

SMOKE AND MIRRORS ON PLAYGROUND SAFETY

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For a moment yesterday, it seemed as if those who want to keep children in a bubble and deny them any possibility of risk -- those who would take away the humble tire swing from a generation of fragile littl'uns -- were in the ascendant. Vindication, cried the trustees of the Toronto District School Board and all who share their vision of risk-free, fun-free childhood.

Five years ago, the board ripped out the playground equipment at more than 100 elementary schools because it did not meet the letter of tough new safety requirements. The cost of demolition and replacement was \$6.3-million, not to mention the unquantifiable loss of beloved play spaces, including the now-verboden tire swings. Yesterday, a study by Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, published in the Canadian Medical Asso-Association Journal, suggested it had all been worth it. "New school playgrounds prove safer," said The Globe and Mail's report on the CMAJ study. "Child's play now safer," said the Toronto Star. "Fewer children hurt since monkey bars upgraded: accidents decline 49 per cent: study," said the National Post.

There was only one problem. The study proved nothing of the kind.

It said that, at the 86 schools with replacement equipment reviewed in the study, there were 550 fewer playground injuries in the course of a year. But the vast majority of that reduction, the study showed, occurred not on the playground equipment but elsewhere in the schoolyard.

In fact, there was a reduction of just 117 injuries -- at 86 schools -- on the playground equipment. That amounts to roughly one fewer injury per school per year. And for this, Toronto spent \$6.3-million.

So what, you might say. Perhaps it was worth the cost, if one fewer child at each school lost an eye or broke a neck or a back.

But the study does not mention the seriousness of injuries on Toronto's playground equipment either before or after it was replaced.

This is no trivial omission. The school board made it clear that its purpose in replacing the equipment was to

protect against severe hazards. The board's decision was never about reducing the number of broken arms or twisted ankles or cutting what the CMAJ study dubs "injury rates." It was about preventing death from strangulation (though there hadn't been a recorded case in Toronto) or debilitating head injuries from falls onto unforgiving surfaces. It was about protecting against lasting disability.

Yet the authors simply did not have the data to show any such result. The injuries might be more severe now, even if fewer in number, and the authors would not know. All they know is that the injuries required attention, whether from a hospital or simply from a teacher or parent. This is a crucial failing. The study makes no attempt to determine whether the school board achieved its stated goal of reducing severe injuries.

It is not terribly difficult to reduce childhood injuries on playgrounds.

Build the equipment ultra-safe and ultra-dull (the children will climb trees instead). Take away the tire swings and there will be no tire-swing injuries. Unless boredom is an injury. Unless missing a chance to develop oneself through play is an injury.

Vindication? Hardly. The seeming victory for this damaging overprotectiveness in child-rearing turns out to be more finger-wagging and hot air.