

Mind rabid hedgehogs

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Did you realise how dangerous it is doing a risk assessment? Think carefully before you attempt one. You might trip and injure yourself while visiting a site. Your leg could be bitten by an unmuzzled dog not on a short lead. As you type up your report, your tendons will probably become inflamed.

Avoiding accidents, taking care to anticipate problems, supervising children properly - these are all prime professional responsibilities that no one should ever duck. When risk assessment becomes risk aversion, however, everyone suffers.

Children miss out, and their teachers, if they do undertake anything adventurous, tremble for their career. Sad, isn't it?

Teachers and students sometimes ask me about taking pupils on an excursion.

Should they refuse? I think of some of the adventures I have been on and worry on their behalf.

I have often been up mountains with large groups. One sunny August day, a few years ago, I took 180 American children aged 12 to 15 by cable car to the top of a 9,000-foot peak in the Dolomites. For the return journey I gave them three options.

Some teachers were returning in the cable car, others would be walking down into the valley along a clearly marked path. Being a complete nutter, I myself intended to run down the mountain, which I knew very well, so did anyone want to join me?

A dozen fellow loons cheerfully volunteered, so we set off carefully, first across Dolomite rock, then through forest, eerie silence broken only by the slithering sound of feet on pine needles and whoops of excitement. Finally we ran through Alpine meadow, thick with juicy grass. I led the charge, looking out for adders. It was OK for sir to get bitten.

At the bottom our thighs were dead, but no one would ever forget what we had done. Nowadays I would sooner cross the Atlantic on an airbed than repeat it.

Learning to behave sensibly in potentially dangerous situations is an important part of growing up. The "where there's a blame, there's a claim" threat inhibits children from vital experience needed before they grow up.

What aggressive legal advertising does not say, of course, is that law firms usually select cast-iron certainties, take a large chunk of any compensation, and that many legal cases fail when schools have taken sensible safety measures.

The courts recognise that, with eight million children in 24,000 schools, there will occasionally be accidents even in the best-run places. Poor old Comenius, the 17th century empiricist, must be turning in his grave.

He wrote: "A tree needs to be copiously refreshed by wind, rain and frost; otherwise it easily falls into bad condition, and becomes barren. In the same way

the human body needs movement, excitement, and exercise." Sorry, Comenius, far too risky.

New interactive technology is wonderful and the internet, despite the mass of rubbish on it, offers amazing resources. But I feel increasingly worried about children living in a virtual, rather than a real world. It is indeed educational, and also fun, to look at artefacts from museums you could never hope to visit on a computer screen, but how does it compare with the real thing?

What about seeing the Eden Project at first hand, climbing a mountain, looking at an original painting, walking through a great cathedral or castle, breathing the air where our history was made? The cyber version may be safe, but it seems pale by comparison.

So let there be an end to games of conkers wearing suits of armour and motor cycle helmets, school trips to the IT suite, powerpoint presentations on the aerodynamics of tiddlywinks.

If children go pond dipping, will some man-eating shark really seize them and drag them down to the deep?

I thought about writing a column on risk assessment for the back page of The TES, so I did a risk assessment on it. Dearie me, don't even think about it, far too hazardous an undertaking.

People would write in and complain that I was being flippant about the vital issue of safety. The thought police would knock on my door and say the Inquisition awaited outside, twiddling its thumbscrews. A school would complain it had felt encouraged to take a party of pupils off-site collecting insects and had been attacked by a rampaging herd of rabid hedgehogs.

Then I thought, bugger it, and hurled the risk assessment into the wastebin.

Fatal. I should have done an assessment first on the risk of throwing it.

The screwed up paper bounced off the rim, sailed through the window, hit the windscreen of a passing oil tanker, which then crashed into a wall and burst into flames. The whole city was burned to the ground. Serves me right.