

Is the Elimination of Risk Really the Best Practice for Canadian Child Care Centres?

By Hannah Gillis



Swinging from ropes, jumping from monkey bars, and climbing trees, what used to be considered normal child's play is now referred to as 'risky play'. Risky play often has a negative connotation, but is this really the case? It can be a thrilling experience that provides children with an opportunity to challenge themselves, test their limits and explore boundaries. With risk comes reward. When a child climbs up the monkey bars by themselves for the first time, there is a small risk that they may fall and possibly suffer an injury, but should this risk squander the chance for the child to succeed and feel a sense of accomplishment?

Many child care providers today believe that over the past few decades child care has become less centered around the child and more focused on the rules and regulations. Hundreds, if not thousands of pages of various child care policies and guidelines are distributed at both the municipal and provincial level. In the city of Toronto, the Municipality's Assessment for Quality Improvement guidelines state that they assist child care centres in the deliverance of high quality programs that allow children opportunities for play, socialization, exploration and developmentally appropriate learning in a safe and nurturing environment. The provincial guidelines also known as "How Does Learning Happen" supports pedagogy and program development in early years settings that is shaped by views surrounding children, the role of educators and families, and the relationships among them. Although these guidelines are in place to ensure a high

standard of child care and to hold providers accountable, are they preventing the children from getting the most out of their early years?

In the Canadian child care system, true child-centered care is hard to come by. The authoritarian nature of our child care regulations reaffirms the mental anguish and increased fear of failure to meet the proposed guidelines that child care providers face everyday. Elimination of risk becomes the provider's main priority, rather than allowing the children to make their own decisions and accept responsibility for their actions. Children should have the freedom to make mistakes and errors, it's how they learn and thrive. We live in a democratic society that promotes equality, freedom and justice, shouldn't child care centres be able to portray these values without the fear of being litigated or written up as non-satisfactory? When safety and protection are at the main focus of the child care provider, education can be severely compromised. For example, limiting outdoor play to try and prevent potential injuries negatively affects the children's creativity, social learning and exploration. We've created an environment where children must look to authority figures to make decisions and solve conflict, which decreases their independence, personal responsibility and decision making. These types of environments can remove problem solving, responsibility and reasoning from a student's education which are all very critical aspects of child development.

Like any society, guidelines are essential to maintain peace, prevent chaos and ensure that everyone is on the same level. Child care guidelines are no different, they are there

to protect and guide the child, family, educator and the environment. Deaths, injuries and serious occurrences are far too common in unlicensed child care centres, which displays the need for regulation and accountability. However, it seems that the guidelines have become increasingly rigid, exclusive and not centered on the child. The assessment for quality improvement guidelines used by the Municipality of Toronto child care facilities are strictly based on a numerical scale which indicates whether the facility did not meet, met or exceeded the expectations. Although a lot of these guidelines are very reasonable, there is definitely room for improvement. We need more fluid and flexible guidelines, a child care centre should not be labelled as “non-compliant” or “unacceptable” strictly for not fulfilling some of the more superficial guidelines. The guidelines should be prioritized and weighted to signify their importance. For example, there is a minimum number of books required in each child care room that include children with disabilities. When an AQI inspector came to the centre the child care workers could not find the book right away, due to the fact that a child had placed it in the toy oven across the room. The child care center was given a non-compliance rating regarding this incident, even though they did have the correct number of books. The issue was that the inspector was not able to view the book at all times. What could the child care providers have possibly done to prevent this from happening? Are they expected to keep track of all the books while the children are playing?

Another guideline often questioned by child care providers is the inability to use terms of endearment towards children (i.e. honey, dear, sweetie, etc.). What if some of the children have names associated with these terms? Should the child care providers not call the child by their name for fear of being written up as being non-compliant? We have to take a look at the inclusivity of child care guidelines and if they are truly focused on supporting the overall development and well-being of the children.

One of our society's main issues surrounding child care regulations is that we are so concerned with risk elimination that we are taking away children's personal responsibility and decision making. In our compensation-centered society, the fear of litigation or the failure to meet the established guidelines prevent child care providers and educators from doing their job to the best of their abilities. The increased pressure that childcare providers face on a day-to-day basis to meet every guideline and regulation has an extremely corrosive impact on their professional life. This has led to a surplus of "What if...?" questions which are used more and more to restrict the activities of children in order to prevent potential injuries or non-compliances. This leads to wasted time, effort and resources that could have been directed towards the child's education and development. Many providers have to sacrifice a children's independence and autonomy to keep their programming within the provided guidelines. They often find themselves constantly trying to prevent the inevitable. It is not uncommon for young children to have problems with balance and low core strength, which ultimately contributes to their

clumsiness and frequent falls. Should a child care provider be expected to prevent all the bumps, bruises and injuries that are associated with childhood?

In Iceland, the Ministry of Culture and Education also has a pedagogical aim when it comes to child care regulations and methods. Their primary focus is not centered around the elimination of risk, but rather risk management - which in turn, provides children with more freedom and responsibility. Iceland's national curriculum is based on six pillars (literacy, sustainable development, health and well-being, democracy/human rights and equality) from birth until adulthood. The Ministry of Culture and Education grants child care licenses, creates national guidelines and supervises law implementation, but child care centers are encouraged to develop their own emphasis within these national guidelines. These guidelines use children's play as an educational tool and emphasize children's happiness and social development through emotional, social, cognitive and motor development. Their main objectives are to encourage personal responsibility, independence and autonomy as well as foster self-esteem, confidence and health awareness.

Children's interests and welfare should be the primary mission of the child care centre, as well as the cultivation of a child's personal expression and general development. Iceland's guidelines put a heavy emphasis on democracy and human rights for they believe that it is very important for children to experience a democratic society as they will eventually be an active member of one. Providing children with opportunities to

make their own decisions and taking responsibility for their actions is an extremely valuable experience that can prepare them for 'real world' situations.

When discussing the role of child care in the Icelandic society, a heavy emphasis is placed on ensuring that children respect nature and have the opportunity to be outdoors as much as possible. Children are encouraged to explore their environment - jump, climb and run around without the constant use of outdoor toys and structured activities. They encourage children to listen to and exchange views with one another, to select activities and places to explore outdoors. The child care provider facilitates dialogue between the children so that they can decide as a group what some potential risks/dangers might be and how they can be prevented. By allowing children to take an active part in this group discussion, it gives them a sense of personal responsibility and respect which fosters caring, consideration and mutual assistance for everyone. The child care methods used in Iceland are widely accepted and praised by Icelandic parents, which gives child care providers the ability to do their jobs without the fear of being reprimanded or questioned on the quality, safety and credibility of their programming. The Ministry of Culture and Education trusts that child care providers are able to manage potential risks and will follow the six pillars of the national guidelines when providing child care. This allows child care providers to feel respected and capable of providing high-quality programming.

Eliminating risk from a child care environment is not a practical solution to a child care providers fear of a non-compliance rating. It not only compromises the quality of

education and care a child receives, but it also affects their development, autonomy and personal responsibility. We need to look at new child-centered ways to hold child care centres accountable and to ensure a high-quality standard of care. Parents need to be familiarized with the child care pedagogy and the reasoning behind these guidelines. We need to consider the amount of adult pre-planning that enhances program quality and the amount that squelches spontaneity and creativity among educators and children. As seen in Icelandic child care facilities, going back to the basics of child-initiated play while allowing children to manage risks with minimal adult input proves that if we trust the children (and in turn - the educators) they will rarely put themselves in danger and are capable of assessing what is an appropriate risk.

Excessively specific guidelines and regulations are the norm in our society in an attempt to prevent any form of legal responsibility for future serious occurrences. A more inclusive system with simplistic approaches based on maintaining the autonomy of children and trusting the educators to do their job and manage risks without reservation, would allow children to grow up into self-sufficient members of society.

Reference List:

Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2011) Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools. Retrieved from: http://www.dalvikurbyggd.is/resources/Files/krilakot/adskr_leiksk_ens_2012.pdf

Kierna Corr (2016) Learning for Life: Iceland. Retrieved from: <http://nosuchthingasbadweather.blogspot.ca/search/label/Iceland>

Martha Friendly (2006) University of Toronto, Childcare Resource and Research Unit: Briefing Notes. Retrieved from: http://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/BN_EarlyLearning06.pdf

Quality of Childcare and Early Education Services (2010), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Retrieved from: <http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/37864559.pdf>

Rachel Wilkinson (2016) University of Akureyri: Risky Play in Icelandic Preschools. Retrieved from: http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/21910/50747/3/Risky_play_in_Icelandic_preschools_RACHEL.pdf

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2008), The Icelandic Preschool Act. Retrieved from: https://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf_Annad/Preschool_Act.pdf

WOW air UK (2016), Growing up in Iceland. Retrieved from: <https://wowair.us/magazine/growing-up-in-iceland/>