

Saturday, April 5, 2008

Let them be kids

OUCH. The thud of a shoulder crunching into an unprotected midriff. The sting of a wet tennis ball striking bare flesh on a cold morning.

Unsupervised playground games of bullrush and ball tag, known, for obvious reasons, in some schools as "brandy", were once a daily part of school life.

Strangely they were enjoyed too, despite the occasional bump and bruise. It was what boys, and some girls, did whenever the bell rang and they were released from suffocating classrooms on to fields fresh with the smell of new-mown grass. A quick round of "eeny meeny miny mo", a lone individual dispatched to the middle of the field, or handed a tennis ball, and the game commenced.

The rough and tumble didn't breed a nation of brutes or bullies. Running about in the open has seldom been attractive to those who prefer to operate out of sight of the authorities. But it did breed boys, and girls, who were resilient, resourceful and comfortable in their own skins.

But today, as Ross Scrymgeour, the head of private Hereworth School in Havelock North, mourned this week, these are opportunities being denied to more and more children as school boards take too literally the Education Ministry injunction to "provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students".

In what one education researcher has described as "the bubble-wrapping of children", boards are outlawing activities like bullrush, ball tag and even impromptu games of rugby for fear children will be hurt.

Schools like Mr Scrymgeour's which has a "play

rough" philosophy allow their pupils to explore their capabilities. But at many other schools pupils are being denied what used to be a quintessential part of a New Zealand childhood.

Getting branded with a wet tennis ball, being bowled over in a tackle, and getting up again, was once as much a part of growing up in New Zealand as walking to school barefoot, falling off your bike and racing pencils home in rain-filled gutters. Physical play didn't breed a nation of concert pianists, nuclear physicists or linguists, although New Zealand produced its share, but it did breed confident resourceful individuals who could turn their hands to almost any task.

But today many kids are being denied the opportunities given to their parents. It is part of a wider societal trend. Where once footpaths were crowded with children walking, biking and skateboarding to school, now the roads are clogged with mums and dads driving them there in four-wheel-drive vehicles. That is partly because of a largely irrational fear of sexual predators and partly because many parents have to hurry the kids out of the house so they can get to work on time.

The extra precautions may avoid the odd scrape, but if children don't learn during childhood how to cope with setbacks, how to organise their own fun and what they are physically capable of, and incapable of, when are they going to learn?

All power to Hereworth School and other schools like it. Kids, who want to scrag their mates, climb trees and slide down muddy banks should be allowed to do so. It's what being a kid is all about.