Let kids be kids

Overprotecting them will do them no good, says Cassandra Wilkinson.

A
n absurd over-protectiveness of our children is being encouraged by our media, culture and government.

Our outdoor lifestyle, rugged country and self-reliant mindset served our elders well through tough times. Those being raised to fear a skinned knee, broken bone or bruised ego are not likely to be ready to look after themselves when they need to.

The great resilience-building Australian childhood is available to fewer of our kids. Some kids’ parents are overprotective ‘helicopter parents’ who don’t trust others to teach their kids to swim or take them hiking.

Some kids are living in high density neighborhoods with fewer opportunities for outdoor play. Many kids are being raised by parents who no longer believe in unsupervised play and will not take them out to play for more than one hour per day.

Whether they are afraid of child molesters or cars or broken bones, most of their fears are unfounded. In Australia, serious injuries from play are extremely rare. According to a 2009 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the most common causes of child deaths in Australia (2006-2007) were:

1. traffic accidents
2. drowning and
3. assault.

The most common causes of childhood injuries (2006-2007) were:

1. falls
2. road accidents such as running out into traffic
3. poisoning
4. burns and scalds
5. assault.

The number of falls is significant but the consequences are usually not. Falls cause the most injuries for children (61 per cent), but according to the ABS, 93 per cent were from one metre or less.

Injury from healthy outdoor activity is rare; however health problems from a lack of activity are growing, raising concerns of lifetime poor health impacts and increased rates of asthma, cardiovascular conditions and Type 2 diabetes.

According to Australia’s Health 2010, the proportion of overweight or obese children aged 5–12 years increased from 21 per cent in 1995 to 23 per cent in 2007–08. The corresponding increase was larger for those aged 13–17 years—from 21 per cent to 29 per cent.

Despite this, the swings get shorter, the games get duller, the running, shouting and climbing stop. It is having a detrimental effect on their health, but more important is the impact on their mental well being.

A growing body of research, and many child development professionals, argue that the opportunity to access a rich, outdoor play experience which we assess and take risks, is vital for healthy development—physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and creatively.

To raise our children without risk is to hobble them for life. At risk is the fundamental quality that guarantees a secure economic, social and creative future. Without entrepreneurs we have no financial future, without new ideas we cannot tackle the future’s unforeseen challenges, without adventurers we will never thrill to the heights of physical, sporting, artistic and intellectual endeavour.

When we raise them on fear, it is kids paying the price today, but it’s society that will pay the price tomorrow if kids grow up afraid.

When I was seven my friend Jenny had an absolutely genius idea to combat the Queensland summer sun. At her instigation we poured dishwashing liquid all over her trampoline and then taped a garden hose to it. No adults stopped us because no adult was around to care.

These days too many kids have adults hovering over them, fretting, fetching, wiping, lifting and preventing every possible injury. Meanwhile, trampolines are regarded as one of the most dangerous predators in a child’s life.

Government safety guidelines for trampolines now warn parents:

Some of the common injuries incurred by children using trampolines include fractures, injuries to internal organs and spinal injuries. It is essential that children are supervised by an adult while jumping on a trampoline. Trampolines are not suitable for children under six years of age. Consider the trampoline as sports equipment, not a toy. Only one child at a time on the trampoline. Encourage and remind the child to jump in the centre, not near the sides.

A recent study by Play England, part of the British National Children’s Bureau, found that half of all UK children have been stopped from climbing trees and 17 per cent have been told they cannot take part in games of tag or chase.

Early Childhood Australia has raised similar concerns that misplaced fears are encouraging parents to deny children opportunities to engage in traditional childhood activities including spending time outdoors.

So what is so bad about an injury free childhood? Tim Gill, author of ‘No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk-Averse Society’, argues that over-protection has perverse consequences, as it makes children less able to adequately assess and respond to risk and danger and less able to take responsibility for their actions and decisions.

Tom Mullarkey, chief executive of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), has warned against ‘wrapping children in cotton wool’. He says, ‘A skinned knee or a twisted ankle in a challenging and exciting play environment is not only acceptable, it is a positive necessity to educate our children and to prepare them for a complex, dangerous world.’

There is a growing movement rising against this trend. Some of the rebels are outdoors types like Richard Louv, whose Last Child in the Woods has become a touchstone for the explorer scout crowd. The Free Range Mom is a voice of reason for city kids and others, like my kids, are ticking off Gever Tulley’s 50 Dangerous Things (You Should Let Your Children Do).

Kids are natural leaders. All of them. Broken collar bones, grazed knees and fractured wrists are the hallmarks of conviction and bold action. Adults do not take bold action, or at least they do it so rarely that the few who retain this spirit come to be called leaders.

By playing rough, running off in shopping centres, getting lost in the bush, swimming in heavy surf and riding their bicycles down the back steps, our kids are preparing themselves for life. We must do a better job of letting them.

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