

Let kids be kids

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My wife and I have just cleaned up after our son's 7th birthday party with eight of his friends. Lives were put at risk when the boys attempted to send the ten pin bowling ball (which was heavier than some of the kids) down the alley. Either the ball was dropped dangerously close to the child's feet or the ball actually came back towards the party group, sitting in the 'apparently' safe area! Don't tell OSH.

Then it was back home to party food which would have sent the Obesity Action Coalition into a spin – coke, chips, bbq sausages, lollies, and worst of all, a full birthday cake! This was all accompanied by incessant talking and laughing at the volume of 150 decibels, singing "Diarrhoea" to the tune of Abba's Mamma Mia, and jokes with a consistent theme of flatulence!

Finally it's on to the trampoline (yes – all nine of them!) and re-enactment of pro-wrestling moves with neck holds and karate chops.

My wife wondered whether it was wise to do all this after just eating and whether one of the boys would be maimed for life as a result of a 'body slam'. So she put me in charge of supervision and retreated to a cup of tea inside. My reaction was "they're fine. Boys will be boys!"

And that's the message we seem to be getting repeatedly from principals, social workers, and educationalists.

A school principal recently said that the banning of physical games like bullrush and murder-ball is bubble-wrapping boys in a 'feminised' school system. He's not encouraging brawls or fights, just physicality.

An organisation representing men involved in early childhood education says boys often needed more boisterous and aggressive play than girls but the lack of men in childcare means that environment is often lacking. They highlight that people tend to think of aggression as violence "but we need to differentiate between the two." (the exact argument that the overwhelming majority of parents argue when distinguishing between appropriate smacking and child abuse – but that's another issue.)

The recent case of a school banning birthday cakes because of obesity concerns shows just how far this 'risk-averse' approach is infiltrating into our schools – affecting both boys and girls.

Yet the 'cotton wool culture' is rife in other countries as well.

In the UK, a school banned playground games such as kiss chase and tag because of the fear of spreading diseases such as meningitis and another school labelled any physical contact as 'inappropriate behaviour' and told children that the only time they could touch each other was to help a classmate who had fallen over.

The headmistress said pupils were now more creative, playing games like 'shadow tig' so that rough shoves on the back were replaced by trying to jump on their shadow.

Other schools have forced children to wear goggles during conker fights and banned lunchtime soccer to stop people being hit by stray soccer kicks.

A former UK government advisor and author of the book "*No Fear: Growing up in a Risk-Averse Society*" warns that this denies opportunities for children to develop skills they can draw on in later life. A report in Scotland suggests that much of the bullying in Britain's playgrounds is caused by children simply not being stimulated enough, so they engage in nasty behaviour because they have nothing better to do.

In Australia, research found that safer playgrounds had not resulted in fewer playground injuries and more children than ever were suffering injuries from playground equipment. And a report from Australia's Kidsafe Playground Conference said that injuries inflicted by children on other children had increased by more than 300% in the past 20 years.

One expert suggested that children might be displaying more risk-taking behaviour and aggression out of boredom, as play became less adventurous and challenging because of safety concerns.

In the US, an elementary school banned tag because some kids complained they were chased against their will, and a Californian school banned tag because there is a 'victim' or 'it' which creates a self-esteem issue.

Yet the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents in the UK seemed to contradict its own calling when it said that children would learn valuable life-long lessons by scraping knees, grazing elbows, and bumping heads – not least how they would avoid hurting themselves in the future. They felt that these injuries would be better in the long term than developing repetitive strain injury (RSI) from playing computer games.

Perhaps stomach ache from eating too much birthday cake might even be a good learning tool as well.

Put simply, the cotton wool culture is denying the child's right to be a child. Playing freely helps kids learn to follow and understand rules, and resolve disputes.

It seems ironic that at the same time that we are wrapping our kids in cotton wool and banning tag in the playground, we are consumed with concern about our kids getting too fat.

As is quoted in various forms, 'It wasn't that long ago that we never wore seatbelts, didn't have airbags, didn't have childproof medicine bottles, childproof houses, bike helmets, cell phones so our parents could text us, we would drink water from the hose in the backyard, eat worms, we would eat cake, bread and butter, drink sugary drinks, and we weren't overweight because we were always outside playing.'

A recent study by London University published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* confirmed that gender differences are hard-wired into children's brains from birth. The study warned against trying

to censor children's 'natural' inclinations.

And a study published in the journal *Hormone and Behaviour* concluded from observing young male monkeys that boys have an innate predisposition for masculine toys.

In other words, boys will be boys, and girls will be.. um.. girls. It's the adults that may need to grow up.

(976 words)