Your child is a wuss

Christopher Murn

W hen Belgian Gardens, a Townsville state primary school, banned cartwheels and handstands in August, it ignited a media frenzy. But as bizarre as it is, the handstand ban is only one incidence of a widespread trend affecting all Australian schools.

Carlton Gardens Primary School has removed its monkey bars, St Michael’s Primary School has banned football and soccer during recess, St Peter Chanel Primary School now allows students to play football and soccer only if there is no tackling, and Ascot Vale West Primary has banned all games that are deemed ‘too rough.’

Many schools have even instituted birthday cake bans to prevent children bringing cakes to school to share with their classmates; cakes are too unhealthy and raise food safety concerns.

The Belgian Gardens cartwheel ban drew attention from both the Queensland and federal governments. Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard promised to look into the ban, while Queensland Premier Anna Bligh and Education Minister Rod Welford made it clear responsibility for the decision rested on the principal’s shoulders.

The media never picked up on, and the politicians never admitted, that the principal’s shoulders.

It advocates pre-participation screening of students before physical activity using a questionnaire to ascertain the medical history of all participants as well as family, school, other sporting and social commitments.

Swings, see-saws, flying foxes and roundabouts are also now banned from NSW and Victorian public schools. Playground equipment must meet strict building standards which regulate falling heights, impact absorbing surfaces and construction materials.

Litigious parents are taking the blame for these bans after Education Queensland released figures showing that 93 compensation claims were brought against the Queensland Government last year over school yard injuries. No consideration has been given to the fact that these guidelines actually invite litigation; setting unrealistic and complex safety requirements is throwing ammunition to litigious parents and encouraging stupid bans from fearful principals. What principal will want to admit at court that they chose not to follow safety guidelines?

The real losers are the children. Not only are they being harassed by the fun police, but experts are saying these bans are having long term consequences on children’s development. The child and adolescent psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg believes that sanitising children’s playing environments will create a generation of wimps who lack decision making skills and resilience to life’s setbacks: ‘it’s all part of this ‘wussification’ syndrome that we’re seeing in contemporary Australia where schools have been forced to bow to the great God of occupational health and safety.’

Long and complex education department guidelines are encouraging a culture of risk adversity in schools. If governments wish to continue denying liability for these maternalistic bans, they must remove these absurd guidelines and restore true autonomy to teaching staff.

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