



Edward Achorn: When children are out of the game

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THERE'S SOMETHING profoundly sick about a society that aggressively markets sex and violence to children through addictive electronics, but won't let them play tag.

Maybe we should think about that.

Last week, in Attleboro, parents learned that Willett Elementary School Principal Gaylene Heppe's new playground rules included a ban on the classic children's game of tag, and other unsupervised "chasing" games such as touch football. The reason? She was worried about the risk of injury to children, and the potential liability to the school.

In games of tag, kids can get rough and slam into each other. One teacher from another community, speaking on a radio show last week, said the game of tag also raises concerns about "inappropriate touching" by 7- and 8-year-olds, leading to fears of sexual-harassment lawsuits!

Recess is "a time when accidents can happen," said Ms. Heppe.

Faced with an uproar by parents and national media attention, the school reportedly sent home a notice Friday saying the rules would be rewritten to allow tag, with an emphasis on safety. Whatever rules ultimately result, one thing is clear: The much-criticized principal was merely reflecting trends and attitudes that have taken deep root in the culture. Elementary schools in Cheyenne, Wyo., and Spokane, Wash., have imposed similar bans, and a school in suburban Charleston, S.C., outlawed all unsupervised contact sports.

Lawyer Philip K. Howard warned about this more than a decade ago in his landmark best-seller *The Death of Common Sense: How Law is Suffocating America*.

He thinks that America suffers from a social illness brought on by aggressive trial lawyers and an increasingly pervasive fear of being sued or fired. But, ironically, in trying to eliminate all risk in life, people in positions of authority often make life riskier for everyone -- especially children.

Oh yes, them. They seem to be the forgotten figures in our society of rapacious lawyers and worried job-holders.

For all the risk of injury from tag -- skinned knees or, in extreme instances, broken bones -- such games are good, if not crucial, for children. Child-development specialists understand that unstructured play is essential to their growth and preparation for life. Encasing them in bubble wrap until adulthood does them no favor.

In such games, like almost nothing else, the neurons of children's brains fire up. The American Academy of Pediatrics reported, in a study released this month, that unstructured play "can help children become creative, discover their own passions, develop problem-solving skills, relate to others and adjust to school settings." By the same token, a "lack of spontaneous playtime can create stress," as well as "increase risks for obesity" and "contribute to depression."

By playing among themselves, children learn how to push themselves physically, how to interact with others, how to deal with bullies, how to take risks. Some studies have linked the fidgeting and attention-deficit problems that strike a disproportionate percentage of boys to a lack of such recess activity.

Why should our society deny children these crucial benefits? Is it too late to fight back?

Mr. Howard argues that states should pass legislation giving judges clear authority -- and, indeed, a clear duty -- "to assert the reasonable values of society" in weighing lawsuits. Judges should be able to determine whether playground games pose an unreasonable risk to children -- and, clearly, they do not (to the contrary, they are vital to their growth) -- and to negate damages on those grounds. Common Good (cgood.org), a group that Mr. Howard helped found, is working on it.

"What the public needs to understand is that the right to sue has no substance without the rule of law. Rights without law do not protect freedom but undermine it -- causing disorder in schools, contributing to unaffordable health care and putting a pall over life's pleasures," Mr. Howard wrote last June in the Riverside (Calif.) Press-Enterprise.

Meanwhile, the experts are pleading with parents to turn off the TV, the computers and the iPods, and send children outside, ignoring their keening cries of "I'm bored!" and the sibling fighting and squabbling that erupt as they go cold turkey from technology. As the father of three, I well understand: It is human nature to prefer the blessed peace conferred by electronic babysitters.

Once, I suppose, grownups understood instinctively that children need to play on their own. Today, the effort to win them that space has turned into a struggle against powerful political interests and the ceaseless, insidious onslaught of addictive media technology. It's almost unbelievable that citizens had to rise up in protest last week to save the playground game of tag.

That's a true tragedy for children. Maybe it's time to start caring -- really caring -- a little bit more about them.

Edward Achorn is The Journal's deputy editorial-pages editor. His e-mail address is eachorn@projo.com.