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No Fear: growing up in a risk averse society

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Hello, and thank you so much for inviting me here.

Let's leave our own childhoods behind us, and fast forward to the children of the United Kingdom at the start of the 21st century.

We've all heard the stories: the school that banned pupils from playing kiss chase and tag, because of staff concerns that playtimes were becoming too rough. The junior league football referee who banned parents from taking photographs of their children during matches, claiming that his actions were required by child protection procedures. The grandmother who had been building shelters in the woods with her 5-year-old grandson, but was escorted home by a policeman after two separate reports by members of the public concerned about what they saw.

And one of my favourites, courtesy of the Willow Park Housing Trust in Manchester. In 2006 it wrote a letter to Michelle Mann about her son Ben, stating that (I quote) 'Willow Park has received a complaint about anti-social behaviour perpetrated by your son Ben and his friends, who have been playing football and causing a disturbance,' and that 'it takes all complaints seriously.' Clearly it does, because Ben Mann, the cause of the disturbance and the perpetrator of the act, was just three years old.

Childhood in the UK is becoming colonised by risk aversion. Activities and experiences that previous generations of children enjoyed without a second thought have been relabelled as troubling or dangerous, while the adults who still permit them are branded as irresponsible.

At the extreme we seem unable to cope with any adverse outcomes whatsoever, no matter how trivial or improbable. Adult anxieties typically focus on children's vulnerability. But they can also portray children as villains, again recasting normal childhood experiences as something more sinister.

Perhaps you are thinking that the reason for these changes is that society itself has changed. Certainly, the days when most British parents felt able to let their children roam free are long gone. Hold that thought for now, and instead ask yourself another question: why are the memories you just shared so universal? Why do the experiences feel so resonant to us?

The answer is simple: from the earliest age, we have an urge to get to grips with the world on our own terms: to get the hang of being a human being.

But we grown-ups have gotten confused about the very nature of childhood and the adult role in shaping it, so we have a big problem about risk in children's everyday lives. I will argue that we in the UK are falling prey to what I call a zero risk approach to childhood. Our growing anxiety about harm *to* children, and harm *by* children, is taking us 180 degrees away from the kind of childhood that best nurtures children and that best serves the interests of the rest of us.

I will conclude that we need to reintroduce something like the kinds of everyday adventures that epitomised our own childhoods. Experiences that are in danger of vanishing altogether from the lives of today's children.

Crucially, we need to do two things. First, we need to revisit and revise the way we think about children and childhood. Second, and just as important, we need to put much more effort into making our towns and cities safer, more welcoming and more engaging places for children to grow up in.

I'm going to take a closer look at the problem by focusing on three topic areas or case studies of risk aversion: playgrounds, vetting & child protection, and anti-bullying. In each case, I'll argue that we in the UK are falling prey to a zero risk approach to childhood.

But before I examine my three case studies, I want to look at how childhood has been changing in recent years. People say that children today grow up faster than they used to. This view may reflect children's engagement with adult culture, and their adoption of adult attitudes, mannerisms and styles. But as a statement about their everyday freedoms, nothing could be further from the truth. For the past thirty years or more, childhood prior to adolescence has been marked by shrinking freedom of action for children, and growing adult control and oversight.

Academic studies show this picture is true. In 1971, 80 per cent of seven and eight year olds went to school on their own. By 1990 just nine per cent did. Again, in 1971 the average seven-year-old was making trips to their friends or the shops on their own. By 1990 that 'licence' was being withheld until the age of 10. So over a single generation, children had lost up to three years of freedom of mobility.

In school, the time given to breaks has fallen by a quarter in recent years. Some secondary schools in England have scrapped unstructured outdoor free time altogether, along with the playgrounds that allow it.

The overall effect is that the kind of everyday adventures with friends, peers and adults that feature so prominently in the childhood memories of older generations are disappearing from the lives of children today. This drop largely cuts across socio-economic, cultural and gender divides.

As for the causes of this decline, let me say straight off that I *don't* just blame the parents. Most parents are well aware that part of their job is to help their children prepare for life as an autonomous adult, and that this process involves a gradual transfer of power. And if they are not aware of this fact, sooner or later their offspring will bring it to their attention one way or another.

A host of social and cultural changes have made this transfer of power more difficult. Perhaps foremost amongst these is traffic growth. Perhaps foremost amongst these is traffic growth. This has severed communities, fuelled an atomised, individualistic outlook on life and led many children to experience the wider world beyond their front doors not first-hand, but through a windscreen. It has also, of course, converted residential streets from valued play spaces to dangerous, unpleasant car corridors.

Meanwhile fear of crime and strangers, and other less specific fears, have made streets, parks and public spaces feel less safe. These factors, combined with our appetite for digital and consumer cultures, mean that family life is now lived increasingly under cover: inside the home, and in cars, shops and indoor leisure facilities.

Hence as many parents today look out of their front doors, they see a world that is unfamiliar to them, and that appears at best uninterested in their children, at worst hostile to them. These societal changes have radically altered the norms of good parenting for parents of children up to their teenage

years. Children are expected to be under the active care of a responsible adult: either a parent, or someone explicitly or implicitly 'contracted' to take on the role.

Of course, children themselves want to take more control of their lives as they grow up. As parents, we know this, and if we look for it we can see this hunger for autonomy all the time. I saw it myself only a couple of weeks ago. My daughter has just started secondary school – a big step in itself, of course. As I walked into school with her on her third morning, she started telling me how being in secondary school was much better than primary school, because they treated her more like a grown-up. In primary school, she said, they were 'herded from room to room like sheep, even when the classes were right next door.' But now, they are left to get around the school site on their own. What was revealing was that a few days ago, she had been a little worried about getting lost in such a big school, but now it is a source of pride and pleasure for her that she has overcome that challenge.

So to sum up, it is crucial that we realise how much more controlled and constrained children's lives are today. And so, having sketched this context, I want to turn to my first case study of risk aversion: that most emblematic of childhood territories, the playground.

Over the last 30 years or so public playgrounds in the UK have become overrun by the pursuit of risk elimination. All too often tame equipment, wall-to-wall safety surfacing, dog-proof fencing and a sterile, unchallenging ambience are fitted as standard, as I hope my slides demonstrate.

But perhaps you need more convincing that there's a problem. After all, children do have accidents on playgrounds, and occasionally they are serious ones, so isn't it better to be safe than sorry?

Actually we know quite a lot about playground accidents. I will spare you the statistics, but they suggest that playing on playgrounds has for decades been less risky than playing cricket, rugby, soccer or even non-contact games like badminton and tennis. In all these sports, bruises, scrapes, sprains and even broken limbs are seen not as a sign of unacceptable danger but as par for the course. But not on playgrounds, apparently.

I will say something about the statistics on child deaths on playgrounds. These events are incredibly rare. Over the past two decades, there have been perhaps five or six equipment-related deaths. For a comparison, over the same period over 2,500 children have died after being run over.

Even so, some will say it is all very well me making light of the numbers, but how would I feel if it were my child? I want you to think about that question for a moment. While it is understandable as a plea for sympathy, as a way of deciding what is best for children, it is deeply unhelpful. Gaining perspective means moving beyond the emotions that arise in the aftermath of tragedy. The truth is that if we were always required to see the world through the eyes of the most unlucky, then we would always choose zero risk.

Surely the right answer to the question 'how would I feel' is this: we would all want to feel that our collective efforts to keep children reasonably safe were effective, and that our money was being spent wisely. In fact, the amount of money being spent on safety surfacing gives perhaps the best proof that playgrounds have become infected by risk aversion.

In the UK up to 40 per cent of the capital cost of a playground goes on hi-tech rubber safety surfacing. Put it another way: without this expense, we could get almost twice as many playgrounds for our money.

Add up the sums and we have spent perhaps £300 million of public funds in the last decade on saving at the very most, two or three lives. The same amount spent on tried and tested traffic calming measures would probably have saved ten times as many lives.

In fact, the jury is out on how effective IAS is. There is also growing evidence of intended consequences – in other words, side effects – in an increased risk of long bone fractures with hi-tech rubber surfaces compared even to hard surfaces.

Let's be clear what this means. If I am right, in the UK today there are 20 or more families whose children were killed on roads in the last decade, and whose children would still be alive if the money spent on playground surfacing had instead been spent on speed bumps and the like. No-one knows who those families are, of course, not even the families themselves. But surely that does not mean we should ignore what the numbers tell us. After all, their loss is no less tragic, or less deserving of a response, simply because it is less dramatic, less visible or less rare.

Why have playgrounds become so risk averse? To answer this, I want to revive another childhood memory, of the BBC TV programme *That's Life*. I'm sure you remember it: a generous helping of stories of everyday life – skateboarding ducks, talking Yorkshire terriers, erotically shaped root vegetables, that kind of thing. But let's not forget: for much of its 21-year run, the programme was a national institution. Around 20 years ago it ran a campaign to force playground providers to install safety surfacing. In one episode the programme sets out to 'prove' just how well safety surfacing works through the device of dropping china plates onto first, the studio floor and second, some rubber matting - with predictable results.

I cannot think of a better image to depict our confusion about childhood. The clear message from the programme is that children are irredeemably vulnerable, and that our role as adults is to protect them at all costs. As I argue in my book *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*, this vision of children as in some absolute sense incompetent lies at the heart of all zero-risk approaches.

The programme also gives us a lesson from history. It shows that the origins of our pursuit of the zero risk childhood have nothing to do with either of those two alleged curses of modern life, the compensation culture or the nanny state – though it is true that these can make things worse. The simple fact is that neither of these was in existence at the time the programme was broadcast back in 1989.

It is not too hard to make the case that playgrounds have suffered from the disease of excessive risk aversion. My second case study looks at a more difficult and emotive issue: child protection.

Now, thanks to the Daily Mail, we all know rather more about the Government's plans for vetting and barring than a couple of weeks ago. The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 in effect places 11 million adults – one third of the adult working population - under suspicion of being abusers, including 2 million volunteers and workers in sport and leisure activities, and hundreds of thousands of school governors.

I reckon the additional costs of widening the net of the new safeguarding regime will be around £200 million over the first 5 years. Figures like these are hard to get your head around, so it is worth pausing a moment to reflect on what it means. Here is one comparison: the annual amount would pay for at least 500 extra probation officers. That's around 5 more officers in every local authority area in England and Wales available to monitor and supervise offenders.

The Government admits that it has not got any idea how many cases of child abuse this new Act will prevent. In fact, I doubt that any of this has much to do with protecting children. It has more to do with people wanting to cover their backs: to be able to say, if anything ever does go wrong, 'it's not our fault – we did all the checks.'

I hope it goes without saying that I take seriously the threat posed by people who, though small in number, are dangerous and devious. I accept that we need to take action to prevent such people from gaining access to children. And I accept that this is not easy. My point – and I think, the point made by those many, many people who responded in the wake of the Daily Mail story, is that we also have to accept that we cannot eliminate the risk: indeed if we overreact, the side-effects will be worse than the disease.

The greatest danger in all this is that we undermine the casual friendly social contact between the generations that in reality builds neighbourliness and makes communities safe and welcoming for children. For a foretaste of where this ultimately leads to, I am going to share another story, about a girl called Abigail Rae. She was a child aged just two years old who in 2002 drowned after wandering unnoticed from her nursery. It was a terrible event, but what made it even worse was that a passing motorist saw her out on the streets, yet did nothing. Why not? Because he was afraid he would be accused of abducting her.

My third and final case study is anti-bullying. My interest in bullying was triggered by an incident about three years ago involving my daughter. In itself, the event was trivial. We were in a local park with a friend of hers when she came over to me and said, 'dad, those boys were bullying us.' She pointed to three boys, each younger than her, none of whom she had ever met before. 'What were they doing?' I asked. She explained that the boys had started teasing her and her friend during a treasure hunt. I calmly suggested that they try to sort it out for themselves, and they were soon off playing again. But what stayed with me was my daughter's choice of the word 'bullying' to describe the boys' actions.

Bullying is a serious problem, and it needs to be tackled effectively. This means distinguishing between bullying - which is sustained and involves a power imbalance - and more minor fallings-out amongst children. The problem is that this distinction is becoming blurred. Just like my daughter, some parents and children are misdiagnosing bullying. Teachers and child psychologists tell me that this misdiagnosis is not uncommon. Some experts and researchers are also stretching the definition of bullying. For instance, one piece of peer-reviewed research chose to define bullying as 'any form of victimisation or harassment perpetrated by another child or young person.'

Make no mistake, definitions matter. Because if teachers feel under pressure to respond to what others may call bullying, they may step in too soon, stopping children from learning how to handle social situations for themselves. The rest of children's lives are so controlled that social interactions in school are especially important, and teachers need to take a measured approach. But children still need someone they can turn to when they need help.

Here is a good example of the mess and confusion that arises when a school adopts the logic and the language of the zero risk childhood. This school's anti-bullying policy includes, as you can see, strong condemnation of many forms of behaviour that, while not exactly pleasant, hardly constitutes bullying. In fact, the school wants to support its students in resolving arguments and disputes by themselves,

and is getting fed up with the extent to which parents and students are drawing teaching staff into minor squabbles. Yet this outcome is all but inevitable, given the sentiments in its policy.

I hope you can see in each of my three case studies how the pursuit of the zero risk childhood has led us to close down childhood experience. How a preoccupation with eliminating risk has had the effect of drastically restricting the opportunities for children to learn from their self-directed experiences, and to learn from their mistakes and the mistakes of other children. This when, as we saw, the domain of childhood is shrinking dramatically.

With more time, I could have looked at other case studies where the same zero risk approach is unfolding, including outdoor education, touching and physical contact, photography of children, the virtual world, school trips – the list is long.

So to final part of my talk, and the crucial question. How do we resist the false logic of the zero risk childhood and offer children a better diet of experience: one with more opportunities to nurture their sense of responsibility and self-reliance, from the earliest possible age?

I believe that we must do two things. First playgrounds, schools, nurseries, childcare, out of school hours and other services for children need to revisit their value systems, and move from what might be called a philosophy of protection to a philosophy of resilience. Second, we must all take seriously the need to create more child-friendly communities.

Let me give you an example of what I mean when I talk about the shift from a philosophy of protection to a philosophy of resilience. It concerns the topic of my first case study. In fact, I didn't tell the whole story of playground safety, and it is a story that looks like it might have a happier ending. Those of us concerned with playgrounds realised some years ago that a preoccupation with safety at all costs was creating big problems.

So the Play Safety Forum – the sector's safety experts – went back to first principles and had a long hard look at what playgrounds were for in the first place. We argued that a more balanced approach to risk was urgently needed. What's more, we got support from a virtual roll call of safety agencies, including the government's own Health & Safety Executive. This work has been the catalyst for a sea change in professional attitudes about play safety.

The climate around play safety is, I believe, continuing to improve. The Government has just published a guide to managing risk in play provision, which I co-wrote. And it's ripping up all the old rules. Instead of conducting risk assessments, providers will be encouraged to carry out risk-benefit assessments. This simple yet far-reaching shift means that for the first time, providers will be able to take into account the **benefits** of giving children the chance to experience a given risk, and to include these views in their decisions. In case you think this is asking people to break the law, or put themselves out on a limb, let me reassure you, as one of the authors: the guide has also been endorsed by the Health & Safety Executive.

In the wake of this work, some of the latest playgrounds are genuinely exciting, challenging places to play. Here are some slides of some of recent public play spaces in the UK. We have even seen the relaxation of European playground safety standards: a move almost unheard of in health and safety circles.

Make no mistake, adopting a philosophy of resilience means taking a stand against what is sometimes called the 'health & safety culture'. The fact is that there is a lot of myth-making around the so-called rules, especially when it comes to children. What's needed is a robust, critical attitude.

For instance, how many of you here have worked in settings where egg boxes and toilet rolls are banned, because of the alleged risk of bacteriological contamination? Here's a news flash: it's a myth. In fact, it was the Health & Safety Executive's Myth of the Month for August 2007.

The take-home point is this: unless you recognise children's competences and their ability to learn and recover from what everyday life throws at them, you will be at the mercy of the logic of zero risk, and children will be the losers.

My second, and more fundamental call is for collective action to create genuinely child-friendly communities. What do I mean by a child-friendly community? In essence, one that offers children the opportunity to explore, learn, grow and adapt through their own experiences in their neighbourhoods, beyond home and school.

My last slides of playgrounds show one aspect of what child-friendly communities might look like. The following slides give a few images to illustrate some other elements of this idea. It is about easy access to welcoming, accessible parks, squares and public spaces. In policing and overseeing behaviour in public, it is about a presence that is sympathetic to children. Perhaps most important, it is about prioritising walking, cycling and public transport over the car, and about using city-wide planning to create compact, mixed-use settlements that reduce car dependence.

My time is almost up. And I do not like to end on a downbeat note, but there is a big 'but' to all this. I mentioned during my warm-up that not everyone in the UK gave the same answers to my childhood memory questions as you.

This is not scientific, but I reckon that the odd ones out are people under the age of about 25. While as a group they are equally positive about being out of doors, a fair few of this age group do *not* say their favourite place to play was out of sight of adults. I find this profoundly disturbing.

When I was researching my book, I interviewed some parents and professionals, and asked them about their childhoods, just as I asked you right at the beginning of this talk. Most told me how when they were young, their parents would often simply make their children a packed lunch and usher them out of the door on the weekend or during the holidays, the only words of warning being 'don't come home before tea time.' These days, such a parenting style would be seen as bordering on neglectful. But of course it wasn't, and it isn't. These parents meant well by their children. And let's not forget – the technique had benefits for them too, no doubt grateful the kids were out of their hair for a while.

This is why I am quite genuine when I leave you with this final thought: perhaps, in rethinking our attitudes to childhood, the approach we grown-ups have to revive is that shown by previous generations of parents: the lost art of benign neglect.