

Risk-Benefit:

Balancing Creativity and Concern in Playground Design



A round-table discussion

12 November 2013, 9:00 – 11:00 am

Coffee and light breakfast provided.
Discussion begins promptly at 9:30 am.

CUNY Graduate Center
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In recent decades, growing concerns about children's safety have led to heightened restrictions on children's play and movement. These changes in societal attitudes have affected the design of playgrounds, which serve as most children's primary outdoor environments for free play. Generalized fears about potential injuries have led to playground designs that prize children's safety over effective challenge and play value. Research shows, however, that protecting children from risks may have serious consequences for their physical and mental health—with repercussions for society at large. How can we balance the desire to protect children while at the same time offering them the freedom to take risks? What is the potential for moving policy and public perception to a more balanced approach?

The session is scheduled to take advantage of the visit to the USA by *Julian Richter*, Managing Director, Richter Spielgeräte GmbH, playground equipment manufacturer and former chair of the technical committee for European safety standards, who is well known for his approach to managed risk taking in play.

Moderators:

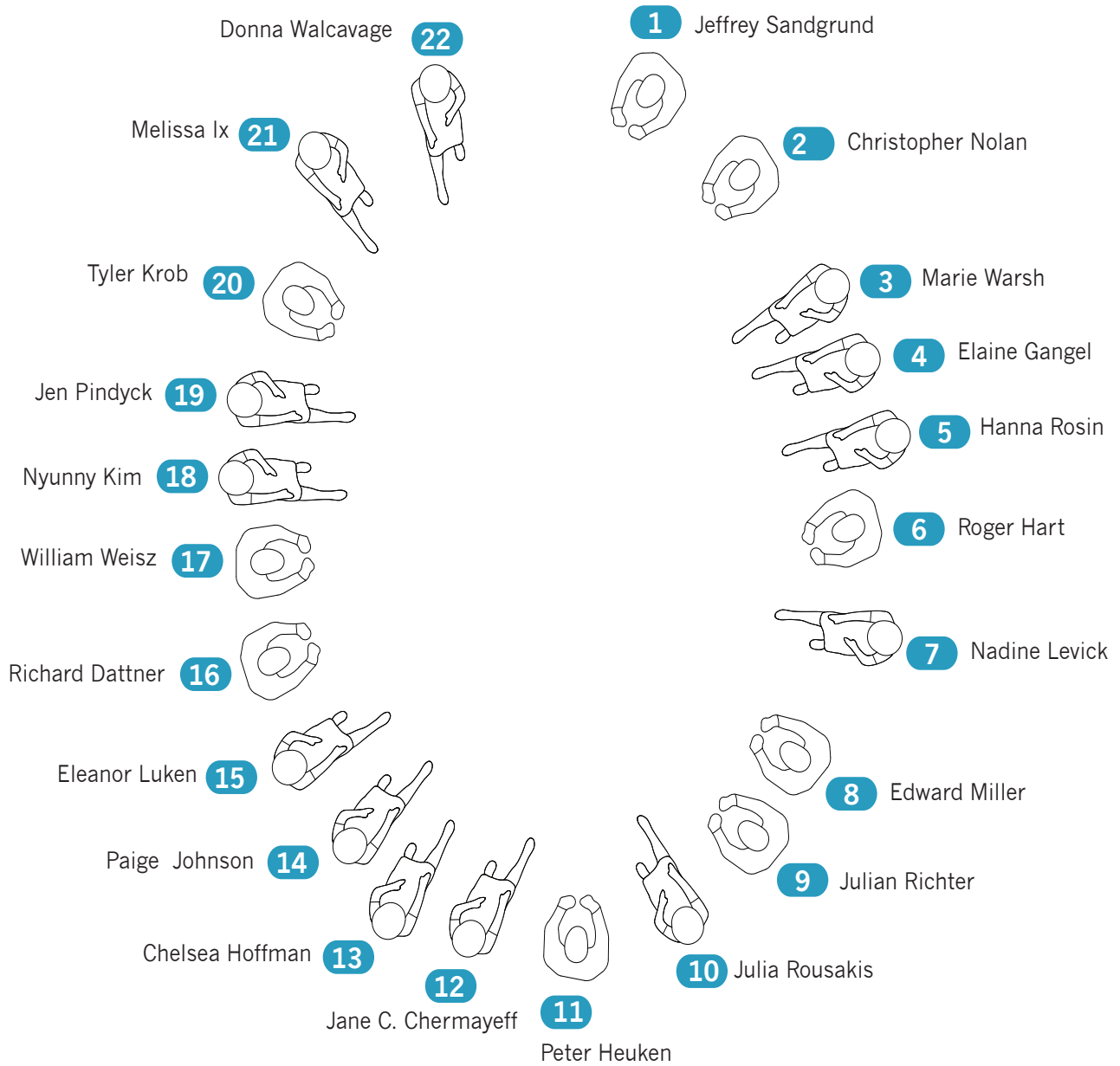
Jane Clark Chermayeff, President, Architectural Playground Equipment, Inc., planner and recreation consultant

Roger Hart, Director, Children's Environments Research Group, CUNY Graduate Center

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The Conversation...

Who was there?



Contacts

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Concept Map of the Conversation



Summary

The morning began with an introduction by Jane Clark Chermayeff that explored today's diminished state of play and the juxtaposition of our increasingly risk-averse society with current research into the role of risk in healthy child development. Julian Richter, Sr. then discussed the importance of play value and risk management, from both the German legal perspective and his personal vision for improving the state of childhood for the future. Roger Hart initiated a wide-ranging discussion of play in America that touched on issues as diverse as child development, legal procedures, and the power of custodians to veto design plans. In the end, the group arrived at the consensus that what is needed is both revised policy and standards and new cultural norms. It was acknowledged that this conversation, in various forms, has already been going on for a number of decades but has not yet created significant change. To make a difference, we will need to adopt a broader perspective that looks at challenges to child development overall and brings together a truly interdisciplinary coalition of advocates and experts.

What We Heard

A collection of design recommendations and key quotes from the discussion:

- Create play environments that minimize children's anxiety and frustration
- Design risks such that children can see, understand, and explore them
- Design for the behavior you want to see in children as well as adults (ex: hills slow children down)
- Think carefully about enclosures: where needed, what type, how high, how much space they enclose

"We must think about risk perception and risk awareness." –Nadine Levick

"Playgrounds are spaces that bring together people of all ages and abilities." –Christopher Nolan

"Are we entering a POST-PLAYGROUND ERA?"
–Paige Johnson

"Kids don't understand the repercussions of risk because they don't have experience with risk."
–Elaine Gangel

Moving Forward

A number of small, feasible ideas were identified over the course of the conversation:

1. Think about language used to talk to parents: Focus on the benefits, find language that resonates (ex: "challenge" is a better choice than "risk")
2. Think about how risk is evaluated and communicated on playgrounds
3. Acknowledge the concerns of a diverse group of design allies, including maintenance staff
4. Develop creative design solutions that respond the layers of standards playgrounds must adhere to (ASTM/CPSC + ADA)
5. Find a way to align concerns about play value with growing public concern about the competitiveness of education and the erosion of play opportunities
6. For POLICY MAKERS: Bring a child development perspective to bear on play-related policy

References and Bibliography

Child Development

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Gill, Tim. *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk-Averse Society*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2007.

<http://rethinkingchildhood.com/>

History

Clements, Rhonda. "An Investigation of the Status of Outdoor Play." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. No. 5 (2004): 68-80.

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Legal/Policy Perspectives

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Ball, D. J. "Policy issues and risk-benefit trade-offs of 'safer surfacing' for children's playgrounds." *Accident Analysis and Prevention*. No. 36 (2004): 661-670.

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Common Good, legal reform non-profit: www.commongood.org

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Ball, D.J. *Playgrounds—Risks, benefits and choices, Contract Research Report No. 426/2002*. Sudbury: HSE Books, 2002.

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Health and Safety Executive. *Children's Play and Leisure—Promoting a Balanced Approach*.(2012).<http://www.hse.gov.uk/entertainment/chlds-play-statement.htm>

Reddy, Sumathi. "Playing It Too Safe?." *The Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2012.

Tierney, John. "Can a Playground Be Too Safe?." *The New York Times*, July 18, 2011.

Injury statistics from CPSC: <http://www.cpsc.gov/en/Research-Statistics/NEISS-Injury-Data/standards>

Standards and Guidelines

ASTM (American Society for Testing and Materials)

CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission)

ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)

EN-1176 (European Standards for Playground Equipment)

Ball, D.J., Gill, T, and Spiegel, B. *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide*. London: Play England, Department for Children, Schools and Families; and Department for Culture, Media and Sport. (2008).

Noteworthy Playgrounds and Play Advocates

Beauvoir Outdoors

Official site: <http://www.beauvoirschool.org/beauvoiroutdoors>
APE photos: <http://archplayequipment.com/richter/beauvoir-outdoors.html>

Brooklyn Bridge Park

Official site: <http://www.brooklynbridgepark.org/events/recreation-facilities/playgrounds>
APE photos: <http://archplayequipment.com/richter/brooklyn-bridge-park.html>

Prospect Park – Donald & Barbara Zucker Natural Exploration Area

Official site: <http://www.prospectpark.org/about/community-news-updates-post/zucker-natural-exploration-area>

Blogger photos: <http://mommypoppins.com/prospect-park-playground-donald-barbara-zucker-natural-exploration-area>

10 Adventure Playgrounds in the UK

<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356402625938/>

UK Play Advocacy Groups:

www.playengland.org.uk,

www.playwales.org.uk

Life without a swing is a misunderstanding!

–Hugo Kukelhaus