

Bill Rea ? I'll never be ?it? again

Although I have never been a parent, I do understand the need to protect children from harm.

But I also appreciate that it's possible to go too far.

That appears to be happening in a school in Toronto.

I had heard about this early last week, but it wasn't until last Thursday that I found time to read about it in detail. Mike Strobel in the Toronto Sun wrote about the banning of tag playing in the schoolyard at recess.

There is a time and a place for everything. I will grant that is acceptable to be cracking down on tag playing in class. Having a bunch of kids running up and down the rows yelling "Tag! You're it!?" during spelling class will disrupt things completely and result in the education system turning out a bunch of lousy spellers. It certainly wouldn't have been allowed some 50 years ago when I was going through the primary education system (it certainly wouldn't have been allowed by some of the teachers I had, who seemed to bring a prison guard mentality to their work). For some reason, I'm still a lousy speller.

But shouldn't the schoolyard be different? And especially at recess?

Strobel went on to describe how things have changed since he was a school kid. According to his account, boys and girls were segregated in the schoolyard, complete with a wooden fence to enforce things, and woe betide the kid who breached that barrier.

It was much the same in the school I attended, except it was a solid white line painted across the pavement. There wasn't much in the way of disciplinary action from the faculty against those who dared cross it. It wasn't necessary. Girls didn't want to be with the boys because boys were icky. Boys didn't want to cross for fear of getting the coodies.

By the time we had outgrown such concerns, it didn't matter. In my day, once you had made it to Grade 7, you no longer got recess.

Besides, how many kids in that age group are interested in playing tag?

Interestingly, I started attending that school when I was in Grade 1, after my family had moved. My older brother lamented the segregated schoolyard, recalling that was not the case at the previous school. He told me it was fun when it was a drizzly day, because the ground would be wet and worms would be in abundance. I guess it's true that boys don't scream as loud as girls when you throw worms at them.

I could be a mean little kid in my day too.

But it's always seemed to me that playing tag was one of those things that constituted good, clean fun. It involved running around, dodging other players, etc. There's no body checking in tag. The main physical contact involves the actual act of "tagging," which seldom amounted to a serious injury.

True, there's the possibility of bumping into another player, which could be rather painful, or bumping into a teacher on yard duty, which could result in a detention (some teachers had very little in the way of a sense of humour).

There is also the danger of a kid falling down and hurting him or herself. Not always pleasant, but bumps and bruises and scrapes are all part of being a kid. They happened to all of us, usually accidentally, but sometimes maliciously (some kids are meaner than others).

I played organized hockey for several years. There was one time in practice when a teammate and I got tangled up. My stick was a little high, and I dinged him on the forehead. Not a serious contact, but it did bring a bit of blood. It was one of those unfortunate parts of the game, and we both knew it. I felt bad about it, nevertheless, and I felt worse when I learned that his parents had freaked and pulled him out of hockey. They soon relented, and I think the coach had a lot to do with that.

One morning, in Grade 5, a bigger kid in my class grabbed me by the arms, swung me around and sent me flying a couple of times. I thought it was kind of amusing, until I landed flat on my face and broke my two front teeth.

The reactions were predictable all around. I ended up with crowns on my main choppers for the rest of my life, but I've found myself able to live with it. My parents were half angry and half amused, and relieved that they had sprung for school insurance at the start of the year. The school administration was appropriately stern with the perpetrator, who was not renowned for exemplary behavior (the principal, if memory serves, loudly called him "fathead" in the presence of several youngsters, myself included). The kid responsible showed the amount of contrition one would expect after the bawling out he received from the principal and vice-principal. And lest you get the idea that this led to some reformation, that same kid snuck up behind me a couple of years later, pulled on my belt and shoved a banana peel down my backside. Needless to say, this fellow and I do not correspond these days.

The point is kids, being kids, are going to do aggressive things. True it's mainly boys who get into the real rough housing, but we all grew up with little girls who fancied themselves tomboys. It was a lot of fun playing street hockey with them, especially if they were accurate with their wrist shots.

And most of these kids get through all this stuff with some scrapes and cuts, and maybe the occasions break or scar. But in just about

all cases, there are a lot of memories.

I can understand why some school authorities in Toronto, or anywhere else for that matter, are concerned about the possibility of kids being injured in the schoolyard. For one thing, it's part of their job. And it is also true that we live in something of a litigious society, in which one must always be mindful of the possibility of lawsuits. But I think it's also true that too many parents are over protective of their kids.

We're hearing a lot these days about childhood obesity, and how kids don't get enough physical activity. Yet what is a game of tag, but lot of running around, burning off potential excess blubber. But there are people in positions of authority who would bar such activity.

Bumps and bruises will heal. I had lots of them as a kid, and so did most of you, and things are all better now, are they not? Cuts will happen, but some smart person invented Band-aids long before I appeared on the scene. Broken teeth can be lived with, and I have spent almost 50 years proving that. Broken bones can be mended. Obesity is a problem today for many. Yet there are those who restrict physical activity.

If that makes sense to you, see your doctor.

