



Your child is a wuss

Christopher Murn

When 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, Glen Dickson, was following *Queensland Activity Risk Management Guidelines* when instituting the ban. He correctly classified cartwheels as a level 2 (medium risk) activity requiring adult supervision. He followed the rules and in return has been given the cold shoulder by politicians who should ultimately be responsible for these ridiculous state department guidelines.

In addition to the general risk management guidelines, there are 133 curriculum activity risk management modules

that Queensland teachers must follow. The modules cover nearly every activity a child could undertake at school, and some they likely will not. There are even modules for candle making, tractor driving, shooting and bait gathering.

The NSW Department of Education and Training's *Guidelines for Safe Conduct of Sport and Physical Activity in Schools* is 284 pages long, with detailed requirements for 61 different sports from abseiling to water polo.

The document is full of useful advice including diagrams to locate the seat, handlebars and pedals when conducting a bicycle safety check. Prohibited sports include bungee jumping, break dancing, tobogganing, rodeo, hang-gliding, multi-pitch rock-climbing, boxing, and rock-fishing.

NSW students should remain in the shade if possible between 11am and 3pm daylight savings time and padding must be 2m high on goal posts. Students aren't allowed to throw curve balls at baseball until they are in Year 9. Finishing tape is banned from certain running events for fear of choking runners. Teachers are recommended to confirm that students can swim before letting them onto the high diving platform.

The Victorian Government's *Schools Reference Guide* fairs little better, it has 66 pages dedicated to student safety and risk management. Paragraph 4.4.2.3.1 recommends young children should wear identity tags if taken outside school premises.

In case this wasn't enough, the federal government released its own guidelines for *Children's Safety in Sport and Recreation*. The Rudd Government contributed over \$300,000 to Sport Medicine Australia to develop the guidelines and subsequently plans to distribute over a million brochures and 40,000 copies of the guidelines across Australia. Alarmingly, it advocates pre-participation screening of students before physical ac-

tivity 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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