

Why kids need delightfully dangerous playgrounds

By Joe Mathews | April 14, 2016



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle



Ruby Zavislak, 4, plays on the swing with her dad, Justin Zavislak, at Christopher Playground on Diamond Heights in San Francisco in 2011. Most contemporary playgrounds are built so safe that it can take the fun out of it for kids.

California doesn't make playgrounds like it used to.

Fifteen years after the state legislated compliance with national safety standards for new and renovated public playgrounds, I can take the Three Stooges — my three sons under age 8 — to parks around California confident I'll see the same reassuringly safe equipment: low swings, low slides, ubiquitous guardrails and super-soft rubbery mats to cushion falls.

But all that safe sameness is boring. Today, the playground pieces that once captured children's attention — merry-go-rounds, custom teeter-totters, Tarzan-style ropes, high monkey bars and flat swings — are nearly impossible to find. It turns out that safer playgrounds, while producing less litigation over injuries, carry their own risks.

Pediatric researchers warn that today's playgrounds no longer provide the fast-moving kinds of play that help children overcome fears and develop sensory and motor skills. Older kids, finding safer equipment less challenging, may be using playgrounds less.

San Francisco Chronicle

APRIL 14, 2016 / PAGE 2 OF 3

California parents should counter these trends — by seeking out those classic California playgrounds too old (before the mid-'90s) to comply fully with today's regulations. So I've been introducing the Three Stooges to dangerous old playgrounds.

On road trips, we've visited Santa Barbara's Kid's World playground, a giant wood fort with so many places to hide that you can't keep your eyes on your kids. Despite the risk of falls, we've enjoyed the playground at Tidelands Park right on Morro Bay — with its wood-and-metal pirate ship allowing kids glimpses of bay otters and a majestic view of Morro Rock.

Then there's our local San Gabriel Valley favorite, La Laguna, at Vincent Lugo Park in the city of San Gabriel. Someone should write a book about the Mexican artist Benjamin Dominguez, who created 14 somewhat-scary concrete structures a half-century ago, near the end of a difficult life that also produced the Atlantis playground in Garden Grove (Orange County). The concrete structures look like dinosaurs and whales and octopi, and kids climb slippery steps to go down long, treacherous slides.

The Three Stooges love La Laguna so much I decided to take them to the mecca of old-school California playgrounds: the Dennis the Menace Playground inside El Estero Park in downtown Monterey.

Dennis the Menace has had some safety updates, but it remains much the same place designed in the 1950s by Monterey citizens, including Hank Ketcham, creator of the trouble-making comic strip character for whom the park is named. A suspension bridge hangs high and long near the playground's entrance. The place is full of extra long and twisty slides. Our only disappointment was that you can no longer play on the old rail steam engine near the entrance — a sign says the city is seeking a way to allow access that complies with state safety laws.

After an hour on the playground, I drove the family north to Grandma's, muttering about playground greatness being a thing of California's past. But a few days later, I was proven wrong — when I took the Stooges to Palo Alto's Mitchell Park, where the Magical Bridge playground opened just last year.

Magical Bridge is annoying in the way of so many Silicon Valley enterprises; it's not content to be smart, it has to tell you how smart it is. Playground signs cite research on how its equipment improves your children's vestibular development, and offer links to a website boasting that Magical Bridge is "the nation's most innovative and inclusive playground." There's a donor wall honoring the worthies who covered the \$3.8 million cost, a "Kindness Corner" with anti-bullying messages, and "a patent-pending safe slide landing."

San Francisco Chronicle

APRIL 14, 2016 / PAGE 3 OF 3

In spite of its preciousness, the place is great.

Magical Bridge is the brainchild of a local mother who wanted a playground to serve children with all manner of developmental and physical disabilities, including her own daughter.

Large disc and bucket swings accommodate kids with disabilities and create speedy movement to satisfy risk takers. There are multiple bridges, a two-story playhouse and a theater — all fully accessible. A 24-string laser harp allows children of all abilities to make music with movement.

The slides are tall, and there are two 21st century versions of the merry-go-round. One connects a spinning circular platform with a cone of ropes that allows kids to climb as they spin.

At the top of the merry-go-rope structure, the Stooges enjoyed a 360-degree view of this new and classic California playground. They also loved the dangerous and novel feeling of being so high that they were out of the reach of their parents.

*Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for **Zócalo Public Square**. To comment, submit your letter to the editor at <http://bit.ly/SFChronicleletters>.*



Joe Mathews

Syndicated columnist