

We Survived the Playground

The adults who raised us were not wimps -- they had come through the Great Depression and fought wars in Germany, Korea, and Viet Nam -- they had been toughened and tempered by the hard-edge of life. They loved their kids (no doubt), but going overboard about safety had not crossed their minds -- nothing like today. For example, I remember when I was a kid... there was a different philosophy of playgrounds and playground equipment. There were fun things to do on the playground, but those things were also quite hazardous. Somehow we survived -- well, at least I did, I'm not sure about the rest of you.

For example... There was the Jungle Gym -- or Monkey Bars as we called them. This thing was a maze of metal pipes welded and fit together to form a structure one could climb on and around. There were no safety nets, and the ground below this beast was not mulch or even grass -- it was just packed dirt. The more adventurous kids would climb up on top and slide down one of the "fireman" poles (or if you please, the "Bat Cave" pole). Or, if one was really daring, he could walk across the top of the structure from one side to the other on the bars intended for hand-walking. One wrong step doing this maneuver and you would fall a good 8-10 feet to the hard dirt ground below. Sure, it was a little on the dangerous side, but we survived -- well, most of us!

Then there was the Merry-Go-Round. I witnessed several injuries on this baby! Imagine a super-large bicycle wheel laying on its side with 6-8 spokes coming out from the center. All along the outer edge of the wheel was a wooden bench and a bar about face-high to hold onto. Kids would often climb into the middle of this contraption and push it to amazing RPMs -- and just at the point where they were about to be overcome by the spinning -- they would hop up and sit on one of the spokes near the center and ride there until it slowed down a bit. Well, of course there were the few unfortunate ones who got tripped up while in the middle and who fell face-first underneath as they were pushing from the middle! Again, there was just hard-packed dirt under these things with a few random rocks and gravels mixed in for good measure. Of course, there were also the numerous kids who were hanging on the outside for dear life! When some of the older and stronger kids got the thing spinning so fast that the younger and weaker ones could no longer hold on -- they would be thrown off into the hard dirt -- often face first! Ah, good times! I saw several folks get bloodied up this way -- nothing too serious -- just bloodied noses and skinned knees. Some good playground fun!

Of course the See-Saws were always a must-do activity! These were the big and heavy ones -- and it was great fun to pair up with a friend and ride them. Of course, it was also "fun" to get your friend's side up in the air and then jump off your seat when your side was on the ground! This had the effect of slamming your friend down to the ground before he knew what hit him! Again, great fun for all, except for the one who got slammed!

And the swings -- who could forget them? We loved to swing as high as we could, and just at the right moment, we would jump out and launch ourselves into the air! We would see who could jump the farthest! I'm sure these days this activity has been outlawed by the United Nations.

David Mills, Fayetteville, Tennessee
DavidVMills@bellsouth.net

If one survived all these obstacles, there were always the playground bullies who were lurking about looking for someone to beat up or harass. I never had much problem with this -- well, I got in a few fights, I guess, but nothing too serious. Of course, these days, if kids get into a playground fight, one or both will be suspended, expelled, or jailed.

I can still almost hear the sound of the kids laughing and yelling and playing on the playground! I can almost taste the playground dust. Nothing tastes quite so sweet as memories of playground dust. We survived it... somehow.

But those were different days... different times... different values.

(Originally written: August 21, 2016)