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Let kids do dumb stuff, psychologist tells headteachers



“Unstructured free play is essential to children’s brain development,” Dr Thurber said

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Heads of prestigious boarding schools will be told to let children do the “dumb stuff of youth” by an expert at their annual conference.

Parents and teachers who are overly cautious can restrict children’s learning by fussing too much about safety, according to Christopher Thurber, a clinical psychologist and teacher who works at a boarding school in New Hampshire.

He will address head teachers at the Boarding Schools’ Association conference in Glasgow next month about how excessive use of safety measures can retard learning.

Dr Thurber told *The Times*: “When parents or teachers are overly cautious, young people do not have opportunities to explore, create, test and imagine.

“Some safety measures, such as wearing life jackets in boats, are critical. Others, such as seat belts on swings, are restrictive and therefore retard learning.

“Unstructured free play is essential to children’s brain development and we adults need to be careful not to turn passive supervision into active restriction.”

He said he was trying to help those working in schools and colleges to understand youth development and to be patient with young people. Their development was bound to include a lot of mistakes, he said.

“They need to understand how mistakes and dumb behaviour, such as foibles and gaffes, are normal.

“When boarding staff find out about young people doing dumb things, they often ask ‘what were you thinking?’. The answer, usually, is ‘I wasn’t’.

“But the part of our brain that is for hypothetical thinking and planning is the last to develop, impeding young people’s executive function skills.

“It’s not until about 22 to 24 years old that the frontal lobes necessary for cognitive skills are fully developed, and teachers need to recognise they’ve chosen to work with a population that’s neurologically under-developed.

“We sometimes hold pupils to high standards without an eye towards what’s normal development, which can be dumb stuff.”

Dr Thurber plans to host a workshop with head teachers, asking them to remember the most stupid thing they did when young. At a previous session he hosted in Britain, one head teacher confessed that she and her brother had a competition to see who could stick the most coins up their nose, aiming for one of each denomination.

He said: “People forget because older pupils can be articulate — they look like grown-ups and in many ways they act like grown-ups — that they’re not.”

Late brain development was important, he said, because it encouraged children and young adults to learn through taking risks.

“If risks are taken, it’s best it happens in the context of a family or boarding school,” Dr Thurber said. “If children have done something really dumb, then there still need to be disciplinary sanctions and consequences but teachers shouldn’t just leave it at that or all the child has learnt is that he or she did something wrong - and they already knew that.

“They need to consider their own thinking and what triggered it - were they tired, were they encouraged by peer pressure, was someone filming it?”

Dr Thurber said parents and teachers could tell children the stupid things they did when young, as long as they imparted the lesson they learnt from it but that it was best not to share

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