

Which is riskier: a window blind or a canoe trip?

We need intelligent ways to assess both the hazards and the benefits of everyday life

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Newton's Third Law of Platitudes states that every proverb — "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" — has an equal and opposite version: "Better safe than sorry." So which cliché should we believe when we choose an attitude to risk? Should we encourage taking chances and release our entrepreneurial spirit, but which can also lead us to eat, drink and die early, and drill holes in the bottom of the sea with abandon? Or should we be cautious, try to protect ourselves and our children from all harm, but which can also mean grounding all aircraft at the first whiff of volcanic ash?

It's yet another cliché to say we should try to get the balance right between these two extremes and, in a term used by the peer Ilora Finlay, to develop "risk intelligence". But it's not so easy to be intelligent when we are unsure what is going on and when we are pulled by our emotions and anxieties of the new and unknown: surveys in the mid-1980s showed deep fears of microwave ovens.

Let's look at another household item — window blinds. Hardly the most obvious threat to mankind, but remarkably topical. Last month Ikea recalled 3.5 million roller blinds in the US and Canada because of the risk of children being strangled on the cord. It is now against US federal law to sell

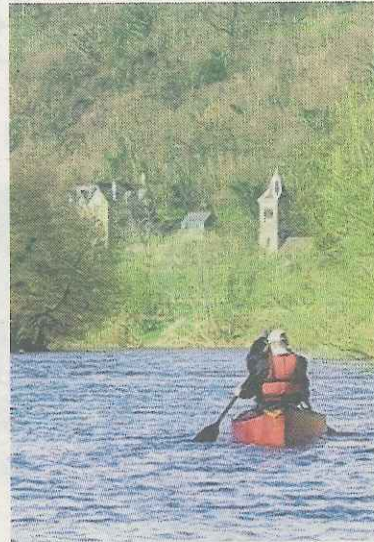
these products. Is this 'elf-and-safety gone mad? Maybe not: this week's *British Medical Journal* coincidentally reports on numerous fatalities and near-misses from window blinds, and claims that at least five young children in the UK have died in this way in the past year. As a comparison, seven children under 5 were killed in car accidents in 2008 in England and Wales.

Risk to children arouses strong feelings and we might agree that window blinds could simply be redesigned. But what if the claimed risk to children also involves some benefits? The positive aspects of risktaking are argued by entrepreneurs and others keen to encourage adventure, and the previous government set up the Risk and Regulation Advisory Council which stoutly declared itself as "fighting zero-tolerance of risk".

Children's outdoor activities, especially school trips, are a natural battleground in this difficult conflict between risk and caution. After the sad

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deaths of four children canoeing in Lyme Bay in 1993, there was pressure that "something must be done", and subsequent legislation (opposed by the Health and Safety Executive) was followed by the closure of around half of outdoor centres. Reductions in school trips and growing parental caution have led to children having increasing "safe" time spent in front of screens.



After four children died canoeing, half of outdoor centres closed

But adventurous, and risky, activities are now making a steady but concerted fight back. The Countryside Alliance recently argued that expensive litigation is a myth, and that local authorities each pay out an average of just £293 a year in compensation after accidents on schools trips, while the English Outdoor Council produced a report featuring grinning kids hurling themselves down waterfalls and a remarkable quote from the chief executive of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents: "We need to accept that uncertainty is inherent in adventure, and this contains the possibility of adverse outcomes. A young person's development should not be unduly stifled by the proper need to consider the worst

consequence of risk but must be balanced by its likelihood and indeed its benefits."

Indeed, the dreaded "risk assessment" is beginning, in children's play provision, to be replaced by a "risk-benefit assessment", which explicitly requires the carer to weigh up whether the benefits are worth the risks. Even the head of the Health and Safety Executive says that "an approach that accepts a degree of risk — properly managed — is not just inevitable but positively desirable".

These are fine sentiments. But it requires courage to argue that taking chances can be beneficial in the almost certain knowledge that eventually something horrible will happen that, in principle, could have been avoided. But someone has to have the confidence to declare that safety both cannot, and should not, be guaranteed.

So how can we increase our risk intelligence, both as individuals and as a society? In theory we need to weigh the potential harms and benefits and come up with a rational, balanced decision that assumes we have trustworthy evidence, can assess the magnitude of chances of futures events, both good and bad, and weigh them by the severity of the consequences. Unfortunately none of these conditions generally holds, and it all becomes particularly tricky when the consequences of the risktaking are felt by others, whether it's future generations, the natural world or the people who will now have to suffer for the gung-ho behaviour of smart young things in banks.

We need to look at the statistics and get a feel for how big the risks and benefits might be; but we can't expect risk intelligence to come from a mathematical formula.