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 [Pages 4 and 5]

# the harder t The lower they climb, they fall

School playground equipment is lower, landing surfaces are softer, but falling accidents at schools are increasing. In the first of a two part series on falling injuries, CityLife's Andrew Bonallack looks at playground equipment and asks, are we bringing up a generation of clumsy and uncoordinated primary school kids?



HANGING OUT: Raene School climbing frame in the late 70s. Photo: John Bonallack

Are our children too tightly wrapped in cotton wool that they are missing out on exploring the great outdoors? Reporter *Rachelle Stewart* asks two principals about the balance between having fun outdoors and keeping children safe.

**Pele Tui, principal of Strathmore Community School**

- Do you think children are less adept than previous generations?  
 Yes I do. Less adept because computer technology has provided children with other indoor interests and many parents have safety concerns and time constraints with allowing children to discover the pleasures of the outdoors. At school there are health and safety issues to consider and often we look at prevention of injuries by simply not allowing children to engage in activities that pose even a minor risk of falling over for example.  
 - Are children at your school allowed to climb trees, play bullrush etc or are there certain rules in place so as they don't hurt themselves?  
 Currently children are not allowed to climb trees mainly due to prevention of injuries that may happen, however in the New Year that will likely change. There are two main reasons why our school will be introducing climbing trees in a designated area of the school as a recreational activity. The first is that we want to maximise the well established trees in the playground for children's fun and enjoyment - for children,

that means climbing them. Our school earlier this year had a sun shade audit and from that we were reminded to maximise natural shade for children's safety from sun exposure. As a 'SunSmart School' we will be encouraging children to play under natural shade which trees provide; and it's much more fun to be climbing trees rather than sitting beneath them. In Term 1 we are planning a physical education and physical activity focus to teach children the fundamental skills of jumping, landing and balance to minimise injuries sustained from a fall; along with that we also need to teach children to look after the trees.  
 - Have you noticed more accidents on the school playground recently in your career?  
 Last year we had one accident on the climbing frames where a child fell and needed medical attention.  
 - Do you notice some children lack confidence on some playground equipment and is this a reflection of them being wrapped in cotton wool?  
 The less confident child wants to join in the fun, so it is only for a short time that they feel anxious before they build up the courage to join in. I don't see a lack of

confidence in children climbing frames and moving up ladders and down a slide but there is a lack of confidence in children swinging on bars and moving from one end to the other particularly if it's from quite a height.  
 Jude Pentecost, principal at Worser Bay School  
 - Do you think children are less adept than previous generations?  
 No, much the same  
 - Are children at your school allowed to climb trees, play bullrush etc or are there certain rules in place so as they don't hurt themselves?  
 Trees up to a certain height, no bullrush or contact sport  
 - Have you noticed more accidents on the school playground recently in your career?  
 No  
 - Do you notice some children lack confidence on some playground equipment and is this a reflection of them being wrapped in cotton wool?  
 No. Parents definitely are more anxious, kids are as robust as they always were



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In 1996 a team of Otago University researchers published a paper that later became the benchmark for height recommendations for playground equipment in New Zealand. In the paper, titled 'Height and surfacing as risk factors for injury in falls from playground equipment: a case-control study', the academics sampled 300 children to arrive at a figure of 1.5m as the maximum recommended height for playground equipment. If you went beyond that height, the research indicated that risk of injury from falling was increased 4.1 times. Their recommendation went on to become part of commonplace literature and standards on safe playground equipment. The researchers even estimated

that their recommendation would achieve 45 percent reduction in children attending emergency departments. But that isn't happening. In 2005 the SafeKids Campaign said on average 4800 children a year are injured in a fall severely enough that they need to be hospitalised, and 32 percent of those happened on playground equipment. Data from the Accident Compensation Corporation shows reported school playground injuries in Porirua City jumped from 78 a year in 2003 to 215 in 2007, while Wellington City went from 401 in 2003 to 545 in 2005, where it has remained constant. Now, proponents of motor coordination programmes in schools say they are having to pick up the slack because the experiences and skills gained from 'adventurous play' is lacking in this generation.

## Losing coordination

**Deidre Ah Wong is a teacher aide who runs Moving Kids, a PE-based motor coordination programme for children, at Randwick School in the Hutt.**  
 "We are finding that a lot of kids at school have very poor spatial awareness, and a great deal of fear at being up at any height," she says.  
 "They aren't falling properly, and they are not aware of how to fall."  
 "You all know what our generation did - balanced on top of the verandah, giving the parents kittens, but no-one panicked or suggested failure to you."  
 She says worst situations she had encountered are new entrants that have the coordination of

a two-year-old, or children who cannot work out how to sit on a swing and get moving.  
 "In Moving Kids, we teach them how to fall, how to drop off a playground from a height," she says.  
 "People say, a lot of the old ways, like marching before school, were good ways, but we didn't know why then."  
 "We know now more about the brain, and we know it was teaching those kids brain skills, and it was serving them well."  
 "If I could tell parents one thing to prepare them to school, I would say, teach them to skip."

