Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

Common Error No. 66 [1]

Written by **Dr Madsen Pirie** [2] | Thursday 20 March 2008

66. "Schools should provide our children a risk-free environment."

There is no such thing as a risk-free environment. There are degrees of risk and there are ways of managing risk. Growing up is not a risk-free zone. Children learn by making mistakes. They hurt themselves and each other at play. Each day has its coterie of bumps and bruises and grazes. On more serious occasions bones are broken.

Schools cannot be risk-free. They have hard surfaces and corners, desks and chairs. They feature sports and games. Children will injure themselves. There is a balance to be struck between recklessly exposing children to potential dangers and maintaining such tight controls that they have no independence or learning experience. Schools which ban marbles because people might slip on them or swallow them, or which ban conkers because a child might get struck by one, are in effect banning part of childhood.

The attempt to be risk-free leads schools to abandon foreign visits such as ski trips, and adventure holidays such as canoeing or camping. Even educational visits can be banned because of the risk of traffic accidents en route. None of this does the children any favours. It denies them learning experiences, and it even denies them the carefree fun and excitement that childhood should involve.

Part of the problem is the litigation culture which assumes that everything that happens is somebody's fault, and that someone has to pay every time any child is injured. Part of it is the health and safety bureaucracy seeking to cover itself. Anything that happens will be laid at its door, so its officials seek to anticipate all eventualities and allow nothing that could come back at them. They try to make schools places where no-one has cause to sue, or to blame health and safety officers for failing to anticipate accidents. In doing so they make schools unfit for children. Schools, like childhood itself, cannot be risk free.

blog comments powered by Disqus [4]

Source URL: http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/education/common-error-no-66

Links:
[1] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/education/common-error-no-66
[2] http://www.adamsmith.org/taxonomy/term/5779
[3] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
[4] http://disqus.com