

Sometimes, kids need to fall down: DiManno

Rosie DiManno Published on Thursday July 05, 2012
Star Columnist



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO A decade ago, the Toronto District School Board deemed the playgrounds at 172 of their public schools unsafe and razed them. Slides, swings and monkey bars were torn down, \$27 million worth of equipment.

Playtime: It's complicated.

Rules of engagement are squishing the joy out of childhood. Don't jump here, don't dangle there. Mind your head, watch your feet. No running. No daring. No minuscule risk that might cause an owie — and potentially a lawsuit.

Safety management has become the thou-shall-not mantra in an age of over-weaning kid-minding.

Remember the boy in the bubble? The very air he could not breathe put him at life-and-death peril. So sad, yet this is precisely the bell-jar hyper-vigilance our risk-averse society is imposing on youngsters as we micro-manage their environment. It's not just helicopter parents either, hovering over precious progeny so that nary a knee might ever be scraped. Officialdom has stomped all

over the once boundless domain of youthful discovery with their regulations and their proscriptions and their projected accident spread sheets.

At the YMCA in west end Toronto, a mother is told her eight-year-old son can no longer clamber onto the kids' indoor playground apparatus — a heavily padded two-storey climbing structure that the borderline special needs boy adores. Why? Because he's now grown taller than 48 inches and somebody, somewhere, decided the equipment is no longer safe for him to use.

“It is a situation where concerns about liability have superseded common sense,” Sandra Dorenberg, told the Star in an email. “The problem seems to be that kids might have to bend over to go through parts of the structure and someone has deemed this an unacceptable risk for a fitness facility.”

Dorenberg had been taking her two sons to that Y for a year before a staff member suddenly intervened recently to keep the older boy, Austin, off the apparatus. Her complaints to management that they were being absurdly over-cautious went nowhere. “They have offered alternate programs like arts and crafts for children affected by this newly created program gap. The mind boggles at a gym offering arts and crafts as a fitness activity.”

It is particularly annoying to Dorenberg that the Y, of all places, would attempt to substitute sedentary recreation for physically diverting activity. “I think of all the articles about the declining levels of kids' fitness. I think of the YMCA advertising campaign: ‘Will your child beat the odds and be more fit than you? Ask Y not?’”

In a follow-up interview, Dorenberg expressed frustration with the unseen and apparently irrefutable authorities who set down the rule — which is posted on the wall outside the gym. “Are we letting risk managers run our life? At some point we have to say, this is not right.”

Cathyann White, manager of the Y, says she is merely following guidelines by the company that built and installed the kids' gym. “We want to make sure kids

are as safe as possible. I don't know if it just about the kids having to bend over if they're too tall. But these were the recommendations that we received."

When the Star contacted the British Columbia-based company that made the equipment, they were puzzled by the Y-imposed restrictions. "That doesn't make any sense," said vice-president Terry Forbes. "I could see there might be problems if the kids were too small to use the equipment safely. But we build our soft play areas with 36-inch (climbing) tubes — the largest in the industry — so that parents can go on them with their children. We would never put a restriction like that on it. Sounds to me like they've got it all backwards."

Nor does the company provide rules for posting such as those on the Y wall.

This might all seem like a minor matter but it does illustrate the tenor of these proactively wary and watchful times. A decade ago, the Toronto District School Board deemed the playgrounds at 172 of their public schools "unsafe" and razed them — slides, swings and monkey bars torn down, \$27 million worth of equipment. Parents, who hadn't been notified or consulted, were furious. The board argued it was following new, voluntary playground safety guidelines. All because a consultant who'd attended a two-day course on equipment safety recommended the destruction that created desolate playgrounds across the city, with no plan in place for replacing what was lost.

There hadn't been any rash of schoolyard accidents. A study conducted after the fact calculated that playground accidents had fallen from 0.58 to 0.44 per 1,000 as a result of the equipment's removal — or 117 accidents avoided. But nowhere were the nature of these accidents described, whether a bruised shin or a concussion.

We seem all to have fallen for the catechism that even teensy "trauma" can or should always be avoided and the nanny state invariably knows best. London-based New York Times columnist Roger Cohen wrote last weekend about the excesses of "coddled conformists" in Great Britain: "Children at various British schools have been told in recent years to wear goggles when using certain glues;

avoid playing with empty egg cartons because of possible salmonella poisoning; wear a helmet when walking under horse chestnut trees and desist from three-legged races because they are too dangerous. A costly study found that taking children bowling could be perilous because they might run down the alley and get entangled in machinery.”

Kids need to spread their wings. Sometimes they even need to fall down.

Rosie DiManno usually appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.