

Why the Danes encourage their kids to swing axes, play with fire, and ride bikes in traffic ^[1]

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Source: Quartz

Format: Article

Publication Date: 29 Oct 2018

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Heidi Vikkelsø Nielsen needed to find an image to show what childhood looks like in her country. The former teacher and current professor of education in Denmark settled on one of a young girl gleefully wielding a very sharp saw. “I think it captures perfectly how we think about childhood,” she says.

Adults appreciate that children learn by doing, not by being taught, she adds. So adults—both teachers and parents—generally get out of the way to let children do what they love: run, jump, climb, dig, hide, run, and, apparently, do some light carpentry.

At a forest playground on the outskirts of Copenhagen, kids are encouraged to build fires. At an urban playground in the city, kids cycle around a mini-version of Copenhagen with kid-sized bike lanes, pint-sized street lights, and mini-walkways. As a school principal told Nielsen: “We are trying to embrace the child in an adult world.”

As many university heads, school reformers, and fed-up parents clamor for more free play for children, Denmark offers an appealing example of what child-led care and early education looks like. Independence is favored over “learning,” care is emphasized over “teaching,” and over-supervision—helicoptering—is considered a sure-fire path to preventing kids from acquiring essential life skills.

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“There’s a high focus on play especially, free play,” says Nielsen. When you walk into a vuggestue (nursery) or dagpleje (daycare), caregivers are hands-off, with less structured activity and more child-led exploring. This is different from many UK and US early-care systems, which often prioritize school readiness, making kids spend more time at desks learning numbers and letters, which means less time doing whatever catches their fancy. In Denmark, “academic learning is almost frowned upon,” Nielsen notes. “We don’t want to disturb the child with all this learning.”

Nature plays a significant role, with natural materials prominent in Danish playgrounds, instead of all the plastic and rubber often used elsewhere. Risky play is encouraged, and injuries almost expected. There is a distinction between getting hurt and seriously hurt, though. “I think a broken arm is seriously hurt,” Nielsen says.

“Bruises are seen as how you experience life,” she explains. “You fall, you get up.” Professionals would not be punished—or sued—for a child coming home with the requisite bumps and bruises of childhood.

Tim Gill, author of *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society* and a long-time play advocate in the UK, says Copenhagen and other Danish cities are leading the way internationally to create distinctive, challenging public playgrounds and schoolyards. “Water, fallen trees, hillocks [berms], ditches and other risky elements are common ingredients,” he says. The approach reflects Danes’ love of nature and their desire for children to interact with it. “The Danes trust their children to take responsibility for themselves from an early age, with spaces that feed children’s appetite for adventure and nurture their resilience and self-reliance.”

Some playgrounds are staffed, so there are adults to bring out equipment for kids and show them how to use it. “They manage items like bikes, axes, or balls,” says Jeff Risom, chief innovation officer at Gehl Architects in Copenhagen. “There’s a teaching element,” he notes, like showing kids how to use a knife for whittling or an ax to chop wood.

Danes come from a starting point that children need to play, so schools and the government find ways to create structures that encourage this, from building playgrounds and public spaces that encourage risky play, to providing after-school care that focuses on freedom, not skills to get into university or a high-paying job. Indeed, some CEOs now argue that more free play is exactly what kids will need to survive and thrive in the age of AI, when machines do the computations and humans will be needed to be, well, human.

Institutions matter

Nielsen admits that it’s not just the country’s prevailing philosophy that makes Denmark’s approach so novel: it’s the role of the welfare state. For one thing, parents are paid, quarterly, for having children, on a sliding scale that diminishes with age, up until the child turns 17.

Maternity leave starts four weeks before birth, continues for 14 weeks after birth, and then another 32 weeks can be shared between partners. Fathers get two weeks of paternity and whatever is chosen to share. A nurse comes to check up on new mothers at home, and support is offered to those who struggle with breastfeeding.

By age one, most children go into care, which is affordable, local, high-quality and hands-off. It is even cheaper if you are poorer, or parenting alone. Even private schools are subsidized, with 71% of the cost covered.

As a result, Denmark has one of the highest female labor participation rates in the world—76.1%, according to the OECD. “The concept of a stay-at-home-mother does not really exist in Denmark due to parental leave system,” says Nielsen.

When kids enter school in Denmark, they can sign up for after-school clubs that keep them occupied until parents are done with work. Rather than hone their piano, math, or Mandarin skills, these clubs also simply let children play.

On a windy Monday afternoon at a playground outside of the Guldberg school in Nørrebro, one of Copenhagen’s poorer neighborhoods, children are jumping on small trampolines and talking to us strangers—what are we looking at, why are we here, and would we like to see them bicycle full speed? They climb on high structures and most are not wearing coats. “They know if they are cold,” says Nielsen. There are no grownups around; in the corner of the playground, there is a building which houses the after-school club. Our guide says the adults are inside.

Child’s play

Research supports Denmark’s approach. Meghan Talarowski, an American landscape designer, conducted a massive study on playground use in the US and UK, using video to track how 18,000 visitors used the playgrounds. Comparing playgrounds of similar size (one-quarter to three-quarters of an acre) and population density (50,000 to 175,000 people in a square mile area) in London, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, she discovered that the London playgrounds had 55% more visitors, 14% more adults, and children and teens were 16-18% more physically active. One reason, she concluded, was that the London playgrounds used more natural materials and promoted riskier play.

“Besides accommodating adults, the London playgrounds think outside the box,” her report concluded. “They use diverse materials and non-prescriptive, riskier play structures that lead to lower costs and lower injury rates than U.S. playgrounds, which is counter intuitive, given our intense focus on safety in the last few decades.”

American playgrounds, she countered, have reached “peak safety.” “We have created a nation of overly expensive, homogeneously safe, and insidiously boring play spaces,” she wrote. In her study, half of the children studied were found in just four areas: climbing, swinging, or in sand or grass.

Gill, the author, reflects on numerous reports published this autumn concluding that girls in the UK are less happy than they used to be, and wonders whether a lack of choice may be at the heart of their growing unhappiness. “We know children value their everyday freedoms and choices,” he says, referencing the 2013 Children’s Society Good Childhood studies, which showed that simply having choice in life had the highest correlation to kids’ reported well-being. Indeed, studies suggest children have less everyday freedom than they used to. “I think it’s entirely reasonable to think that—amongst other things—less everyday freedom means less happy children,” Gill says.

Glorifying social care and education systems in small, rich, homogenous countries like Denmark can be both instructive and annoying. Every country must adapt to its own reality, and nobody has got it exactly right.

For her part, Nielsen thinks Denmark’s hands-off approach in the early years, when children are learning to negotiate social settings, can be problematic. Some kids, including those from poorer backgrounds, she argues, may not have well-developed social skills; without guidance, they might fail to develop it. “It is almost like a lord of the flies,” she says.

Denmark’s education system is also rarely extolled as being a global leader, like Finland’s or Estonia’s. The state spends a lot of money to get mediocre international test results. But new OECD research (pdf) shows educational social mobility is relatively high, meaning the poorest kids have a shot at getting a good education, unlike in many other places, where neighborhoods determine students’ destinies. The other advantage Danish children have in their crucial early years is the time, and space, to just play.

Region: Europe [3]

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risky play [5]

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