Bylekeplasser

Thea Kvamme Hartmann – Arkitektur N, www.arkitektur-n.no

Norge er internasjonalt kjent for å satse på barn. Våre barnehager er i verdensklasse, vi feirer nasjonal-dagen med barnetog, og vi lokker til oss høyt utdannet arbeidskraft med våre gode fødselspermisjonsordninger. Fylt av fri natur og med frisk luft, ytringsfrihet og demokrati er Norge et fantastisk sted å vokse opp. Men norske byer utmerker seg på ingen måte med innovative lekeområder. Det er ikke bare innovasjon det er mangel på – fraværet av lekeplasser i seg selv er slående. Bylivsundersøkelsen i 2014 konstaterte at det kun eksisterer to offentlige lekeplasser innenfor Ring 1 i Oslo. Foruten Bergen kommunes satsing "Barnas byrom", er det vanskelig å se at det finnes klare strategier for plassering og utforming av nye lekeområder i norske byer. Samtidig blir mange nordmenn, som resten av verdens befolkning, mer urbane. Vi flytter til byene og ønsker å bo sentralt, vi liker å dra på café, vi liker å sitte på en benk og se på folk, og vi liker muligheten til frivillig å ta del i det spontane felleskapet som oppstår i byrommene. Mange småbarnsfamilier bor i byene og bruker mye av fritiden sin nettopp i ulike byrom. Barna er en ressurs for bylivet. Likevel virker det som om byplanbegreper som *torg*, *plass* og *gate* ikke assosieres med noe som bør tilrettelegges for barn.

Hvis du googler "ideas about playground design" vil du finne et mangfoldig utvalg av spennende rom fra hele verden. Paradoksalt nok for et barnevennlig land er den gjennomsnittlige norske lekeplassen en repetitiv samling av standardiserte katalogvarer. Hovedsakelig prosjekterer vi to typer lekeplasser: Enten er det gummiasfalt, sklie, huskestativ og lekehus i sterke kontrastfarger, eller så er det mer naturinspirerte lekeplasser med duse farger og tømmerstokker. Norge burde vært i verdensklasse i lekeplassutforming. Lekeplassen er en ramme for våre kollektive minner fra barndommen. Bør vi ikke tilrettelegge for at dette minnet blir mindre ensidig?

På starten av 1900-tallet var den internasjonale arkitektstanden engasjert i en diskusjon rundt offentlige lekeområder, innhold og utforming. Denne artikkelen tar for seg en bit av lekeplasshistoriens gullalder i håp om å inspirere byplanleggere og arkitekter til en sterkere og mer bevisst satsing på barna.

Overlappende programmering

Lekeplasser som etableres i norske byer har en tendens til å gjerdes inn og plasseres i parker atskilt fra bylivet ellers, og isolert fra folk som ikke har noe med barn å gjøre. Da Amsterdam skulle bygges opp etter krigen, så arkitekt Aldo van Eyck det sosiale potensialet ved barnas tilstedeværelse i byen.Han tegnet over 700 offentlige lekeplasser i Amsterdam, og for å få folk til å oppholde seg ute i det offentlige rommet, ble lekeplassene anlagt sentralt i byrommene. Benker ble plassert slik at de henvendte seg mot lekeplassen, men med såpass god avstand at du kunne sette deg ned selv om du ikke var der med barn. Her kunne barna leke trygt i midten, og foreldre og andre sitte og ta del i byens sosiale liv. Lekeplassen var integrert i byrommet og skilte seg ikke ut som et eget element.

Den amerikanske non-profit plan- og arkitektorganisasjonen Project for Public Spaces (PPS) arbeider med strategier for placemaking på det amerikanske kontinentet. De fokuserer på viktigheten av å ha overlappende funksjoner i byrommene våre. Vi vil ikke bare ha en grunn for å dra et sted, vi vil ha mange. Vi vil se på folk, se på kunst, drikke, spise, prate, sole oss, lese avisa og mye annet samtidig, med barn og uten barn. Overlappende programmering av byrommet er et tema mange er opptatt av. Likevel ser vi fortsatt nye parker og byrom dukke opp hvor lekeplassen er plassert i et hjørne, vendt bort fra all annen aktivitet. På denne måten fratas småbarnsforeldre muligheten til å delta i resten av byens sosiale liv. Lekeplassens plassering begrenser dermed det sosiale potensialet den kunne ha hatt. Hvis barna skal få en naturlig plass i byrommene våre, må vi programmere byen smartere.

Inspirerende utforming

Hvis lekeplassen skal oppnå sin potensielle funksjon må den også ha en vakker utforming som inspirerer barn til utforskning og kreativ og sosial utvikling. Norge er avhengig av en ny kreativ generasjon, og i utformingen av lekeplasser ligger en mulighet til å ta barna på alvor, eller til det motsatte: å fordumme fremtidige generasjoner gjennom understimulering. Opp igjennom historien har det utviklet seg trender innenfor lekeplassutforming. Vi kjenner den standardiserte lekeplassen, den som har oppstått ut av et økende fokus på sikkerhet og som et resultat av en mer standardisert hverdag. I tillegg til denne ser vi tre andre sterke trender: 1) naturlekeplassen med røtter i natur og rekreasjonsbevegelsen 2) byggelekeplassen med røtter i kulturradikalismen 3) kunstlekeplassen med røtter i kunstarenaen.

I 1972 skrev arkitekten Simon Nicholson en liten blekke kalt "Theory of Loose Parts". Teorien hans har fått mye oppmerksomhet i ettertid. Kort fortalt går teorien ut på at løse materialer eller deler i omgivelsene våre, som kan danderes fritt og settes sammen på ulike måter, stimulerer mer til kreativ utvikling enn statiske materialer som bare har én funksjon. "Theory of Loose Parts" blir ofte referert til når man snakker om barn og kreativ utvikling. Felles for alle de tre trendene innenfor lekeplasshistorien er at de på hver sin måte berører dette temaet.

Naturlekeplassen

Naturlekeplasser finnes det mange av i Norge i dag. Plassene har store innslag av grønt, underlaget er sand eller bark og apparatene er laget i naturmaterialer. Filosofien som ligger bak disse er at barn leker best i naturen. Forskning innenfor miljøpsykologien peker på betydningen av det grønne i forbindelse med stressmestring. Trær, sand, vann, søle, blader og kvister er formbare materialer som kan flyttes på og arrangeres fritt og på denne måten stimulere til barnas kreative utvikling. Klatring i trær og på knauser har også høyere risikofaktor enn hva du normalt finner på standard lekeplasser. Mange forskere peker på viktigheten av dette: Barn som ikke lærer å ta risiko tidlig i livet viser tendenser til å la være å ta risikable valg som voksne.

Byggelekeplassen

Den første av denne type lekeplasser var lekeplassen i Emdrup utenfor København, som ble anlagt i 1943 under den tyske okkupasjonen, på initiativ fra Arbejdernes Kooperative Byggeforening i samarbeid med den danske landskapsarkitekten C. Th. Sørensen. Opprinnelig ble lekeplassene omtalt som "skrammellegepladser", men for å dempe det radikale ved ideen tok danske politikere etter hvert i bruk begrepet "byggelekeplasser". Hensikten med det 7000 kvadratmeter store området i Emdrup var å gi barna et eget sted hvor de kunne oppholde seg og utvikle seg fritt. Grunnet situasjonen under krigen, med liten tilgang til materialer, ble skrapdeler, plankebiter og annet skrot samlet sammen som byggeklosser som barna selv fritt kunne disponere. Lekeplassen hadde en ansatt, John Bertelsen, som bisto barna med snekringen. Allerede første dagen var det 900 barn innom lekeplassen. Ideen bak byggelekeplassen var at barn som blir møtt med utfordringer og respekt oppfører seg bedre enn barn som henger rundt i gata uten noe å ta seg til. Gjennom å måtte planlegge, skissere og bygge selvinitierte prosjekter skapes et unikt engasjement og et inkluderende samarbeid som fokuserer på likheter fremfor ulikheter.

Prosessen stimulerer til kreativ utfoldelse, samtidig som barna lærer å måle, tegne, regne og bruke verktøy. Det er påfallende når du leser notatene til Bertelsen hvor lite bøll og mobbing som foregikk gjennom lekeplassens levetid. Britiske Lady Allen of Hurtwood, landskapsarkitekt og en forkjemper for såkalt "adventure playgrounds" i Storbritannia, besøkte Emdrup rett etter krigen. Hun ble fascinert av de sosiale relasjonene barna utviklet på lekeplassen. Det bombede England var fullt av tilgjengelige restmaterialer, samtidig som barna sårt trengte et tilbud. Hun tok ideen med seg hjem, skrev boken *Planning for Play* og brakte konseptet ut i verden. Byggelekeplasskonseptet blomstret fram mot 70-tallet, og det ble anlagt byggelekeplasser i mange europeiske byer, i Amerika og i Japan. Arvid Bengtssons bok *Adventure playgrounds* fra 1972 beskriver på entusiastisk vis troen på en framtid full av slike arenaer.

Slik ble det ikke. Byggelekeplasser krever inngjerding og aktiv drift og de krever en ansatt. Mange av disse lekeplassene ble etter hvert stengt, men noen byggelekeplasser eksisterer fortsatt. De mest kjente for oss nordmenn er kanskje Kolle Abenteuerspielplatz i Berlin og Byggeren i København. Selv om byggelekeplassens storhetstid er forbi, lever pedagogikken videre i mer institusjonaliserte former. Her til lands eksisterer for eksempel et lignende tilbud i ReMida-senteret i Trondheim. ReMida bygger på den italienske filosofien rundt kreativitet og gjenbruk, og inviterer skolebarn og barnehager inn på workshops med gjenbruksmaterialer.

Kunstlekeplassen

Under den tidlige modernismen oppstår det, sammen med mange andre nye ideer, et nytt perspektiv på lekeplassen. I 1933 lanserte Isamu Noguchi "Play mountain", en modell av et geometrisk formet landskap med lekefunksjoner som en del av hovedformen. Prosjektet ble aldri bygget, men dette var starten på en tid hvor mange kunstnere begynte å interessere seg for lekeplasser som kunne inspirere til en mer abstrakt form for lek. Det ble hevdet at kunstlekeplasser i tillegg til å tilrettelegge for fysisk aktivitet kunne stimulere barns fantasi og forståelse av skjønnhet. I 1949 ble Egon Møller-Nielsens leke-skulptur Tufsen oppført i Stockholm. Tufsen var en abstrakt betong-skulptur, det var kunst som kunne brukes. Kombinasjonen av kunst og lek fikk etter hvert stor oppmerksomhet over hele verden. I 1952 ble Noguchis modell utstilt på MoMA i New York. Og i 1954 annonserte MoMA i samarbeid med leke-utstyrprodusenten Creative Playthings og Parents Magazine en konkurranse om lekeskulpturer. Viktigheten av å forbinde lek, kunst, utdanning og offentlig rom stod sterkt i tiden, og lekeplassen var en

arena hvor kunsten kunne utspille seg utenfor institusjonene. Niki de Saint Phalle var en av kunstnerne som ga leken et fargerikt og humoristisk tilskudd med sine enorme installasjoner. Le Golem, et enormt hode med tre røde sklier, ble bygget i en barnepark i Øst-Jerusalem i 1972 og står fortsatt som et sentralt landemerke for barna i Jerusalem i dag. Mot 60- og 70-tallet dukket det opp flere kunstnere som fokuserte på at barna selv skulle være med på å utforme lekeplassen – at skulpturene aldri skulle være statiske. Det franske kollektivet Group Ludic ble dannet i 1968 og laget i samarbeid med barn flere lekeplasser basert på modulbaserte industrimaterialer. Ingen av disse lekeplassene har overlevd tidens gang.

Fokus på vedlikehold, sikkerhet og kommersialisering har ført oss bort fra kunstlekeplassene og over i en mer standardisert tilnærming til utforming av lekeplasser. Det begynner også å bli en god stund siden lekeplassene hadde noen posisjon innenfor kunstverdenen, men kunstlekeplasser eller lekeplasser i samarbeid med kunstnere er fortsatt å finne i dag. København kommune har de siste årene renovert byens 125 lekeplasser. Gjennom dette arbeidet er det oppført fem kunstlekeplasser i samarbeid med danske kunstnere. Målet er ikke at alle lekeplasser skal fremstå som skulpturer, men at disse kan tilføre noe annerledes i mangfoldet av byens lekeplasser.

Gi barna plass i byen

Norge er i utvikling. Byene vokser, nye byrom kommer til, gamle byrom transformeres. Mitt håp for framtiden er at byrommene kan romme funksjoner for alle, og at barn i byen tilbys et mangfold av lekeområder som inspirerer dem til å bli kreative og sosiale borgere i fremtiden, og glade i byene sine. Jeg kunne nevnt flere storbyer som har satset kraftig på lekeplasser, men vi behøver ikke reise langt for å finne gode forbilder. I København har de satset stort på bybarna de siste tiårene og mange av de nye byrommene er rettet mot barn.

Charlotte Ammundsens Plads er et eksempel som tidligere er omtalt i Arkitektur N (i Bianca Hermansens artikkel "Er der også plads til piger i det aktive byrum?", Arkitektur N nr.7-2013). Beliggende ved kulturhuset i København indre by er dette blitt en naturlig destinasjon for barnefamilier. Her kan du ta deg en kaffe i solveggen og se på at barna leker. Det fleksible lekeområdet i midten er også arena for loppemarkeder og ulike arrangementer som inviterer et bredere spekter av folk inn på plassen. Og det er ikke bare folk som har barn som liker å se på at barn leker, vi liker alle å se at det er liv i byen. Nettopp denne tankegangen var sentral da Guldberg

skole på Nørrebro skulle oppgraderes. Deler av skolegården er plassert på torget på framsiden av skolen slik at leken integreres med bylivet for øvrig. Den åpne grensen mellom skole, lek og byliv styrker plassrommet og gir torget en ekstra dimensjon. Jeg kunne nevnt mange flere. Lekeplasser er blitt en naturlig del i etableringen av Københavns nye byrom.

I Norge ligger vi litt etter, men det skjer endringer her også. Torget i Arendal er en konvensjonell lekeplass, men fint plassert, og Kirketorget i Moss har nylig åpnet med lek integrert på en urban måte. I Stavanger har det dukket opp flere spennende lekeområder i det siste, selv om Geoparken fra 2008 fremdeles er mest nytenkende i forhold til hva en lekeplass kan være. I norske aviser etterspørres det en sterkere satsing på barna nå som bilene skal forlate hovedstadens sentrum. Felles for lekeplassene som er omtalt i denne artikkelen er at de er et uttrykk for en reflektert pedagogikk og et verdisyn som inkluderer et ønske om å gi barna det aller beste. Kanskje er tiden moden for en ny gullalder i norsk lekeplasshistorie?

Hva vil vi med lekeplassen?

Thea Kvamme Hartmann – Periskop, 23/10/17

Det er september, jeg har hentet datteren min på skolen og sammengår vi mot barnehagen for å hente lillebroren hennes. Når vi går gjennom porten utbryter hun: «Det er urettferdig at de har så mye løv her!» Jeg ser spørrende på henne, idet hun forklarer meg at vaktmesteren på skolen fjerner løvet samme dag som det faller ned fra treet. I barnehagen kunne de leke med hauger av løv, på skolen har de kun noen blader å leke med. Datteren min går i første klasse. Selv om hun gledet seg til å begynne på skolen, selv om skolearbeidet er morsomt og det er spennende med nye barn, så savner hun den frie leken som barnehagen ga rom for, hun savner trærne, sanden, gjørma og kjøkkenhagen.

I 1972 lanserte arkitekten Simon Nicholson «The Theory Of Loose Parts». Han hevdet at løse elementer i sterkere grad enn statiske og fastmonterte deler styrker vår kreative utvikling. Disse elementene er materialer som kan flyttes på og organiseres fritt, uten noen regler for hvordan de skal settes sammen. Teorien har hatt stor innflytelse i ettertid, og den er fortsatt like aktuell. Løvet som faller ned om høsten er nettopp slike løse elementer. Greiner, småstein og regnvann også. Sandkassen bygger på en lignende ideologi, og har en historie som går tilbake til slutten av 1840-årene. Likevel er det som om vi ofte glemmer at de løse elementene ikke er tilfeldige innslag på lekeplassen.

Det finnes mange teorier om hvordan man skal tilrettelegge for riktig lek. Noen teorier er målstyrte, andre, som Nicholsons, fokuserer mer på det frie. Lekeplasser formes, bevisst eller ubevisst, som en konsekvens av ulike verdisyn og forestillinger på hva som er viktig for barns utvikling.

Lekeplassens utvikling

Den sveitsiske byplanleggeren Gabriela Burkhalter har gjennom sitt arbeid med The Playground Project samlet et arkiv av europeiske, amerikanske, japanske og indiske lekeplasser fra det siste århundret. Det som startet som en interesse og fascinasjon for lekeplasser, endte opp som en hjemmeside med bilder av inspirerende lekeplasser hun kom over. Etterhvert som samlingen vokste, ble det stadig klarere hvordan lekeplassens utforming til enhver tid har sprunget ut av tidsåndens syn på lekens betydning og viktigheten av det å leke. Samlingen har vært grunnlag for flere utstillinger de siste årene, senest på Kunsthalle Zürich i 2016.

Burkhalter peker på fire ulike paradigmeskifter innenfor lekeplassens historie. På starten av 1900-tallet var lekeplassen et sosialt virkemiddel for å bedre den mentale og psykiske helsen til barn fra fattige familier. På 1930-tallet var hovedideen bak lekeplassene at de skulle bygge på naturmaterialer, på 1960-tallet blomstret nabolagstankegangen og de selvbygde lekeplassene fylte byene våre. På 1980-tallet stagnerte på mange måter den sosiale og politiske drømmen, og lekeplassens utvikling stoppet. Men Burkhalter ser optimistisk på fremtiden, med nye internasjonale prosjekter som viser et sterkt engasjement for alternativ lek. Flere arkitekter og kunstnere viser stigende interesse for feltet. Jeg venter på at denne bølgen slår inn over Norge.

I Norge har natur- og rekreasjonbevegelsen sterke røtter, og vi har en lang tradisjon med lekeplasser utført i naturmaterialer og med store innslag av grønt. Særlig inspirerende i denne sammenhengen er arbeidene til Asbjørn Flemmen i samarbeid med Tom Jambor i Volda.

Men med urbaniseringens krav til å gi barna egne lekeområder i byen har vi også innført en annen type lekeplass. Inngjerdede områder med husker, sklier og lekehus i kontrastfarger fyller opp det offentlige rommet og stadfester på mange måter vårt standardiserte samfunn. Disse lekeområdene speiler også noe annet, de speiler et samfunn som setter det rasjonelle høyere enn det sansbare. I stedet for å fremstå som annerledes og lekne rom, er lekeplassene fylt med apparater som gjennom sin definerte funksjon skal gi barna bestemte ferdigheter. Det er fint at lekeplasser er med på å fremme sosial og motorisk utvikling, og det er lett å argumentere for dette aspektet fordi det gir målbare resultater. Men leken i seg selv er også et grunnleggende behov i oss mennesker. Lek behøver nødvendigvis ikke har noe annet formål enn den sansbare opplevelsen i seg selv. Gjennom å leke kommer vi i kontakt med vår indre sansbare verden. Vi lærer å kjenne oss selv.

Mange barn i dag får ikke nok rom til å fordype seg i fri lek, fordi vi voksne i alt for stor grad blander oss inn i hvordan de skal leke/ikke leke. Områder avsatt til lek er fylt med apparater som skal brukes på bestemte måter. Fri lek er viktig for å gi barna en indre trygghet. Det er synd om barna kun definerer seg selv ut fra de aktivitetene og målbare oppgavene de mestrer, særlig fordi det kan skape usikkerhet når barna skal ut i omgivelser hvor disse aktivitetene ikke lenger er til stede.

Lekeplasser utenom det vanlige

Annette Snarby – KK, 2013

Hva er egentlig statusen når det gjelder ikke-kommersielle lekeplasser her til lands? Har vi lov til å ønske oss noe mer enn et par slitne husker og en sandkasse, eller bør vi være fornøyde med det vi har?

Norges største ikke-kommersielle lekeplass er Frognerborgen som ligger i Vigelandsparken i Oslo. Her kan ungene boltre seg i et flott anlegg med et areal på 20 x 20 meter, som består av syv meter høye tårn, rutsjebaner og en lekeløype med gyngebroer, sklier og klatrevegger. Selv om dette kanskje høres stort ut, så er den langt ifra en gigant i europeisk målestokk. Når man ser på hordene av folk denne lekeplassen tiltrekker seg – spesielt i helgene – må man kunne påstå at det her hadde vært rom for et mye større lekeområde. Parken skryter av å kunne ta i mot opptil to hundre barn samtidig, men særlig avslappende for foreldrene er den ikke. Her må man fotfølge barna for ikke å miste de av syne blant hundre andre.

Besøker man andre av Oslos lekeplasser, ser man at det samme gjentar seg. De få gode lekeplassene som finnes er overfylte og de øvrige er rett og slett kjedelige. Hvorfor bygges det ikke flere lekeplasser i Norge? Og hvorfor er det slik, at vi som er så stolte av vårt vakre kulturlandskap velger å plassere ut grelle plastapparater midt i naturskjønne parker? Hva kommer det av at det alltid er de samme kjedelige apparatene som går igjen, om det så er i Flekkefjord eller i Tromsø?

Lite satsning fra kommunene

– Det er nok økonomien i kommunene som stopper utbyggingen av lekeplasser, mener Bernhard Lie som er daglig leder i bedriften Gartner Lie i Haugesund. De siste ti årene har han drevet med utbygging av uteområder i parker og barnehager, og er leverandør av lekeplassutstyr fra den tyske produsenten Spielart.

– Dessuten ble mye endret etter at den nye standarden for lekeutstyr kom i 1994. Det at sikkerheten blir ivaretatt er svært bra, men det har dessverre også ført til at flere nærmiljøanlegg er blitt fjernet. Det virker som om kommunene fjerner lekeområdene for å slippe å ta ansvar, sier han.

Kommunale lekeplasser synes det altså å bli færre av, men Bernhard Lie opplever at stadig flere barnehager ønsker å oppgradere uteområdene og han

får også henvendelser fra nye aktører som kjøpesentre, hagesentre og campingplasser. – Det legges mer penger i uteområdene i barnehagene enn før, det kan kanskje skyldes konkurranse, sier Lie. – Det er uansett positivt å se at mange ønsker noe mer enn bare en lekebåt, og det er bra at flere ser verdien i å ha et lekeanlegg som oppfordrer til mye bevegelse. Akkurat nå holder jeg på med et prosjekt for en barnehage som faktisk ikke har et eneste huskestativ. Pedagogene har sett at barna sitter så mye foran tv-skjermer til vanlig, at de derfor ikke trenger å sitte på husker når de kommer ut. Til tross for denne positive utviklingen, merker han at det fortsatt er slik at de fleste aktører ikke vil bruke mye penger på lekeutstyr. – Fokuset ligger på å spare penger. Dessverre ser vi noen ganger at barnehager kutter ned på utstyret til ungene, men at de gjerne bruker mer på datautstyr, sier Lie.

Færre lekeplasser = mindre sosial lek?

Lie er opptatt av at lekeplassutstyr skal utløse en nysgjerrighet og forundring hos barna, og at det ikke må bli forutsigbart. Produktene han selger fra Spielart skiller seg virkelig ut i mengden og appellerer både til voksne og barn. Stativene lages av tresorten Rubina som vokser i Sør-Europa og er et veldig hardt, krokete og skeivt treslag. Denne tresorten blir mye brukt til lekeapparater i Europa, fordi det er veldig hardført og i grunn ikke egner seg til så mye annet. Spielarts produkter bygges i Tyskland på bestilling fra kunden, og tilpasset hvert enkelt område. Selv om uttrykket er likt med sine svært kunstneriske former, er aldri målene de samme og området rundt avgjør hvordan resultatet blir. Ofte gjenspeiler lekeplassen et kjennetegn eller en attraksjon som allerede eksisterer i byen. Et eksempel er den tyske byen Magdeburg som er kjent for sin flotte borg. På lekeplassen har Spielart laget en lekeborg som ligner denne.

Med barn som tilbringer mesteparten av dagen i barnehagen, kan man jo spørre seg om man fortsatt trenger offentlige lekeplasser i Norge. Lie mener at vi ikke må glemme det sosiale aspektet ved å kunne møtes ute – som en hel familie. Han ser også store forskjeller på tyske og norske lekeplasser. – Det som skjer i Tyskland, er at de satser på store lekeområder i urbane strøk. Mens her i Norge virker det som at vi går i motsatt retning. Her blir lekeplassene fjernet fra kommunalt ansvar, og isteden blomstrer byggevareforhandlere som selger lekeplassutstyr til private. Resultatet er at barna står i hver sin hage og hopper på en trampoline, istedenfor å møtes på lekeplassen og leke sosialt.

Barn vil ha utfordrende lekeplasser

Ida Kvittingen – forsking.no, 5/12/14

Å klatre høyt i et stativ, å grave dypt i sand. Å fylle en grop med løv og vann. Å hente pinner og andre redskaper fra skogen. Å lage et hemmelig sted under sklien.
Barn er kreative i møtet med lekeplassen, og vil selv være med og endre den. Det fant den svenske forskeren Märit Jansson ut da hun spurte skolebarn om hvordan de bruker lekeplassen.

– Det designede, trygge og vakre er ikke alltid like interessant for barna, sier landskapsarkitekten ved Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet (SLU) til forskning.no.

For lite å gjøre
Jansson snakket med 141 barn i alderen 6-11 år fra to mindre steder i Sverige. I gruppeintervjuer stilte hun åpne spørsmål om hvordan de brukte lekeplassen.
Egentlig var hun på utkikk etter noe annet enn barnas opplevelser av manglene. Hun ville undersøke hvilke lekeplasser de kjente til i nærmiljøet, og hvordan de lekte der med venner.

Men underveis i intervjuene tok barna selv opp frustrasjonene over kjedelige lekeplasser.

– Særlig de eldre barna sa at det ikke var noe å gjøre der. De fikk ikke nok utfordringer, sier Jansson.

– Barna vil gjerne være medskapere, de vil kunne påvirke lekeplassen, få fysiske utfordringer og skape egne rom på og rundt apparatene. Gjennomregulerte lekeplasser, med gummimatter og detaljert design, blir vanskelige å endre, sier Jansson.

– Spør barna
Det er ikke slik at de dyreste og mest avanserte lekeplassene er de mest populære, skal vi tro de svenske barna. Viktigere er lekeplassens plassering og muligheten for å omskape den.
Det var særlig lekeplassene som lå i nærheten av et skogholt eller annen natur som vakte begeistring. Der kunne barna kombinere natur og kultur, hente stein og vann og tilpasse lekeplassen til leken.

Også en norsk doktorgrad har pekt på at utfordringer er viktig i barns lek. Andre studier viser at varierte skolegårder med naturinnslag er bra for skolebarn.

– Noen ganger har jeg inntrykk av at lekeplassene er laget mest ut fra hensynet til de voksne, så de skal ha oversikt over barna på et trygt sted. Lekeplassene passer best for barn i barnehagealder, mens de eldre barna blir litt glemt, mener Jansson.

– Spør barna om hva de vil ha før dere bygger, oppfordrer hun.

Bekymret for sikkerhet

Noen av barna fortalte at det var så lite å gjøre på lekeplassen at de begynte å kaste stein på lekeapparatene i ren frustrasjon.
Slik vandalisme er noe av grunnen til at voksne blir skeptiske når barn forsøker å endre lekeplassen.

Men også endringer som er en del av leken kan bli sett på med ublide øyne av de voksne.

Jansson snakket med parkansatte som reagerte på at barn forsøkte å bruke lekene til andre formål enn de var ment for.

Noen ganger gikk barnas endringer på sikkerheten løs, som når de gravde i jorda rundt fundamentet til lekeapparatet og gjorde det mer ustabilt.

– Greit å slå seg

Slik graving er det grunn til å stanse. Men generelt har vi blitt så opptatt av trygghet at det går på bekostning av barnas behov for utfoldelse, mener Jansson.
– Om vi tenker for mye på sikkerhet, blir lekeplassene ofte så kjedelige at de ikke er interessante for barna, sier hun.

Også i Norge har det vært en opphetet diskusjon om utforming av lekeplasser. Skal barna kunne slå seg, eller bør de beskyttes? Gummimatter under husker og fjerning av klatrestativ har vært blant sikkerhetstiltakene.

Noen mener lek med risiko gjør barn robuste. Mens andre kaller dem som mener barn lærer av å gå på en smell, for blodsromantikere, noe en diskusjon om trygghet og lek i A-magasinet viser.

Jansson er blant dem som mener det er verdt å slå seg en gang i blant for å få utfordringer.

– Vi skal selvsagt ikke skape farlige lekemiljøer, men det å få skrubbsår er en del av det å vokse opp, sier hun.

Referanse:

Jansson, M.: Children's perspectives on playground use as basis for children's participation in local play space management. Local Environment: The international journal of justice and sustainability, nr. 2, 2015.

Her bruker de naturen som lekeplass

Bjørnhild Fjeld – Utdanningsnytt.no, 29/9/16

– Skogen er en fornøyelsespark som har alt. Vi må bare tørre å se opp, se ned og under en stein, mener Anders Baumberger.

Han er forfatter av boken Turglede, lektor, foredragsholder og driver et småbruk i Ski sammen med kona Kari Baumberger, som er barnehagelærer.

– Man merker knapt alt man lærer av motorikk, språk og kunnskap mens man er ute. Det er sjelden vi trenger å stoppe opp og si «nå skal vi lære om kongler», sier Anders Baumberger.

Motorisk læring

Anders mener den viktigste læringen ute skjer ubevisst gjennom samtaler, observasjoner og undring.
– Summen av tusenvis av ubevisste spørsmål, mens barna observerer skaper gradvis forståelse av verden rundt dem, sier han. Det å være ute gir ikke bare kunnskap om planter og dyr.

– I naturen får barna motorisk læring og trening i å utfolde seg i uorganisert kreativitet. Viktigst av alt er mestringsfølelsen det gir når barna balanser, klatrer, bestiger og forserer, sier han.

Utfordringer for alle

Barnehagelærer Kari Baumberger forteller at turer i naturen også er positivt for barnets språkutvikling.
– Gjennom samtaler kommer språket, og ikke minst når vi har så mye konkret å knytte samtalen til som vi har ute, sier hun.

– Skogen egner seg også til leker der barna bruker fantasien til å skape egne univers. Det er supert for kreativiteten og språket. Skogen er dessuten den perfekte lekeplass, fordi den har utfordringer til alle aldre, sier hun.

Synet på utelek

Seniorforsker ved Norsk institutt for naturforskning, Margrete Skår, er prosjektleder for en studie om barn og natur, der en barnehagestudie inngår.
Hun sier barnehagen er en viktig arena for barns lek i naturen, men peker på særlig to ting som utfordrer den frie leken i naturen for dagens barn.

– Mange barn har en organisert og travel fritid. Dette virker inn på tiden de har til å kunne leke, og det påvirker voksnes syn på og prioritering av lek, sier hun.

Hun viser til debatter om økt fokus på barnehagen som læringsarena, kontra verdsetting av fri lek. En annen begrensning for å være ute i naturen i barnehagetiden er administrative hensyn, som personalressurser og møter.

Verdifull læring

– Når vi spør barn om hvorfor de liker natur, sier de ofte at de liker å være sammen med andre barn å leke. Lek i naturen oppleves som et supplement til tilrettelagte aktiviteter inne i barnehagen, sier Skår.
Selv om de voksne ikke kan krysse av på et skjema over læringsmål som er oppfylt, er hun ikke i tvil om at læringen som foregår i naturen er meget verdifull.

– Forskning viser at når barn får tid og rom til å leke sammen uten at voksne blander seg inn, blir naturkontakten mer sanselig, kroppslig og emosjonell, sier Skår.

Direktoratet for samfunnssikkerhet og beredskap

Ofte stilte spørsmål om lekeplassutstyr

DSB mottar fra tid til annen en del spørsmål knyttet til sikkerhet på lekeplasser. Her er svarene på de oftest stilte spørsmålene.

Finnes det en egen godkjenningsordning for lekeplassutstyr?

Svar: Nei, det finnes ingen godkjenningsordning for lekeplassutstyr. Tilbyder/eier er selv ansvarlig for at utstyret er i henhold til regelverket, se produktkontrolloven, lekeplassforskriften og interkontrollforskriften.

Hvem har ansvaret for at lekeplassutstyret er sikkert?

Svar: I utgangspunktet er produsenten av lekeplassutstyret ansvarlig for å levere sikkert utstyr som er i henhold til gjeldende regelverk. Dersom produsenten, importøren eller distributøren vet eller burde vite at lekeplassutstyret som er gjort tilgjengelig for bruker utgjør en uakseptabel risiko for helseskade, skal han straks informere DSB om dette.

Har jeg som eier et ansvar for at lekeplassutstyret er sikkert?

Svar: Ja, det heter i lekeplassforskriftens § 16 at den som anskaffer eller eier lekeplassutstyr er ansvarlig for jevnlig ettersyn og nødvendig vedlikehold, slik at utstyrets sikkerhetsegenskaper opprettholdes.

Hvordan kan jeg oppfylle mine plikter som ansvarlig for lekeplassen?

Svar: I tillegg til å oppfylle lekeplassforskriften skal alle som er ansvarlige for lekeplasser ha et velfungerende internkontrollsystem i medhold av internkontrollforskriften.

Hvilken rolle har lekeplasskontrollørene?

Svar: Slik DSB opplever det utfører ulike lekeplasskontrollører kontroll av lekeplassutstyr på vegne av eierne av utstyret. Dette er en jobb eierne kan gjøre selv, men som de av ulike grunner får andre til å utføre. Det presiseres imidlertid at det i regelverket ikke foreligger noe krav om å bruke eksterne ”kontrollører”. Det nevnes også at slike kontroller ikke medfører en godkjenning av lekeplassutstyret. Tilbydere av lekeplassutstyr, f. eks. barnehager, er selv ansvarlige for at utstyret til enhver tid er i henhold til regelverket.

Kan en velforening være ansvarlig for sikkerheten til lekeplassutstyret når kommunen eier lekeplassen?
Svar: Ja, DSB har sett flere eksempler på at velforeninger har påtatt seg et slikt ansvar ved å tilgjengeliggjøre lekeplassutsyr, men kanskje uten å ha satt seg inn i hvilke plikter et slikt ansvar fører med seg, blant annet kravet til å ha et internkontrollsystem. DSBs anbefaling er at det skriftliggjøres en avtale mellom kommunen og velforeningen som klart angir hvem som har ansvaret for vedlikeholdet og sikkerheten på lekeplassen.

Kan vi som barnehage/skole/velforening montere lekeplassutstyr selv/ på dugnad?
Svar: Ja, DSB nekter ingen å montere eget ustyr, men det vektlegges at det er viktig å bruke monteringsanvisninger som skal følge utstyret ved kjøp. Dersom man er usikker bør denne jobben overlates til personer med fagkompetanse da feilmonteringer kan bidra til at utstyret får farlige feil og mangler.

Er lekeplassutstyr som naturbarnehagen har laget i skogen omfattet av lekeplassforskriften?
Svar: Ja, i henhold til lekeplassforskriftens § 4 er lekeplassutstyr "alle installasjoner og/eller delkomponenter med tilhørende underlag, som er konstruert, produsert eller markedsført med den hensikt å bli installert på lekeplasser, med sikte på individuell eller kollektiv lek. En lekeplass er i henhold til samme paragraf; "ethvert areal, opparbeidet eller naturlig, som er tilgjengelig og som er tilrettelagt for barns lek".

Er kunstverk og naturmaterialer å anse som lekeplassutstyr?
Svar: Kunstverk og naturmaterialer er i utgangspunktet ikke å anse som lekeplassutstyr. Kunstverk/naturmaterialer er imidlertid omfattet av lekeplassforskriften når materialene er en integrert del av lekeplassutstyret og plasseres på et lekeområde med formål om at barn skal leke med eller på en tilvirket konstruksjon. Steiner og trær etc. som fra naturens side hører hjemme på lekeplassområdet er ikke omfattet av lekeplassforskriften. Dette legitimerer likevel ikke en ansvarsfraskrivelse for nødvendige risikovurderinger hos den som designer, er ansvarlige for eller tilrettelegger en lekeplass der kunstverk og naturmaterialer plasseres.

1, 32 (*Above*) Emdrup waste material playground in Copenhagen inspired the movement in Britain; (*below*) Lollard adventure playground, one of the first in London.

When play got serious

Gabriela Burkhalter – Tate Etc., issue 31, 2014

In the late 1940s Danish sculptor Egon Møller-Nielsen placed *Tufsen*, an abstract play sculpture, in a public park in Stockholm. It marked an important moment as art, play and public space started to interact with each other in a new way. It also broke new ground for the design of play equipment, which became more joyful and appealing for both users and designers. Furthermore, it revealed that playgrounds - as Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck was advocating at the same time in Amsterdam - could take on a significant role for the city, fostering a different relationship between children, families and their neighbourhood. In the following years play sculptures proliferated throughout Europe, the United States and Japan, as artists, urban planners and activists embraced the playground as a field for experimentation.

The installation of *Tufsen* was part of park commissioner Holger Blom's initiative to improve the quality of life in the fast-growing city of Stockholm. An organic, abstract shape in a pool of sand, it was art that could be touched, climbed on and crawled through. American architectural critic and photographer GE Kidder Smith brought this novelty to the United States. He travelled to Sweden in 1939-40 as a fellow of the American-Scandinavian Foundation to research modern Swedish architecture. His findings were presented in *Stockholm Builds*, a travelling exhibition shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1941, and subsequently published in *Sweden Builds* in 1950, which also included images of Møller-Nielsen's play sculptures. Swedish architecture, with its comprehensive planning, became a model for public buildings and housing.

In 1953 Frank Caplan, the founder of the toy company Creative Playthings, also visited Sweden, met with Møller-Nielsen and started to market his play sculpture *Spiral Slide*. Thus, for the first time something other than steel pipe swings, monkey bars and see-saws was available to buy. Caplan frequently contacted MoMA for advice on design, and deliberately chose abstract play equipment for his catalogue. Philadelphia, America's most progressive city in recreation planning and playground design, became an important client of Creative Playthings and helped to provide broad media coverage for new products.

Play Sculpture, a division of Creative Playthings established in 1953, co-sponsored a nationwide play sculpture competition, organised with *Parents Magazine* and MoMA. *Playground Sculpture* opened at MoMA in 1954, featuring 360 models including life-size examples of the winning entries, two of which were produced and sold through Play Sculpture. The show formed part of the institution's influential promotion of modernist architecture, contemporary design and abstract art. Through exhibitions, educational programmes and model houses in the museum's garden, good design was presented as a part of everyday life, and a meaningful childhood became linked to modern design, abstract educational toys and art education.

The need to build more recreation facilities for the baby boomers and the interest in creative playground designs boosted the demand for abstract play sculptures. The European model remained dominant - a fact criticised by, among others, American boxer and artist Joseph Brown. A resident fellow in sculpture at Princeton, he encouraged his students to go beyond developing variations on the Møller-Nielsen theme and started to come up with his own ideas.

A figurative sculptor, he forged a radically new aesthetic of play design, which brought him into contact with renowned architects such as Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius. In a letter to Brown, Breuer wrote: 'These are I believe magnificently simple, sympathetic and dynamic instruments and succeed in being first-rate sculptured objects.' His 'dynamic instruments' consisted of rope and/or steel and fully acquired their sculptural quality when children played on them, the rope's instability and unpredictability demanding quick reactions and communication. Brown termed them "'Play Communities' and they included the so-called *Swing-Ring*, which seems to have inspired many play structures up until today. But back in 1955 no manufacturer was interested in mass-producing them.

The enthusiasm for modern life paralleled the decline of the inner city, especially in the US. Publications such as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* 1961 by Jane Jacobs highlighted the fact that the 'white flight' to the suburbs and the destruction of entire neighbourhoods in the name of urban renewal led to the slow decline of the city. Neighbourhood associations and city officials tried to stem the tide by clearing empty lots and creating small recreation areas known as 'vest pocket parks'. In New York, the parks department invited artists to be part of festivals, events and happenings to

revitalise Central Park and other public spaces by bringing people together, strengthening the local community and making the metropolis safer. The urban crisis of the 1960s showed that design was not enough. Real change needed human presence, or as American artist Robert Rauschenberg wrote in 1968 in his *Proposals for Public Parks*:

> *All cultural activities should, I believe, be dependent on participation and involvement by the inhabitants in their specific localised environment. It is essential to break down the sense of exclusivity, foreignness and imposed prestige of conventional attitudes about art.*

The same was true for play sculptures and playgrounds in general. They underwent a transformation from places solely for children to collective and non-exclusive spaces, a shift taking place parallel to the development of Land Art, Allan Kaprow's Happenings, or the idea of a museum without walls championed by visionary curators such as Pontus Hultén or Harald Szeemann. Play sculptures, whether temporary or built out of scrap materials, abounded as artists and urban activists explored new possibilities in collaboration, participation and art-making. In reaction to a materialistic society dominated by TV culture, artists provided accessible, playful and non-commercial tools for children and adults to liberate the senses and connect to the human and natural environment.

The members of Group Ludic, a French collective formed in 1968 in Paris by architect David Roditi, sculptor Xavier de la Salle and film-maker Simon Koszel, insisted that play sculpture should never be a ready-made solution. Prior to their collaboration, they had observed how children got involved with an outdoor sculpture exhibition - integrating the works into their play activities, or even throwing stones and trying to destroy them. This 'cruel' art handling would inform the group's understanding of play sculpture: an object that could be transformed into a play machine by the child. As a consequence, its members would not design structures without the children's participation. They tested a wide range of forms and materials to allow kids to connect with their environments, which often happened to be monotone leftovers in France's newly built satellite cities. Group Ludic designed different types of modular objects by using industrial materials and built numerous playgrounds, none of which survived.

In 1969 de la Salle and Roditi contributed two play sculptures to the *Play Orbit* show at the ICA in London, described in the accompanying catalogue as an 'exhibition of toys, games and playables by people who are not professionally involved with the design of playthings, but who work in the field of visual arts'. More than 100 artists participated, among them Barry Flanagan and Tom Phillips, as well as eleven art colleges with a broad range of projects.

The history of play sculpture and playgrounds in general can be understood as yet another overlooked chapter of modernism. Connecting play, art, education and public space, it finds itself at the centre of some of the twentieth century's most pressing issues. Playgrounds became lively, interactive and imaginative public spaces. If they were too small to stop the urban blight, they nevertheless provided room for art outside institutions and away from bureaucracy.

Today, the years between 1940 and the late 1970s appear to be the golden age of playground design. With the rise of safety standards, liability lawsuits and a general commercialisation of public space, playgrounds have become yet another expression of a society obsessed with standardisation, control and helicopter parenting.

The Overprotected Kid

Hanna Rosin – The Atlantic, April 2014

A trio of boys tramps along the length of a wooden fence, back and forth, shouting like carnival barkers. "The Land! It opens in half an hour." Down a path and across a grassy square, 5-year-old Dylan can hear them through the window of his nana's front room. He tries to figure out what half an hour is and whether he can wait that long. When the heavy gate finally swings open, Dylan, the boys, and about a dozen other children race directly to their favorite spots, although it's hard to see how they navigate so expertly amid the chaos. "Is this a junkyard?" asks my 5-year-old son, Gideon, who has come with me to visit. "Not exactly," I tell him, although it's inspired by one. The Land is a playground that takes up nearly an acre at the far end of a quiet housing development in North Wales. It's only two years old but has no marks of newness and could just as well have been here for decades. The ground is muddy in spots and, at one end, slopes down steeply to a creek where a big, faded plastic boat that most people would have thrown away is wedged into the bank. The center of the playground is dominated by a high pile of tires that is growing ever smaller as a redheaded girl and her friend roll them down the hill and into the creek. "Why are you rolling tires into the water?" my son asks. "Because we are," the girl replies.

It's still morning, but someone has already started a fire in the tin drum in the corner, perhaps because it's late fall and wet-cold, or more likely because the kids here love to start fires. Three boys lounge in the only unbroken chairs around it; they are the oldest ones here, so no one complains. One of them turns on the radio—Shaggy is playing (*Honey came in and she caught me red-handed, creeping with the girl next door*)—as the others feel in their pockets to make sure the candy bars and soda cans are still there. Nearby, a couple of boys are doing mad flips on a stack of filthy mattresses, which makes a fine trampoline. At the other end of the playground, a dozen or so of the younger kids dart in and out of large structures made up of wooden pallets stacked on top of one another. Occasionally a group knocks down a few pallets—just for the fun of it, or to build some new kind of slide or fort or unnamed structure. Come tomorrow and the Land might have a whole new topography.

Other than some walls lit up with graffiti, there are no bright colors, or anything else that belongs to the usual playground landscape: no shiny metal

slide topped by a red steering wheel or a tic-tac-toe board; no yellow seesaw with a central ballast to make sure no one falls off; no rubber bucket swing for babies. There is, however, a frayed rope swing that carries you over the creek and deposits you on the other side, if you can make it that far (otherwise it deposits you in the creek). The actual children's toys (a tiny stuffed elephant, a soiled Winnie the Pooh) are ignored, one facedown in the mud, the other sitting behind a green plastic chair. On this day, the kids seem excited by a walker that was donated by one of the elderly neighbors and is repurposed, at different moments, as a scooter, a jail cell, and a gymnastics bar.

The playgrounds were novel, but they were in tune with the cultural expectations of London in the aftermath of World War II. Children who might grow up to fight wars were not shielded from danger; they were expected to meet it with assertiveness and even bravado. Today, these playgrounds are so out of sync with affluent and middle-class parenting norms that when I showed fellow parents back home a video of kids crouched in the dark lighting fires, the most common sentence I heard from them was "This is insane." (Working-class parents hold at least some of the same ideals, but are generally less controlling—out of necessity, and maybe greater respect for toughness.) That might explain why there are so few adventure playgrounds left around the world, and why a newly established one, such as the Land, feels like an act of defiance.

If a 10-year-old lit a fire at an American playground, someone would call the police and the kid would be taken for counseling. At the Land, spontaneous fires are a frequent occurrence. The park is staffed by professionally trained "playworkers," who keep a close eye on the kids but don't intervene all that much. Claire Griffiths, the manager of the Land, describes her job as "loitering with intent." Although the playworkers almost never stop the kids from what they're doing, before the playground had even opened they'd filled binders with "risk benefits assessments" for nearly every activity. (In the two years since it opened, no one has been injured outside of the occasional scraped knee.) Here's the list of benefits for fire: "It can be a social experience to sit around with friends, make friends, to sing songs to dance around, to stare at, it can be a co-operative experience where everyone has jobs. It can be something to experiment with, to take risks, to test its properties, its heat, its power, to re-live our evolutionary past." The risks? "Burns from fire or fire

pit" and "children accidentally burning each other with flaming cardboard or wood." In this case, the benefits win, because a playworker is always nearby, watching for impending accidents but otherwise letting the children figure out lessons about fire on their own.

"I'm gonna put this cardboard box in the fire," one of the boys says.

"You know that will make a lot of smoke," says Griffiths.

"Where there's smoke, there's fire," he answers, and in goes the box. Smoke instantly fills the air and burns our eyes. The other boys sitting around the fire cough, duck their heads, and curse him out. In my playground set, we would call this "natural consequences," although we rarely have the nerve to let even much tamer scenarios than this one play out. By contrast, the custom at the Land is for parents not to intervene. In fact, it's for parents not to come at all. The dozens of kids who passed through the playground on the day I visited came and went on their own. In seven hours, aside from Griffiths and the other playworkers, I saw only two adults: Dylan's nana, who walked him over because he's only 5, and Steve Hughes, who runs a local fishing-tackle shop and came by to lend some tools.

Griffiths started selling local families on the proposed playground in 2006. She talked about the health and developmental benefits of freer outdoor play, and explained that the playground would look messy but be fenced in. But mostly she made an appeal rooted in nostalgia. She explained some of the things kids might be able to do and then asked the parents to remember their own childhoods. "Ahh, did you never used to do that?" she would ask. This is how she would win them over. Hughes moved to the neighborhood after the Land was already open, but when he stopped by, I asked how he would have answered that question. "When I was a kid, we didn't have all the rules about health and safety," he said. "I used to go swimming in the Dee, which is one of the most dangerous rivers around. If my parents had found out, they would have grounded me for life. But back then we would get up to all sorts of mischief."

Like most parents my age, I have memories of childhood so different from the way my children are growing up that sometimes I think I might be making them up, or at least exaggerating them. I grew up on a block of nearly identical six-story apartment buildings in Queens, New York. In my

elementary-school years, my friends and I spent a lot of afternoons playing cops and robbers in two interconnected apartment garages, after we discovered a door between them that we could pry open. Once, when I was about 9, my friend Kim and I "locked" a bunch of younger kids in an imaginary jail behind a low gate. Then Kim and I got hungry and walked over to Alba's pizzeria a few blocks away and forgot all about them. When we got back an hour later, they were still standing in the same spot. They never hopped over the gate, even though they easily could have; their parents never came looking for them, and no one expected them to. A couple of them were pretty upset, but back then, the code between kids ruled. We'd told them they were in jail, so they stayed in jail until we let them out. A parent's opinion on their term of incarceration would have been irrelevant.

I used to puzzle over a particular statistic that routinely comes up in articles about time use: even though women work vastly more hours now than they did in the 1970s, mothers—and fathers—of all income levels spend much more time with their children than they used to. This seemed impossible to me until recently, when I began to think about my own life. My mother didn't work all that much when I was younger, but she didn't spend vast amounts of time with me, either. She didn't arrange my playdates or drive me to swimming lessons or introduce me to cool music she liked. On weekdays after school she just expected me to show up for dinner; on weekends I barely saw her at all. I, on the other hand, might easily spend every waking Saturday hour with one if not all three of my children, taking one to a soccer game, the second to a theater program, the third to a friend's house, or just hanging out with them at home. When my daughter was about 10, my husband suddenly realized that in her whole life, she had probably not spent more than 10 minutes unsupervised by an adult. Not 10 minutes in 10 years.

It's hard to absorb how much childhood norms have shifted in just one generation. Actions that would have been considered paranoid in the '70s—walking third-graders to school, forbidding your kid to play ball in the street, going down the slide with your child in your lap—are now routine. In fact, they are the markers of good, responsible parenting. One very thorough study of "children's independent mobility," conducted in urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods in the U.K., shows that in 1971, 80 percent of third-graders walked to school alone. By 1990, that measure had dropped to 9 percent, and now it's even lower. When you ask parents why they are more

protective than their parents were, they might answer that the world is more dangerous than it was when they were growing up. But this isn't true, or at least not in the way that we think. For example, parents now routinely tell their children never to talk to strangers, even though all available evidence suggests that children have about the same (very slim) chance of being abducted by a stranger as they did a generation ago. Maybe the real question is, how did these fears come to have such a hold over us? And what have our children lost—and gained—as we've succumbed to them?

In 1978, a toddler named Frank Nelson made his way to the top of a 12-foot slide in Hamlin Park in Chicago, with his mother, Debra, a few steps behind him. The structure, installed three years earlier, was known as a "tornado slide" because it twisted on the way down, but the boy never made it that far. He fell through the gap between the handrail and the steps and landed on his head on the asphalt. A year later, his parents sued the Chicago Park District and the two companies that had manufactured and installed the slide. Frank had fractured his skull in the fall and suffered permanent brain damage. He was paralyzed on his left side and had speech and vision problems. His attorneys noted that he was forced to wear a helmet all the time to protect his fragile skull.

The Nelsons' was one of a number of lawsuits of that era that fueled a backlash against potentially dangerous playground equipment. Theodora Briggs Sweeney, a consumer advocate and safety consultant from John Carroll University, near Cleveland, testified at dozens of trials and became a public crusader for playground reform. "The name of the playground game will continue to be Russian roulette, with the child as unsuspecting victim," Sweeney wrote in a 1979 paper published in *Pediatrics*. She was concerned about many things—the heights of slides, the space between railings, the danger of loose S-shaped hooks holding parts together—but what she worried about most was asphalt and dirt. In her paper, Sweeney declared that lab simulations showed children could die from a fall of as little as a foot if their head hit asphalt, or three feet if their head hit dirt.

A federal-government report published around that time found that tens of thousands of children were turning up in the emergency room each year because of playground accidents. As a result, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1981 published the first "Handbook for Public Playground Safety," a short set of general guidelines—the word *guidelines* was

in bold, to distinguish the contents from *requirements*—that should govern the equipment. For example, no component of any equipment should form angles or openings that could trap any part of a child's body, especially the head.

To turn up the pressure, Sweeney and a fellow consultant on playground safety, Joe Frost, began cataloguing the horrors that befell children at playgrounds. Between them, they had testified in almost 200 cases and could detail gruesome specifics—several kids who had gotten their heads trapped or crushed by merry-go-rounds; one who was hanged by a jump rope attached to a deck railing; one who was killed by a motorcycle that crashed into an unfenced playground; one who fell while playing football on rocky ground. In a paper they wrote together, Sweeney and Frost called for "immediate inspection" of all equipment that had been installed before 1981, and the removal of anything faulty. They also called for playgrounds nationwide to incorporate rubber flooring in crucial areas.

In January 1985, the Chicago Park District settled the suit with the Nelsons. Frank Nelson was guaranteed a minimum of $9.5 million. Maurice Thominet, the chief engineer for the Park District, told the *Chicago Tribune* that the city would have to "take a cold, hard look at all of our equipment" and likely remove all the tornado slides and some other structures. At the time, a reader wrote to the paper:

Do accidents happen anymore? …
Can a mother take the risk of taking her young child up to the top of a tornado slide, with every good intention, and have an accident?
Who is responsible for a child in a park, the park district or the parent? … Swings hit 1-year-old children in the head, I'm sure with dire consequences in some instances. Do we eliminate swings?

But these proved to be musings from a dying age. Around the time the Nelson settlement became public, park departments all over the country began removing equipment newly considered dangerous, partly because they could not afford to be sued, especially now that a government handbook could be used by litigants as proof of standards that parks were failing to meet. In anticipation of lawsuits, insurance premiums skyrocketed. As the *Tribune* reader had intuited, the cultural understanding of acceptable risk

began to shift, such that any known risk became nearly synonymous with hazard.

Over the years, the official consumer-product handbook has gone through several revisions; it is now supplemented by a set of technical guidelines for manufacturers. More and more, the standards are set by engineers and technical experts and lawyers, with little meaningful input from "people who know anything about children's play," says William Weisz, a design consultant who has sat on several committees overseeing changes to the guidelines. The handbook includes specific prescriptions for the exact heights, slopes, and other angles of nearly every piece of equipment. Rubber flooring or wood chips are virtually required; grass and dirt are "not considered protective surfacing because wear and environmental factors can reduce their shock absorbing effectiveness."

It is no longer easy to find a playground that has an element of surprise, no matter how far you travel. Kids can find the same slides at the same heights and angles as the ones in their own neighborhood, with many of the same accessories. I live in Washington, D.C., near a section of Rock Creek Park, and during my first year in the neighborhood, a remote corner of the park dead-ended into what our neighbors called the forgotten playground. The slide had wooden steps, and was at such a steep angle that kids had to practice controlling their speed so they wouldn't land too hard on the dirt. More glorious, a freestanding tree house perched about 12 feet off the ground, where the neighborhood kids would gather and sort themselves into the pack hierarchies I remember from my childhood—little kids on the ground "cooking" while the bigger kids dominated the high shelter. But in 2003, nearly a year after I moved in, the park service tore down the tree house and replaced all the old equipment with a prefab playground set on rubber flooring. Now the playground can hold only a toddler's attention, and not for very long. The kids seem to spend most of their time in the sandbox; maybe they like it because the neighbors have turned it into a mini adventure playground, dropping off an odd mixing spoon or colander or broken-down toy car.

In recent years, Joe Frost, Sweeney's old partner in the safety crusade, has become concerned that maybe we have gone too far. In a 2006 paper, he gives the example of two parents who sued when their child fell over a stump in a small redwood forest that was part of a playground. They had a basis for the

lawsuit. After all, the latest safety handbook advises designers to "look out for tripping hazards, like exposed concrete footings, tree stumps, and rocks." But adults have come to the mistaken view "that children must somehow be sheltered from all risks of injury," Frost writes. "In the real world, life is filled with risks—financial, physical, emotional, social—and reasonable risks are essential for children's healthy development."

At the core of the safety obsession is a view of children that is the exact opposite of Lady Allen's, "an idea that children are too fragile or unintelligent to assess the risk of any given situation," argues Tim Gill, the author of *No Fear*, a critique of our risk-averse society. "Now our working assumption is that children cannot be trusted to find their way around tricky physical or social and emotional situations."

What's lost amid all this protection? In the mid-1990s, Norway passed a law that required playgrounds to meet certain safety standards. Ellen Sandseter, a professor of early-childhood education at Queen Maud University College in Trondheim, had just had her first child, and she watched as one by one the playgrounds in her neighborhood were transformed into sterile, boring places. Sandseter had written her master's dissertation on young teens and their need for sensation and risk; she'd noticed that if they couldn't feed that desire in some socially acceptable way, some would turn to more-reckless behavior. She wondered whether a similar dynamic might take hold among younger kids as playgrounds started to become safer and less interesting.

Sandseter began observing and interviewing children on playgrounds in Norway. In 2011, she published her results in a paper called "Children's Risky Play From an Evolutionary Perspective: The Anti-Phobic Effects of Thrilling Experiences." Children, she concluded, have a sensory need to taste danger and excitement; this doesn't mean that what they do has to actually be dangerous, only that they *feel* they are taking a great risk. That scares them, but then they overcome the fear. In the paper, Sandseter identifies six kinds of risky play:

(1) Exploring heights, or getting the "bird's perspective," as she calls it—"high enough to evoke the sensation of fear." (2) Handling dangerous tools—using sharp scissors or knives, or heavy hammers that at first seem unmanageable but that kids learn to master. (3) Being near dangerous elements—playing near vast bodies of water, or near a fire, so kids are aware that there is danger

nearby. (4) Rough-and-tumble play—wrestling, play-fighting—so kids learn to negotiate aggression and cooperation. (5) Speed—cycling or skiing at a pace that feels too fast. (6) Exploring on one's own.

This last one Sandseter describes as "the most important for the children." She told me, "When they are left alone and can take full responsibility for their actions, and the consequences of their decisions, it's a thrilling experience."

To gauge the effects of losing these experiences, Sandseter turns to evolutionary psychology. Children are born with the instinct to take risks in play, because historically, learning to negotiate risk has been crucial to survival; in another era, they would have had to learn to run from some danger, defend themselves from others, be independent. Even today, growing up is a process of managing fears and learning to arrive at sound decisions. By engaging in risky play, children are effectively subjecting themselves to a form of exposure therapy, in which they force themselves to do the thing they're afraid of in order to overcome their fear. But if they never go through that process, the fear can turn into a phobia. Paradoxically, Sandseter writes, "our fear of children being harmed," mostly in minor ways, "may result in more fearful children and increased levels of psychopathology." She cites a study showing that children who injured themselves falling from heights when they were between 5 and 9 years old are less likely to be afraid of heights at age 18. "Risky play with great heights will provide a desensitizing or habituating experience," she writes.

We might accept a few more phobias in our children in exchange for fewer injuries. But the final irony is that our close attention to safety has not in fact made a tremendous difference in the number of accidents children have. According to the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System, which monitors hospital visits, the frequency of emergency-room visits related to playground equipment, including home equipment, in 1980 was 156,000, or one visit per 1,452 Americans. In 2012, it was 271,475, or one per 1,156 Americans. The number of deaths hasn't changed much either. From 2001 through 2008, the Consumer Product Safety Commission reported 100 deaths associated with playground equipment—an average of 13 a year, or 10 fewer than were reported in 1980. Head injuries, runaway motorcycles, a fatal fall onto a rock—most of the horrors Sweeney and Frost described all those

years ago turn out to be freakishly rare, unexpected tragedies that no amount of safety-proofing can prevent.

Even rubber surfacing doesn't seem to have made much of a difference in the real world. David Ball, a professor of risk management at Middlesex University, analyzed U.K. injury statistics and found that as in the U.S., there was no clear trend over time. "The advent of all these special surfaces for playgrounds has contributed very little, if anything at all, to the safety of children," he told me. Ball has found some evidence that long-bone injuries, which are far more common than head injuries, are actually increasing. The best theory for that is "risk compensation"—kids don't worry as much about falling on rubber, so they're not as careful, and end up hurting themselves more often. The problem, says Ball, is that "we have come to think of accidents as preventable and not a natural part of life."

The category of risky play on Sandseter's list that likely makes this current generation of parents most nervous is the one involving children getting lost, or straying from adult supervision. "Children love to walk off alone and go exploring away from the eyes of adults," she writes. They "experience a feeling of risk and danger of getting lost" when "given the opportunity to 'cruise' on their own exploring unknown areas; still, they have an urge to do it." Here again Sandseter cites evidence showing that the number of separation experiences before age 9 correlates negatively with separation-anxiety symptoms at age 18, "suggesting an 'inoculation' effect."

But parents these days have little tolerance for children's wandering on their own, for reasons that, much like the growing fear of playground injuries, have their roots in the 1970s. In 1979, nine months after Frank Nelson fell off that slide in Chicago, 6-year-old Etan Patz left his parents' downtown New York apartment to walk by himself to the school-bus stop. Etan had been begging his mother to let him walk by himself; many of his friends did, and that morning was the first time she let him. But, as just about anyone who grew up in New York in that era knows, he never came home. (In 2012, a New Jersey man was arrested for Etan's murder.) I was nearly 10 at the time, and I remember watching the nightly news and seeing his school picture, with a smile almost as wide as Mick Jagger's. I also remember that, sometime during those weeks of endless coverage of the search for Etan, the parents in my neighborhood for the first time organized a walk pool to take us to the bus stop.

The Etan Patz case launched the era of the ubiquitous missing child, as Paula Fass chronicles in *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America*. Children's faces began to appear on milk cartons, and Ronald Reagan chose the date of Etan's disappearance as National Missing Children's Day. Although no one knew what had happened to Etan, a theory developed that he had been sexually abused; soon *The New York Times* quoted a psychologist who said that the Patz case heralded an "epidemic of sexual abuse of children." In a short period, writes Fass, Americans came to think child molestations were very prevalent. Over time, the fear drove a new parenting absolute: children were never to talk to strangers.

But abduction cases like Etan Patz's were incredibly uncommon a generation ago, and remain so today. David Finkelhor is the director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center and the most reliable authority on sexual-abuse and abduction statistics for children. In his research, Finkelhor singles out a category of crime called the "stereotypical abduction," by which he means the kind of abduction that's likely to make the news, during which the victim disappears overnight, or is taken more than 50 miles away, or is killed. Finkelhor says these cases remain exceedingly rare and do not appear to have increased since at least the mid-'80s, and he guesses the '70s, although he was not keeping track then. Overall, crimes against children have been declining, in keeping with the general crime drop since the '90s. A child from a happy, intact family who walks to the bus stop and never comes home is still a singular tragedy, not a national epidemic.

One kind of crime that *has* increased, says Finkelhor, is family abduction (which is lumped together with stereotypical abduction in FBI crime reports, accounting for the seemingly alarming numbers sometimes reported in the media). The explosion in divorce in the '70s meant many more custody wars and many more children being smuggled away by one or the other of their parents. If a mother is afraid that her child might be abducted, her ironclad rule should not be *Don't talk to strangers*. It should be *Don't talk to your father*.

The gap between what people fear (abduction by a stranger) and what's actually happening (family turmoil and custody battles) is revealing. What has changed since the 1970s is the nature of the American family, and the broader sense of community. For a variety of reasons—divorce, more single-parent families, more mothers working—both families and neighborhoods have lost some of their cohesion. It is perhaps natural that trust in general

has eroded, and that parents have sought to control more closely what they can—most of all, their children.

As we parents began to see public spaces—playgrounds, streets, public ball fields, the distance between school and home—as dangerous, other, smaller daily decisions fell into place. Ask any of my parenting peers to chronicle a typical week in their child's life and they will likely mention school, homework, after-school classes, organized playdates, sports teams coached by a fellow parent, and very little free, unsupervised time. Failure to supervise has become, in fact, synonymous with failure to parent. The result is a "continuous and ultimately dramatic decline in children's opportunities to play and explore in their own chosen ways," writes Peter Gray, a psychologist at Boston College and the author of *Free to Learn*. No more pickup games, idle walks home from school, or cops and robbers in the garage all afternoon. The child culture from my Queens days, with its own traditions and codas, its particular pleasures and distresses, is virtually extinct.

In 1972, the British-born geography student Roger Hart settled on an unusual project for his dissertation. He moved to a rural New England town and, for two years, tracked the movements of 86 children in the local elementary school, to create what he called a "geography of children," including actual maps that would show where and how far the children typically roamed away from home. Usually research on children is conducted by interviewing parents, but Hart decided he would go straight to the source. The principal of the school lent him a room, which became known as "Roger's room," and he slowly got to know the children. Hart asked them questions about where they went each day and how they felt about those places, but mostly he just wandered around with them. Even now, as a father and a settled academic, Hart has a dreamy, puckish air. Children were comfortable with him and loved to share their moments of pride, their secrets. Often they took him to places adults had never seen before—playhouses or forts the kids had made just for themselves.

Hart's methodology was novel, but he didn't think he was recording anything radical. Many of his observations must have seemed mundane at the time. For example: "I was struck by the large amount of time children spend modifying the landscape in order to make places for themselves and for their play." But reading his dissertation today feels like coming upon a lost

civilization, a child culture with its own ways of playing and thinking and feeling that seems utterly foreign now. The children spent immense amounts of time on their own, creating imaginary landscapes their parents sometimes knew nothing about. The parents played no role in their coming together—"it is through cycling around that the older boys chance to fall into games with each other," Hart observed. The forts they built were not praised and cooed over by their parents, because their parents almost never saw them.

Through his maps, Hart discovered broad patterns: between second and third grade, for instance, the children's "free range"—the distance they were allowed to travel away from home without checking in first—tended to expand significantly, because they were permitted to ride bikes alone to a friend's house or to a ball field. By fifth grade, the boys especially gained a "dramatic new freedom" and could go pretty much wherever they wanted without checking in at all. (The girls were more restricted because they often helped their mothers with chores or errands, or stayed behind to look after younger siblings.) To the children, each little addition to their free range—being allowed to cross a paved road, or go to the center of town—was a sign of growing up. The kids took special pride, Hart noted, in "knowing how to get places," and in finding shortcuts that adults wouldn't normally use.

Hart's research became the basis for a BBC documentary, which he recently showed me in his office at the City University of New York. One long scene takes place across a river where the kids would go to build what they called "river houses," structures made from branches and odds and ends they'd snuck out from home. In one scene, Joanne and her sister Sylvia show the filmmakers the "house" they made, mostly from orange and brown sheets slung over branches. The furniture has been built with love and wit—the TV, for example, is a crate on a rock with a magazine glamour shot taped onto the front. The phone is a stone with a curled piece of wire coming out from under it.

The girls should be self-conscious because they are being filmed, but they are utterly at home, flipping their hair, sitting close to each other on crates, and drawing up plans for how to renovate. Nearby, their 4-year-old brother is cutting down a small tree with a hatchet for a new addition. The girls and their siblings have logged hundreds of hours here over the years; their

mother has never been here, not once, they say, because she doesn't like to get her toes wet.

In another scene, Andrew and Jenny, a brother and sister who are 6 and 4, respectively, explore a patch of woods to find the best ferns to make a bed with. Jenny walks around in her knee-high white socks, her braids swinging, looking for the biggest fronds. Her big brother tries to arrange them just so. The sun is shining through the dense trees and the camera stays on the children for a long time. When they are satisfied with their bed, they lie down next to each other. "Don't take any of my ferns," Jenny scolds, and Andrew sticks his tongue out. At this point, I could hear in my head the parent intervening: "Come on, kids, share. There's plenty to go around." But no parents are there; the kids have been out of their sight for several hours now. I teared up while watching the film, and it was only a few days later that I understood why. In all my years as a parent, I have never come upon children who are so inwardly focused, so in tune with each other, so utterly absorbed by the world they've created, and I think that's because in all my years as a parent, I've mostly met children who take it for granted that they are always being *watched*.

In 2004, Hart returned to the same town to do a follow-up study. His aim was to reconnect with any kids he had written about who still lived within 100 miles of the town and see how they were raising their own children, and also to track some of the kids who now lived in the town. But from the first day he arrived, he knew he would never be able to do the research in the same way. Hart started at the house of a boy he'd known, now a father, and asked whether he could talk to his son outside. The mother said they could go in the backyard, but she followed them, always staying about 200 yards behind them. Hart didn't get the sense that the parents were suspicious of him, more that they'd "gotten used to the idea of always being close to their children, and didn't like them going off." He realized that this time around, he could get to the children only through the adults; even the kids didn't seem that interested in talking to him alone; they got plenty of adult attention already. "They were so used to having their lives organized by their parents," he told me. Meanwhile, the new principal at the school said he didn't want Hart doing any research there, because it was not directly related to the curriculum.

At one point Hart tracked down Sylvia, one of the girls he'd filmed at the river house. "Roger Hart! Oh my God, my childhood existed," she screamed into the phone. "It's just that I'm always telling people what we used to do, and they don't believe me!" Sylvia was now a suburban mom of two kids (ages 5 and 4), and she and her husband had moved into a new house 30 miles away. When Hart went to visit Sylvia, he filmed the exchange. Standing outside in her backyard, Sylvia tells him she bought this house because she wanted to give her own children the kinds of childhood experiences she'd had, and when she saw the little wooded area out back, her "heart leapt." But "there's no way they'd be out in the woods," she adds. "My hometown is now so diverse, with people coming in and out and lots of transients." Hart reminds her how she used to spend most of her time across the river, playing. "There's no river here," she tells him, then whispers, "and I'm really glad about that." There will soon be a fence around the yard—she mentions the fence several times—"so they'll be contained," and she'll always be able to see her kids from the kitchen window. As Sylvia is being interviewed, her son makes some halfhearted attempts to cut the hedges with a pair of scissors, but he doesn't really seem to know how to do it, and he never strays more than a few inches from his father.

When Hart shows Jenny and Andrew the film of themselves playing in the ferns, they are both deeply moved, because they'd never seen a film of themselves as children, and because for them, too, the memories had receded into hazy unreality. They are both parents and are still living in that New England town. Of all the people Hart caught up with, they seem to have tried the hardest to create some of the same recreational opportunities for their own children that they'd had. Jenny bought a house, with a barn, near a large patch of woods; she doesn't let her sons watch TV or play video games all that much, instead encouraging them to go to the barn and play in the hay, or tend the garden. She says she wouldn't really mind if they strayed into the woods, but "they don't want to go out of sight." Anyway, they get their exercise from the various sports teams they play on. Jenny gets some of her girlish self back when she talks about how she and the boys pile up rocks in the backyard to build a ski jump or use sticks to make a fort. But Jenny initiates these activities; the boys usually don't discover them on their own.

Among this new set of kids, the free range is fairly limited. They don't roam all that far from home, and they don't seem to want to. Hart talked with a

law-enforcement officer in the area, who said that there weren't all that many transients and that over the years, crime has stayed pretty steady—steadily low. "There's a fear" among the parents, Hart told me, "an exaggeration of the dangers, a loss of trust that isn't totally clearly explainable." Hart hasn't yet published his findings from his more recent research, and he told me he's wary of running into his own nostalgia for the Rousseauean children of his memories. For example, he said he has to be honest about the things that have improved in the new version of childhood. In the old days, when children were left on their own, child power hierarchies formed fairly quickly, and some children always remained on the bottom, or were excluded entirely. Also, fathers were largely absent; now children are much closer to their dads—closer to both their parents than kids were back then. I would add that the 1970s was the decade of the divorce boom, and many children felt neglected by their parents; perhaps today's close supervision is part of a vow not to repeat that mistake. And yet despite all this, Hart can't help but wonder what disappeared with "the erosion of child culture," in which children were "inventing their own activities and building up a kind of community of their own that they knew much more about than their parents."

One common concern of parents these days is that children grow up too fast. But sometimes it seems as if children don't get the space to grow up at all; they just become adept at mimicking the habits of adulthood. As Hart's research shows, children used to gradually take on responsibilities, year by year. They crossed the road, went to the store; eventually some of them got small neighborhood jobs. Their pride was wrapped up in competence and independence, which grew as they tried and mastered activities they hadn't known how to do the previous year. But these days, middle-class children, at least, skip these milestones. They spend a lot of time in the company of adults, so they can talk and think like them, but they never build up the confidence to be truly independent and self-reliant.

Lately parents have come to think along the class lines defined by the University of Pennsylvania sociologist Annette Lareau. Middle-class parents see their children as projects: they engage in what she calls "concerted cultivation," an active pursuit of their child's enrichment. Working-class and poor parents, meanwhile, speak fewer words to their children, watch their progress less closely, and promote what Lareau calls the "accomplishment of

natural growth," perhaps leaving the children less prepared to lead middle-class lives as adults. Many people interpret her findings as proof that middle-class parenting styles, in their totality, are superior. But this may be an overly simplistic and self-serving conclusion; perhaps each form of child-rearing has something to recommend it to the other.

When Claire Griffiths, the Land's manager, applies for grants to fund her innovative play spaces, she often lists the concrete advantages of enticing children outside: combatting obesity, developing motor skills. She also talks about the same issue Lady Allen talked about all those years ago—encouraging children to take risks so they build their confidence. But the more nebulous benefits of a freer child culture are harder to explain in a grant application, even though experiments bear them out. For example, beginning in 2011, Swanson Primary School in New Zealand submitted itself to a university experiment and agreed to suspend all playground rules, allowing the kids to run, climb trees, slide down a muddy hill, jump off swings, and play in a "loose-parts pit" that was like a mini adventure playground. The teachers feared chaos, but in fact what they got was less naughtiness and bullying—because the kids were too busy and engaged to want to cause trouble, the principal said.

In an essay called "The Play Deficit," Peter Gray, the Boston College psychologist, chronicles the fallout from the loss of the old childhood culture, and it's a familiar list of the usual ills attributed to Millennials: depression, narcissism, and a decline in empathy. In the past decade, the percentage of college-age kids taking psychiatric medication has spiked, according to a 2012 study by the American College Counseling Association. Practicing psychologists have written (in this magazine and others) about the unique identity crisis this generation faces—a fear of growing up and, in the words of Brooke Donatone, a New York–based therapist, an inability "to think for themselves."

In his essay, Gray highlights the work of Kyung-Hee Kim, an educational psychologist at the College of William and Mary and the author of the 2011 paper "The Creativity Crisis." Kim has analyzed results from the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking and found that American children's scores have declined steadily across the past decade or more. The data show that children have become:

less emotionally expressive, less energetic, less talkative and verbally expressive, less humorous, less imaginative, less unconventional, less lively and passionate, less perceptive, less apt to connect seemingly irrelevant things, less synthesizing, and less likely to see things from a different angle.

The largest drop, Kim noted, has been in the measure of "elaboration," or the ability to take an idea and expand on it in a novel way.

The stereotypes about Millennials have alarmed researchers and parents enough that they've started pushing back against the culture of parental control. Many recent parenting books have called for a retreat, among them *Duct Tape Parenting*, *Baby Knows Best*, and the upcoming *The Kids Will Be Fine*. In her excellent new book, *All Joy and No Fun*, Jennifer Senior takes the route that parents are making themselves miserable by believing they always have to maximize their children's happiness and success.

In the U.K., the safety paranoia is easing up. The British equivalent of the Consumer Product Safety Commission recently released a statement saying it "wants to make sure that mistaken health and safety concerns do not create sterile play environments that lack challenge and so prevent children from expanding their learning and stretching their abilities." When I was in the U.K., Tim Gill, the author of *No Fear*, took me to a newly built London playground that reminded me of the old days, with long, fast slides down a rocky hill, high drops from a climbing rock, and few fenced-in areas. Meanwhile, the Welsh government has explicitly adopted a strategy to encourage active independent play, rather than book learning, among young children, paving the way for a handful of adventure playgrounds like the Land and other play initiatives.

Whether Americans will pick up on the British vibe is hard to say, although some hopeful signs are appearing. There is rising American interest in European-style "forest kindergartens," where kids receive little formal instruction and have more freedom to explore in nature. And in Washington, D.C., not far from where I live, we finally have our first exciting playground since the "forgotten playground" was leveled. Located at a private school called Beauvoir, it has a zip line and climbing structures that kids of all ages perceive as treacherous. I recently met someone who worked on the playground and asked him why the school board wasn't put off by safety concerns, especially since it keeps the park open to the public on weekends.

He said the board was concerned about safety but also wanted an exciting playground; the safety guidelines are, after all these years, still just guidelines.

But the real cultural shift has to come from parents. There is a big difference between avoiding major hazards and making every decision with the primary goal of optimizing child safety (or enrichment, or happiness). We can no more create the perfect environment for our children than we can create perfect children. To believe otherwise is a delusion, and a harmful one; remind yourself of that every time the panic rises.

As the sun set over the Land, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a gray bin, like the kind you'd keep your recycling in, about to be pushed down the slope that led to the creek. A kid's head poked out of the top, and I realized it was my son's. Even by my relatively laissez-faire parenting standards, the situation seemed dicey. The light was fading, the slope was very steep, and Christian, the kid who was doing the pushing, was only 7. Also, the creek was frigid, and I had no change of clothes for Gideon.

I hadn't seen much of my son that day. Kids, unparented, take on pack habits, so as the youngest and newest player, he'd been taken care of by the veterans of the Land. I inched close enough to hear the exchange.

"You might fall in the creek," said Christian. "I know," said Gideon.

Christian had already taught Gideon how to climb up to the highest slide and manage the rope swing. At this point, he'd earned some trust. "I'll push you gently, okay?" "Ready, steady, go!," Gideon said in response. Down he went, and landed in the creek. In my experience, Gideon is very finicky about water. He hates to have even a drop land on his sleeve while he's brushing his teeth. I hadn't rented a car on this trip, and the woman who'd been driving us around had left for a while. I started scheming how to get him new clothes. Could I knock on one of the neighbors' doors? Ask Christian to get his father? Or, failing that, persuade Gideon to sit a while with the big boys by the fire?

"I'm wet," Gideon said to Christian, and then they raced over to claim some hammers to build a new fort.