

## "Question of Balance" Conference

Wednesday, 04 October 2000

Press Article published in Young People Now (October, 2000) promoting the "Question of Balance" conference - After every crisis there are screams to make things safer, but at what cost to education?

The place of risk and adventure in our society, but particularly in education, has again been brought into sharp focus by the tragic accident in which Rochelle Cauvet and Hannah Black, on a geography field trip to the Yorkshire Dales, drowned. The loss of two young lives in a normally safe river, dealt with safely by thousands every year, forces every youth worker involved with young people outdoors (or in any challenging or 'risky' experience) to search their soul for the answer to the question: Just what should we do?

We have legislation, inspection, qualification, training, experience, judgement and responsibility, registration and exemption. Is there something still missing? The answer is not by any means clear, and long may it remain so.

Taken to its basics and to extremes we can quote some fine statistics: in Britain, 20 people are killed (electrocuted) every year by their bedside light. 20 are killed falling over as they get out of bed and 30 drown in the bath. Not much in the papers about these then, but we do have to have baths, light and sleep. Yet annually 200,000 die of smoking, alcohol related diseases and driving 'accidents'; not much about these either, but we could do without alcohol, smoking and a lot of driving. Life would be different - and some would even say better without, but the answer cannot lie in 'necessity' then, or could it?

A year or so of headlines in our newspapers offers a sanctuary of balancing views: 'The dangers of taking the soft option with children', 'Children becoming 'softies' as red tape halts adventure', 'Too cosseted for comfort', 'Safety first, second, third, fourth...', 'Are active kids becoming a thing of the past?', 'Isn't the future of our children worth the risk?'. Is this the middle ground, where some risk is necessary in real education? E. M. Forster, in his 'The Machine Stops', wrote in the early days of television, of a permanently cubed, screen viewing society that had decried the rebels who secretly weight-trained with pillows to become fit enough even get outdoors, an adventure illegal in itself. Was Forster's short story a more accurate vision of the future than 1984? With current fitness levels dropping, obesity rising, ability to judge movement in unfamiliar circumstance diminishing, couch potato syndrome/ TV soap addiction/ web addiction all on the rise, can we say for certain that hundreds will not be showing up in future statistics, and of course amongst the acceptable 200,000 - if they are not already? Perhaps quality of life would also ask a question here.

Perhaps it is also possible to look at the source of the problem: poor judgement. Judgement may be technical or common sense in origin. judgement often (but not always) requires experience; common sense does come from experience and awareness (of groups and situations). Is it right then that the less young people experience in life, the less common sense they will have; thus we will slowly evolve an educational cadre incapable of even the most basic common sense judgements, requiring all situations to be super, super safe?

Most youth workers are daily committing themselves in the balance debate, fighting or shouldering increasing personal responsibility to 'let/take them out?'. Who should we quote? A retired Outward Bound® Director of School 'Every day the young people went out my fingers were crossed. Not that I was doing wrong. On my retirement I breathed a huge sigh of relief.' She had not lost anybody in 30 years. A LEA Outdoor Education Advisor 'They' would prefer us not to walk out the door. What sort of education for life would that be'. Sir Christian Bonnington: 'After every crisis there are screams to make things safer, but at what cost to education?'

On one side we have parachuting grannies and fully risk-conscious doctors who hang-glide; and we have the safety & cotton wool brigade looking to remove all risk from our lives - and perhaps life from our lives as well. We also have the new 'anxiety industry' increasing the GDP by persuading us to prevent risks that scare us but (statistically) should not and ignoring risks that (statistically) should. So where is the balance? Perhaps Professor Gerald Wilde of Queens University has it: "The art of life is not to reduce risk to zero, but to take the right amount of risk." Dr Frank Furedi, in his book 'The Culture of Fear' states: "The worship of 'safety represents a profoundly pessimistic attitude towards human potential". To reach this equilibrium demands experience, judgement, knowledge and skill, much of which must come from first hand [experiential] learning: actually going out and living life!