

When I was a little boy, my parents and grandparents were personally responsible for the then decrepit state of Iowa Highway 9 out of their sheer use of that state artery. It seemed they or we were constantly in our seatbelt-less cars, hurtling between Ashton/Ocheyedan and Sioux Falls, to visit the extended family. Occasionally, we would even ‘split the difference,’ meeting them halfway for a big, joyful family picnic in Rock Rapids where, in my memory at least, the sun never failed to shine and neither the fried chicken nor the potato salad ever ran out. (And I did my best to make them run out.)

There were two great parks for such an event in Rock Rapids, one right on the highway with a serviceable playground and a pioneer log home—West Side Park, I think—and one that was a bit harder to find down by the river, Island Park. We almost always went to West Side Park for the picnics, though I don’t remember why exactly. But on rare occasions, and on all occasions when I got my way, we went to Island Park.

Island Park was one of those old-fashioned parks so populated with huge elms and maples that it was dimmed in shadows even on the sunniest of days. It was old-fashioned, too, in its playground equipment. Huge wooden-planked teeter totters with peeling paint and 6-inch splinters welcomed and dropped the unwary to the ground when the joker on the other end leapt from his seat on reaching bottom. Or kept the smaller rider elevated in the air, unable to get down and howling for Grandma. The swings, the legs of which were industrial steel pipes commandeered for this frolicking function, were so long you could actually sing full verses of nursery rhymes from the top of one arc to the next. Both of these were wonderful. But the *pièce de résistance* was neither of these. That was, rather, the slide. Its legs, too, were made of large metal pipes and the steps to the top were, seemingly, cast iron, not simple platforms but stairs made from the name of some now probably long defunct slide manufacturer. These both added to the slide’s appeal but its truly alluring feature was its height. I wish I could give you some actual estimate of the altitudes to which is ascended but my then child’s mind jousts too much with my adult mind to do so. Was it 40 feet? That doesn’t seem possible but it seemed much, much taller than that at the time. And it was tall, unbelievably tall. So tall that if I were to install it on one of our elementary playgrounds today, the next PTA meeting at that school would include attendees greeting me with pitch forks and torches. And deservedly so.

Still, I lament the loss of all those playgrounds and their seemingly endless opportunities for scraped knees, broken arms, chipped teeth, and endless falls. The great challenge of the modern playground designer is to build outdoor play settings which give the child the perception of danger and risk without the reality of such. And so we erect enclosed slides, install thick pads of fall-insulating wood chips or pea gravel or rubber fibers, send merry-go-rounds and teeter totters to the scrap yards, and even, in many places today, organize recesses and playtimes with adult-led games and activities. Accidents still occur, of course, but they are fewer (perhaps though some decent research indicates they are as common as ever, suggesting that as equipment gets safer, children pursue ever greater risks) and less-severe and endlessly studied to see how they could be prevented in the future.

Fewer children being harmed on playgrounds is a great outcome, of course, but it has come at a price. Play is more directed and less independent. While we try to give children the perception of risk and danger—it is a fundamental principle that such must exist on a playground for it to be enjoyable for children—we aren't always successful. As a result, some children shy away from it. Lacking danger—real or just perceived—children don't build up that grit, that toughness, that ability to take whatever the world dishes out that we value in them, both then and later in life.

Interestingly, the British, that people of the stiff upper lip, have begun to rebel against the insipidness they see in the modern playground. In a growing number of communities, they have begun opening what they call 'adventure playgrounds,' where children might find large, undrained puddles of water, piles of actual cement blocks and red bricks, scatterings of wooden boards with nails nearby for their assembly, and even various tools—hammers, screwdrivers, and saws, among others. Adults, if they are even present, are instructed not to intervene in the children's play except in the case of the severest of injuries or the immediate need to prevent them. The idea has even spread to such former British colonies as New Zealand and New York.

Initial research on the ideas seems to suggest the result has been no more injuries than with the 'safety' playground but also a number of definite improvements. The adventure playgrounds seem to rather effectively push back against obesity, boost manual dexterity and motor skills, end minor fears of heights and separation anxiety, build confidence in the ability to assess safety risks, reward curiosity and creative thinking, and, yes, instill grit.

Seems like a lot of ask from a crude teeter totter, a military gauged merry-go-round, and a sheet metal stairway to Heaven. Still, I would have to admit that, as with the Magna Carta and the English Parliament, the English might very well be on to something here.