



Balancing Safety and Challenge in Playground Design

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“Playgrounds are a place where children can learn and grow through exploration and social interaction.”

1 Introduction

Playgrounds are a place where children can learn and grow through exploration and social interaction. However, that development can't take place without age- and developmentally appropriate challenges. Playgrounds should ideally offer age-appropriate challenges and a safe environment all in one. Unfortunately, this balance doesn't always occur. Parental concern along with standards that have decreased design freedom are contributors to the lack of challenging opportunities in today's play equipment. The balance between challenge and safety is important to childhood development, and society can reconcile the obstacles to create that healthy median.

2 Benefits of Challenging Play

Age- and developmentally appropriate challenge is healthy, but caution may be preventing kids from experiencing it. According to a report compiled by the University of Technology in Sydney,¹ playgrounds and the activities they

¹ University of Technology, Sydney report: http://www.academia.edu/1585542/Not_all_risk_is_bad_playgrounds_as_a_learning_environment_for_children

support are critical for childhood development. The report notes that play equipment provides children with necessary opportunities to develop social, cognitive, physical and emotional skills. These playgrounds must adhere to some safety regulations (such as preventing kids from trapping their fingers), but age-appropriate challenge must be protected in order for children to reap the aforementioned benefits. Challenging equipment provides a safe environment in which to assess risk (the report notes that the word “risk” is often associated with danger, though it technically has no positive or negative implications).

“ *Well-designed playgrounds keep kids away from hazards while encouraging them to test their limits and learn to overcome challenges.* ”

Well-designed playgrounds keep kids away from hazards while encouraging them to test their limits and learn to overcome challenges. Unfortunately, these positive results of experiencing challenging play may be in jeopardy because of a general mindset that puts excessive safety priorities above those of learning. According to the *Wall Street Journal*,² parents, administrators and lawmakers might be forcing kids to play it too safe. When play equipment becomes increasingly “safe,” it may also appear to be generic. Kids are less likely to play on a jungle gym that does not present some new challenge or opportunity. As a result, children could be staying inside where they can find different forms of entertainment.

Dr. Joe Frost, retired professor emeritus in The University of Texas at Austin College of Education’s Department of Curriculum and Instruction, believes safety concerns can become an obstacle to childhood development.³ Frost travels around the U.S. and abroad to consultant companies as they design playgrounds. He is an advocate of creating appropriate structures and his experience has showed him that many people do not see the issue of challenge the same way he does. In fact, he labels the increased prevalence of strict regulation as “the demise of play.” While regulations are in place to protect children, they are often detrimental to the

2 Wall Street Journal article: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323622904578129063506832312>

3 University of Texas article: <https://www.edb.utexas.edu/education/news/2007/?start=49>

diversification of play equipment and prevent children from experiencing this healthy level of challenge.

3 Governing Playground Regulations

Safety concerns are certainly relevant—proponents of challenge-supporting playgrounds are more than aware of that. Parents and lawmakers alike want to protect children as best as possible. However, sweeping regulations may not be the most beneficial way to do that. According to a study published in *Science Direct*,⁴ risk assessment often determines whether or not a parent allows their child to play on their own. However, the way parents determine risk is different than methods used by lawmakers, administrators and builders. Moreover, dimensions of risk include views on children's competence, environment, the possibility that adverse situations may occur and how those situations could affect kids over time.

Compliance with playground industry safety standards help ease the minds of parents by addressing hazards.



Parents generally fear outside influences most, which include factors such as equipment safety and the intentions of others. Compliance with playground industry safety standards help ease the minds of parents by addressing hazards. An article in *The Conversation*,⁵ a newspaper in Australia, examined the state of age- and developmentally appropriate challenge and how regulation standards were inhibiting it. The writers asserted that part of the issue was caused by the way safety policies avoided nuance.

Rather than asking playground designers and manufacturers to create equipment with age- and developmentally appropriate challenge in mind, blanket regulations were created that would protect all children. Unfortunately, sweeping standards prevented children who were able to take

4 Science Direct article: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S030590061200044X>

5 The Conversation article: <http://theconversation.com/kids-need-to-take-risks-mum-and-dad-will-just-have-to-deal-with-it-7862>

on greater challenges from having the opportunity. Some may argue that the possibility of adverse circumstances occurring isn't worth raising a generation of kids too afraid to act. The trick is to design playgrounds that provide age- and developmentally appropriate challenge for all kids. And this can, in fact, be done.

A lecture given at the Macquarie University Institute of Early Childhood⁶ points to play environments as the key to achieving a balance between challenge and safety. Children achieve a sense of accomplishment when they push past the obstacles on a playground. Kids can explore, learn and create while overcoming a challenge. It is then important that structures provide a challenging and hazard-free play experience.

4 Striking a Balance

Landscape Structures is an example of a company that is already doing that by meeting international standards of safety.⁷ The company remains committed to working and complying with the International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association, the Consumer Product Safety Commission and other organizations to ensure that its products are safe for children. However, it also provides age- and developmentally appropriate challenge in its equipment.

New designs make the balance between challenge and safety a possibility. For example, Landscape Structures designs and manufactures net-based climbers, boulder-climbing courses and zip line-type play components. Each piece of equipment offers kids a chance to challenge themselves physically and cognitively by creating an experience completely different from those offered by typical playstructures. Children must navigate sturdy nets, scale rock-style facades and race down

“New designs make the balance between challenge and safety a possibility.”

⁶ Macquarie University lecture presentation: http://www.academia.edu/2287644/Children_need_risk

⁷ Landscape Structures certification and standards: <https://www.playlsi.com/en/company/certifications-standards>

a line placed at a safe height. Designs such as these can provide age- and developmentally appropriate challenge while removing hazards, which should please both parents and regulators.

5 Providing Kids the Best of Both Worlds

Playstructures provide kids with the opportunity to establish: physical, psychological, emotional and social skills.






Playground manufacturers can offer age- and developmentally appropriate challenge and create a safe environment by designing intelligent equipment. Playstructures are key components of childhood development as they provide kids with the opportunity to establish physical, psychological, emotional and social skills. While regulators and parents both want to protect children, they may be over compensating by creating safety standards that take away those playground benefits. Implementing designs that support the needs of both kids and parents may be more functional and beneficial than creating sweeping regulations. Age- and developmentally appropriate challenge and playground safety can be reconciled, providing kids with the experiences they need to grow into well-balanced adults.



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