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Playing It Too Safe? *New Playground Gear Promotes Risk-Taking to Boost Fitness And Brain Development*

The child who insists on running up the slide at the playground is doing it for a good reason.

Chances are he's uninspired and trying to create more of a challenge for himself. And if the child is 9 or 10 years old, he is likely fully bored by the swings, slides and climbing gear.

Some child-development experts and parents say decades of dumbed-down playgrounds, fueled by fears of litigation, concerns about injury and worrywart helicopter parents, have led to cookie-cutter equipment that offers little thrill. The result, they say, is that children are less compelled to play outside, potentially stunting emotional and physical development and exacerbating a nationwide epidemic of childhood obesity.



Some psychologists suggest that not exposing children to risk can result in increases in anxiety and other phobias. Children who never climb trees, for example, are more likely to develop a fear of heights, according to a study in Norway. And encouraging free play, in an age of structured activities and computer games, is believed to be important in helping children develop physical and cognitive competencies, creativity and self-worth.

"We don't give our children enough roaming space to help them test their limits or to help them become confident in their physical skills," says Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, a professor in the department of psychology at Philadelphia's Temple University. "Sometimes when we protect people too much they never learn to take healthy risks."

Still, playground-equipment injuries, such as wrist and forearm fractures from falling off monkey bars and jungle gyms, remain common. More than 200,000 children are treated in U.S. emergency rooms for such injuries every year, according to estimates from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Increasingly, planners and manufacturers are designing equipment and play spaces that introduce greater risk, or at least a perception of risk, to encourage physical activity. Playground zip lines convey a sense of thrill, even when they are just a few feet off the ground. Specially designed climbing nets allow children to scale considerable heights, without sacrificing safety in case of falls. There is also a push for more natural elements: trees to climb, logs on which to balance, and slides that follow the natural contours of hills, which makes them seem riskier even when they're not.

Provocative playgrounds are common in some foreign countries such as Germany, Norway and England, according to playground manufacturers and experts. Gradually, the move is taking root in the U.S., which has traditionally been restrained by litigation concerns and restrictive safety standards. ASTM International, a professional organization, creates voluntary industry standards for various equipment, including playgrounds. And a handbook from the Consumer Product Safety Commission contains safety guidelines for playground equipment. Some states have laws mandating compliance with such recommendations.

In Atlanta, a \$2.5 million fundraising effort kicked off this month for a new city-owned development called Chastain Park. The master plan includes swings that multiple kids can pile in, rope climbing, a stream and a tree house with a spiral slide. Another slide will be 8 feet wide allowing several kids to go down at a time, unusual for a U.S. playground.

A 30-foot high pyramid made of climbing nets was installed in March at Neptune Park, a city-owned facility in Saratoga Springs, Utah. Dozens of children at a time are able to clamber to the top, putting their skill and strength to the test.

Mark Edwards, capital facilities manager for Saratoga Springs, says the climbing pyramid, made by Berliner, a German manufacturer, has the appeal of looking risky, but is safe. Horizontal webs of nets ensure that the most anyone can fall is 6 feet. "Our intent was to provide activity for kids that would keep them coming back" until they mastered it, Mr. Edwards says. Although a couple of parents

raised concerns about the pyramid's height, and there has been at least one broken arm, for the most part the reaction has been positive, he says.

Woodland Discovery playground, located in Shelby Farms Park in Memphis, Tenn., in 2010 introduced two new types of swings. The cradle nest swing, sometimes called the basket swing, has room for multiple kids to pile in together, making swinging a social event. And the queen swing consists of three interconnected pendulum seats. The force of a seat moving up and down adds unexpected momentum and speed to the movement of the others. The new equipment was manufactured by Richter Spielgeräte of Germany.

Tennessee doesn't mandate that playground equipment comply with federal or voluntary safety guidelines, giving the facility some wiggle room in putting in the new swings. "We accepted the European safety standards, knowing the equipment was safe," says Laura Adams, executive director of Shelby Farms Park Conservancy, which operates the county-owned park.

Research shows that challenging outdoor play is important for children's health. A recent study in the journal *Pediatrics*, examining the physical activity in day-care centers, found that strict safety standards, among other factors, discouraged kids from playing.

Boosting fitness and improving upper-body strength were big factors that went into planning the Esplanade Playspace in Boston, which features a 65-foot zip line, a manufactured rock-climbing structure and a more than 20-foot-high climbing net.

"One big point to get this built was childhood obesity and the fact that most of the kids, the third- and fourth-grade kids, failed the Presidential Fitness exam," says Christopher Egan, a father of five and board member of the Friends of the Esplanade Playspace, which raised money to open the state-owned playground last year.

Risk can be useful training for children, recent scientific articles assert. In a report in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Mariana Brussoni, a developmental psychologist in the faculty of medicine at the University of British Columbia, and colleagues suggest risky play ultimately keeps children safer by allowing them to learn how to take and manage risk.

Dr. Brussoni cited a multi-year U.S. study of disadvantaged young children that found those given more free-play time were more likely to participate in sports and contribute to family or community as teenagers than children allowed little free play. In their 20s, those allowed greater free-play time as children had fewer work suspensions and arrests. The study, involving 68 children, was published in *Preventive Medicine* in 1998.

Risky play exposes children to stimuli they may have feared, such as heights. "As the child's coping skills improve, these situations and stimuli may be mastered and no longer feared," according to Ellen Sandseter, an associate professor at Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education in Norway, who co-wrote a study in the journal *Evolutionary Psychology* last year. Dr. Sandseter suggests that hindering children from participating in risky play may result in an increase in neuroticism and phobias.

"It's important that play environments are as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible," Dr. Sandseter says, adding that broken and fractured arms and legs shouldn't be considered serious injuries.

At Neptune Park in Utah, Mr. Edwards says fire officials did rescue drills before the 30-foot climbing net was put in. So far, they haven't had to do any rescues though they came close once. "We had to try to talk her down," he says, "tell her where to put her feet."

She wasn't a kid, though. She was a reporter from a local news station who apparently hadn't conquered her fear of heights as a child.

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