

**Taking hold of the language
of
RISK**

Many teachers, pedagogues, designers and others understand *intellectually* that children and teenagers taking self-chosen risks is a natural and necessary part of their play and learning.

We might call this type of risk-taking ‘beneficial risk-taking’.

Equally, some if not most of those teachers, pedagogues and designers can feel marginalised – disempowered - when decisions about risk levels are being made. Somehow, the very words used to talk about risk – for example, hazard, harm, serious injury - can intimidate.

My task today is to help you take back the language of risk and risk assessment - to make it your own.

First, the logic:

- Risk is both inevitable and necessary – in all lives, adult, teenager, child: we cross busy roads, fall in love, drive cars, and so on
- Whilst we can be taught many things, some things *cannot* be taught – they have to be learned through experience
- No experience = no learning
- Even when one knows a technique, say, crossing the road – look left, look right, look left again – *actually* deciding when it's OK to cross is a question of judgment. And making best possible judgments relies to a significant extent on building up accumulated experience
- And the process of building up experience necessarily entails risk.

But taking risks is also FUN

We choose to do it. It's part of being human.

It's part of the reason we ski, climb mountains, do extreme sports, climb trees and much more.

Thus, risk is not simply a BAD thing, but is, rather, in itself neutral.

We need to make judgments about what, in any particular context or circumstance, constitutes an *acceptable level of risk*.

What constitutes an *acceptable level of risk* will vary according to circumstances and can only be decided in the context of the potential BENEFITS that might be gained from taking 'x', 'y' or 'z' risks.

For example, adults who go skiing, who send their kids skiing, have decided that the very real risk of breaking a bone is *an acceptable level of risk* because they value the benefits of skiing – fun, the fresh air, the thrills, the sense of taking a risk and so forth.

We can say they are engaging in *Beneficial Risk Taking*. A useful term, I think. One that we should own and use.

In any assessment of risk one MUST set it against an assessment of the potential BENEFITS that taking the risk may offer.

So, if risk-taking is inevitable, necessary, and can bring benefits, words that have too often carried only a negative meaning, need to be rethought, re-defined.

HAZARDS – cannot simply and always be bad. Without ‘hazards’ there are no mountains to ski on, no trees to climb, no steps that will take us upstairs – or down.

HARM – cannot always be simply bad (though may be uncomfortable for a bit), to be avoided at all costs. Harm can be a good teacher – teaching children and teenagers in particular the virtues of alertness, thinking before one leaps.

That’s why parents say to their child who has just fallen over after being careless, ‘That’ll teach you’. It’s a form of common sense or *sunt fornuft*.

Bumps, bruises, even broken limbs, may be the price we pay – are prepared to pay – for gaining the benefits of an activity. Skiing is a good example.

Therefore pursuing an automatic policy of *risk elimination* (in any case impossible) or *risk minimisation* is a false, mistaken policy because used indiscriminately it lessens or obliterates the possibility of Beneficial Risk Taking. We may think that such an indiscriminate negative approach can in practice cause Harm.

To assess what constitutes an *acceptable level of risk*, one must determine where the balance lies between the potential risks of an activity or feature and potential benefits. In other words, a Risk-Benefit Assessment.

Where you decide the balance will be struck will depend on the values and objectives of your organisation.

What's a Serious Injury?

'Serious injury' can be thought of in medical terms and in social terms.

The social terms are valid. Thus, in the skiing example, adults have decided that both for themselves, and for their children, a broken bone sustained in skiing is not a sufficiently serious injury such that it stops them skiing.

And certainly, plenty of adults and children break a bone when skiing. And on recovery, go skiing again! And, for many, the same sort of logic applies to horse riding, tree climbing, and so forth

Do not use the word SAFE. It's an unsafe thing to do.

'Safe' has many meanings and connotations, e.g. it can be interpreted as suggesting that no harm will come to someone in a particular circumstance. We have seen that this is an unhelpful way of thinking about activities and features.

Safe can also mean that something adheres to a set standard. But adherence to a standard cannot guarantee that potential harm is eliminated.

Try and avoid talking about 'safe' and speak instead of *acceptable* or *unacceptable* level of risk, depending on your assessment of the case.

Sources of Knowledge

Please, respect yourself.

You know about children and teenagers. How? Why?

You were once a child and your recollections about what you did, how you did it, how you felt, what you failed at, what you achieved, are legitimate sources of knowledge.

In addition, you work with and for children and teenagers, you observe them on a regular and sustained basis. You have day to day, practical knowledge of their abilities, their actual behaviours and responses, their intuitive and growing personal risk assessment capabilities.

Both are valid – your history, your observations – authoritative sources of knowledge. Respect them. Use them.

Play equipment and surfacing Standards

It is becoming increasingly clear that many who work with and design for children see Standards as unhelpful and seemingly disconnected from the objective of creating school grounds that are rich, varied, natural, challenging, and flexible.

Yet, the very word *Standard* has intimidatory force.

As I promised at the outset, my task today is to *take back the language* associated with risk and its assessment. So, let's get hold of that word and concept: Standard

Standard

First, the dictionary definitions of the word offer clues as to the hold the idea of a Standard has over us. Here are some:

- ‘a definite level of excellence or adequacy’
- ‘of enduring value’
- ‘an established or accepted model’
- ‘an accepted authoritative statement of a church’s creed’

Thus, the very idea of a Standard implies immunity from fundamental critique. And play equipment and surfacing Standards have their own army of inspectors to make sure you don’t deviate from the rule or creed.

Little wonder that Standards are perceived as inevitable, unchallengeable.

But that is wrong

A key motivation for having Standards, increasingly now international, is that they facilitate free trade between countries and trading blocks.

This objective of 'harmonising' Standards across jurisdictions is a core purpose of Standard-making bodies, for example, the American Society for Testing Materials (ASTM International) and the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN).

Thus, the impetus for Standards is not at base the welfare of children, or based on an understanding of the needs of children and their outdoor play and learning.

From the outset, there is the sense of a disconnect between the objectives of Standard-making, and our outdoor learning and play objectives.

This is exacerbated when one looks at who actually makes decisions about play equipment and surfacing standards.

Who makes decisions about play equipment and surfacing standards?

In the main, it is the manufacturers of play equipment and surfacing. There is some representation of consumer interests but, so far as I'm aware, no or little representation by those who work with, understand, and are committed to children and teenagers outdoor play and learning. One might say that Standards have been captured by vested interests.

A Civil Society Matter

My point here is that what should be a *civil society* matter – a matter for play organisations, pedagogical experts, designers, and so forth - has been captured by manufacturing industry. That industry takes a narrow technical-

cum-medical approach to standards, rather than a wider, value-based perspective.

Thus, for example, decisions about what constitutes a 'serious injury', what constitutes an 'acceptable level of risk' in play are judgment-based questions, not reducible to the technical. And it is within civil society that such judgments should be determined

It is time for civil society – you who are here today – to challenge Standards and Standard-making structures and processes.

A criticism I would make of many of us, our organisations, our municipalities – I include myself – is that we have failed in our responsibilities in not taking hold of Standard-making, the structures and processes through which they are formulated. (If this interests you, please contact me: info@playlink.org)

Finally, a word about Anxiety

We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, anxious when fulfilling our responsibilities towards children and teenagers.

But anxiety is not a moral quality. Being anxious is simply part of the job, part of the context in which we make decisions, whether as pedagogues, designers or parents. Being anxious is not a form of justification for decisions taken about what constitutes an *acceptable level of risk*'

The responsibility is to interrogate our anxiety, to understand its source and power, but not to let it affect our decisions about what is good for children and teenagers.

We all know the phrase the 'over-anxious parent'. That is a parent whose decisions, for whatever reason, are directed at comforting the parent via the decisions they make about their child.

We must avoid being the over-anxious school, municipality, pedagogue, designer, protecting ourselves via the decisions we make about what children and teenagers are allowed to do.

So, perhaps my little talk has at least started the work of helping to reclaim the language of risk, to make it your own, to curb its intimidatory force. Here again are your words:

1. Risk

2. Hazard

3. Harm

4. Safe

5. Serious injury

6. Acceptable level of risk/unacceptable level of risk

7. Beneficial risk taking

8. Standards

I sign off and wish you:

Common Sense

Sunt Fornuft

Bernard Spiegel

www.playlink.org

Bernard@playlink.org