

CEN....and the art of Motor- Skill Maintenance!

by Soc. Paed. Mogens Tom Jensen. Kompan a/s

I hope Robert M. Pirsig, the author of ZEN - and the art of Motorcycle Maintenance, will forgive this deliberate coincidence! I just couldn't help it, and I thought I might get away with it, by promoting this spiritual ride across the USA. If you haven't already!

In his book is a reference to a ZEN Buddhist concept of "simply sitting" and this exercise has the aim of dissolving the readers notion of separation between the "self" and the surrounding world, so that separation no longer dominates our consciousness. The point is, that we will never come to terms with the concept of quality if we maintain this separation between ourselves and what we are occupied with. I believe he is right!

As far as Playground Safety is concerned, the last decade has indeed been a very busy period. The time has come to pose a critical evaluation on what we have done so far. To se, if we have separated our self from our surrounding's, from real reality! It's "simply sitting" time!

25 years of working with kid's play and playgrounds, a recent injury prevention conference where a philosopher stated that: "ultimate safety is a preparation for death" and an article in a UK play magazine: "Confessions of a playground safety adviser" is what triggered me to write this article.

"We have made playgrounds so monumentally boring that any self-respecting child will go somewhere else to play, somewhere more interesting and usually more dangerous" (Peter Hesseltine. HAPA Journal nr. 13, 1995)

As the Product Safety Manager for an organisation with a world wide network of people having "ears to the ground" every day, and actively participating in the making of Playground Safety Standards in both Europe and the US, I receive a continuous flow of information concerning actions and re-actions to the safety issue. Over the years I have also had the habit of cutting or copy articles from newspapers, professional magazines etc. all related to children's world and everyday lives.

Looking at these articles over time, they seem to reveal trends that are to easily confirmed when talking to professionals. Cross-relating the information to other bit's

and pieces of child- and play related information, it looks as if we are quite successful, in making life difficult. Not just for kid's, but also for our self. It really scares me!

One could easily get the notion that the subject of children's play are being somewhat victimised by the impact from adult interests. The intense commercial, academic and public focus on play from a rather narrow safety point of view, seem on one hand to have promoted safety where safety was infringed, on the other hand, the process seem to be guided by inertia, apparently out of any body's control.

Processing through play is a prerequisite for human development and this notion should be everybody's possession. As war is too serious to leave to the generals, play is too important to leave to specialists.

In the words of King and Ball, we need to take a holistic approach, and this is an attempt to present and relate to some of the pieces in a complicated puzzle, that can only be made to form a holistic picture, if we look and evaluate it together.

What are we doing to our children?

"The environment of our childhood, remains the landscape of your soul".

A quote from an American architect, I believe, and surely worth remembering.

I see an increase in the reporting of children having "learning" difficulties!

The symptoms are lack of concentration, anti social behaviour and disciplinary problems. They get transferred to special education programmes. They get the "mark"! I ask myself, is it not us, the adults, who suffer from "learning difficulties" trying to make children learn in a way that doesn't suit the purpose?

At a nearby public school from where I live, teachers, refusing to mark the kids, has join up with a physical therapist and a Phys. Ed teacher. They have designed a program based on play and having fun together. By jumping, running, climbing, sliding and swinging. All the things that normally would happen on the playground!

The kid's assigned to the program are allowed to invite a friend along. Now everybody want's to go. Classroom teachers report remarkable progress, the whole class is profiting. The parents notice the change in their children's personality, classmates are calling all the time wanting to play. The energy, the self esteem, the fun! Life is a miracle, based on the concept of play !

My wife is an Early Childhood professional with 25 years of experience. She works as a supervisor for the municipal day-care system for 0-3 years old kid's. The number of children requiring additional pedagogical support to enhance their development to an age related level, is at a steep rise. We are talking about lacking in motorical, social and Cognitive skills.

She also report that parents generally are unfamiliar with the concept of play and its potential for their children's development. At worse, sometimes when the care-takers let children out for play, it is perceived as a "smart" move, in order not to do the job they are getting paid for? Watch parents with children, during shopping. If they bring the kid's at all, they install them in strollers, shopping carts etc. or they carry them. If they only knew the value of letting children "carry their own weight" getting the feel of their own body! Shopping can be a miracle too, based on the concept of play!

Another article reported on the rapidly increasing number of children suffering from allergic reactions. Due to these reactions they get to play less outside, they can't go to certain places (animals, hay, etc.) The article claims that a lot of these reactions and their severity, could be avoided if children were more physically active, because It would stimulate their immune system.

On diabetes, a doctor told me recently, that the number of people in Denmark, suffering from diabetes, will double in year 2010. More kids than ever are getting it. One of the three major parameters for the development of the disease, is the lack of exercise. The same day I read in a newspaper, that the purchase of video film has increased by 66 % in one year. 40 % of these are movies made for children.

You don't get to much exercise from watching the tube.
Could a challenging play environments change this? I think it could!

Talking about what children are exposed to from TV and video. The chief of Childrens Psychiatric Hospital in Copenhagen recently made reference to research showing an increase of violent behaviour among even very young children. Sometimes even with fatal consequences. There seem little doubt that children learn "how to" from watching violent movies.

But even knowing "how to", does not necessarily bring children to exercise violence, unless their personality is damaged. I believe, that a psychological profile would show a significant deficit on the more playful side of life, for these unfortunate kid's. Would anybody argue that we are talking about lack of self esteem, proper social

conception and all the rest of it? A new study has found, that every 20th individual between 15 and 20 years of age, has attempted suicide, and every 3rd individual in the same age group has considered it. (Danish Research Center for Suicide)

Children deliberately killing other children, beginning at the age of five !
With the present options, my personal choice is children running the risk of an accident on the playground. Not a fatal or debilitating one, but the kind of stuff that seem to happen no matter what we do!

Dr. Sue Jennings recently suggested that: "We might begin to understand the potential dangers for society, if people do not play enough when they are young".
(International Play Journal 3.95)

How can we make lawyers, Insurance companies and parents to understand this?

There seem to be an increasing gap between what we would like our children to become and the developmental opportunities we provide for them to achieve this. Child care professionals are reporting that parents apparently are more reluctant than ever, to accept what might happen to their child during what use to be perceived "normal" child play behaviour.

These are first generation of parents who themselves has been exposed to institutional care. According to a Danish Child Psychologist, these parents have spend an average of 23000 hours in institutional care. This is 17000 hours more than a child of the fifties. (E. Sigsgaard. The reality of Children, then and now!)

Have they learned, that someone else is responsible when something happens?
That someone must pay?

Are we becoming too afraid of liability to let children play?:

It is only logical, if the staff (or the state) makes a defensive move by issuing rules for absolute supervision and limiting "better safe than sorry" safety rules for play. They are in the same situation as the consulting Safety adviser and the responsible play equipment manufacturer. But, what if the outcome is wrong?

More and more programmes are developed to promote safe play behaviour. Unfortunately, many of them suggest to interfere by regulating the interaction between children. "Don't be two on the ladder at the same time" "Don't move in opposite directions on the overhead ladder" "Don't be two on the swing seat, etc. etc.

Regulations of this nature are designed to prevent children from getting into situations where potential conflicts would have to be resolved by negotiation, consideration, developing care and respect. In other words, it is likely to have a devastating effect on the development of social skills.

I still have nightmares from a program developed at an American University. A series of pictograms, showing generic play situations with crossed over "don't do that" signs. (Actually It's a love / hate relation, because these pictograms placed at the entrance of a playground, would act as a terrific guide to have some fun) The highlight is a template for a diploma to go on the billboard, announcing the: "Playground safety Star of the week".....and, by all means, with a photo of the child!

Question: What happens to individuals without a concept of social behaviour ?

The Impact of Playground safety on children's play:

Most playground safety standards has no intend to interfere with play value as such. Some, even make statements such as CEN 1176-1: "It is not the purpose of this standard, to affect the child's need to play, or to lessen the contribution that playground equipment makes either to the child's development or play that is meaningful from an educational point of view".

This intend to allow for play, is also emphasised by such statements as the US/ ASTM F-1487-93: "It's purpose is to reduce life threatening and debilitating injuries".

At the European Consumer Safety Association's (ECOSA) conference in 1988, initiating the drafting of the CEN/EN standard on Playground safety, Mr. Prentergast, the then director of the Consumer Safety Association (ECOSA) stated in his opening address: *"Obviously our long term goal is to reduce the number of accidents. However, such a reduction must not be at the cost of making the playgrounds so uninteresting and lacking in excitement that it no longer serves its primary purpose"*

If the question is: " Have we managed to cope with that? The answer is no !

"An objective method of determining the optimum distribution of expenditure among the various remedial options would be based on an assessment of their importance in contributing to accidents". (King &Ball. A Holistic Approach...LSS.1989)

Is that what we have done? Have we been objective?

The word "impact attenuating" surface is used throughout the standards and gives the impression that is has to be applied generally throughout the playground.

This is not at all the case. The requirement is set forth in the Safety Surfacing Standards and require an impact level of max. 200 Peak G and/or a 1000 HIC. In a lot of cases this means plain grass, dirt or just thin layers of sand, wood chips or other materials alike. After all, these requirements are designed for a worse case "head first fall" scenario, and this does not happen as often as we seem to believe. Used in a selective way, different surfaces could enhance the environment from a play value point of view but combined with a requirement of accessibility, this could ultimately lead to a situation where playgrounds are turned into a rubberised, unnatural environment. The costs are prohibitive and there seem to be a risk of some types of injuries to increase dramatically.

Numerous of playgrounds are being dismantled (in some cities, more than 50 %) due to the cost of retrofit and maintenance required to obtain insurance coverage. Getting rid of certain categories of equipment is already common praxis. Not necessarily because they are dangerous, but simply because they belong to a category of equipment, where specific types or brands has proven to cause injuries. This is not just happening to a particular category of equipment's, but to all!

Another example of safety having a significant impact on design. The play house is an important prop for role play. Due to a perceived need for supervision, they are either being removed completely, or they are cut full of "se-through" holes. In some cases, roofs has been prohibited. There goes the "secret" retreat, highly recommended in the literature as a prop for developing a sense of privacy!

Question: What happens to individuals without a concept of privacy ?

All known standards has requirements of safety zones around the equipment. Of course there should be space enough to move about, but is 12 feet (4 meters) plus "encroachment zone" really necessary? Are we simply not trying to avoid children from getting close to each other, and are we simply not just stealing al-ready limited space from children. These are the messages that we constantly get!

Ad to the above, what I would like to baptise the "Happy Birthday requirements". It's a serie of requirements regulating i.e. Step heights, Guard-rail heights, "Grip and grasp" dimensions etc. etc.

The intend is of course to address specific age groups, but the practical implications does not always deal with reality. To day you can't, but tomorrow you may!

As always, when regulation become to specific, the results are questionable.

Let's assume play as being a necessity in order for children to acquire skills enabling them on their way into the strange world of adulthood. Lets also assume the notion that play involves risk assessment and - management and if children learn to manage while being in a challenging play environment, they will know how to cope better with all the things they will get exposed to outside the playground!

Seriously, are we developing mutants:

Is it possible, that there is a link between our continuous intrusion (read limitation) on children's play and problems found, but normally not connected to play?

A recent survey showing that 25 % of 3-4 years old, and progressively increasing to 50 % girls and 94 % boys at age 15, are having problems with their Achilles Heal being too tight. (Danish Rigshospital. Reimers, Brodersen and Pedersen)

These kids are subject to: Valgus position of the ankle, Growing pains in the legs, Toe-walking, Lowered forefoot, Heal pain, and an increased risk of strained ankles. A main activity recommended for the training programme is simply climbing and children are encouraged to run up the slide bedway!

I admire these people!

Listen to this quote by the Australian Health and Safety Commission, made at a playground equipment evaluation:

"We agree that the equipment do appear to conform with the Australian standard, but it is our opinion that the equipment is generally rather dull and repetitive. Whereas this can be seen as very safe, we believe it encourages user to "improve" the equipment's excitement.

We therefore feel that it is better to have some active dynamic features with an acceptable risk level, rather than bland, un-inspiring, safe ones"

The Australian standard is not better or worse than any other similar standard!

Is it possible, that a "safety zone and play safe rule" guided behaviour, give children the impression that even minor "social conflicts" should be avoided, instead of being used to develop social skills, like consideration, sharing and respect?

Is it possible, that without these fundamental skills children will resort to dominant aggressive "my rights" and "I was first" behaviour? Always in need for adult intervention to settle disputes "according to rules"

Question: What kind of youngsters are they going to be. What kind of adults?

Is it possible, that the age distinction introduced in the standards is cementing the already widespread and unfortunate separation of age groups. A separation that seem to further the lack of transferral of culture and human values.

The unwritten rules previously transferred between generations through play?

An international standard in ISO regi is probably inevitable, but a second thought tell me, that neither time or we, as involved adults, has "matured" enough yet, to do the job in the sensible way it ought to be done?

This is by all means not a commercial attempt to avoid the legally set requirements of product liability, on the contrary. It is an attempt to do better, to se things in a wider perspective in order to cause as little side effects to children as possible.

There are things we ought to do, before we move directly ahead with an international standard, things to be regarded as part of proper planning and preparation. We don't know, if what we have done so far is working, we would be going on blindfolded, if we would not consider a very busy "simply sitting" period!

Research for the future:

I se an almost desperate need for research of the following issues:

- 1) We need better statistics from the EHLASS and similar programmes. Products are not properly identified and categorised so that manufacturers can readily use the information in their product development process!
- 2) We need relative data to show the amount and availability of products by type in the geographical areas where data are accumulated, to help us prioritise!
- 3) We need better information on the safety level and - reference of a product! Present data does not show whether a product complies with a given standard!
- 4) We need better information on the products origin. We have a suspicion that a large number of products causing injuries are "non-commercial" products!
- 5) We need to investigate the implications of the standards already made, in areas where they have been fully implemented compared to areas where they have not!

The new European EN 1176 Safety standard for Public Playgrounds, present itself with 250 pages of requirements. What would an international ISO standard look like? What would that make us look like?

Mr. Henrik Ibsen, a famous Norwegian author apparently had a pretty good idea:
"There is always a risk of being alive, the more alive, the more risk!"

Soc. Paed.

Mogens Tom Jensen.

Product Safety Manager

Kompan a/s

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