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Risky play is good for kids, even if they break an arm, researchers say

By Tralee Pearce

The playground is starting to look like a danger zone to many doctors and parents. Most recently, slides [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/the-hot-button/the-latest-threat-to-your-child-at-the-park-youll-be-surprised/article4102121>] and trampolines [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/the-hot-button/the-latest-danger-to-your-kids-could-be-in-your-backyard/article4563120>] have been the villains. Now, father and Slate writer Dan Kois is shaking his fist at the darned monkey bars after his monkey-bar-loving daughter fell and broke her arm.

In a humorous piece called *Monkey Bars Are a Menace*

[http://www.slate.com/articles/life/family/2012/10/how_dangerous_are_monkey_bars_risky_play_and_the_case_for_banning_unsafe.html], he says the hospital tech who examined his daughter asked, "Monkey bars or trampoline?" If it were up to him, he said, he'd tear all the monkey bars down."

Kois then points out that one x-ray technician friend says 15 to 20 per cent of all fractures are due to monkey bar falls.

"Why do we suffer these malevolent goons on our playgrounds? Shouldn't we just replace monkey bars with playground equipment less likely to maim our children? ... I headed to school to check out these silent plastic killers, ready to become That Kind of Parent."

It's an irritating character few of us really want to be. And yet this is where all that re-learned free-range-parenting ethos smashes up against the primal urge to protect our kids. We know that playgrounds shouldn't be levelled and covered in bubble wrap (it would probably be a suffocation risk, anyway) but what's the alternative?

Well, Kois has found one. He taps into a new line of reasoning (your grandparents would call it an old line of reasoning) that suggests "more challenging – even dangerous – playgrounds might be better for children than safer, simpler ones."

He cites two Norwegian researchers, Leif Kennair and Ellen Sandseter, and a paper they recently wrote in favour of "risky play." [<http://www.epjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/ep092572842.pdf>]

"They argue that children who aren't given the chance to negotiate difficult physical challenges might grow up more fearful than children who risk (relatively minor) injury and make it through. The occasional broken bone, twisted ankle, or knocked-out tooth may be traumatic, but those injuries are 'species normal' – that is, the kinds of injuries children have suffered throughout human history without any permanent damage."

Kois does add that, "It's easy to call a broken arm 'species normal' when it's not your child who's screaming in pain."

Looking for a middle ground, he finds one: schools who demand an adult spotter for kindergarteners. And, well, actual softer ground to buffer those falls, according to some experts.

"So there's the solution! Look for me to head down to Jamestown Elementary this weekend with a couple of spare mattresses."

Parents, how do you balance your kid's need to take physical risk and your need to not be in an emergency waiting room every week?