Imagine! Children playing in the trees

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Bravely, if naively, an influential British accident-prevention group has urged people to tolerate more risk in children's play. It's brave because the prevailing wisdom is that risk needs to be stamped out at all costs for children. It's naive because the group's recommendation - that wild areas be built within parks so children can, say, climb trees, under supervision - could never happen under liability law. Not unless the trees were five feet tall and there was pea gravel or wood chips underneath.

But there is something wonderful in the idealism of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. Despite its name, the society does not wish to prevent every single accident. "We need to ask ourselves whether it is better for a child to break a wrist falling out of a tree or to get a repetitive strain wrist injury at a young age from using a computer or video games console." That is not just a figure of speech. British statistics show that nearly 600 children went to hospital in 2005 for repetitive strain injury, usually an affliction of office workers who spend their days at keyboards. Meanwhile, there has been a sharp drop in tree-climbing and bike-riding accidents over the past several years. Isn't safety wonderful?

The problem caused by risk aversion is in a sense invisible. Parks, schoolyards and ravines once filled with children now have a few scattered souls (except during organized activities), largely because children are not allowed out on their own because of the fear of pedophiles. A British study found that 43 per cent of parents do not believe children under 14 should be set loose out of doors unsupervised. The Royal Society reminds us of what our children have lost: the opportunity for unstructured play, especially in nature.

Children need to take reasonable risks to learn and grow. But there is a tyranny afoot, a tyranny of liability lawyers and timid decision-makers and overanxious parents - a tyranny exemplified by the Toronto District School Board's panicky decision to spend $6.3-million in 2000 to scrap the allegedly dangerous playgrounds in 170 schools and replace them with dull, metal contraptions. In the madness, even the simple tire swing was ruled a life-disabling risk.

The notion that play in the wild is essential to children is so simple, yet so forgotten, that the opening words of a study on play in nature by Norwegian education expert Ingunn Fjortoft feel like a revelation. "Modern societies seem to have neglected the value of such environments for the development of children and adolescents. A generation ago, children had access to wild lands and used them for exploring, challenging and exercising the skills needed to master a challenging landscape and unforeseen situations." Today's children may have electronic devices unknown to previous generations, but they have been deprived of something beautiful and valuable.

How valuable? The Norwegian study was set at a school beside a forest. Children 5 to 7 were split into two groups: one group played in the forest, the other on a traditional playground. In the forest, the children hid among the spruce trees, climbed the deciduous trees, chased each other in the open areas, built dens and played hide and seek among the shrubs. They climbed and leapt off a steep rocky wall and in winter slid on the hills. A big rock was "the Space Ship"; a place of pine cones was "the Cone War." (They threw the cones at one another.) A prickly juniper bush became a favourite home; the whole group of 12 children would be embraced within its "rooms." The study found that the natural playscape is important to the development of children's motor skills - co-ordination, speed, agility, power and balance. A traditional playground, not so much.

Bringing the wild into the mainstream is a lovely idea, even if doomed; the wild areas would soon be as sterile as the manmade ones. But the larger message should not be lost. In trying to protect children from reasonable risk, we do them no favours.