

The No Rules Playground

New Zealand principal BRUCE McLACHLAN provides the rationale behind a controversial approach to children's play that is being trialled at his Auckland school.

IN 2011, my school was approached by Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and asked to take part in a study being undertaken jointly by the University of Otago and AUT. The study was funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand and its aim was to improve school playgrounds, to enhance physical activity and to reduce the prevalence of obesity and bullying among New Zealand school children.

As well as being interested in potentially reducing obesity and bullying in the school, intervention schools received \$15,000 to put towards developing and improving their playgrounds. How could I possibly refuse?

Over the next few months, various meetings and communications occurred in relation to the study. Researchers came to the school several times to interview and measure our students and we used the \$15,000 to purchase some play equipment.

I also got to thinking more about play.

A time of questioning

The more I researched, considered and discussed play, the more certain ideas resonated with me. I found myself questioning why there were so many restrictions on children's play in school playgrounds and I started making changes to the way we did things at Swanson School.

One key change was to try to reduce the amount of input adults have into children's play. To the uninitiated, play is sometimes the term given to kids 'mucking around', and sometimes to organised sports such as rugby, soccer or netball. The *Welsh Government Play Policy (2002)*, however, defines play as '*children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward...*'. I therefore asked the question: as teachers in the 21st century, are we just letting kids play or are we, in fact, directing that play? Instead of 'letting' kids play at

recess, teachers seem to feel it is their responsibility, not only to provide equipment with which children can 'play', but also to monitor them closely while they are 'playing'.

Teachers, like parents, are naturally well-meaning. By and large, they like children and they want them to learn. They also don't want children to hurt themselves or, more accurately (and especially in the case of teachers), they don't want kids to get hurt 'on their watch'. Increasingly, this has meant supervising children's every waking nanosecond and wrapping them up in cotton wool so that nothing can possibly harm them!

Child-based control

I then set out to increase the extent to which children could control the intent and content of their play. What children do in their own time, away from the control of adults, is what they have always done: play. Today, we might more accurately call it 'free play', to differentiate it from what it has become today: a much more 'supervised' activity. On occasion, a parent or teacher might even 'reward' a child with an opportunity to play, or provide or allow a particular play experience. This unconsciously reinforces in adults the notion that they have an important role in the play experience. They don't.

Over the years the perception of good parenting has gradually changed from hands-off to hands-on. 'Good' parents drive their kids to dance lessons and rugby practice while 'bad' parents tell their children to go outside and play! Unstructured or 'free' play may not be so much a lost activity, but it certainly is a significantly diminished one.

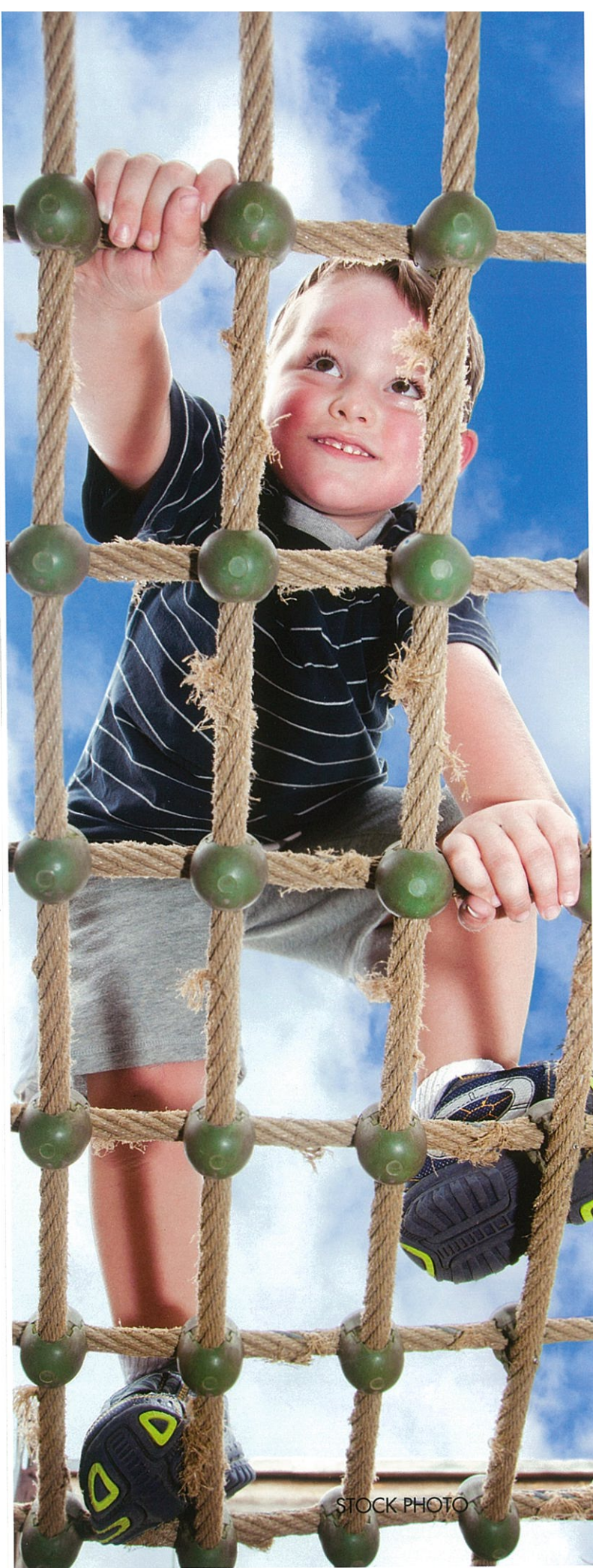
How helicopter parenting and political correctness came to prevail is a question for researchers to answer. However, the effect of it has been that the play experience has been significantly modified for many children. Another reason is generational. Because we have been 'bubble-wrapping' children for a long time, some young parents were themselves cossetted when young, and that is simply all they know.

With the increasing sanitisation of the play experience by well-meaning adults, the opportunities for children to learn through play have been reduced. Play is how a child learns about risk, problem-solving, consequences and getting along with others. These learning experiences are arguably just as important as the traditional learning experiences that schools provide children.

continued on page 8 . . .

STOCK PHOTO





Free play at recess

Today, what we do at Swanson School is simply encourage free play to happen at recess. We do this by minimising the influence of adults in the play experience, and by challenging other long-held beliefs. At recess, children at Swanson can be seen building huts, riding the many wheeled contraptions that exist all over the school, climbing trees, play fighting, sliding down mudslides, using stair rails as monkey bars, or just lying in the long grass and talking. The results have been very encouraging and we have received a great deal of international interest in what we do.

We had been freeing up the playground rules for a couple of years, and were starting to take things for granted, when we were visited by a journalist accompanied by a videographer. How circumstances can affect children's play was perfectly illustrated as I accompanied the guy with the camera out into the playground. On one occasion, the videographer pointed the camera at a four metre high netting fence beside a concrete ball court, where a child was climbing skilfully to the top. In a flash, a dozen other kids leaped onto the fence and started climbing rapidly to the top. This had the potential for disaster, as many of those kids had not slowly developed their climbing skills over time. On the contrary, they were simply showing off to the camera, and some risked falling off and hurting themselves. A few moments later as we noticed another great shot (some kids a long way up a very large tree), I insisted that the videographer use a zoom lens, so as not to risk kids showing off and potentially hurting themselves.

On a funny note, while the journalist's attention was focused on kids playing naturally, I became aware of a child lying on the ground, supposedly hurt, with a growing circle of onlookers gathering. I quietly sidled over to him, and quickly ascertained that he had been flattened by a truck tyre rolled down the adjacent slope and was actually just being dramatic. Through clenched teeth, I hissed, *'Get up. You are fine!'* His only response was to writhe in pretended agony, screaming, *'My leg, my leg!'* Just as I was thinking, *'How the hell am I going to play this one down?'*, one of the teachers on playground duty came over and perceptively took charge, allowing me to attend to the visitors who had the potential to make the situation look very much worse than it was!

As expected, the media has simplified and summarised our story and we have become the 'no rules school' – a somewhat unfortunate label that conjures up pictures of anti-social chaos. In fact, in a recent internal review of our free play philosophy, some teachers expressed concern about the 'no rules' description. Despite this concern, however, most did not want to go back.

So, what were the rules we were getting rid of? Well, when I once asked the staff to list all the rules we had in the playground at a staff meeting, we found there actually

weren't any. Well, not written ones, anyway. There were beliefs. There were understandings. But there weren't any rules. Over the years – for reasons no one could remember – children had been stopped from climbing trees, riding scooters or bikes, sliding down mudslides, or building huts out of junk. In the process of wrapping them up in cotton wool in order to stop them getting hurt, we were preventing them from being the playful, creative creatures they are.

As well as being busy and engaged, Swanson kids are active – much more so than they used to be. Nowadays, we assume that children, given the chance, will sit down in front of a screen. Screens aren't banned at Swanson and yet that does not seem to be what they choose. It is interesting to note that we, as adults, make all sorts of assumptions about children. We assume, for example, that if left unsupervised, they will do something that will hurt them or do something that is not allowed. Of course, left to their own devices, they will often hurt themselves or do stuff they assume they are not supposed to do. However, kids do not set out to hurt themselves unless they are risking it as part of a contact game. Nor do they tend to indulge in anti-social activity. Kids basically know right from wrong, and the wrong they usually choose is seldom on the serious side of wrong-doing. Given the choice of breaking a window of the neighbour's house or an abandoned building, most kids will choose the abandoned building. Sure – not totally OK, but less anti-social.

Setting the limits

I was in my office during recess one day when one of my teachers appeared. She showed me a video she had taken on her phone of kids knocking down the deck of the abandoned classroom block awaiting demolition. She wasn't sure whether or not it was OK and had come to check it out. To be honest, I wasn't sure either. After a moment's thought, though, I said to let it happen. I reasoned that the building was due to be demolished, the kids were having fun wrecking something that didn't matter, and the video clearly showed that there was a lot of cooperating and problem-solving going on.

The demolition was not well received by some teachers, but when I analysed why, it was because they assumed that, if we condoned it, the kids would go on to demolish other buildings that were not due for knocking down. Because our default position as adults has become to assume that kids will do anti-social things and hurt themselves, many of us assumed the worst. The demolition went on for the rest of that day. If you haven't had the pleasure of wrecking something – you've honestly missed out! It is great fun! After the fact, I was very pleased to have been able to allow our children to have an experience they would not normally have had these days.

How many of us these days live in houses with tiny back yards, on busy streets, with no access to the bush or open

spaces? In New Zealand, schools tend to have spacious grounds, even in urban centres. Why not give kids the opportunity to let off steam and, in the process, learn all sorts of things?

In a staff meeting one day, I asked all teachers who carried a pocket knife to hold it up. Probably about a quarter of the teachers produced an array of knives. I then asked them to consider why we don't give pocket knives to kids any more as presents. Why was it acceptable for kids to carry a pocket knife in the sixties but not in the 21st century? What were we assuming they would do with them? Hurt themselves or others? Break the law? A number of teachers got the point of the discussion but one asked if that meant I was condoning children bringing knives to school. In reply, I told them that I had been the principal who had suspended a child for having a knife at school – just as I had been the principal who had told children to get off their bikes and walk them in the school grounds. I was now questioning why I had done those things, and I wanted them to question why they were assuming the worst of children.

Over the summer break I had the opportunity of putting one of my theories into practice. My nine-year-old grandson has always been fascinated by my Swiss army knife, which I carry with me always, so I decided to let him borrow it. My wife and daughter were reluctant to allow him to play with it but I insisted, pointing out that children do not purposefully hurt themselves. On a number of occasions, I had to avert my eyes as he opened and closed the blades and various tools, fearing he would slice open a thumb or finger. I had to remind my wife and daughter to avert their eyes, as well. In fact, children do what adults do when learning a new skill. They practice and take care – especially when doing something risky. Sure enough, after many hours of playing with the pocket knife, there were no injuries. We need to stop removing the possibility that children will get hurt. Getting hurt is part of growing up.

I love my mum but I always said that she was overprotective. Her comeback was, 'Well, at least you are still alive!' Back in the sixties, however, when I was playing alone or with friends, we were more often than not out of the sight and supervision of adults – even those of us with overprotective mums! In those days, when we climbed trees or played with pocket knives, broken glass or fire, we made very sure that we didn't hurt ourselves to the extent that we needed adult assistance. If we did, we soon found out that, with first aid, usually came a telling off! Kids at Swanson School don't report as many injuries as they used to and this is not because they get told off when they hurt themselves! I have been asked many times about this reduction in reported injuries, and I think one reason for it is that because they are doing something they want to do, and they don't want to interrupt their play to get assistance. Another reason could be that they are becoming more resilient and/or skilled.

Interview with scratched child

I was showing a film crew around the playground one day when the camera happened to capture a child sliding down a metal pole wedged between two branches and leaning on the ground. It immediately became obvious that, in the process of sliding down, the boy had scratched his arm. The female reporter noticed the blood and asked if she could 'interview' the child. What followed was one of those moments that you can't, for the life of you, capture if you set out to do so. When the reporter drew his attention to the wound, the boy merely shrugged his shoulders and said it was no big deal. Blood is no longer the big deal it used to be at Swanson School. There was a time when that child would have sought out a teacher, or others would have sought a teacher on his or her behalf. The child would have been bandaged to within an inch of its life. Parents would have been notified, not to mention lawyers and insurers. Justifications would have been prepared, sometimes alongside apologies, and the offending pole would have been disposed of; children warned off such behaviour and the principal would find himself hounded by the local press!

Less boredom in the playground

Another interesting phenomenon we have noticed is fewer bored kids in our playground, and this seems to have resulted in less conflict and less bullying. It makes me wonder if children sometimes bully because they're bored. Bullying is a human condition – not one that is peculiar to children. We know bullying occurs in adult environments, as well. When children play with other children away from the supervision of adults, a pecking order is established. Let's not assume that that is just where bullies ply their trade – it's also where leaders come to the fore.

At Swanson, children help others. They also boss each other around, disagree about stuff and occasionally come to blows. That's how they learn to communicate, to take turns and to win and lose and, dare I say it, to throw a punch and to take one; or to lose your temper and regain it – with or without help. When we sanitise the play experience for little children by constant supervision, we risk the result being big boys expressing surprise when a punch to the head results in serious consequences. Little children who are allowed to experience a physical fight seldom get badly hurt. In fact, they can learn valuable lessons about cause and effect long before a punch can have serious consequences. Contrary to the beliefs of some, taking adults out of the play equation at Swanson has not resulted in us hosting a sequel to *Lord of the Flies*. Helicopter parenting has resulted in adults preventing all harm from coming to children; however a little hurt is a good thing.

One of our teachers observed the other day that, in our playground, it was also more acceptable for older, less socially adept kids, to play with the younger kids, because

there is no separation of big kids and little kids in the playground. These kids are not made to feel out of place. The 'Nigel No Mates' also mostly seem to find something to do – even if it is to obsess over hut building or scooting. How many times are parents and teachers concerned because some kids don't seem to have friends? We can certainly try to help kids learn how to attract friends, rather than drive them away. But how many friends do you have? Sure, as adults, we interact with a lot of people, but real friends tend to be numbered in single digits. This is also the case with children.

As a direct result of the play initiative, teachers report an improvement in student engagement in learning, a marked reduction in conflict and bullying incidents in the playground, and we now find the need to have fewer teachers on duty in the playground and less need for a time-out space. The process of change has been difficult, particularly for some teachers, but gradually the majority have come around to recognising the benefits. For many years now, schools have been preoccupied with academic achievement and classroom dynamics. Maybe it's time to recognise instead that school is where children learn to be productive, cooperative members of society; and that play is where they learn those things.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Mr Bruce McLachlan is Principal of Swanson School, a primary school of 500 children aged 5-13, in Auckland, New Zealand. In 2014, Mr McLachlan made international headlines for the approach his school is taking to the rules governing children's play. The school provides an environment where children have ample opportunities to learn from their mistakes, to manage risk within reason and to figure out what works by trial and error. Children ride bikes, build huts, climb trees and play-fight. The international media attention has been overwhelmingly positive. The idea of allowing "kids to be kids" has resonated with people all over the world. Bullying, conflict and serious injuries are down, while creativity, problem-solving and concentration are up.

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