

# Ian Lewis Campaign for Adventure

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RSA Risk Commission Conference Judith Hackitt CBE, HSC Chair      Date: 13th Nov 2007  
 RSA Risk Commission Conference on 31 October 2007      Category: National News

It seems to me that whether or not life for all of us is riskier today than it was yesterday or ten or even twenty years ago is not so much the issue here. The issues are more about: whether the nature of the risks faced in childhood have changed – and they certainly have – I didn't have a mobile phone when I was a kid and I didn't have the opportunity to take a gap year – which both of my daughters have done with my blessing in the last 3 years. So my parents didn't have to worry about whether mobile phone radiation was a risk they wanted to expose me to or whether it was safe for me to backpack around the world on my own at the age of 18.

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The other issue is whether or not our tolerance of risk has increased, decreased or diverged and it would seem to me from the regulator's perspective that we now live in the middle of a huge paradox and one which we see played out in the media every day. On any given day a quick trawl of newspapers will yield stories of "health and safety" stopping things from happening – school trips, playing on swings and so on – but that same trawl is also as likely to find the opposite side of the coin – the "someone must be blamed/someone else was responsible/we must have rules to stop this happening again" stories. Many of the stories of things that have been stopped by health and safety are actually myths or excuses which add to the confusion.

I say this not to point the finger away from ourselves as regulators but to provide some context to the debate.

It is a simple statement of the obvious that we are all exposed to risk all of the time – people in work, people at home and children. What I believe we as adults are charged with doing is helping children to understand that risks are there and how to deal with them NOT how to avoid them.

Last year my predecessor as Chair of HSC, Sir Bill Callaghan, launched a campaign two years ago promoting a sensible approach to risk. This is an approach which I fully endorse and intend to continue.

There can be no question but that adventure is good for our children – it keeps them fit, helps them learn and develops social skills and a sense of responsibility. But it is also beyond question that we all have a moral obligation to protect them from very obvious and foreseeable dangers. The difficulty we all face, and we as regulators in particular, is how to strike that balance between enabling activities to go ahead but ensuring that the risks are managed. This is especially difficult when we are actually removed from the decisions themselves and much depends on how others interpret – or misinterpret – our guidance. The process of risk assessment is a perfect example of this. Risk assessment is something that all of us do, all the time mostly without even knowing consciously that we're doing it – whether it's driving a car in poor weather conditions or gardening and taking care of our dodgy backs. But "risk assessment" becomes a dirty word when it gets translated into a bureaucratic mountain of paper or a valueless "tick-box" exercise.

It's clear to me that there is currently a great deal of confusion about what is really required versus what people feel they have to do to eliminate the fear of litigation/prosecution if things go wrong. Debates such as this taking place here today are important to make it clear that the Health and Safety Executive/Commission are absolutely not about risk elimination but we are about risk management and enabling things to go ahead safely – so that people don't get hurt or injured or killed. And that applies to everything whether it's adults at work or children in school or at play in public places. Our role is to ensure that risks are considered, managed as best they can be and then the activity should continue.

There is no need for this to turn into a paperwork nightmare. Pages and pages of risk assessment for simple school trips are not only unnecessary but unhelpful. Here is one example from Leicestershire County Council of a simple, sensible approach – it's only 3 sides and it covers multiple events.

Life without risk would be pretty dull and boring &ndash; it&rsquo;s not even possible to achieve whether that is applied to adults or children. But equally I don&rsquo;t think anyone should feel the need to apologise for insisting that risks are considered and managed &ndash; the challenge we all face is how to do that sensibly and proportionately.