

# Play and risk in Nicaragua

Harry Shier

In Nicaragua children can be seen playing everywhere. Most children have to manage the conflicting demands of work, school and play from a young age, but the impulse to play is felt as urgently here as anywhere in the world, so children make the most of any space and any spare minute for their play. Rural children play in the fields, forests, lakes and rivers that surround them, while city children play in streets and back yards. Those that attend school take advantage of all being together in one place to self-organise playground games. Where I live in the northern mountains, the busiest

time for children is the coffee harvest, which keeps them hard at work picking coffee for three months of the year, but even here children make games out of this tedious work.

There is little room for indoor play in the small wooden shacks that are home to most rural Nicaraguans, but with warm weather 365 days a year the outdoors beckon all year round. There is no adult-organised play provision in Nicaragua. Most towns have some unsupervised rusting swings in a park, but there are no playworkers, play centres or out-of-school clubs.

To sum up, in Nicaragua children's

play is generally outdoors, unsupervised, autonomous and self-organised. Although it can be seen everywhere, most of it, especially in rural areas, is hidden from adult eyes.

So what about risk? Well, in seven years living and working here, I have never heard anyone, adult or child, express concern over risk at play. The risks that children face in Nicaragua are many; among the most often cited are the risk of physical, psychological or sexual abuse in the home, at school or at work on the coffee plantations, the risk to healthy development due to







excessive and inappropriate burden of work, or malnutrition, or contaminated drinking water, the risk to social and intellectual development due to lack of access to education; but of risk at play, never a mention.

I have observed children in Nicaragua engaging in all sorts of play activities – unsupervised – that would be considered too risky to contemplate in a northern supervised-play situation: diving head-first into river-pools, sailing dug-out canoes on tropical lagoons, shooting at birds with catapults, riding horses (without helmets – or even saddles), lighting fires, climbing trees in search of the lushest fruits on the highest branches. And no-one, adult or child, seems remotely concerned about the risks of these activities. Perhaps in part this is because children are not seen coming to harm through play: if they come to harm it is through abuse at home, at school or at work – but very rarely at play.

One day I'd like to have the time

and resources to get to the bottom of this with children and their parents. In the meantime, here are some tentative conclusions:

#### **Firstly**

In Nicaragua it is taken for granted that children gradually learn to recognise, assess and manage risk through play. Climbing a tree is a good example: you check each branch before you put your weight on it, and the more trees you climb, the better you get at doing this.

#### **Secondly**

In Nicaragua the local authorities and service providers, such as they are, do not concern themselves with risk to children at play because they know they will not be held responsible for mishaps that occur to children. No one accepts a "duty of care" in respect of children playing unsupervised in fields, woods, lakes and rivers. That is, when something goes wrong there's no point seeking compensation from anyone. In many northern countries, on the other hand, there has developed a "compensation culture" in which local authorities and other service

providers can be sued for compensation if any mishap occurs to a child, and they are very conscious of this in determining what play opportunities may and may not be offered to children. In Nicaragua, children play out more freely because, from an early age, they learn about taking some responsibility for themselves.

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*Photos, including the cover photo, are from their files.*

CESESMA, the Centre for Education in Health and Environment, is an independent, non-government organisation working with children and young people in the coffee-growing area of northern Nicaragua, where dependence on coffee production leads to a high incidence of child labour and the associated social problems. We are a team made up almost entirely of Nicaraguans, most of us local people. Although we depend on overseas support and solidarity to fund our work, we are self-governing and independent of any external agency.