

# GP 2.1

Question number

Assessor  
use only

2 Directly outside my P.E class is a crèche. Four times a week, my fellow students and I are subject to the boisterous squeals coming from next door as the toddlers race around on bikes, frolic in the sand pit and clamber up the tire tree. It's great entertainment, reminiscent of the days when we too enjoyed the freedom of playing in the great outdoors. However, this experience is not at all indicative of the upbringing of a growing number of kids children today.

A recent surge of media interest has highlighted the growing phenomenon known as 'cotton-wool kids', in reference to those children who are over-protected, metaphorically padded or cotton-wool to keep them from harm not only by parents and caregivers but also through educational and even governmental policy. It is only natural that, as a society, we would seek to protect our children, but we must ask ourselves, "how much is too much?" How does one distinguish between appropriate caution and excessive restriction? How has this trend towards a generation of cotton wool kids come about, and what are it's potential consequences not only for the individual children affected, but for NZ society at large?

Among the numerous influences and causal factors is our <sup>modern</sup> ~~present~~-day ability to identify

and measure risk. As Dr. Carson (2008) states,

"We are seeing an unprecedented convergence of trends and historical developments that supports the contention that we are more aware of the risks we face today than any other society in history".

Scientific and technological advances have allowed us to more accurately identify risk.

C/I

R

A significant contributor to this awareness of the dangers we face is the media, who "often ignore the positive outcomes of risk-taking, sensational risk, and focus on the dangers of the world"

(Humberstone 2006). High-profile cases featuring kidnapping, as in the case of Madeleine McCann, along with emotive accounts of tragic accidents involving children (such as the Elm College canyoning disaster) are often portrayed in a way misrepresentative of the true risk magnitude of risk faced by children. They are nevertheless effective in causing parents to clutch their children that much more tightly. Parents that I have spoken to frequently cite the media - that is, what they see on TV or in the internet - as key causes for concern in regards to the safety of their children.

R

C/I

OE

OR

R

TOP

We are now living in what certain sociologists refer to as a "compensation culture" (Thomson et al 2007), where individuals exercise their freedom by suing corporate bodies for failure

to provide sufficient warning labels or protective measures. This is why many schools<sup>across NZ</sup> have banned games like dodgeball or bullrush, not only to prevent injuries but also to 'shield staff and the school from accusations of negligence and potential litigious action' (Thompson 2005).

In addition to this, the lifestyle choices of many New Zealanders are such that couples are having children considerably later in life for career's sake, and having fewer children. The boss at Playcentre Michelle noted that "parents who had a stillborn child, or whose little one was sick as a baby often find it hard to let go - the same applies for older parents". It could be fair to say that "parental anxiety has risen throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century as children are perceived as both more valuable and vulnerable (Stearns, 2003.)

So how are children affected? The root of the over-protective behaviour and rules is fear that children will be hurt and, indirectly, that the parents or schools will be seen as irresponsible.

Often this over-protectiveness often manifests itself through the way some children are kept from engaging in what is perceived to be risky play, or indeed, any risky activities. If they are allowed to play, full protective clothing is mandatory. I had to laugh when one of my friends told me her mother used to make her wear a helmet when

playing around the house! When we realise the benefits of play for children, we can begin to understand the potential impact on children benefit of play. //

EV

In the words of Dempsey and Frost (1993), "the role of play is to foster optimal growth, development and learning across all domains - cognitive, social and emotional - throughout childhood."

R

When children are playing, Playing is essential for a child's ~~have~~ well-being, or *Hauora*. Well-being consists of four interlinked spheres - the physical (*te taha tinana*), the social (*te taha whanau*), the mental and emotional (*te taha hinengaro*) and the spiritual (*te taha waima*). When one sphere is affected, whether positively or negatively, the other 3 spheres are likewise impacted to differing extents. Research has shown that play offers a multitude of ~~beneficial~~ benefits; it "provides a vehicle through which children can both demonstrate and develop ~~by~~ knowledge, skills, concepts, and dispositions" (Dempsey and Frost, 1993). The positive impact of play both directly and indirectly on each of a child's four spheres of well-being is extensive. //

ASK

R

IMP+

Risk-taking is similarly important. It is by "negotiating risks <sup>and relating them to individual capacity</sup>" that children learn from their mistakes and become aware of their personal health and safety (French et al, 2006). It is impossible to exist in a

DI

world without risk, and if our children are kept from learning how to deal with risks from an early age, it is highly likely that they will grow up with an impaired capacity to logically and wisely navigate the risks they will inevitably encounter later in life.

Socially, children who are "cotton-wooled" may struggle to interact confidently with others. Michelle R from Playcentre noted that "the over-protected children often isolated themselves from the rest of the group and refused offers to join in games". If these children have learned an attitude of fear passed on by anxious parents and do not have the social skills to engage their peers, they risk growing up isolated, struggling to make friends, with a <sup>consequently</sup> poor self-image.

It is difficult to predict the impact of 'cotton wool kids' on NZ society, as this is only come we have only become aware of it in the last decade or so. Not only are we lacking in statistical evidence, but due to the subjective nature of the topic, we cannot objectively 'measure' the magnitude to which certain children are 'cotton-wooled'. However, based on my findings concerning the impact being 'cotton-wooled' seems to have on the individual, and given the nature of NZ society I can make logical and inferences about it's potential impact on our society at large.

As addressed earlier, risk learning how to take calculated risk is essential for the physical, social, emotional and mental dimensions well-being of a child. So much of our society is dependent on our ability to gauge and respond wisely to the risks before us, whether it be making business decisions, driving, in the classroom or otherwise. If our children do not develop a 'risk-taking disposition' (Little and Wyner, 2008), then we could very well see either a lack of risk-taking or a highly unwise risk-taking, resulting in poor economical choices and dangerous physical pursuits such as binge drinking. As Sir Digby Jones puts it, "overprotecting our children - swaddling them in cotton wool - is bad for society, the economy, and young people's preparation for adulthood in a world of uncertainties" (2006). ()

Q1

Cotton wool kids kept from free play may also be somewhat underdeveloped physically, as they have not had the opportunity to hone their gross and fine locomotor skills, spatial sense, coordination and a host of other key skills essential to sport.

R

Sociologist Furedi even goes as far as to say "I predict sport will be the next area to be destroyed by the childhood protection industry". These are strong words, but physically underdeveloped children will simply struggle to reach their full

EV

athletic capacity.

It is possible that we will become a more suspicious culture, given the rigorous vetting systems that teachers, coaches and other adults in contact with children must first undergo. This sends "alarmist messages, often on a subliminal level, to parents that they must be wary of all strangers". While <sup>"Furedi (2009)"</sup> ~~as~~ <sup>E</sup> there are those who do have less than honorable intentions, they only represent a very small minority, ~~as~~ and a culture of mistrust and wariness does little to foster community spirit and social belonging.

Presently, cotton wool kids are considered a trend; however, if over-protected children grow up and come into positions of power where they can effect educational and even governmental policies in favour of ~~as~~ over-protecting our children, ~~that is~~ this may cause it to shift to become a national issue. Clearly, the effects of over-protecting our children are ~~are~~ hardly positive, both for their individual well-being and for our nation as a whole.

To conclude, it is my belief that this trend towards a generation of cotton-wool kids is both dangerous for the children and <sup>potentially</sup> detrimental for NZ society on multiple levels. It is essential that we act at the level of influence to bring about sustainable change by educating parents about the true risks of 'cotton-wooling' their

Question  
number

the active participation of kids, and about the benefits of play, through crèches of positive media influences, such as Nigel Latta's parenting show, which directly addresses these concerns. By doing this, we can effectively work to see a generation of children who are <sup>both</sup> equipped and encouraged to reach their full-potential.

Assessor's  
use only

JPO

8