

What is more dangerous, an adventure playground or a conventional playground? ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

In the cultural conversation ^[3] about play and risk ^[4], adventure playgrounds – proper ones ^[5] I mean, with timber structures, tools, junk materials and skilled workers – are very much on the radical side of the argument. But how dangerous are they, really?

One American school has conducted a natural experiment that helps to answer this question. And the results ^[6] – set out in a report from the leading playwork group *Pop-Up Adventure Play* ^[7] – cast doubt on standard approaches and thinking.

Parish school in Houston, Texas is a private school for children with a range of disabilities and conditions. It is highly unusual in that it has, on one site, two very different types of play space.

It has an adventure playground with bespoke structures (some designed with input from children), stocked with sand, water, tools and junk materials and supervised by trained playworkers. And it has a fixed equipment playground that is supervised by school educators.

The school's population makes regular use of both facilities. And the school keeps good records of accidents and injuries.

The set-up of the experiment is simple: one institution, one group of children, two very different playgrounds. So how do the injury rates compare?

As you may have guessed by now, the fixed playground came out worst for safety. In fact, three or four times as many injuries occurred there compared to the adventure playground. This is based on a like-for-like 'relative risk' comparison that takes into account the different usage levels and opening hours for the two sites.

(There are some caveats around this comparison – see the end of this post.)

In case you get the wrong idea, injury rates on both sites are, by any reasonable measure, very low. The paper draws on statistics ^[8] from my long-term collaborator Prof David Ball which suggest that even the 'more dangerous' equipped playground is about as safe as being at home. (Playing in the adventure playground is about as safe as playing table tennis.)

[Table, "Relative injury risk per 100,000 hours", available to view online].

Over the five years of the study, there were just ten serious injuries (defined as anything that required off-site treatment or care). These included two impact head injuries and six fractures or possible fractures.

The report does not give details of long-term consequences. But based on the descriptions of the incidents, my guess is that few if any of the injuries were life-changing.

Even though I have given away the ending, do not let this stop you from reading the full report ^[6], which is engaging, accessible and well-argued.

Indeed it doubles up as an insightful account of the workings of a staffed adventure playground. It also gives a glimpse (not suitable for the super squeamish) into the reality of children's play lives, which is one filled with scrapes, bruises, setbacks and – occasionally – more unpleasant incidents, which bring to mind *Lady Allen of Hurtwood* ^[9] quote, now a rallying cry for adventurous play.

The authors Morgan Leichter-Saxby and Jill Wood – both playworkers – speculate briefly on the possible reasons for the differences. Is it something about the playwork approach to risk, they wonder? Or perhaps that children who encounter what play designer Helle Nebelong calls ^[10] 'the knobbly and asymmetrical forms of life' learn to take more responsibility for themselves and their safety?

As with any research, the study raises questions as well as answers. Be that as it may, its great strength is that it shows elegantly how play safety is not a simple matter.

'Safe' does not mean free from risk. 'More safe' does not mean removing hazards. Taking a thoughtful approach to safety does not mean simply building structures that comply with industry standards. These are crucial insights for anyone who cares about children's play

experiences, and I hope they are shared far and wide.

Caveats

This is a small study with a specific child user group that is not representative of the local child population. So the findings may not transfer to this population, or to other population groups. Also, the report is not an academic or peer reviewed paper. And the lapsed mathematician in me cannot help but point out that no statistical tests are given to back up the claim of statistical significance. But at the very least, the injury rates cast severe doubt on the idea that the adventure playground is more dangerous. Finally, I am not entirely clear that the same population is using the two spaces. The report states this in its introduction. However, the analysis states there were 150 users of the adventure playground, and 424 users of the conventional playground. While the calculated injury rates take these numbers into account, comparisons between the two are made harder if the two user groups are significantly different. (I would be happy if the authors wanted to clarify this here.)

-reprinted from Rethinking Childhood

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