



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on June 14, 2024

Making Recess Fun — for Bureaucrats

A mom who wished to remain anonymous recently went to her daughter's Maryland elementary school to ask why the kids aren't allowed to play tag, or even close their eyes, at recess.

"We'd recently transferred from another district, and my daughter was taken aback by how many rules there were," said the mom.

There are indeed a lot of rules at the girl's new school — four pages of them. The mom found this out when the school administrator handed her a copy of the "Montgomery County Public Schools Playground Supervision Recess Procedures for Playground Aides." It states, among other things:

- Baseball and football games are not permitted at any time.
- Haphazard running, chasing and tag games on the blacktop are not permitted.
- A student may not begin to swing on rings and bars until the student ahead of them has finished. Once they do swing or climb, they must use "opposed thumb grip." (As opposed to ... their teeth?)

As for behavior:

- It is the responsibility of the playground aide to "caution children if it appears emotions and excitement are mounting to a point where incorrect actions may soon result."

Incorrect actions! It's like the prequel to "Minority Report."

After the mom sent me the rules, I contacted the Montgomery County office in charge of recess safety. They did not respond.

The mom did, when I called for more background. "It really feels as though maybe we've lost touch with what's developmentally appropriate," she said.

The administrator who met with her was kind, she said, but told her the school's primary job was to keep children safe. "I didn't say anything, but the primary job of a school is to teach children and certainly not to interfere with children's development."

But that's exactly what interfering in kids' play does. "These rules demonstrate no trust at all of the children, nor even of the playground supervisors," Boston College psychology professor — and Let Grow co-founder — Peter Gray writes. (I'd forwarded him a copy of the rules.) "When we treat people as irresponsible, they become irresponsible."

When we treat kids as fragile, they become that, too. The rules tell the monitors to "discourage dangerous situations such as ... a student trying a task that is too difficult for his/her age or size." But



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kids SHOULD be trying difficult things. That's how they learn:

1. Yay, I can do it!
2. Rats, I can't do it ... yet!

Then they realize failure is part of the process of doing anything new.

The mom said she felt for the administrator, who had no say in these rules. (Just like the kids!) And she added that today's children really do seem a little rough when they play tag — because they've had so little practice playing tag.

I have heard this from other people who work with children, like therapist Angela Hanscom, who has noted that when kids don't move enough, their "proprioception" — the ability to know where their body is in space, and how much force it needs to do something (a hug, a tag, a handshake) — is off.

All the more reason to let kids start adjusting to each other in the easiest, oldest way possible. Depriving kids of play in the name of "safety" is dangerous.

Even more dangerous than two kids on the climbing rings at once.

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