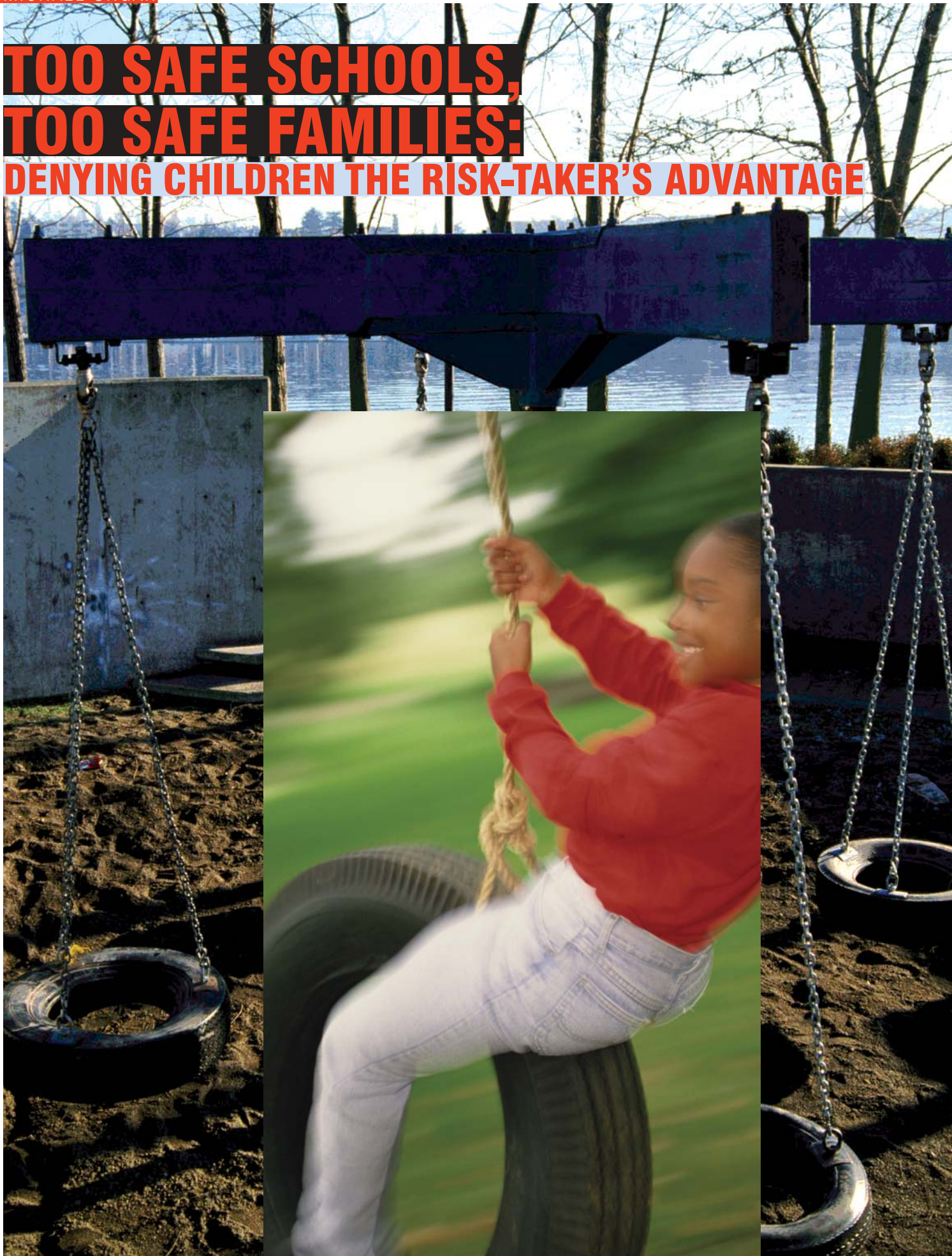


MICHAEL UNGAR

# TOO SAFE SCHOOLS, TOO SAFE FAMILIES: DENYING CHILDREN THE RISK-TAKER'S ADVANTAGE



Since Pam's divorce, she has been worried that she puts too much responsibility on her 14-year-old son, Adrian. At the end of his school day, he is expected to meet his younger sister, Britney, at the door to her elementary school a block from his junior high. Then the two catch a public bus home. They let themselves in and prepare a snack, usually potato chips and fruit drinks. They're supposed to do their homework. Or go out to play. Adrian doesn't play much. Nor do his homework. Instead, he prefers videogames on the new system his father gave him for Christmas. By the time Pam gets home at 5:30, and makes supper, Adrian will have logged a good couple of hours of virtual play. His sister will be at a neighbour's most likely seeking the attention of the babysitter who is there minding Britney's friend after school.

Are these children at risk? To many educators, social workers, and parents, the answer is a resounding "Yes." Fourteen-year-olds shouldn't have to look after their younger sisters. Children should have someone looking after them. Adrian does too much gaming. Both he and his sister have a poor diet. Neither is supervised. Their homework isn't getting done. Our collective wisdom is that these kids are bound to turn into couch potatoes, dropouts or delinquents. Or all three.

### THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF RISK AND RESPONSIBILITY GIVES CHILDREN THE RISK-TAKER'S ADVANTAGE.

#### THE REAL RISKS FACING CHILDREN

Adrian and Britney are at risk, but some of the risks we perceive are not risks at all. Increasingly, in my work as a family therapist and researcher with children and families in educational and community settings, I am encountering children who are anxious, depressed, lacking in empathy, self-esteem and motivation, and naïve in their expectations about their physical and mental abilities. They haven't been properly challenged. They lack some of the *advantages* Adrian and Britney have. These other kids miss exposure to sufficient amounts of risk and responsibility to help them jump what New Zealand human development researcher Terri Moffitt calls, "the maturity gap."<sup>1</sup>

The *right amount* of risk and responsibility gives children the risk-taker's advantage. In *Too Safe for Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*, I explore how the child who has been given increasingly more challenging opportunities to take risks, and assume responsibilities at home and at school, has some decided advantages over more protected peers. The *less protected* child learns:

- to trust his own judgement
- to respect his talents
- to know his limits
- to understand the consequences of his actions
- how to reach out for help
- to assert his independence
- how to keep himself healthy, physically and mentally.

Despite our fears of 'hurried children' growing up fast, Adrian's responsibility for his sister is something many children like Adrian say they take pride in.<sup>2</sup> Our reluctance to let our children take risks and assume responsibilities may do them more harm than good.

Once we've institutionalized no-touch policies, exercised zero tolerance for snowball fights, climbing trees, or run-

**EN BREF** La bonne dose de risque et de responsabilité procure aux enfants « l'avantage du preneur de risques ». Malgré les masses de preuves indiquant que nos enfants ne sont ni plus dangereux pour eux-mêmes ou pour les autres, ni plus déchaînés qu'auparavant, nous avons le sentiment que leur génération est à risque. Limiter l'exposition au risque et à la responsabilité, c'est aussi restreindre l'accès aux possibilités de croissance. Sans défis, sans pressions, la croissance psychosociale est interrompue. Les enfants compenseraient même la sécurité accrue que nous leur procurons en prenant des risques plus grands que s'ils étaient moins protégés. Lorsque les enfants manifestent des comportements que nous jugeons risqués, nous devons nous demander ce que nous faisons quand nous avons leur âge, ce qu'ils désirent accomplir par leur comportement risqué et comment ils peuvent avoir d'autres comportements qui leur procurent risque et responsabilité, sans les mettre en danger.

ning in the halls, cocooned our children in a middle-class world of safe toys, netnannies, cell phones, and a cult of self-esteem, will we provide our children with enough risk and responsibility to help them develop the skills we developed at their age? Schools can help provide children with opportunities to show their strengths. Educators are uniquely positioned to offer children like Adrian and Britney the recognition they need to feel competent. But we are going to need to make our schools places where risk-taking and responsibility are part of children's lives.

#### THE RISK-TAKER'S ADVANTAGE

Both children are much more street smart than many of their peers who are shuttled in minivans that line the school parking lot morning and afternoon. Taking public transportation, walking on city streets, understanding their responsibilities to each other, those aspects of their lives are likely to predict positive development.

Adrian doesn't mind the responsibility or challenge he faces. He says he'd like more opportunities to show how adult he is. At school he gets only an hour's shop class a week and seldom any chance to operate the machinery. He's not old enough yet for chemistry labs or reading books with four-letter words. His life at school is cloistered just at the point in his development when he wants to take risks and assume more responsibility. Maybe that's why he's not willing to do his homework. It doesn't seem that meaningful to him.

Environments that are too safe deny children opportunities to experience incremental amounts of risk required for good psychosocial development. Adrian worries me less than children who are sheltered in their homes and never allowed to cross a street alone, walk to school or ride their bikes on busy roads. I'm worried about children who lack enough daily exercise to prevent obesity. I'm worried about children who have to cheat on exams



## IF CLIMBING TREES, WEARING TRENDY CLOTHING, AND SNOWBALL

## FIGHTS WERE WAYS WE SHOWED MATURITY AND LEARNED ABOUT

## LIMITS AND COMMON SENSE... WHAT ARE WE GOING TO OFFER TO OUR

## KIDS TO HELP THEM EXPERIENCE THESE SAME LIFE LESSONS?

to feel the thrill of adventure.

I'm worried about these children because they have only two choices. They can become anxious children who hold themselves back, or they can find their own version of risk and responsibility, which frequently means delinquency and drug use.



### WHERE THE DANGER LIES

Many parents and educators argue that today the world is a more dangerous place than when we were growing up. A barrage of media reports about a generation at risk has created the perception by parents of the need for overprotection. This, despite evidence that suggests a young person growing up in a western middle-class family is safer today than at any time in modern history. Criminologists Meda Chesney-Lind and Joanne Belknap tell us that our children are neither more dangerous to themselves and others, nor more out-of-control than in the past.<sup>3</sup> If we were to take a city like San Francisco, and compare two 17-year-old girls, one from the baby boom generation of the 1960s and 1970s, another, her daughter growing up today, we would find that the girl growing up now is much safer, much better behaved, and much more responsible than her mother. The daughter is 50% less likely to be murdered, 60% less likely to be in an accident causing her death, 75% less likely to commit suicide, 55% less likely to become a mother herself, 60% less likely to commit murder and 40% less likely to be arrested for property crimes. The statistics for Canadian cities are as good or better.

And yet, our perception is of a generation at risk. US data gathered by *Child Trends* shows instead that the percentage of high school students who have had sexual intercourse in the past three months (are sexually active) has fluctuated only slightly since 1991, ranging from 33 percent to 38 percent, with 34 percent of high school students reporting being sexually active in 2005. Among non-Hispanic Black students, however, the percentage of sexually active students *decreased* from 59 percent in 1991 to a low of 46 percent in 2001. These changes have not been the result of changing preferences for other high-risk sexual activities. Among teens ages 15 to 19 who have not had sexual intercourse, only one in four report having ever engaged in oral sex with an opposite sex partner (24 percent of males and 22 percent of females in 2002), based on analyses of the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Furthermore, condom use at most recent sexual intercourse among sexually active high school students increased from 46 percent in 1991 to 63 percent in 2005.

Violence in our communities is also decreasing despite changing charge patterns by police, which have tended to criminalize status offences of youth (like drinking under age) and aspects of youth behaviour like bullying and school yard fighting that went unnoticed by police a generation ago. The most common crimes committed by young



people remain common assault causing no injury and theft under \$5,000. Population wide, rates of homicide are also down from three per 100,000 in 1973, to two per 100,000 in 2005. Most of the homicides involving young people are gang-related which means few kids in stable communities will ever be at risk. Firearm related deaths are half of what they were in 1973. Rates of sexual assault are also down, reportedly 25% lower than a decade ago.

Likewise, there is little evidence that drug and alcohol use among youth as a population has increased, and may have actually decreased over the past 30 years. While the 2004 National Canadian Addiction Survey reported that 91% of young people ages 18 to 19 used alcohol at least once in the past year and that 62% of 15 to 17-year-olds did the same, these numbers do not indicate any increases over time. Cannabis use of any amount in the past year was 47% for 18-19 year olds and 29% for 15-17 year olds.<sup>4</sup> Are those numbers really all that shocking considering how we adults behaved?

A disturbing irony, however, regarding risk exposure is that statistically, children are most at risk when they are with their families or at their place of residence. Sexual assaults are most commonly perpetrated by individuals known to a child and while the child is at home. Most child abductions are carried out by parents themselves and result from custody disputes. It is the same for internet solicitations by sexual predators. A survey of youth internet use showed that 79% of such solicitations occur while children are using their home computers.<sup>5</sup> Gun related deaths are also more likely when a child is at home. Sadly, the safest place for our children seems to be beyond their front doors, in school or on the street.

### SAFE BUT SORRY

In a recent *Macleans* article, Cynthia Reynolds wondered if our children are becoming ninnies.<sup>6</sup> Even in other western countries, like Germany, children are more likely to be given a knife to use, operate boats, and know how to make a fire. In England the popularity of Conn and Hal Igguldens' *The Dangerous Book for Boys* shows that many parents and educators are beginning to rethink their overprotective ways. The Igguldens show kids how to use a Swiss Army knife, hunt and cook a rabbit, and build tree houses. The book is about how to find courage and self-confidence through doing rather than through the sanitized exercises of classroom encounters.

The problem with families and schools limiting exposure to risk and responsibility is that it prevents access to growth opportunities. The next time a school committee considers limiting school trips, cutting down trees on the playground to prevent climbing, or denying children the freedom to play tag at recess (all recently reported decisions by educational institutions across North America), consider doing the following:

- **Step One:** Ask yourselves as adults what you were doing when you were the same age as the children you are responsible for. What did you learn from taking some measured risks and having responsibilities? Many educators and parents will argue, "But I put myself in real danger!" I'm not for putting children in danger, but I am for remembering that it is through risk and responsibility that we learn things about ourselves. If our children are

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kept safe, then how will they learn the same life lessons we learned? Do we want a child who has never crossed a busy street or driven her bicycle to school driving the family car?

- **Step Two:** Think about your students. What are they trying to achieve through their reckless and irresponsible behaviours? Alternatively, why are they so anxious? Why do they show so little common sense? It is important for us as adults to look at children and the decisions they make as functional adaptations to their environments. The withdrawn child has accepted our definition of the world as dangerous. The delinquent has gone out to find her own rites of passage to adulthood.
- **Step Three:** Combine what we've learned from Steps One and Two. *Offer children substitutes that meet their needs for risk and responsibility but keep their exposure to danger within manageable limits.* If climbing trees, wearing trendy clothing, and snowball fights were ways we showed maturity and learned about limits and common sense, then we need to ask ourselves what are we going to offer to our kids to help them experience these same life lessons. Our role is to offer substitutes that give them risk and responsibility without endangering them.

## **LIKE AN UNTAXED IMMUNE SYSTEM, HOWEVER, OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL GROWTH STALLS WHEN WE FAIL TO EXPERIENCE CHALLENGE AND STRESS.**

This may mean dances where the kids push the limits of good taste (didn't we, in our own time, do the same?).

This may mean adventure trips where kids scale mountains, ride zip lines and run the chance of getting hurt.

This may mean playgrounds where behaviour is monitored, but risk-taking is encouraged.

This may mean schools where children are given lots of responsibilities, as hall monitors, crossing guards, and events coordinators.

### **THE NEED FOR SPEED**

Making our worlds safer and safer, we ignore the damage we are doing. It's easy to see the destructiveness of the path we are on when we look inter-nationally. In Tokyo, there are playgrounds for children with anxious parents. Indoor air-conditioning, sterilized sand, security cameras and plasticized edges combine to remove all danger. Like an untaxed immune system, however, our psychosocial growth stalls when we fail to experience challenge and stress. Children compensate for the added security we provide. Studies of risk-taking among children show that all that gear we wrap them in makes them take larger

risks than they would if they weren't so protected. Wearing a helmet actually makes kids feel like they can do more dangerous stunts. A bike helmet and elbow guards are a formula for excessive speed and unstable turns.

While I'm not advocating taking the gear off, it's important to realize that children want the same kinds of experiences we had growing up. Olympic medalist and advocate for children's play, Silken Laumann, reminds us in her book *Right to Play* that children still need space to break with structure. They need risk and responsibility.

Adrian and Brittany could use more time with their parents, for sure. They would benefit from a healthier diet. They should get all their homework done on time. But to overlook the advantages they experience over more cloistered kids is to forget what many of us adults experienced growing up: opportunities to hear "You belong," "You're trustworthy," "You're capable," and "You're responsible." Those are four powerful messages that children want to hear when they seek adventure of one sort or another. If Adrian and Brittany get into trouble, it's not for lack of manageable amounts of risk and responsibility. It will be because they haven't heard those messages from parents and educators. |

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### Notes

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