

Walking home from kindergarten should be child's play

Karen Malone

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Picture this. It is 2005, I arrive for the first time in Tokyo. I am making my way across the busy city to attend a meeting when I encounter a small group of kindergarten children walking home from school. They are oblivious to my presence as they busy themselves crossing streets, picking up autumn leaves, straddling low brick kerbs and chatting. There is not a supervising adult in sight, no older siblings. As a parent I feel a sense of foreboding - I worry about their safety.

I recount my experience to a Japanese colleague and exclaim "there were no adults watching out for them". He is a little taken back. "What do you mean, no adults? There were the car drivers, the shopkeepers, the other pedestrians. The city is full of adults who are taking care of them!" On average, 80 per cent of primary age Japanese children walk to school. In Australia the figure in most communities is as low as 40 per cent. Why? What happens in Japan that makes it so different?

At a community seminar recently I asked the audience to imagine themselves aged eight in a special place and to describe it. Most recounted being outside in their neighbourhood, with other children, out of earshot of parents: "I had some bushes where I would play and hide with my brothers and sisters and sometimes friends" (Wilma, 43); "My friends and I would go to this vacant lot and build our own cubbies" (Richard, 36); "We used to get all the neighbourhood kids together and go out on the street and play cricket" (Andrew, 39).

Tim Gill, author and play commentator, would call this parenting style "benign neglect" and for many of us, growing up in baby boom suburbia, this was our experience. It made us independent, confident, physically active, socially competent and good risk assessors.

I next asked the audience to consider if they would give these same freedoms now to their own children. They all said no.

The question is, then, are we killing our kids with kindness? Is our desire to protect our children actually making them more vulnerable?

The big issue pervading the psyche of parents around children's independence in the streets is "stranger danger" and child abductions. The irony is, when you look at the statistics on abductions, almost all are by family members, and the numbers have been going down for a decade. When I tell my audience the odds of a child being murdered by a stranger in Australia is one in four million and their child is at a much greater statistical risk of drowning in the bathtub or being hit by a car at a pedestrian crossing, they answer like Andrew, 39: "I want to and I wish we could. I know the chances are slim but I just couldn't forgive myself."

So is there a middle ground between "benign neglect" and "eternal vigilance"? There is in Japan and Scandinavian countries, where children's independent mobility is high. While parental fear of strangers is still high in these countries, rather than driving children to school or other venues, parents and the community have initiated and participated in activities to increase their safety.

In inner Tokyo, a neighbourhood has parent safety brigades that patrol the streets around schools; shopkeepers who are signed up as members of the neighbourhood watch program; and the local council has provided a mamoruchi, a GPS-connected device that hangs around a child's neck and connects them instantly to a help call centre.

These concrete strategies, while unique to each neighbourhood, are reliant on one critical cultural factor: a commitment to the belief that children being able to walk the streets alone is a critical ingredient in a civil, safe and healthy society.

So while we might criticise the policeman who decides to take it on himself to deliver a child back home, as reported in the *Herald* recently, it is heartening to know someone is watching over us. It was reassuring when recent results from a historical comparison in suburban Sydney showed children's independent mobility in the

past 10 years has remained stable and in some cases increased, with many parents looking to get children out of the house and back to parks and playgrounds. So it is timely to have these debates, but if we want to start claiming back the streets and local parks for children then it's our role as community members to step up to the plate and let parents know we are willing to support them and play our part.

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Schoolboys thrive on risk at recess

Andrew Stevenson

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On a Razor's edge ... students show their scooter skills at Tudor House. *Photo: Brendan Esposito*

FOR generations children have complained that school can be cruel and unusual punishment. Now it seems some headmasters are listening, introducing more breaks during the school day and explicitly recognising the value of running wild.

John Stewart, the headmaster of Tudor House, a private boys' school at Moss Vale, is adding an extra recess to the day with classroom doors locked to push boys to push the limits.

"For boys to be sitting in a classroom, contained behind a desk for hours on end, just skilling and drilling that can help you improve in a test score, is not only archaic, it is cruel. We felt boys needed more time to play and that social and emotional learning is just as important as reading and writing skills."



Rough and tumble ... boys are encouraged to learn through physical play at Tudor House. *Photo: Brendan Esposito*

Children at the kindergarten to year 6 school are encouraged to ride bikes, skateboards, fly kites, build bases and climb trees during recess and lunchtime. Electronic games, computers and mobile phones are banned.

Angus Macdonald, 12, says the risk still "depends if the teachers are there or not", but loves the opportunity for adventure. Some boys get hurt "but only occasionally".

"You're always going to have an accident at school, someone's always going to get hurt," he said.

Mr Stewart fears risk has become a dirty word. "Our risk assessment is all based on the risk of injury and we have to rethink that ... and consider the risk of the loss of a learning or leadership opportunity," he said. "If we continually ban cartwheels and ban soccer we're taking away a whole element of social and emotional growth."

His concerns are echoed by Jim Cooper, the president of the NSW Primary Principals Association, who says a "bubble wrap" syndrome is affecting the development of children.

"I see it as absolutely vital that boys in particular have the chance to blow off a bit of steam at recess, lunchtime and in breaks," Mr Cooper said. His school, Albion Park Public, is one of many to introduce a "munch and crunch" fruit break during the first two-hour block of the day.

But it's not just time out of the classroom but what children can do in it that is important. At some schools young students, who are confined to asphalt areas during breaks, are essentially not allowed to run. Monkey bars can only be used under adult supervision. Ball games are restricted.

"There's got to be a little bit of risk-taking for kids otherwise they learn nothing," said Mr Cooper, who has no doubt principals are responding to community pressure, and the risk of legal action. "The pressure is not coming from schools. Schools are being forced into doing this because of the expectations of helicopter parents."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/schoolboys-thrive-on-risk-at-recess-20111020-1madc.html#ixzz1np67warb>

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/walking-home-from-kindergarten-should-be-childs-play-20120228-1u0uj.html#ixzz1noyCml3I>

<http://rethinkingchildhood.com/>

<http://creativestartlearning.blogspot.com.au/>

“The woods were my Ritalin. Nature calmed me, focused me, and yet excited my senses.”

“An environment-based education movement--at all levels of education--will help students realize that school isn't supposed to be a polite form of incarceration, but a portal to the wider world.”

— Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*

“If getting our kids out into nature is a search for perfection, or is one more chore, then the belief in perfection and the chore defeats the joy. It's a good thing to learn more about nature in order to share this knowledge with children; it's even better if the adult and child learn about nature together. And it's a lot more fun.”

— Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*

"We're part of nature, and ultimately we're predatory animals and we have a role in nature...and if we separate ourselves from that, we're separating ourselves from our history, from the things that tie use together. We don't want to live in a world where there are not recreational fishermen, where we've lost touch with the seasons, the tides, the things that connect us—to ten thousand generations of human beings that were here before there were laptops and ultimately connect us to God.' We shouldn't be worshipping nature as God, he said, but nature is the way that God communicates to us most forcefully. 'God communicates to us through each other and through organized religion, through wise people and the great books, through music and art,' but nowhere 'with such texture and forcefulness in detail and grace and joy, as through creation...And when we destroy large resources, or when we cut off our access by putting railroads along river banks, by polluting so that people can't fish, or by making so many rules that people can't get out on the water, **it's the moral equivalent of tearing the last pages out of the last Bible on Earth**[emphasis mine]...Our children ought to be out there on the water...This is what connects us, this is what connects humanity, this is what we have in common. It's not the Internet, it's the oceans."