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NEWS

Analysis: Playgrounds without swings just aren't playgrounds



JOE O'CONNOR | May 4, 2012 8:36 PM ET | Last Updated: May 7, 2012 10:50 AM ET
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While at one time swings were king, now they are disappearing two-by-two from North American parks and schoolyards.

Matthew Sherwood for National Post

The game was simple. You picked a swing. Mine was usually the third one in from the fence line at Rosedale Park playground. Then you swung as high as you could, as high as you dared, pumping your legs, pushing and pulling with your arms, watching the ground drop away and feeling your stomach drop away just a little bit, too.

Then you jumped, jumped off and jumped out as far as you could before landing in a tangle and drawing a line in the sand to mark the spot. Farthest jump won. There were other playground attractions at Rosedale Park: green and yellow teeter-totters (ideal for bumping your pal to the sand); a wading pool (for splash fights); monkey bars (for chin-up contests) and the dizzying entertainment of the push-it-yourself-merry-go-round (two pushed and one crouched in the middle, getting woozy).

But the swings, the swings were king, the purest symbol of playground freedom. They were the closest a kid could get to flying. And now they are gone, or going, and have been for years, disappearing two-by-two from North American parks and schoolyards.

Reduced in number. Reduced in height. Reduced in fun/fear factor.

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It is hard to pinpoint when, precisely, the war on the swing began. Maybe it was back in 1993, when a young Dalton McGuinty, the Liberal MPP for Ottawa South, argued eloquently in the Ontario Legislature in support of adopting the Canadian Standards Association's national guidelines for playground equipment.

"Let's consider this issue of playground equipment. It is specifically designed for children to play on it. It is designed to attract them. It is designed to invite them. It is designed to entertain them," Ontario's future premier said.

"They want to swing. They want to slide. They want to have fun ... but what I think the CSA standards do is place some kind of reasonable limitation on the element of risk associated with playground."

Over the next decade, it happened, in Toronto and in cities across the country to a lesser extent.

Teeter-totters, merry-go-rounds, monkey bars, jiggling-bridges, wooden forts, sand and swings began vanishing.

"The playground industry set these new supposed safety standards — the Canadian Standards Association [in 1998] — and 75% of the members were actually from the playground industry," says Jutta Mason, a community gatekeeper and self-appointed playground protector of Dufferin Grove Park in Toronto's west-end.

"Almost overnight they were taking out a slide and suddenly a jiggle-bridge didn't jiggle anymore and certainly the old swings — you have seen the dumbed-down ones and they have no radius — and that is what killed the swing, and it killed a lot of other things, too."

A contemporary swing, when occupied, must sit 30-centimetres above ground to meet CSA guidelines. It must be separated from the neighbouring swing by a minimum of 60 cm and be a minimum of 75 cm from the supporting structure.

While altruistic in intent, the CSA's playground regulations were designed by risk managers, not playground specialists, or child development experts. Or kids. Swings are still out there.

There just not the same swings as before.

"The most basic change with the swing was to have a safety surface put beneath it," says Mary Lou Wilmott, a regional play consultant with RecTec Industries in Delta, B.C.

"When you and I were kids, the swings would have been planted out on the grass or sometimes over asphalt and you would always get the mud pit under the swing where you killed the turf from dragging your feet.

"So the first thing was having an engineered wood fibre or a rubber surface or pea-gravel put in that would absorb a fall, and then they gave minimum spacing around swings to allow for kids flying off the front to see how far they could jump.

"And then they went from allowing, for instance, three swings in a swing bay to two swings because there was always that kid in the middle — if you were trying to run the gauntlet and go in front of the swings.

"I'm not sure if the overall height has come down. We can go up to about a 10-foot crossbeam and I'm never sure if, when we were kids, we just imagined it being way taller than that or if it really was."



'The closest a kid could get to flying' Getty Images



The purest symbol of playground freedom' Matthew Sherwood for NP

Ms. Wilmott says there is a delicate balance to be struck in the playground industry between playgrounds alluring.

“Ontario, in particular, has gone crazy in terms of safety,” she says. “Kids have got to be able to challenge themselves. If there is no perceived risk they won’t play on it. We still want to build in some risk because, if it is so low to the ground, the kids are going to think it is lame.”

Dufferin Grove fought back against lameness, defending their little park with its wooden forts and old school swings against city officials. The winner, in the end, was nostalgia. And fun. Dufferin Grove stands today as a sandy, tree-dappled reminder of a more innocent and yet more risky era — when swing sets were about soaring, not being anchored near earth.

My old swing, the third one in from the fence at Rosedale Park, is gone. And so is the fence. So is the swings metal support structure with the peeling yellow (or was it red?) paint. So are the nine other swings that used to be there, some 30-years-ago, replaced by a pristine sextet lacking the height, swing radius and fear-factor of its high-flying ancestors.

Plastered to its sparkling green supports is a “warning” sticker: “This playground equipment is designed for children 5-to-12 years old. Remove scarfs and mittens with draw strings. Check for hot surfaces. Adult supervision recommended.”

Things were pretty quiet at the playground on a recent morning. A pair of grandparents kept watch over a young boy as he scrambled about on a shiny new fort; a caregiver chirped away on her cellphone, gently rocking a stroller with a baby inside; while another caregiver plunked her charge — a little girl with pigtails in a pink hoodie and tights — into a kiddie swing.

The girl’s mouth was set, unsmiling. Perhaps she sensed how lame the new swings were. Her nanny gave a push, a second and a third. A breeze stirred the little girl’s hair. She pumped her legs. Her face broke into a radiant grin.

National Post

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TheDonkey • 8 months ago

We offered to take some of the old wooden playground out of our kid's school. They were getting rid of it anyway. They told us that they were not allowed to have that equipment go anywhere but to be destroyed. And it had to be destroyed somewhere where they could



Skulldug · 8 months ago

The playground in small-town Saskatchewan that I grew up playing on has also been destroyed. No more merry-go-round. No more big slides. We had a set of monkey bars shaped like an elephant that was everything from a stagecoach to the Starship Enterprise in our minds. The swings that were built by our local blacksmith would have withstood a nuclear blast but didn't stand a chance against the child hating nanny-staters. Makes me sad just thinking about it.

24 ^ | v · Share >



C_A_ · 8 months ago

We now see young people engaging in supreme "sports" which by any definition are dangerous. Perhaps because they missed out on childhood playground activities they are making up for it when they are old enough to escape supervision.

14 ^ | v · Share >



kcramone · 8 months ago

Kids are supposed to be fearless, have fun, and what we're doing is criminal. We're instilling fear and apprehension in our kids at young ages while we should be building up their confidence by trying new things and, yes, sometimes failing. We're giving them the gift of fear of the world around us. No wonder, they don't want to leave home. They're afraid. I blame parents of today for raising children who expect the world to kowtow towards them...they don't know anything else.

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nonaldehyde · 8 months ago

Haha! Even tho the anti-fun CSA safety gruppen has jurisdiction over our independent school, we approach playgrounds independently--- built our stuff ourselves, with plenty of injury opportunity built right in.

We even have a rink in the winter.

Sincerely,

Anonymous

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terryinparis · 8 months ago

Swings. Collateral damage in Ontario's war on common sense (note the lowercase c & s)

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Mairi · 8 months ago

I also bemoan the loss of good old fashioned playground equipment but I don't know if I'm so quick to blame the bureaucrats on this one. They have to manage the risk... not really of little Johnny or Janey breaking a limb but of Mom and Pop suing the school/municipality/equipment manufacturer/whomever has six figures in the bank for pain and damages.

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camdross → Mairi · 8 months ago

Exactly . . . the parents need to recalibrate and be ok with their kids breaking limbs, getting cuts/scars, whatever . . . they'll be just fine!

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Laurie Williams · 8 months ago

In Australia we have had the same thing happen. More dumbing down weakening of society.

Not hard to see what comes out of this removal of relatively low risk fun stuff - as others have commented, kids try other things, and with less exposure to risk early in their sanitised lives the more adventurous of them will suffer more later, not less. Fortunately though not all is lost. <http://www.google.com.au/search?num=5...> <http://maps.google.com.au/maps...> "teeter totter" ("see saw" elsewhere) though, presumably because of impact risk if someone slips off one end while someone else is leaning over that end. No roundabout, for similar reasons I assume, the momentum of the thing in that case. But - long metal slides that are smooth and steep enough for high speed, two "zip lines" ("flying fox" elsewhere), tall timber castle and ship, and a swing around 25 feet tall, so tall in fact that although it's certainly good fun it's not as good for gaining height as you may expect because the wind resistance is too high.

Re dumbing down weakening of society - I note the "greener Canada" ad at the top of this page, with pictures of wind generators. Same scam operates in Australia and elsewhere. Pierre Gosselin and others have a way to go.

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Laurie Williams → Laurie Williams • 8 months ago

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Send_us_Doves • 8 months ago

I miss tire swings. And slides you actually went fast down because they were metal - the plastic ones they have now, kids can't even slide all the way to the bottom, they always have to pull themselves down to the bottom and then scooch a foot to get off it.

Kids miss the fun of those object but they also miss out on all the games we used to make up while playing on them.

Ah well, guess that's how it goes. Out with the old, in with the 'new and improved'.

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camdross • 8 months ago

There's nothing wrong with little Beauford breaking an arm by accident. Better to get hurt having fun than to kill the adventure and have no risk.

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