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Safe...and sorry

Have years of child-safety programs turned our kids into ninnies?

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Ute Navidi, who heads a British children's charity called London Play, was walking along a Berlin street, on a break from an international conference, when she stopped to watch a group of primary schoolchildren in the schoolyard. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. "If this was London they would have called in search-and-rescue," says Navidi. "Or the health inspector would have come in and shut the place down." Young German kids were chopping wood with axes and mixing soups in a cauldron over an open flame. Children who looked like kindergarteners were manoeuvring kayaks on their own in a large pond while the adults chatted on the sidelines. The scene got Navidi worried -- and not for those kids. The risks the German children were learning to manage far surpassed anything schoolchildren in her city were doing.

In Britain, as in Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere, an overwhelming concern for safety -- along with a desire to safeguard against child-injury litigation -- has completely altered the landscape of kids' activities over the past 20 years. On playgrounds, it's meant lowering jungle gyms, rubberizing play surfaces, and eliminating play areas with ponds and trees. Some districts have gone as far as banning swing sets and posting signs prohibiting running. Last summer, a father in St. John's, Nfld., was forced to disassemble his children's tree house after a neighbour complained to the city; he was told it didn't meet building codes. A pamphlet on playground safety from Halifax-based Child Safety Link sets out stringent recommendations to parents: ensure your child never jumps off a moving swing; be on the lookout for tripping hazards like tree stumps; never let your child wear a scarf, because she could choke.

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But recently, a growing number of people have reached an epiphany similar to Navidi's: despite our best intentions to protect children, our actions have produced the opposite effect. Studies are showing that kids have become less capable, less self-reliant -- essentially, more vulnerable to harm. And fear of strangers, in part, has helped drive a push toward organized and indoor activities. "The stranger-danger message," the Canada Safety Council wrote in its October 2005 newsletter, "can hinder children from developing the social skills and judgment needed to deal effectively with real-life situations." Last year, an 11-year-old Utah boy lost in the woods for four days prolonged his ordeal because he'd been hiding from the "strangers" trying to rescue him. A 2005 British study found that one of the main reasons kids don't go outside is fear of being abducted.

Instead, kids today spend 90 per cent of their days indoors. By some estimates, time spent in lessons and other adult-managed activities has doubled over the past two decades to five hours per week. And kids spend more time with parents -- eight hours more with their mothers and four more with fathers -- compared with 1981. The radius of play of the average nine-year-old has shrunk to one-ninth of what it was in 1970.

It's all working to keep kids from doing what they've done since humanity began: going outside into spaces where they can jump streams, climb trees, use sticks as swords, and do unjust things to ants and flies. According to a decade's worth of largely overlooked research, this free play is key to developing physical, mental and emotional skills -- such as self-reliance, risk-taking, altruism and delayed gratification -- that help children form into competent, functioning adults. "We seem to need to get our hands dirty and our feet wet from time to time," says Richard Louv, author of last year's landmark *Last Child in the Woods*, which compiled the mounting evidence supporting the need to reconnect kids to the outdoors. "We don't fully understand why that's necessary to our mental and physical health, but there does seem to be something there."

Which is why a new effort is under way to get kids into wild spaces -- or perhaps getting the wild spaces to them. "Society seems to think we can keep children cocooned until they're 18 and then they'll just fly out like some well-formed butterfly," says Navidi. She's working with her government on several pilot projects to design quality spaces throughout London for kids to play. In Canada, too, parents, principals and charities, concerned about the kinds of adults we are

beginning to churn out, are looking for ways to turn the tide, and they're starting by redesigning school grounds.

At Bala Avenue Community School, a primary school in Toronto, principal Laurie Prince, now retired, was responsible for transforming a third of the flat grounds into a playground with logs, boulders, a half-dozen trees, grassy hills, a sand pit and a garden. Prince had to overcome many parental what-ifs, like the possibility of bees nesting in the logs, but Bala now exemplifies the part schools can play in enriching kids' outdoor experiences. Seven school boards are financially supporting such projects across the country, and big-name corporate sponsors such as Toyota, CIBC and Franklin Templeton are donating money.

While the idea of greening school grounds, as it's called, has been around for over a decade, it's just started to gain momentum in the past couple of years. In Canada, Evergreen, a national organization working to preserve and create green areas in urban communities, has helped develop and fund projects that bring in logs, boulders and trees, or more elaborate designs, such as trails, vegetation that attracts city creatures, and areas for building structures like forts. A growing part of the thinking is to encourage free play with sand, sticks, water, leaves. "That kind of open-ended play is really desirable -- things you can manipulate," says Cam Collyer, head of Evergreen's Learning Grounds program. It sparks creativity, problem-solving and imaginative thinking.

It may all sound a little warm and fuzzy, but a study sponsored by the Public Health Agency of Canada this year found that of 59 elementary schools that had been recently greened, 81 per cent reported more civil behaviour among students, and 83 per cent more social play. Other studies show a positive correlation between greened school grounds -- especially those used as outdoor classrooms -- and academic performance. The ultimate illustration of this is in Finland, where children don't learn to read until they're 7 and are instead immersed in engaging outdoor play. Finland is the world leader in literacy. Contrast that with Canada, says Tracy Penner, a Vancouver-based landscape architect who consults for Evergreen, where "kids are driven to school, picked up, put in a program, or sit at home on the computer. For some, their whole outdoor experience is available only at school -- this is their backyard."

On a broader scale, Parks Canada and Nature Canada have jointly begun to invest dollars in reconnecting kids to rugged outdoor spaces. Launched in 2005, the Parks and People program has whisked eight-year-olds by plane to the southern tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands' Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and organized wilderness camping training in New Brunswick. In just two years, it will have taken 27,800 kids into the country's parks. "No one's really focused on the young generation," says Darcie Laur, the program's community outreach coordinator. "But we're starting to recognize how important that is."

For Ute Navidi, it's nothing less than getting parents to recognize the importance of childhood, and it's become a mission. When she asks audiences to reminisce about their childhood experiences, they recall excitedly how they climbed trees, got dirty, built forts and broke a lot of limbs. Within a couple of minutes, she says she has trouble quieting them down. But when she asks about the same risk-taking opportunities for their kids, they balk. "I wouldn't let my children do that" is the common refrain. "We don't know what the long-term effects of this downsized childhood are going to be," she says. "We can only imagine."

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