

## Playwork and risk: beyond elfin safety

Harry Shier

[www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

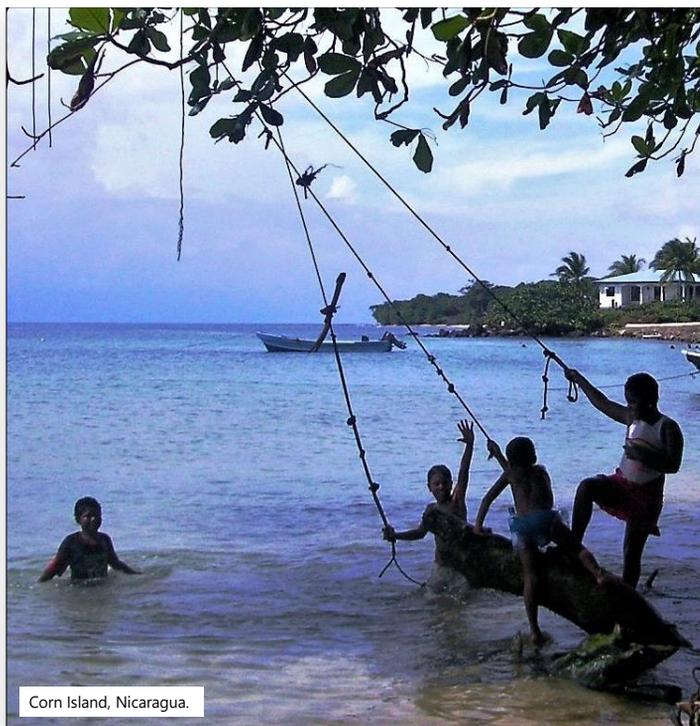
[harry@harryshier.net](mailto:harry@harryshier.net)



Matagalpa, Nicaragua: When the rains came, holes resulting from the excavation of sand from dry riverbeds filled with water, providing an improvised swimming pool for local children.

## Overview

1. **INTRO:** Changing attitudes to risk and safety
2. **GROUP TASK:** The right tools for the job? *(not included in this handout)*
3. **PRESENTATION:**
  - The good old days
  - Changes: The culture of fear
  - Culture of blame and compensation
  - Responsibility, responsibilisation and blame
  - Socialism and individualism
4. **DISCUSSION:** Real playwork in a risk-averse age. *(not included in this handout)*



Corn Island, Nicaragua.

## 1. Changing attitudes to risk and safety

[www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

Writing in English	Obras en español	Videos and podcasts	Conference and seminar slides	CV
--------------------	------------------	---------------------	-------------------------------	----

Archivo de CESEMA  
CESEMA Archive

 The Play Ideas Bank (1980-85)

**The Play Ideas Bank: Creative Playwork in the 1980s**

1981-85. In the early 1980s, I set about creating a comprehensive practical guide to creativity in playwork. This was compiled and distributed as a series of 4-page leaflets, published by the National Playing Fields Association. Years later, the leaflets were scanned and digitised by [Gloucestershire Resource Centre](#). It is their digitised versions that appear here, and I thank them for this.

These leaflets are offered as relics of an earlier time in playwork, and should not be used as practical guides in today's climate.



Extracts from the 1980s Play Ideas Bank leaflets, highlighting things I wouldn't promote in the same way today.



● **Knives**

The quickest and easiest way to cut corrugated cardboard is with a trimming knife:



But these are very sharp and can be very dangerous. You can get children to mark out the shapes they want, and have adult helpers use the knives to cut them out.

On the other hand, all children must sooner or later be taught how to use sharp tools safely. Otherwise they will eventually get their hands on them and learn the hard way by themselves. So with older children, ask yourself whether you can afford the time to introduce them to the correct use of sharp knives, and let them try it under your close supervision.

You can get special hooked blades that are safer, but difficult to use accurately:



When using knives, avoid scoring other people's floors and tables, if you want to use the premises again!

**Real Fires**

Most of the kitchen safety rules apply, but there are a number of extra points to add:

- Check that fires are permitted before you start.
- Check you have buckets of water or a hose-pipe ready **before** you light the fire.
- Direct adult supervision of open fires at all times.
- Double-check fire is properly doused when finished.
- Avoid burns: Have oven-gloves or suitable substitute for lifting things on and off the fire. Use tongs to handle food when frying or grilling.
- Ensure a firm, steady support for pans over fire e.g. metal grille supported on bricks.



A good fire for outdoor cooking is a brazier made from an old oil-drum. Bash holes in the sides and bottom with a pick-axe to allow air to flow. Put a metal grille on top.

**CO-OPERATIVE GAMES**



**TOUCH:** A lot of co-operative games encourage close physical contact between players. For some this feels warm and friendly, but for others it can be quite oppressive, particularly in older or mixed-age groups. As a games leader, please be sensitive to everyone's needs.



# PHOTOGRAPHY

## The Darkroom

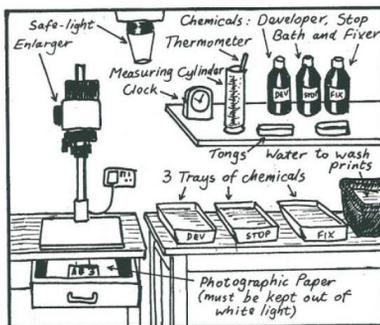
### WHY MAKE A DARKROOM?

Learning to develop and print your own photographs is an excellent project for playworkers and children together:

- \* It develops numeracy skills and also understanding of physics, chemistry, visual communication and design.
- \* It is the cheapest way to produce large black and white prints for displays and publications.
- \* It gives you complete control over how your finished photograph will look.
- \* Doing the whole process themselves gives children a great sense of achievement.
- \* The sense of wonder and excitement when a child sees her first photograph develop in front of her eyes is one of the most magical experiences in playwork.

### 2. MAKING PRINTS

The second stage, making your prints, does need a darkroom and an enlarger.



If you want to do darkroom work with children you should either go on an introductory photography course, or find someone who knows how to do it to teach you step by step. If neither of these is possible, one of the books below, or a grown up photography hand-book will help you get started.

## Safety

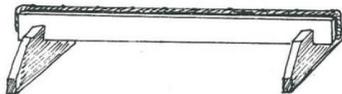
- \* Many grown up photographers work in photographic chemicals with their bare hands with no ill effects. However, the chemicals can irritate sensitive skin so when working with children, play it safe and make sure tongs are always used. If any participants have sensitive or damaged skin make them wear rubber gloves.
- \* Always dry hands before touching switches or any electrical equipment.



# CIRCUS

## The Tight-Rope

For beginners, start with a wooden beam a foot or so above the floor. If you want to practise real rope-walking, nail a rope to the beam so you can start to get the feel of it without the risk.

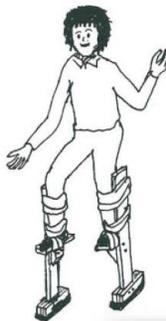


A real tight-rope (or tight-wire) is very difficult to rig up for an improvised circus. The best bet may be to stick with your beam, or use a pole. It should never be above 2m high without expert training and supervision available.

On some sites, such as an Adventure Playground, it may be possible to rig a proper wire, but this should be supervised by an experienced worker. The technique is similar to that for an aerial runway (see "Towards a safer Adventure Playground", NPFA 1984), but the wire is level, and under greater tension, which can most easily be maintained with a heavy-duty turnbuckle.

### TIE-ON STILTS

These are the real thing: The stilts are tied to your legs and feet, leaving hands free - to help you balance at first, but then for other things; juggling, playing an instrument etc. If you lose your balance on these you can't jump off, so there is a risk of falling and hurting yourself, but with a bit of practice you'll never fall anyway.



## A Circus Parade

If you've got a band, why not start the circus off with a parade? A big banner announcing the circus, the Circus band and all the performers and friends in costume. For a small parade that keeps to the pavement you don't need police permission, though you should get permission from parents if you are taking their children out on the streets. You need very good adult supervision, especially anywhere you have to cross a road, and make sure you don't obstruct anyone using the road or pavement. Then back to the big top for the show to begin...

## 2. GROUP TASK

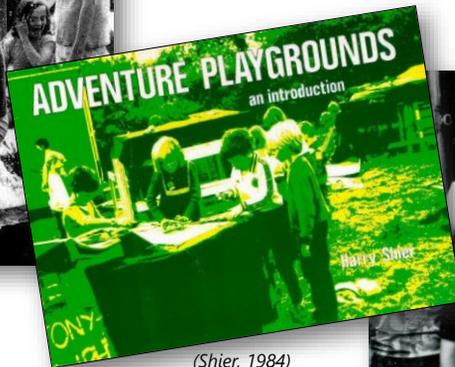
Contact me if you want to know about the group task

7

### 3. PRESENTATION: The good old days



*(Mint Street Adventure Playground, London. Photos by HS)*



*(Shier, 1984)*

I was an adventure playground worker in the 1970s.

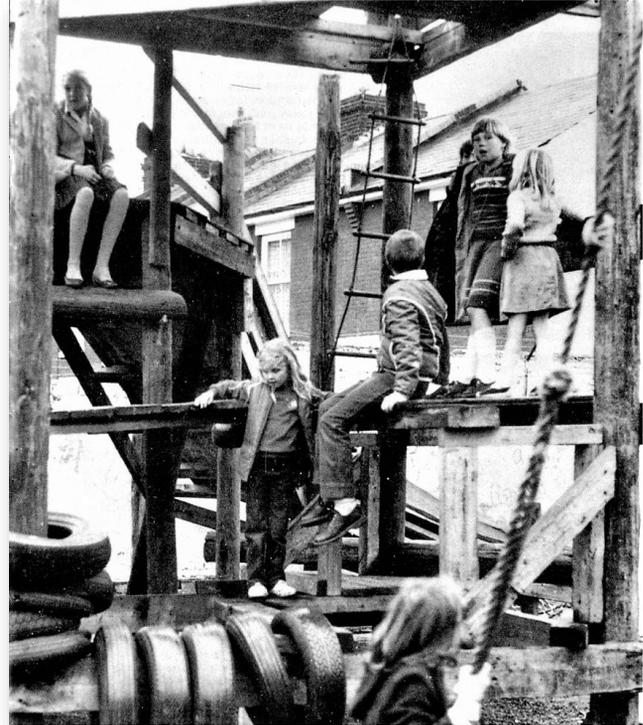
- We scrounged old timbers from demolition sites to build climbing structures and giant rope swings.
- Other favourite activities included lighting fires, cooking, den-building (with indiscriminate handing out of hammers, nails and saws), and various arts and crafts involving sharp knives.



8

# Playwork and risk: beyond elfin safety

Presented by Harry Shier at the Playwork Conference, Eastbourne, 07 March 2023



*(Photos from "Adventure Playgrounds, an Introduction", NPFA 1984. Taken by Peter Heseltine)*



*(Photos from "Adventure Playgrounds, an Introduction", NPFA 1984. Taken by Peter Heseltine)*

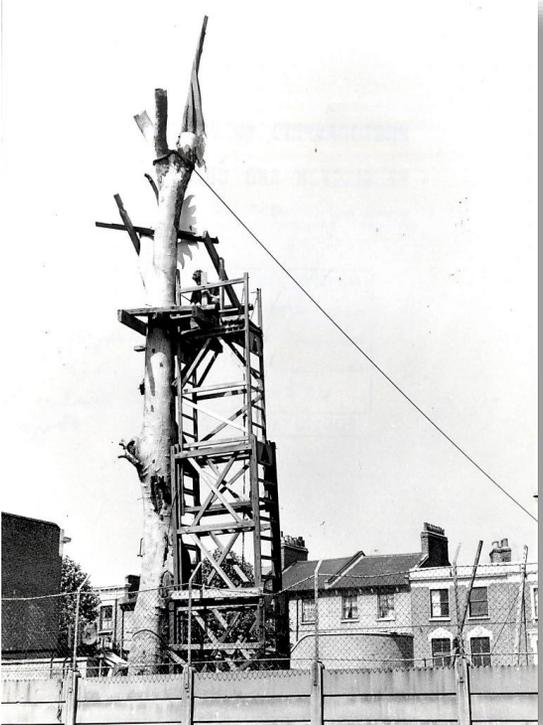
10

# Playwork and risk: beyond elfin safety

Presented by Harry Shier at the Playwork Conference, Eastbourne, 07 March 2023



*(Photos from "Adventure Playgrounds, an Introduction", NPFA 1984. Taken by Peter Heseltine)*



*(Notting Hill Adventure Playground, London: On-line archive)*

These and the following historic archive photos were found online. If you have reason to believe they should not be in the public domain, please let me know.

# Playwork and risk: beyond elfin safety

Presented by Harry Shier at the Playwork Conference, Eastbourne, 07 March 2023



*(Notting Hill Adventure Playground, London: On-line archive)*

13



*(Bandley Hill Adventure Playground, Peterborough: On-line archive, Donne Buck)*



*(SOAP, South Oxford Adventure Playground: On-line archive)*

# Playwork and risk: beyond elfin safety

Presented by Harry Shier at the Playwork Conference, Eastbourne, 07 March 2023



(Adventure Playground in Manchester: On-line archive)

Those were the good old days.

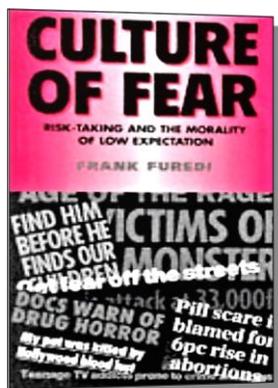
What about now?

15

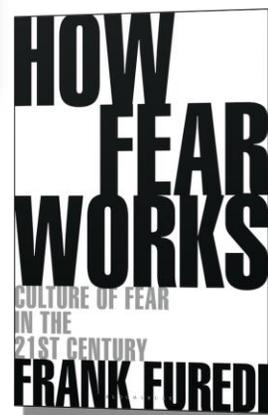
## Changes: The culture of fear

Frank Furedi argues that:

- Contemporary western society is gripped by an obsession with **risk**, which he defines as a fusion of technical calculation with social perceptions of hazard.
- Thus risk becomes a byword for “**danger**” and as such, something that exists autonomously rather than being the outcome of an individual act.
- “**Safety**” has become the cardinal virtue of our society, and fear has become the principal tool for the promotion of its values and practices.
- The corollary of this is that people come to believe that the risk of negative side effects ('hidden dangers') outweighs the benefit of experiment, so consequently shy away from innovation.
- This creates a moral landscape out of which has emerged a ‘**culture of victimhood**’.
- There has been a convergence of beliefs between conservative traditionalists concerned with moral order, and institutional advocates of caution.



(Furedi 1997, reissued 2002)



(Furedi 2018)

(Thanks to Penny Fraser for this summary of Furedi's thinking)

16

# Playwork and risk: beyond elfin safety

Presented by Harry Shier at the Playwork Conference, Eastbourne, 07 March 2023

An invitation that, by chance, arrived in my in-box as I was preparing this presentation.

I think it exemplifies what I've been talking about.

UNICEF INVITES YOU TO A WEBINAR

## Prospects for children and youth in the polycrisis

8 March 2023  
9am EST / 3pm CET

[REGISTER NOW](#)

---

Right now, the world is being confronted by a series of multiple and near-simultaneous shocks amplified by a world that is more interdependent than ever before – and many are calling this phenomenon a “polycrisis”. No matter what it’s called, it will have an enormous impact on children across the world.

17

Also, as I was working on the presentation, I happened to hear this interview on the radio. It's another instance of the reality of the “Culture of Fear”.

**Professor Martin Cormican**, Professor of Bacteriology at the University of Galway, formerly national clinical lead for infection control in Ireland.

Interviewed on RTE radio, 04 March 2023, talking about his role supporting front-line health workers during COVID-19:

*“It was clear that they were compassionate people, but they were paralysed by fear”.*

He explained that this was NOT fear of catching COVID, but fear of being blamed for others' misfortunes.



18

## Culture of Blame and Compensation



(Young, 2010)

*Extracts from the 2010 Young Report:*

"I believe that a 'compensation culture' driven by litigation is at the heart of the problems that so beset health and safety today.

The ubiquitous media reports ... hide a serious point; the perception of a compensation culture results in real and costly burdens for businesses up and down the country. Today there is a growing fear among business owners of being sued for even minor accidents.

Today, accident victims are given the impression that they may be entitled to handsome rewards just for making a claim, regardless of any personal responsibility – adding to a real sense that we live in an increasingly litigious society.

Together these factors combine to create a growing view that 'if there's a blame, there's a claim' and any claim means financial recompense."

## Compensation culture



(Young, 2010)

*The Young Report included specific recommendations for children's play spaces:*

### **Children's play areas:**

"A further area of concern is the impact of health and safety on children's play areas. In legal terms, play provision is guided by the Health and Safety at Work etc Act. There is a widely held belief within the play sector that misinterpretations of the Act are leading to the creation of uninspiring play spaces that do not enable children to experience risk. Such play is vital for a child's development and should not be sacrificed to the cause of overzealous and disproportionate risk assessments.

This is a further example of how legislation primarily conceived to be applied in a hazardous environment is being brought into an environment for which it is unsuited with damaging consequences. I believe that, with regard to children's play, we should shift from a system of risk assessment to a system of risk-benefit assessment, where potential positive impacts are weighed against potential risk."

## Responsibility, responsabilisation and blame

Attitudes to risk and responsibility are complicated by underlying battles between political ideologies.

❑ **The left accuses the right of pursuing a neo-liberal “responsibilisation” agenda:**

People are conditioned to believe that whatever misfortune befalls them is their own fault (e.g. poverty, illness, unemployment, homelessness, accidents at work or play). They should get their act together and deal with it. ...Thus ignoring the structural factors in society that place people in such disadvantaged situations.

❑ **The right accuses the left of a neo-socialist “nanny state” mentality:**

The state is seen as responsible for causing, and therefore for sorting out all the difficulties that people face in life.

There is confusion between the concepts of “taking responsibility” and being “held responsible”.

This is resolved in the work of CESESMA in Nicaragua:



Children and adolescents defending our right to play. For health, education, development, happiness and a life without violence

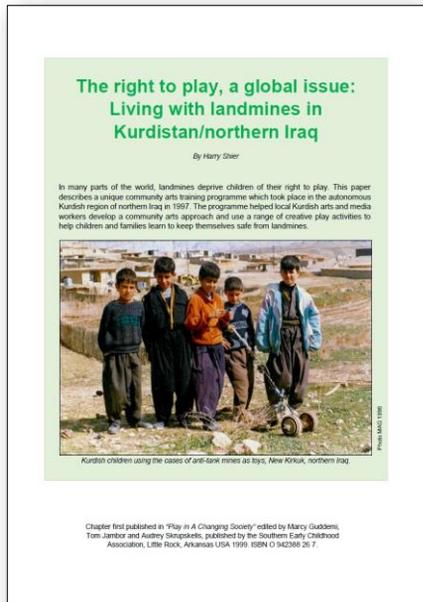
### *Not “Held Responsible” but Responsible Citizens*

Children... are *never* responsible for their own protection. It is axiomatic that protecting children from harm is *always* the responsibility of adults. Though it is generally considered a good thing for children to learn to recognize danger, avoid risk, look after themselves and look out for others; no matter how tough and resilient children become, the responsibility for their protection can never be devolved to the children themselves, and always remains with adults.

However, to affirm that children are *never* responsible for the wrongdoing of adults is not to imply that they must therefore be considered irresponsible... Children can assume the role of active citizens and, as such, can unite to undertake appropriate actions that contribute to their own and others' safety: raising awareness, identifying, and mitigating risks, practicing assertiveness, denouncing abuse and exploitation, and through it all, claiming and defending their right to live without violence. In other words, when it comes to the prevention of violence, children can never be *held responsible*, but they can freely choose to *assume responsibilities*.

(Shier 2023)

## Socialism and individualism



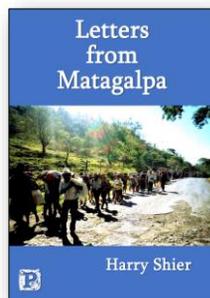
(Shier 1999)

I see these issues battling it out within my own psyche.

- ❑ On the one hand, since my youth I have been a socialist, and I believe we should organise and collectivise to look after each other, ideally through harnessing the power of the state.
- ❑ But I'm also an individualist and a risk-taker, happy to head out on my own to face the unknown without a safety net, and enjoy the excitement that that brings.



23



(Shier, 2022, p. 85)

### The strange case of Ernie Lynch (a.k.a. Che Guevara)



The case of Che Guevara comes to mind (as it always does in Cuba!). I'm not going to compare myself with Che (for one thing, he was a warrior, and I'm a campaigner for non-violence), but in this respect his example is pertinent: After playing a blinder as Fidel's right-hand man in the Cuban revolution, he became a national hero and was given all kinds of top government jobs, even being made head of the National Bank. However, he quickly got bored with life in post-revolution Cuba. As soon as he heard that the Bolivian peasants were thinking of organising their own revolution, he couldn't wait to pack his bags and be off to Bolivia to start all over again.

When asked, in a 1969 interview, why his son was like this, Che's father, Ernesto Guevara Lynch made the following observation: "The first thing to note is that in my son's veins flowed the blood of the Irish rebels. Che inherited some of the features of our restless ancestors. There was something in his nature which drew him to distant wandering, dangerous adventures and new ideas".

(Historical note: In case anyone out there didn't know, Che's granny, Anna Isabel Lynch, was from County Galway).

## References

- Furedi, F. (1997). *Culture of Fear: Risk-taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*. Bloomsbury.
- Furedi, F. (2018). *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*. Bloomsbury.
- Graffham, L. Y. of. (2010). *Common Sense Common Safety*. Cabinet Office.
- Shier, H. (1984). *Adventure Playgrounds: An introduction*. National Playing Fields Association.  
<https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-AdventurePlaygrounds.pdf>
- Shier, H. (1999). The right to play, a global issue: Living with landmines in Kurdistan/ northern Iraq. In M. Guddemi, T. Jambor, & A. Skrupskelis (Eds.), *Play, an Intergenerational Experience*. Southern Early Childhood Association.  
[https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-Living\\_with\\_Landmines.pdf](https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-Living_with_Landmines.pdf)
- Shier, H. (2022). *Letters from Matagalpa*. Protagonismo (first published in 2009).  
[https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-Letters\\_from\\_Matagalpa\\_2022.pdf](https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Shier-Letters_from_Matagalpa_2022.pdf)
- Shier, H. (2023). Claiming the right to live without violence. In K. Križ & M. Petersen (Eds.), *Children's Participation in Child Protection: International Research and Practice Approaches* (forthcoming). Oxford University Press. (In press. I'll send you an advance copy on request)

Harry Shier

[www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

[harry@harryshier.net](mailto:harry@harryshier.net)

25

"There is always a risk in being alive, and if you are more alive, there is more risk". (Henrik Ibsen )

