

Risk management and risk-benefit assessment

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Injury Prevention

INTRODUCTION

This statement is written in the context of children's play, a topic of professional interest which for me commenced in 1986 and has continued with no slackening of pace to occupy a part of my life that otherwise might have been devoted to such things as climate change and nuclear waste. Some people regard play as relatively unimportant on the scale of threats faced by the human race, but I do not share that view. I believe that 'play,' however interpreted, is an essential part of life regardless of one's age and whether it is recognised or acknowledged or not, and that without it things would rapidly deteriorate.

Not everyone shares this view. For instance, as an adviser to the UK's Play Safety Forum (PSF), I am aware that of late the Forum has been in deep discussion with various influential agencies about the role of play. During one meeting, which was focused upon play equipment safety standards, a question was posed about the age of children who were being protected. The answer, after modest hesitation, was 'about 7 or 8 years.' This answer was no surprise but a confirmation of an earlier suspicion. I think there is a tendency, when contemplating play, to think only of the very young. But I also believe this amounts to a serious oversight. Teenagers (and much older folks) need opportunity to play for, to paraphrase the Bard, 'all the world's a playground,' and were one to design all equipment with just toddlers in mind, then others would find it mindlessly tame and so lose out on valuable life experiences.

WORLDVIEWS IN ISOLATION

It could be said that the above separation of view is an example of persons marching to different tunes, not necessarily deliberately, but perhaps more through a certain containment of thought processes, which in turn may be a consequence of different professional cultures and work practices. It is not by any means the only example of the co-existence of parallel universes of thought.[1]

Many research papers on the safety of playgrounds, for instance, commence with a stream of statistics implying that play is dangerous and in need of urgent intervention. What is often missing is some means of putting the injury rate on playgrounds into perspective. If you do that, by factoring

in exposure (how many children play and for how long), a very different picture begins to emerge.[2] Playgrounds start to look more like oases of safety than locations of carnage, which is pretty remarkable considering all of the antics in which players engage.[3]

Nonetheless, in Britain, the injury prevention movement has had a major influence since the 1990s, if not earlier, and its impacts have been felt in numerous areas of public life, including play provision.[4] Not all of these impacts have been considered beneficial, and some have even been ridiculed, such that the British Government is now part-way through a major review of health and safety regulation[5] with the current intention of identifying:

"areas where further reforms are needed to create a modern, simplified, risk-based framework for health and safety in Great Britain." [6]

Within this ministerial statement the words 'risk-based framework' are worthy of contemplation, for they pinpoint a further dichotomy. Although English safety law requires all reasonable interventions to be made, where reasonableness is predicated on a trade-off between the benefits of a safety measure versus its cost and difficulty of implementation, there have been signs of a hazard-based mentality creeping in, first in the workplace and then spreading to encapsulate public life, sometimes including play. The hazard-based approach essentially revolves around the identification of hazards, such as a wooden swing seat or an unprotected drop, and tries to eliminate or remediate them. In contrast, a risk-based approach would also commence by identifying hazards, but would then assess the likelihood of harm (the risk) prior to deciding what if any interventions were reasonable in the circumstances. It is clearly the Government's intention that the hazard-based approach is generally to be shunned, but in practice it remains widespread.

The words 'in the circumstances' are also deeply salient because they, in turn, pinpoint another rift, perhaps the most important of all. The numerous debates in the UK play community over recent decades have, above all, been concerned that the benefits of play have been sidelined and should be factored into decisions about the reasonableness, or otherwise, of proposed safety interventions. The simple

reason is that safety interventions may lessen benefits. The PSF has marshaled this difficult line of thought in the following policy position, which has been endorsed *inter alia* by the Government and the safety regulator:

“Children need and want to take risks when they play. Play provision aims to respond to these needs and wishes by offering children stimulating, challenging environments for exploring and developing their abilities. In doing this, play provision aims to manage the level of risk so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks of death or serious injury.”[7]

This position is, of course, radically different from that of hazard-based control and injury minimisation. Exposure to some risk is here seen as one of the purposes of play provision rather than something to be eliminated, even including some risk of serious consequence. From this has emerged the idea that play situations should be subject to a new form of risk assessment, namely, risk-benefit assessment. So, in thinking about what interventions are reasonable ‘in the circumstances,’ consideration would need to be given to the circumstances of play including its objectives.

This, I should say, may appear radical on the one hand but at the same time it is common sense. Life, on reflection, is about trade-offs in which we accept certain risks in exchange for associated benefits.[8] It is seldom about the selection of one priority, such as injury reduction, and its single-minded pursuit without regard for other factors that may be important.

EMERGING EVIDENCE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Injury statistics are relatively easy to collect but hard evidence of play benefits less so, for obvious reason. Gradually, though, research in social sciences is beginning to identify the importance of play. Benefits are legion including developmental opportunities;[9] opportunities to experience challenge;[10] the chance to learn from mistakes;[11] encounters with the natural world;[12] reductions in psychopathology and neuroticism;[13] and opportunities to foster citizenship and community.[14]

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PATH AHEAD

In most industrialised countries systems of risk assessment and play safety inspection have been devised, coupled with the publication of advisory standards on play equipment safety. The history described here raises serious and complex issues for those involved:

- » For the health and safety community, it needs to be realised that injury control measures at some point impinge adversely upon health and that that point

has likely already been passed. More benefit may be realised more easily by focusing less on injury prevention, and more upon other health benefits (whether physical, psychological or social) of varied and stimulating play provision

- » For the risk assessment community, recognition needs to be given to the essential difference between factory space and public space including play space. While it may be appropriate to minimise risk of injury in factories, public life has other valued objectives which require recognition beyond lip service
- » For standards setters, the trade-off between risk and benefit needs to be fairly acknowledged and this further requires a more inclusive process in which the play community has a greater involvement than historically has been the case
- » In addition, standards setters need to contemplate whether a) equipment standards should be more strongly age-related and b) where the boundary lies between legitimate territory for standards and territory which should be occupied by local community play providers
- » For play safety inspectors, conventional forms of industry-derived risk assessment are no longer appropriate as benefits of play need to be factored in to the consideration of what is reasonable. In turn, this implies that the next generation of safety inspectors needs to have expertise in both benefits and risks and how these may be weighed one against the other
- » Local community play providers need to be more proactive in monitoring the benefits and risks of their play provision. These things are neither delegable, nor predictable given that the recipe of children and young people, plus equipment, plus the environment is a complex system

CONCLUSIONS

It need not be said that all professional communities, whether involved in injury control, play provision, equipment manufacture, or risk management, care about the welfare of children. All do, but what is apparently missing is an agreed agenda for bringing this about, and different actors continue to sail their own course, passing each other like proverbial ships in the night, or sometimes worse - strafing the perceived ‘enemy’ with passing fire. In the interest of the welfare of children and young people, the communities they live in, and society at large, these largely disciplinary and professional barriers need to be breached and a more reflective approach taken.

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