

FIGHTING FOR FREE PLAY

By Dr. Stephen Fine.

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It seems a tug-of-war is going on in Canada. On one side are those who, in the name of safety and reducing liability, want to mandate the risk right out of childhood activities and free play time. On the other side are those who believe free play and safe risk-taking are vital to healthy childhood development.

Some Recent Occurrences

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is the largest school board in Canada serving approximately 232,000 students in almost 600 schools. In May 2014, the TDSB superintendent cited safety concerns for a school trip to a well-known Ontario summer camp (*Toronto Star, 2014*). Students were to be denied participation in canoeing, kayaking, archery, ropes course, swimming — and even a campfire! Although scheduled the preceding fall, the TDSB decree came down the pipe three weeks prior to the trip date. The inner city school's grade eight class had attended the camp for the past seven years, but this year the trip was cancelled because of the lack of activity options. Although this may prove to set an unfortunate precedent for local students, the TDSB's pronouncement has been met with widespread disapproval.

Another intriguing public response to the suppression of active, physical play took place in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In early June of this year, red swing sets began to appear mysteriously in parks and other public spaces around Halifax. A local business group had become aware of the Red Swing Project, an international movement to better utilize underused or vacant public spaces, and began erecting swing sets throughout the area.

The first response came from Halifax city lawyers who expressed concern that someone might get hurt by falling off a swing and sue the city. However, there was an outcry of public support after suggestions that the swings might be removed sparked a Twitter® backlash (CTV, 2014). As is now so often seen, social media unleashed the power of public consciousness, and by week's end city officials were tweeting pictures of municipal executives testing the swings for safety. The swings are still in place.

Contrary to the negative perceptions often attributed to helicopter parents, a fresh and more considered trend is beginning to emerge from this demographic. This new trend more accurately reflects the views of a generation of parents committed to providing opportunity and challenge for their children, especially through advocacy. In response to unyielding and perhaps insensitive school bureaucracies, parents have begun to organize and act on their children's behalf.

A school administrator/parent recently took matters into her own hands to ensure that the students at her school had the opportunity to partake in the camp experience.

Here is what she had to say: "Often in our days we hear the words 'integrity,' 'inclusivity,' 'cooperation,' and 'collaboration,' but in the real world and to our youth what do they mean? Words create images and guidelines, but it is through actual physical experiences that the words find the truest meaning. Our trip to camp offered a place where words become experiences, cherished memories, life skills, and team-building opportunities. I recently had the pleasure of bringing 20 eighth-grade students with four parent volunteers to camp for a 36-hour adventure. The youth participated in activities including archery, tennis, canoeing, physical fitness games, collaborative games, time around the campfire, and outdoor theatre. The students navigated themselves with their counselors and a flashlight to their cabins where they also were without electricity. What a great way for them to learn how to rely on their senses and a flashlight.

Many of our students have never experienced these moments and, for some, they may never have the opportunity again. This was an amazing way to end their eighthgrade year!"

What Research Tells Us about Risky and Free Play

Over the past few years a media storm of debate has raged on the degree of risks and freedoms we as a society ought to allow our children. A draconian attitude towards camp outings, outdoor activities, and "risky" play has emerged with today's policy makers and administrators rooted in fears of legal liability and litigation.

More and more, outdoor and free play activities nostalgically posted on retro blogs and social media sites are reaching a new audience of 21st-century parents, educators, and kids. Common sense is coming back into fashion, and people are beginning to explore ways and means to offset what is being recognized as counterproductive to widely accepted health and skills development goals for youth.

Developmental psychologist Peter Gray states that free play with other children away from adults is how kids "learn to make their own decisions, control their emotions and impulses, see from others' perspectives, negotiate differences with others, and make friends." Additionally, he believes that "as children's opportunities for free play and exploration have declined there has been a dramatic rise in anxiety, depression, and suicide in young people." (Gray, 2014a).

Risky Play

Children love risky play — and risky play is a vital component to development and maturation; it is also how children learn. On risk, Gray (2014b) states that, "Children are highly motivated to play in risky ways, but they are also very good at knowing their own capacities and avoiding risks they are not ready to take, either physically or emotionally. Our children know far better than we do what they are ready for."

Risk is an inherent part of our daily lives. Understanding how to manage risk is something that can only be learned through experience and involves exploring our environments and our limitations within those environments. This is best achieved early through risky play and testing the limits of fear. Camp is the ideal setting for children to take those risks — such as mastering a ropes course, learning to hit a bull's eye with a bow and arrow, and starting a fire the old-fashioned way, without matches — in a safe and controlled environment.

Our camp hosts school groups during the spring and fall months. Recently, we have noted an increase in the list of activities that are restricted for some school children. While our private school campers are allowed access to the full range of outdoor activities we offer, this is not the case with our public schools. For some public school programs we have had to cut swimming, canoeing, kayaking, and trampoline, which are deemed unsafe, although archery is still allowed — and thankfully campfire — for now.

The suppression of active play for youth has implications that are health related as well. The Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group (HALO) of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario recently approached the Canadian Camping Association. HALO director Dr. Mark Tremblay recognizes the importance of summer camp as an active-living center for kids. According to Tremblay, 46 percent of Canadian kids get three hours or less of active play per week, with 63 percent of their free time being sedentary. The major issue is video or computer screen time, which results in weight gain and a decreased level of health (HALO, 2014).

One of our camp mentors is Richard Guilmette, professor of physical education at Quebec's general and vocational college CEGEP de Granby. His personal philosophy regarding free play is that it is a creative process that allows a young person to discover the infinite variety of experiences offered by the outdoors. As one who has been involved in teaching through organized sports for over 15 years, Guilmette believes

there are important life lessons to be learned through the process of curiosity, discovery, creativity, and socialization offered through free play activities.

In his article "Youth Development and the Camp Experience" in *New Directions for Youth Development*, Barry Garst states that, "Unstructured time is one of the features that make camp distinctly different from other out-of-school-time programs, and recent studies suggest campers equate their most meaningful camp experiences to the time they spent outside structured activity." (Garst, Browne, & Bialeschki, 2011)

Some Practical Free Play Ideas

The wonderful thing about free or unstructured play activities at camp is that specific programming and gaming rules are not required. The campers will come up with these on their own. All you need are interesting settings, some props, and some counselors to join in. Often, the kids who attend camp are not only new to the camp experience, but may never have had the chance for free play within their home, school, and community settings. Teaching kids how to play well is what a good camp counselor does best.

Think of your camp setting as a big board game. At our camp we have designated free play periods within the daily routine that allow for the campers to make up their own games and rules. Over the years some of these impromptu activities have become immensely popular and ridiculously engaging.

Try some of these idea-generating activities at your camp:

- For a wooded setting Build a shelter using forest deadfall. No rules here — just let the group decide how to manage the situation. They could end up building a human shelter, a hobbit village, or find a collection of bugs. Who knows? You can join in the fun, but don't be too controlling.
- For a creek setting Build a dam. Just take your campers to the creek and say, "Hey, why don't we build a dam just like beavers do?" The rest is positively magical. Your dam builders will multiply exponentially.
- For an open field setting Play soccer baseball (sometimes called kickball). Basically, this is baseball without a bat with campers using their feet to kick the ball. All the rules are the same as baseball. Campers can use whatever is available to create bases, the pitcher's mound, and home plate. Campers decide shape of the field, how many bases, and point scoring. Babe Ruth might not approve, but the kids love it.
- For a tennis court setting Play the game we call "Role." You'll need tennis rackets, a tennis ball, and two teams. The object of the game is to get the ball into the other team's court. It does not matter how the ball gets there. Campers will make up the rules as the game progresses — it's more fun than you can possibly imagine.
- For a beach setting Build sand castles and more. This is the genesis of all free play activities — in teams or solo. Multiple pails, rakes, and shovels are definite assets and great for every age.
- For stony ground Like the beach, stones offer an infinite variety of creative challenges as one of humankind's oldest building materials. Cairns, inukshuks, walls, and mini villages can all be built with stones and pebbles.
- For a more central camp setting Use natural materials to build a lasting monument at camp such as an archway, a raft, a swing, or a garden.

All of these activities are simply the result of putting a group of kids together with a playful and enthusiastic camp counselor and letting the actions of discovery, curiosity, and creativity take place. Only a minimal amount of guidance is required to kick-start what is a natural process for kids. Camp activities like these can help kids learn how to create fun activities on their own — a skill that we hope will transfer to their homes, providing wonderful options for fun and creativity beyond video games and organized sports.

Camp is a place where kids discover how to be the creators of their own fun, learning, and skill development. Kids at camp find out that there is never a need to be bored in a world full of opportunities for inventiveness.

Camps are places that offer specific skills developed through intentional programs and activities. The logistics of operating a camp demand that it be a structured place, however, I encourage you to take your daily activity sheet and intentionally schedule in some free play time for your campers.

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