



Open letter to Kidsafe Playground Conference

Do you have 'sod's law' in Australia? Is it part of your vernacular?

Sod's law, means, according to my dictionary, 'the law that states that the most inconvenient thing is the most likely to happen'. Well, the inconvenience has happened the result of which is that you are there, and Sue and I are here – a gross misordering of the reality that should have been. For which apologies.

In this letter I want to see if we have between us some common understandings about key ideas. Asking this is potentially dangerous because although, on the one hand, it carries the possibility of illuminating key commonalities across interests, constituencies and voices; on the other hand, it lays open the possibility of highlighting potentially fundamental differences between the same range of interests, constituencies and voices, ones that may have previously been unacknowledged, hidden from view, or simply not mentionable in polite society.

One of the great dangers, or so it seems to me, is the manufacture of false or shallow consensus – a lowest common denominator consensus where differences are air-brushed away. This can be mightily convenient for the component parts of a consensus, its wider affects may not be so benign. Note here current international and national financial woes that, many would argue, have as their source a lazy, self-regarding, self-serving consensus about the ultimately benign power of markets. Play, too, may suffer from an over- commitment to consensus.

In saying this, I am not trying to promote a Manichean point of view, where every category of thought and commitment is neatly allocated to its own impermeable, separate box, carrying with it the implication that – according to one's own predilections – one box is full of right notions, and the other fails in that regard. Nor am I suggesting – in this letter at least – moral judgment, such as who might be thought to be acting in good faith and who in bad. That is a different discussion.

In what follows I want to talk about a form of knowledge and its authority. I then speculate about some of the questions that might arise if this form of knowledge were brought to bear when considering Standards, in particular industry play equipment Standards. These Standards, it seems to me, have a stranglehold on thinking, policy and practice in the field of play. It needs to be said immediately that the argument is not with the idea of Standards as such but – certainly so far as play is concerned – their colonising tendency, their tendency to trespass into territory that is not properly theirs.

I first need to examine the role and authority of 'common sense' or 'common knowledge' in decision-making. 'Common sense' and 'common knowledge' might be characterised as the accumulated and accumulating, experience-based knowledge that is drawn from, feeds into and is tested in everyday life.

A key element of this latter sort of knowledge is ‘tacit understanding’, that amalgam of time-honoured, well-anchored turns of phrase, customs, ‘ways of life’ and forms of engagement not susceptible to codification and resistant to the methodologies of formal teaching. It’s the backdrop to the minute by minute decisions and responses we make in the everyday life. It’s how we get from one day to another. In moral terms, we can characterise the distinction as the difference between learning to recite a moral code and learning how to live by one. It’s how we move from the skill of staying upright on a bicycle, to learning and absorbing ‘the rules of the road’¹ that gets us from A to B.

This sort of knowledge accounts for the fact that most parents – yes, that’s ‘most parents’ – have from the dawn of ages somehow managed to bring up their children without benefit of a helpful manual. And even where manuals are purchased and possibly read, it is likely that parents make their own judgments about the degree of applicability the content has in their own lives. We might even say that those who slavishly follow a manual are the last people who should be reading them. Much the same might be said about books on ‘management’, a ubiquitous genre whose utility, I suspect, is in inverse proportion to their sales figures. We need, I think, to consider the utility of Standards in the same light.

Before offering a set of common-sense assertions, we need to notice that, in accepting common knowledge as a legitimate, necessary, authoritative mode of understanding, we are at the same time starting the work of delineating the role and authority of ‘experts’ and ‘expertise’. And if you have already read into this brief discussion the implication that the authority of some forms of ‘expertise’, with its associated ‘experts’, has extended into territory not properly theirs, you would be right.

This is not in any way to deny, or to seek to undermine, the idea that there is such a thing as expertise. It is to start to notice the context within which it should operate.

It is my contention that, historically, certainly in the UK, providers of play opportunities have, to a worrying degree, shed themselves of their responsibility to make value-based judgments as to the levels of risk children and teenagers are capable of assessing for themselves. Instead, the assessment of risk in play has been ceded to various inspectorates and ‘experts’ who may or may not share the values and understandings of play providers and who rely on various technical formulations – fall heights, free fall areas, impact absorbant materials – as proxies for judgement making.

It is possible that some of you will know about the publication *Managing Risk in Play Provision: implementation guide*², co-authored by Professor David Ball, Tim Gill and myself. The point to be made here is that it is strenuous in its delineation of ‘technical information’ as distinct from ‘value-based risk-benefit assessment’³ of which it is only a part.

¹ This analogy is owed to Harry Collins and Robert Evan’s ‘Rethinking expertise’ published by the University of Chicago press. It is a book I commend to you. As its title implies, it offers a way of thinking about knowledge and the role and limitations of expertise.

² *Managing Risk in Play Provision: implementation guide* is endorsed by the UK Health and Safety Executive and jointly published by Play England, Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Culture Media and Sport. It is downloadable from Play England web site,

³ More on this, along with an attempt to grapple with the practical implications of this approach will be found on the PLAYLINK web site (www.playlink.org.uk) under ‘risk-benefit assessment’.

I said above, 'historically' in relation to this ceding of authority. It is possible to judge that there has been some progress in the UK in this area. How deep-rooted this is and how durable, it is too early to tell. The future is by no means assured. There is an awfully long way to go.

When I speak of 'play' I mean 'free play'. We need also always to be alert to the fact that the term 'play' is itself a source of difficulty – it means different things to different people. In saying this I am not attempting to create a hierarchy of meaning – at least not in this letter. But I do want to sound a warning against assuming that simply because the term 'play' is being used, agreement across interests, constituencies, service objectives and value systems has been secured. Different meanings prompt different forms of understandings and practice. It serves no-one – above all children and teenagers – to paper over key distinctions.

So here is one potential fault line: that between those who recognise the role and authority of 'common sense/common knowledge', legitimising thereby the primacy of its role in value-based decision making, in this instance in the area of play; contrasted with those who believe in the primacy of what we might call 'technical expertise' as a source of ultimate authority for judgment making.

In practice, of course, there will often be a fuzzy boundary and overlap between the two views. For example, it is a simplification too far to draw a sharp line between value-based judgments and technical assessments. Values are implicated in technical assessments (for example, just how great a 'margin of error' do you allow for when assessing the capacity of a platform to hold children without fear of collapse? Is it 'x', or 'x plus or minus'?) but this should not obscure the fact that there is a difference that needs to be acknowledged and its practical implications thought through.

We are discussing authority and knowledge. It may be helpful to draw this out just a little more.

Consider a court case in which a judge – whose expertise is in law - has to determine the weight to be given to expert technical evidence on some matter, not infrequently, contradictory expert evidence from more than one 'expert' witness. Even if the court were to call for still more expert evidence the position is clear - the ultimate judgment-making function lies above and beyond the sphere of the technical expert. It is rightly and logically in the hands of the judge who stands as a layperson in relation to the particular area of expertise being considered. If this line of thought holds for you, then it follows that, when considering play provision, it is the provider of the service – be it in parks, schools, play areas, etc – that must have the ultimate authority to make judgments of value, and how this translates into practice.

And now to some of my own common-sense assertions:

In general, children and teenagers do not push themselves too far beyond the boundaries of their own perceived competency. Of course, their competency increases with age and maturity, as does their judgment-making capacity. They therefore have inherent risk-judging capacities. These capacities can only develop from use.

How might one test the proposition? One way is to remember how you, the adult reader I am addressing, played as a child. And how your friends played. Climb a tree did you? Play in streams, river or sea? Pushed beyond the boundary of your competence? Whoops, need to be a bit more

careful next time! Break a leg or arm? Fall from a tree or garage roof? And most of you climbed again...and again.

And before you played, probably in ways not dissimilar to the way your grandparents played, did an expert go in advance of you to test the tree branch, to measure the height of the roof, to teach you 'risk-assessment' skills, to check fall heights, and free fall zones? Oh, and 'safety' surfacing, where was that? What might follow from reconnecting with this form of shared 'common-knowledge'? To what conclusions might we be drawn?

The second way to test the proposition is to observe children today when left to their own devices – if that is possible now given the relatively recent predilection for parents, carers and supervising staff to intrude themselves into every aspect of a child's life. For the most part, if left to their own devices, children develop the competencies that you grew into when young. Speaking of which, how many of you as parents have seen your child fall or watch some other misshap and then looked askance, and said, 'that'll teach you' – as indeed it well might. In that time-honoured response is a whole 'common-sense' philosophy about how experience itself is a great teacher. And in key aspects of our lives, the only possible teacher.

And third, finally: consider this line of reasoning: we recognise those children who do not seem to have this in-built judgment-making capacity. We pay them special care. We create situations, artificial, constructed, more bounded than the 'norm', that aim to prompt and support the development of these judgment-making capacities. But in noticing the non-norm, we are at once illuminating the competencies of the vast majority of children. That appreciation of competency is the reference point from which other judgments follow. Knock away or distort that reference point, then there is little left to guide you save anxiety or bending to the wind of every passing whim or fad.

My point is that, the three assertions above are rooted in a common-sense understanding of the world, how it works and what the meaning of our experience might add up to.

This letter cannot of course hope to offer a comprehensive account of the role of value-based decision-making and its implications. (That word 'safe', for example, needs critical examination. It is too often used to close down discussion and to stifle a critical appraisal of its meaning. Unexamined, 'safe' is potentially a dangerous word.) Rather, what has been attempted here is a rough and ready mapping exercise, one in which the major features of the landscape are picked out, but which misses many of the routes and byways needed to fully connect those major features. Having said that, those major features are just that: major.

And now to Standards.

If the distinctions I have suggested hold fast for you, then there is a job to be done in taking a critical look at play equipment Standards. In general terms, they need to be examined by people who know about, are committed to, and *responsible* for the well-being of children through play.

The examination will want to distinguish between Standards that, for example, are a means of expressing and demonstrating technical facts of the matter, for example, the tensile strength of metal. And to separate these considerations from value-based judgments about, for example, fall heights. Standards are of questionable validity here. That this is the case is demonstrated in practice simply by noticing that different countries have different fall heights for play equipment.

It is not noticeable that the children of these different countries are markedly different to each other. And, of course, a climbable tree has no fall height attached to it.

We need also to note that whilst it is of course the case that there are individuals involved in the manufacture of play equipment who are as knowledgeable and committed to play as others not of the industry, it is in the nature of any industry, quite properly, to busy itself with the development, manufacture and sale of products; and to yield a profit, a perfectly legitimate function. It is also helpful to an industrial sector to have national and cross-national Standards because it widens the market in which firms can operate. But economic policy goals – upon which I have no comment – are about the creation of market conditions, not about creating good play opportunities. This is not an argument either for or against international Standards, it is a discussion about their scope.

Determining what is best, in this instance, for children is the work of politics and takes place within a value-base framework that contains, limits and is not in thrall to technical expertise. ‘What is best for children’ is always and will always be a contested matter. It cannot be other. It is and must be so because whatever one wishes to say about play, it is at its core an expression of, and initiation into, the possibility of human freedom. That’s why it will always unnerve and threaten a settled order. That’s probably why so many of us adults care about it. It is, we might admit, an expression of self-interest by another means. For which of us does not cherish the possibility of our own freedom and autonomy? And play is, from my perspective at least, simply a member of a family of ideas and commitments that have to do with, dare I say it, what we might mean by a ‘good life’.

I’ll close this letter with a small lexicological excursion. It has a bearing on all that has been said thus far:

- **Resilience** (Chambers Dictionary: ‘recoil, elasticity, physical or mental’). That is, the capacity to bounce back after difficulty, hurt, ‘negative’ experience. You cannot become resilient in the absence of something to be resilient about. What follows from this? It is that accidents, cuts and bruises are not necessarily bad, they are of potential benefit. Policy directed simply at the reduction of risk is potentially damaging to children.
- **Challenge** (Chambers Dictionary: ‘to test one’s powers and capabilities to the full’) That is, to push against boundaries (physical and mental); to be thwarted; to try again; to fail; to be *resilient* in response to difficulty. This perspective needs to be underscored when we are thinking of disabled children.
- **Put a good, brave face on (it)** (Chambers Dictionary: ‘to assume a bold or contented bearing’) See resilience and challenge.
- **Accidents** (Chambers Dictionary: ‘that which happens’) Sometimes painful, most usually the cause of no lasting harm. The inevitability and utility of accidents not generally acknowledged. Obsessive attempts to reduce or prevent accidents logically inconsistent with policy goal of nurturing resilience and ‘stretching’ children through challenge (see above).
- **Experience** (Chambers Dictionary: ‘wisdom derived from the changes and trials of life’) Generally understood as the necessary, inevitable, unavoidable vehicle for developing qualities of, for example, self-confidence, resilience, curiosity. Those qualities understood as un-teachable, the focus being on creating the context within which those qualities might be prompted and nurtured.

- **Learning through experience** (Chambers Dictionary: no entry) Learning and ‘wisdom derived from the changes and trials of life’) These experiences include, but are not limited to, climbing higher today than yesterday; having an argument and resolving or not resolving it without adult intervention; falling over and discovering that pain generally passes and can in any case be overcome.
- **Risk** (Chambers Dictionary: ‘chance of loss or injury’) Logically, prior to having a new experience, you cannot know how you will respond. The moment prior to having a particular experience – for example, climbing higher today than yesterday; having an argument and resolving or not resolving it; falling over and discovering that pain generally passes and can in any case be overcome – is, therefore, by definition, a risky moment. It follows that if it is policy to want to prompt and nurture self-confident, resilient children who respond to, set themselves and overcome challenges, risk needs to be embraced, provided for, not avoided or always minimised.

And there I must end, save to hope the conference went well, to look forward to reports of its content and its success and to hope that at sometime in the near future we can become more personally acquainted.

Best wishes

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