Where was your favourite place to play as a child? Chances are it was outdoors, and out of sight of adults. A place where you felt a sense of freedom and possibility. Where you could follow your impulses and your imagination, even if that led you into situations that were scary, challenging, perhaps even downright dangerous.

It is not mere nostalgia to revive these memories. Of course, we should not fall for the myth that there was a “golden age” for growing up. But if we all agree that a taste of freedom and adventure are vital ingredients of a good childhood, then surely we should see to it that children today are able to enjoy similar experiences.

Sadly, these experiences are under threat. When people say that children grow up faster today, they are confusing appearance with reality. Children may be avid consumers of adult culture. They may adopt adult mannerisms and styles. They certainly get to grips with new technology far more easily than we grown-ups. But when it comes to everyday freedoms — like walking to school alone, or meeting friends in the park — a very different picture emerges.

The fact is that for the last 30 or 40 years or longer, across the developed world, the horizons of childhood have been shrinking, and adult control and oversight is becoming the norm. For instance, Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg (1990) found that in the United Kingdom, in 1971 almost 90 percent of eight-year-olds went to school without their parents. By 1990 it was just 11 percent.

Why has this happened? As I argue in my book No Fear (Gill, 2007), the causes are many and varied, and cannot simply be blamed on parents. Neighbourhoods are more dominated by cars, and families are more dependent on them. Changing family working patterns mean fewer parents are around to watch over children, and more children are in formal childcare. In many areas, people don’t know their neighbours, and there is greater fear of crime. All these factors, and others, reinforce the logic of containment.

However, some parents are actively resisting the pressures to overprotect. In the USA, journalist and mum Lenore Skenazy was inspired to write her book and blog Free-Range Kids (2009) after finding herself at the centre of a media storm for letting her nine-year-old son travel alone on the New York subway.

What motivates Skenazy, and me in my own work, is the conviction that “battery-rearing” children does not help to prepare them for the ups and downs of everyday life. Childhood is a journey from dependence to autonomy. At the heart of this journey is a transfer of responsibility from adult to child. So we have to give children some opportunity for freedom and exploration, not least because children themselves want to get to grips with the world on their own terms.

One of ways we do this is by creating environments for outdoor play. Play spaces are a fascinating arena for exploring ideas about risk and responsibility. On the one hand, they need to engage and stimulate children: to give them challenges and the chance to test themselves through their play. On the other, they should not be places where children are regularly coming to serious harm. A balanced approach is needed.

The idea of balance has come to the fore where I live in the UK, but it was not always so. Ten years ago, schools and municipalities were becoming preoccupied with safety. Many believed they had to eliminate risk. Some of the resulting playgrounds were very dull indeed.
Those of us involved in play safety at the national level felt we had to take action. We went back to first principles, and had a long, hard look at what playgrounds were for in the first place. We argued for a more balanced approach to risk. What is more, we got support from the UK government’s own Health and Safety Executive. This work has been the catalyst for a sea change in professional attitudes about play safety.

The climate around play safety is continuing to improve. In 2008 the UK Government published Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide. And it is ripping up all the old rules. Instead of conducting risk assessments, providers are encouraged to carry out risk-benefit assessments. This simple yet far-reaching shift means that for the first time, providers will be able to take into account the benefits of giving children challenging, risky experiences.

In the wake of this work, some of the latest playgrounds are genuinely exciting, engaging places to play. For instance, sand pits have been included in several new play areas in the London Borough of Islington, even though the municipality was initially worried about the risk of contamination from broken glass or animal feces. Using risk-benefit assessment helped to think through the pros and cons leading to revised maintenance regimes and reduced costs.

The idea of balancing risks and benefits is spreading beyond the public playground into educational settings, and has reached the highest echelons of power. The UK government–sponsored Young Review into health and safety gave risk-benefit assessment a ringing endorsement, and called for the approach to be developed more widely. The report’s recommendations were supported in full by our prime minister.

None of this means that we simply abandon children to their fate, or complacently shrug our shoulders when they come to harm. History teaches us that children have suffered all too often because of the failings of adults. But history — in the form of our recollections of our own childhood memories —also teaches us an invaluable lesson: that giving children the chance to learn from their experiences, and learn from their mistakes, is part and parcel of a good childhood.

References


Tim Gill is one of the UK’s leading writers and thinkers on childhood. He was a keynote speaker at COEO’s 2011 fall conference. His book No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society was published in 2007.