

Social engineers determined to remove the wonder from childhood

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 23 August 2017

Decades of Increased litigation and skyrocketing insurance premiums have already wreaked havoc with kids' playgrounds, writes Janet Albrechtsen. *Childcare centres, preschools and libraries will be encouraged to scrutinise books, toys and posters to ensure play spaces are "gender equitable" in the latest government-led bid to tackle family violence starting in childhood.*

Victoria should change its car numberplates to The Social Engineering State. A new guide has been drafted to help its councils conduct a gender audit on children's playgrounds to ensure that gender stereotypes are not encouraging domestic violence. Question: what will ensure that children can be children, free from busybody bureaucrats imposing their social, moral and political judgments about kids playing families in the sandpit or race car drivers in the playground?

Decades of Increased litigation and skyrocketing insurance premiums have already wreaked havoc with kids' playgrounds. These were once places of adventure where kids could explore the world beyond their home and parents. It's where kids first push the boundaries of everyday risk, exploration and initiative, playing freely and making up their own stories long before helicoptering became a parenting technique rather than a feat of airborne engineering. It's where a grazed knee and a bruise or bump taught kids some resilience; in other words, picking yourself up when something goes wrong. Today most playgrounds are humdrum places for kids. Swings are so safe they have lost their sense of fly-high exhilaration. If you can find a seesaw, it's a shadow of its former self where squeals of delight once signalled tiny bums knocking on the ground.

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Now playgrounds will be measured for more than litigious risk. They will be audited for gendered play so that local councils can think about "not only who is where, and how often, but what are they doing? What are the storylines of their play telling you about what the children think are the normal roles for women and men?" says the Creating Gender Equity in the Early Years guide produced by Melbourne's Darebin City Council.

It's bad enough that bureaucracies have built empires of paternalism in the adult world, sidelining the role of civil society and wrecking the symmetry between individual responsibility and individual liberty. Not content with intruding into the adult world, they search for new arenas to impose their activism.

Under the guise of Safe Schools, they injected LGBTI role playing into the classroom. Now, it's a gender audit of playground. Social engineers of this kind often dress up their effort to regulate using inflated language. Here they are co-opting the emotion around domestic violence

to justify policing in a playground to find episodes of a designated new evil of gendered play. Explaining this latest move as good intentions gone awry doesn't wash any more.

The bureaucratic endeavour to create gender-free playgrounds assumes that this future utopia must be better than what has gone before. It's a story as old and as flawed as the French Revolution. Just as Edmund Burke, in 1790, predicted that the lofty intentions of that period of social and political upheaval would lead to a worse form of tyranny, it's safe to predict a new modern form of tyrannical paternalism by bureaucratic edict.

From health to education to human rights, large swathes of social policy have been delegated to unelected bureaucrats, destroying the little platoons of civil society described by Burke as central to a flourishing and free society. That collected wisdom of people, garnered from experience, tradition and custom, has been replaced with a form of mob rule where the claimed wisdom of an elite class is imposed from above.

It's passing strange that adults cannot conceive that what's an issue for them becomes an issue for kids only when adults make it one. Then again, maybe that's the aim, to project adult obsessions about gender on to children. And this playground pursuit of gender equity by taxpayer-funded public servants is enabled by complacent followers of this latest bureaucratic baloney.

We risk losing the kind of adult-free play that emboldened childhood, assuming we haven't lost it already. I recall a childhood where two working-class parents worked long and hard, and kids after school were left to explore their surrounds free from tightly scheduled afternoon activities. No Kumon lessons to create a maths genius or speech lessons to perfect our voice patterns. No ballet followed by music followed by enforced reading, before a rushed dinner and bed, only to be repeated the next day with a slightly different array of activities.

There was sport organised by schools and clubs, and then the play that kids made up on their own. No gender equity worries, let alone stereotypes. You could play with a Barbie, be a feisty young girl and grow up to be an empowered woman.

When we weren't in school, a few of us local kids often headed to the local Sturt Gorge, a 244ha adult-free zone a good few kilometres from our home. We were nine and 10 years old; my younger brother, just seven, tagged along. We wandered and explored for hours, pretending to be lost in a big unknown world, with no mobile phones but with a bag of food and plenty of adventures in trees and mucky water. Sometimes we did get lost, but we always managed to be home by dinner, invariably dirty, dishevelled and tired, but also exhilarated by the responsibility and freedom of managing in a world away from parents and teachers.

We also set up stalls in our driveway selling a mix of watery orange cordial and old toys. Try that today. A few months ago a five-year old girl in east London set up a homemade lemonade stand. A half-hour later four council officials approached her father, read from a script about operating a stand without a permit and fined him £150 (\$246). Her father, Andre Spicer, who was born in New Zealand and has lived in Australia, told one media outlet that he couldn't imagine this kind of thing happening here. Except it did, in Bunbury, Western Australia, 18 months earlier when 11-year-old Chelsea-lee Downes wanted to earn some money over Christmas by selling "fresh organic" homemade lemonade, cupcakes and lemon meringue pies. Local councillors shut down her stall, too.

Today, child play is ruined by regulation. That deliciously thrilling and sometime scary dance manoeuvred by kids around responsibility and freedom is being undermined. If not by parents

who overthink childhood for their children, then by a broader society that has taken a wholly disproportionate attitude to the normal risks we should expect to confront as children and indeed as adults. Bubble-wrapping kids from the freedom to fall and fail isn't building resilient young adults if the rising rates of mental illness and childhood therapy are anything to go bycorrect.

Now we're pushing kids around again, with Victorian social engineers adding their own layer of regulation to audit playgrounds for some lately imagined evil of gendered play. Not only are we imposing adult fixations about gender on kids, we're regulating the wonder out of childhood. Before we rush headlong into this latest utopian future mapped out by social activists policing modern memes about gender equity, it pays to check whether pushing kids around in this way is moving them and us in the wrong direction.

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