisions like these, but to do so apparently in the belief that they're acting in the best interests of children – or at least in the belief that they have no choice. And most crucially, I'm going to argue that the views that underpin these decisions are both widespread and ultimately damaging to children.

My talk is in two parts. The first part looks at physical risk: specifically, at how risk aversion has shaped the physical environments and challenges that we offer to children, especially in playgrounds. The second part looks at social and emotional risks that come from children's interactions with each other.

At the risk of giving away the plot, I'll argue that in both contexts, what is needed – and all too often, what we are not getting - is a balanced approach. One that on the one hand recognises the need to protect children from serious harm, but on the other accepts the benefits of giving them some opportunities to learn for themselves how to deal with the challenges that will come their way as they grow up. Crucially, this means accepting the inevitability, indeed the desirability, of adverse outcomes. To put it in plain English, we need to accept that children will sometimes make mistakes and behave badly, and that as a result they will sometimes get hurt or upset, but that they will learn from this.

The reason we are where we are – with children being banned from playing with conkers, egg boxes, toilet rolls or daisies – is that we are getting two things seriously wrong. First, we underestimate children's ability to get to grips with the people and world around them, in particular their ability to bounce back from adversity. Second, we grown-ups have become ensnared in a blame culture that leaves everyone involved in children's lives afraid of being held responsible for anything bad that might happen to them.

Part 1: playgrounds

Back in the 1970s when I was growing up there was a major scare over playground safety. Newspapers filled their pages with accounts of horrific accidents. Esther Rantzen led the campaign for safer playgrounds, using her role as presenter of 'That's Life' – lest we forget, a hugely popular TV programme – to illustrate the supposed

dangers by dropping porcelain plates onto tarmac surfaces. Schools, councils, safety experts and Government swung into action. The results? Two decades of dull, dismal playgrounds. Councils closing down thousands of parks and play areas – or putting up daft signs - fearful that parents would sue for the slightest scratch. Bored children with nowhere to go.

I've worked in children's play for over a decade and I can tell you that for most of that time what I call the myth of absolute safety has been the primary goal of playground designers and managers. This safety-at-all-costs mindset has led to the astonishing fact that in the UK up to half of the total cost of a new playground goes on safety surfacing. This is despite the incredibly low level of serious accidents on public playgrounds, and in spite of the fact that the jury is out on whether safety surfaces do anything to prevent serious injuries.

As a result, children are being denied the chance to learn some key physical competences, quite possibly leaving them less safe as they grow up. Here's how the Danish landscape Helle Nebelong – designer of some beautiful public spaces in Copenhagen – puts it:

'I am convinced that standardised play equipment is dangerous. When the distance between all the rungs on the climbing net or the ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where he puts his feet. This lesson cannot be carried over into all the knobbly and asymmetrical forms with which one is confronted throughout life.'

Once you vanquish the myth of absolute safety, the question becomes one of balance. The task facing playground designers is giving children challenging, stimulating environments where they can test themselves and take risks, but where the likelihood of serious harm is kept to a minimum.

This task is not easy. Children have a natural appetite for risk. No child would ever learn to walk, climb stairs or ride a bicycle unless they were strongly driven by an instinctive impulse to learn new skills and competences regardless of the risk of injury. As I said, the possibility of severe injury in a playground can never be entirely ruled out. But that is no reason to stop building them. And it is no reason to build them so 'safe' that even a porcelain plate will not break if dropped.

I suspect that I am preaching to the converted here. After all, no-one who visits KAS – or reads its prospectus – can fail to be struck by the appearance of its playgrounds. The richness and challenge of its outdoor spaces – most obviously in the huge adventure play structure, but for me most inspiringly in the overgrown den-building area tucked almost out of sight – is, we can all agree, a refreshing contrast to the sterile, artificial, tarmac-and-primary-coloured landscapes on offer in most schools. I'm sure I don't need to spell out to you the similarity between KAS's playgrounds and the spaces you were recalling a few moments ago. What I hope I have done – or at least will do by the time the evening is over - is to give you some insights into just what it is about these spaces that makes them so special, so valuable. Part of what makes them special – and here I turn to my second theme – is what the spaces allow in social and emotional terms.

Part 2: social interactions

I want to start this section of my talk with a true story from my own childhood. It begins in the holidays when I was in primary school - I was about 11 years old. I was with two or three other boys playing about in a field on the edge of the village where we all lived. I decided - most likely in an attempt to impress the other boys, who were a bit more streetwise than me – that it would be a fun thing to do to climb up a tree and then urinate from the top. Truth to tell I was a bit of a sensitive soul back then, and - whatever my initial motivation - afterwards I felt somewhat ashamed of my actions and swore my friends to secrecy. Inevitably, some weeks later I fell out with one of the boys. And he took great pleasure in telling the rest of my class about my performance. But my classmates' reaction was, in effect, to ask what all the fuss was about, and the incident quickly faded from everyone's memory except mine.

What did I learn from this event? For a start, I learnt a lot about which friends I could trust with a secret. I also learnt that my peers had rather different standards of behaviour than I had thought. These are, I can tell you, both valuable insights for a just slightly pre-adolescent boy.

The story nicely brings out some of the themes of my talk this evening. 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 each and every one of us has with each other, and that collectively makes up what I will call 'everyday morality'. I will argue that children need freedom and licence if they are 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 much more subtle than is implied in phrases such as 'zero tolerance'.

My aim in all this is simple: to remind ourselves – and that is the right word: those childhood memories we shared offer insights far beyond their nostalgia value – of the importance of giving children time, space and real freedom. In the moral sphere, as in other spheres of child development, children need a foretaste of the autonomy and independence that will eventually come their way as adults.

I would have thought that that the value of giving children a taste of freedom was all but self-evident. But there is something of 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 to control every aspect of their lives. In such a climate it is more important than ever to seek out truths and insights from our own childhood experiences and memories.

Inevitably I will be talking quite a lot about children's play. I use that term just as much for the hanging about of teenagers as for the more recognisably playful behaviour of younger children – in the full knowledge that few young people would talk about their free time as 'play'.

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 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 hoodie). 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 just a handful:

- Knowing when you are being invited to join in a game and when you are being discouraged;
- Working out when to stand up for yourself and argue with someone you disagree with, and when it's better to back off;
- Dealing with criticism, ridicule and the abuse of power;
- Knowing the difference between mock anger and real anger, and between play fighting and real fighting (I'll come back to this);
- Being able to take a joke – and knowing what to do when the joke goes too far;
- 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;
- Learning how to respond to, and where appropriate resist, peer pressure;
- Knowing how to work together to achieve a common goal;
- Understanding what counts as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in different groups and contexts, and why;
- Learning who you can trust and how far you can trust them.

You could not hope to teach children such an impressive set of social skills. For one thing they are just too complex, too subtle. If they were brought together in a college course it would have to be at least an A-level if not a degree. For another, many of these skills are in any case not the kind of thing you can teach: they can only be learnt through experience. How do you teach someone how to take a joke, for instance, without making them the object of one? Yet amazingly, most children acquire these skills 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. A lot. And much of what looks to adults like bad behaviour is simply children practicing, getting the hang of all these skills. Like my aerial water display, it's sometimes unclear what's being practiced or why, but it's nearly always important and valuable. So if we stop children from being able to play 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.

I hope I've convinced you that for children, mastering everyday morality is a major achievement, and demands a lot of experience and practice. Now I want to look briefly at the range of roles that adults – especially parents and teachers - have in this. Their most important role is that they are literally role models. Children model their behaviour closely on that of their parents and other significant adults around them. Adults also hold power over children's lives; to a lesser or greater extent they meet children's basic physical needs – food, clothes, shelter – and many of their emotional needs too. As a result of this power, adults are often in a position to intervene to help children or to stop them from getting hurt. Similarly, adults are called in by children to arbitrate in disputes – something I'll come back to later. Adult power also means that they take on the role of gatekeepers in children's lives: they allow some experiences, and prevent access to others. Adults can teach and guide children – though as I've hinted already, I think that the scope for this is more limited than we think. Finally, adults are, in a straightforward sense, human beings with whom children interact as fellow human beings.

So, to the big question: how should adults intervene in the development of children's everyday moral competences? Though I don't want to give you a manual, I do want to propose one overarching principle, and draw a couple of corollaries from that. I hope you will agree, they fit well with the ethos of KAS.

The overarching principle is that adults should aim to help children to become morally self-reliant; in other words, to make their own way through the moral mazes they encounter, rather than unquestioningly following the rules and prescriptions of others.

My first corollary is that adults should aim to help children and young people to appreciate the consequences of their actions. And children are hardly likely to come to a full appreciation of the consequences of their actions if they are denied the space and time to follow them through.

My second corollary – 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 when they get involved in children's play, and how this might affect children. This is where things get complicated.

To show this, let's take a fictitious scenario involving two children in a school playground - I'll call them Tony and Dave. Tony has done something nasty to Dave – I don't know, given him a swift, hard and deliberate kick during a game of football. The playground supervisor sees this, and – significantly - both Tony and Dave know she has seen it. Does she do something, or does she let it pass? In such circumstances – where children know an adult has witnessed some behaviour that is clearly unacceptable – it is almost always right for the adult to act quickly and decisively, and almost never right for the adult to ignore the behaviour. What action they should take is another matter but they should do something. For to do nothing is, I'm sure you agree, to give a clear and unhelpful signal to both children that Tony's behaviour is acceptable.

But say the playground supervisor sees the kick, but neither Tony nor Dave realise the episode has been witnessed? Here things get more complicated. My key point is that sometimes, it might be reasonable for her to do nothing. For this will allow the

situation to unfold in ways that might help the children involved to learn or develop their understanding and social skills. One of the problems with a zero tolerance approach is precisely that it does not recognise the value in letting children learn for themselves what might happen if they are unpleasant to each other. Of course, there are times when intervening might be the right course of action – most obviously if there is a risk the situation will escalate dangerously, but also perhaps if it is part of a pattern of behaviour that warrants getting involved.

Here's another tricky scenario. Tony tells the playground supervisor that Dave has been bullying, victimising, or hurting him. But she has not seen any evidence of this. What should she do? Again, I'm not going to be so foolish as to think I can provide a formula. But I suggest that one reasonable response in some circumstances may be to suggest that the children try to sort it out amongst themselves. This is not as callous as it sounds. It fosters children's moral self-reliance. It also conveys the expectation that the children concerned indeed may have the capacity to sort it out – a helpful message. And it makes clear to children that adults will be wary of getting involved in what may be a complex dispute, where there may be no obvious rights or wrongs and where there is the possibility of scores being settled.

The messages that adults give to children about their ability to handle difficult situations can have a powerful influence on children's moral and 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. And there is good research evidence that over-protected children are indeed more likely to become, for instance, victims of bullying.

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. 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 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.

So far I have argued that adults need to be thoughtful and careful about when and how they intervene in social situations where children are learning what we might call 'social survival' skills. I am going to further than this. I also believe that it is essential for children to have some time when, to all intents and purposes, they are outside of the adult gaze altogether. I think that it is vital for 'responsible adults' sometimes to be *absent* – to be looking the other way, as it were – if children are to have the fullest opportunity to play freely and independently, without the distortions that come from knowing that a grown-up is watching.

This is all the more crucial when you realise how much more constrained and scheduled children's lives have become in the last generation or two. Here's one of the more striking statistics: in a single generation, the "home habitat" of typical eight-year-olds - the area in which they are able to travel on their own - has shrunk to one-ninth of its former size. As I wrote in a comment piece in the Guardian in April last year, these changes give children a cruel double whammy. They frustrate children's natural urge to explore and push boundaries. And they expose the resultant behaviour to the ever more judgmental gaze of adults. If we are not to deprive children of the raw material they need to make sense of their growing moral and social engagement with the people and world around them, we have to take some risks ourselves: to recognise the value of what I called in that article 'benign neglect'.

This point about sometimes not interfering is absolutely critical. So I want to dwell on it a little longer, by looking at one type of social play behaviour where we're getting things badly wrong, with damaging consequences. That is where children explore conflict and power relations through physical, social play. There are different forms and different names, but what I'm thinking about here is rough-and-tumble play, play fighting and gun and superhero play.

Adults find these forms of play challenging and difficult enough even to interpret, let alone accept. Psychologists looking at rough-and-tumble play have known for years that adults are very poor – and children very good – at judging the difference between play-fighting and real fighting.

This matters because there's growing evidence that such play, far from being a simple mimicry of unpleasant adult behaviour, in fact has developmental origins and benefits. Specifically, it helps children learn how to form and maintain friendships, learn about their position and status in their peer group and develop their wider social skills. Just think how much a child learns about understanding facial expressions, tone of voice and body language, for example, through engaging in play fighting. The practice of restricting or banning such behaviour – common in most nurseries and pre-schools – stops children from learning some key social skills. It can lead to a form of learned helplessness, whereby children become dependent on adults to step in, having been denied the chance to learn and apply these social codes and conventions for themselves. Worse still, banning play fighting inevitably sets up damaging relationships with children who may then become labelled as difficult, perversely increasing the likelihood of longer-term behavioural problems.

There is a real, and unavoidable challenge here. How do adults tell the difference between play and real fighting? How do we know when to step in, and when to hold back? As I said, I don't think there are any easy answers. And in a way, that's precisely the point. It is possible in this scenario to come up with easy answers. One is not to allow any fighting. The other is its opposite, the rule of the jungle. But both these positions strike the wrong balance between risks and benefits. So we are left in the position of having to make balanced judgements based on our (sometimes false) beliefs and attitudes and our (always incomplete) knowledge of the facts. We hope we get it right most of the time. But we will certainly get it wrong some of the time.

Our problems around play fighting are both a clear demonstration of how we are going wrong and a cautionary tale of the possible consequences of our mistakes. We are

going wrong for two reasons. First, we have too little faith in what the KAS prospectus succinctly calls “the natural way in which children go about the business of learning”; in this case, their capacity to learn for themselves the subtleties of getting along and resolving conflicts in a peer group. Second, we adults are too quick to step in and stop any possibility of hurt or harm, too quick to blame each other, and too categorical in laying blame. Evidence of harm is ipso facto evidence of negligence - just as in playgrounds, where an injury is taken to be proof that someone is to blame. But hurt and upset are not always the result of negligence. Sometimes they are a justifiable consequence of a sound judgement.

So let’s see where my argument has taken us. We need to be honest that being a good parent or teacher involves giving children a taste of real freedom. We need to remember that childhood is not always pleasant, and neither are children. In doing this, we need to be aware of the effect and influence that we have as adults in children’s play and free time. We need to be aware of how changes in childhood are limiting children’s opportunities to socialize and learn through their play. In all of this, we need to take a balanced approach that avoids the dangers of overprotecting children and both depriving them of freedom now and leaving them ill-prepared in the longer term. And our guiding light, our North Star in navigating this difficult territory is to help children to become more morally and socially self-reliant and to appreciate better the consequences of their actions.

Which brings me to my final question: what does all this mean for KAS? Returning to the twin themes of my talk: I hope I’ve convinced you that you need to preserve the rich, challenging and even slightly dangerous offers you make to students in the school’s playgrounds. As I said, this is such a visible expression of the school’s ethos that I suspect few of you would need much persuading. But you also need to ensure you maintain a shared, coherent vision for children: that you take seriously your school’s belief in children’s natural eagerness to learn and continue to reflect on and discuss these issues. And an essential part of this is being prepared to give children the space to make mistakes and learn from them: to take the first, essential steps in allowing them, in the words of KAS’s prospectus, “to take responsibility for planning their own lives”.

If we take this KAS maxim seriously – and I think it’s essential that we do – we first of all have to give children the chance to try and fail. It comes down to this: how can we expect children to grow up to become adults who take responsibility for planning their own lives, if we never give them any real responsibility as children – if we are constantly watching over them, ready to jump in at the first hint of trouble? After all, childhood is a journey, and its destination is autonomous adulthood. Sooner or later, we all – parents and teachers - have to let our children make their own way in life, while we wave them goodbye, our fingers metaphorically crossed behind our backs. Do we really think we’re doing the best by them if throughout their childhood we deny them the freedom that our hearts tell us was such a magical ingredient in our own lives?

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