



# The debate on raising Kiwi kids

**MERIDEE WALTER, SAMANTHA GRAHAM AND ELEANOR WOODS look into a debate on children who are missing out on life experiences because of overprotective parents.**

Children of the 60s often talk about the freedom they had when they were growing up.

They could walk home from school, explore with their neighbours and stay out until it got dark.

Experts say modern children are missing out on this experience and this may disadvantage them in the future.

In New Zealand, these modern children number at about 868,000 (0-14-year-olds).

Dr Judith Paphazy says that social and problem-solving skills are becoming weaker, resulting in a lack of ability to make independent decisions.

"A lot of children get up, watch TV and get driven to school. It's ridiculous. They've barely moved and they walk into school half-asleep," she says.

Modern-day children are becoming reliant on entertainment technologies such as the television and video games, which is discouraging imagination and even contributing to health problems later in life.

Dr Aric Sigman, of the British Psychological Society, believes that television should be seen as a major public health issue and it is important to reduce children's television viewing.

He is concerned by studies that show trends between television consumption and obesity, sleeping problems and behavioural issues.

Remuera mother-of-three Fiona Hall believes she has a right to raise her children in her own way.

She says she is very protective of her children Greta, George and Sophia.

"There are many scary, bad things in the world. I just want the best for them," she says.

"I make sure they come home straight after school, don't play on the road and don't talk to strangers...you know, the usual.

"Many other parents I know have the same ideas about how to keep your child safe."

Her son George, 6, says he doesn't know any other children on his street.

"I just play with my little sister in the play room."

Peter N Stearns, a social historian at George Mason University, says "in the last few decades the belief became popular that children are exceptionally fragile creatures and we should treat them that

way".

According to Stearns, children are treated more preciously because it has become more common for parents to want smaller families.

Professor of psychology Dr Bernardo J Carducci argues that over-anxious parenting brings short-term satisfaction but has long-term consequences.

These over-anxious parents are raising children unable to make sound decisions and are unfit to deal with failure.

Sports days, for example, are starting to lose their competitive nature.

The education system particularly encourages participation and "fair play" over winners or losers.

Although there are benefits to this change, concerns are developing over the trend to discourage competition when it is a central part of real life.

The traditional school camp is being similarly avoided for fear of endangering young people unnecessarily.

Camps were a popular way of encouraging children to develop physical, mental and social skills in a fun and educational environment.

A number of schools and organisations now steer clear of camps because of the responsibility and preparation involved in taking the trip.

"We have got to let our children live a little," says Paul Adams, youth affairs spokesperson for United Future.

"We have got to allow them to tackle the world that surrounds them."

Adams feels that school camps are an imperative tool in supporting youth development.

He says it is not just about the simple pleasures of childhood, but a platform to develop necessary skills for adulthood.

"Cotton-wool kids will be timid, under-developed adults," he says.

Christine Walter, national quality services manager for Out of School Care and Recreation (OSCAR) with the YMCA, has worked with youth and recreation for more than 10 years.

She trains staff in risk analysis and how to manage it, and is strict about maintaining high standards in the area.

"No child's experience should be dimin-

ished because of risk assessment management strategies," she says.

"It should be enhanced and safe for them."

As a parent, she says she worries "that we are legislating against decisions a parent would usually be allowed to make".

The recent political debate over the Repeal of Section 59 – or the "anti-smacking bill" – exemplifies the growing role of the Government in determining how children should be raised by dictating the way parents should discipline them.

She says parents should be the ones making decisions about their children's upbringing, but they need to act responsibly.

"In an instant society we need to provide natural experiences because this teaches children to marvel and ask questions."

Katie Clearwater, an early childcare educator, says that early childcare policies are rigid but necessary in modern society.

"We have health and safety policies to protect children, but as educators we have to try to ensure that they don't miss out on learning or having fun," she says.

She supports the early childcare system, but is concerned that future policies may go too far in trying to keep children safe at the expense of their education and development.

Clearwater describes a child who was accidentally hit by a spade in a sand pit at the centre where she works.

Although the injury was minor, the parents tried to have all spades removed as they were concerned for their child's safety.

She understood the parents' concern for the child's safety, but feels this was an overreaction under the circumstances.

"Taking away an activity which has a lot of positives, like the improvement of motor skills, does more harm than good."

Sir Digby Jones, the former director general of the Confederation of British Industry, says he has seen several examples of "excessive risk aversion" in schools.

He says teachers are avoiding many activities because of small dangers and this is denying students the chance to learn valuable skills which will make it

more difficult for them to find employment later in life.

Confederation of British Industry research showed two-thirds of employers said teenagers lacked self-management skills.

"If we never took a risk our children would not learn to walk, climb stairs, ride a bicycle or swim; scientists would not experiment and discover; we would not have great art, literature, music and architecture."

Similar research by the Association of Graduate Recruiters showed that vacancies were being left unfilled because even those with appropriate academic requirements did not have necessary skills such as communication and leadership.

Heads, Teachers and Industry chief executive Anne Evans says failure and competition "are a healthy and necessary part of growing up and certainly something school leavers will face as adults in many different contexts".

Failure has become something schools try to avoid, both in this country and overseas.

The introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in New Zealand schools caused controversy because it effectively eliminated competition in academic success.

Auckland Grammar School principal John Morris sees NCEA as a tool used by the Government to ensure pupils just get through school, rather than challenging their knowledge.

Some schools in the United States have prohibited the use of red pens for marking in favour of lavender because they believe that red marks may traumatise some students if they have performed badly.

Christina Hoff Sommers, a leading writer and philosopher at the American Enterprise Institute at Washington D C says we should be preparing children to deal with criticism instead of avoiding it.

"If we protect children from criticism written in bright colours, it may be that we are short-changing them.

"In the global economy they will be competing with children whose teachers have not protected them."

Overprotection and increased fear that children may not grow up the way society would favour has led to concern over issues that might have once been considered trivial.

"Cotton wool kids will be timid, under-developed adults"