

## Risking some fun

S.F. is game for adding challenges to public playgrounds, removing children from comfort zones to teach vital skills

+1 more By Lizzie Johnson



Photos by Connor Radnovich / The Chronicle

Four-year-old Julian Braun goes down the slide with his father, Christian Braun, at the San Francisco Zoo's playground, which also features more adventurous equipment with uneven surfaces, long tunnels and tall slides in an effort to challenge children.



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Henry Weldon, 7, scurries up a tall net tower at Fulton Park in the Richmond District. From the top, the entire playground spreads out below, and there's a sense of ver-

tigo.

His mom, Lee Ann Weldon, watches from the sidelines. But she doesn't seem worried.

"I know there are a lot of people that would happily bub-

ble-wrap their children," she said. "I'm definitely on the other side. I have two boys, and I know that developmentally they need to stretch their muscles and push their limits a little bit."

But Weldon is not in the majority. Over the past 30 years, playgrounds have shifted toward the norm of safety. Structures were lowered, and sand was replaced with thick rubber padding. A homogenized combination of swings, slides and brid-

Ges is now found in almost every playground across the country.

The San Francisco Recreation and Park Department is trying to put a bit more risk into the city's playgrounds. That translates to installing equipment where children can jump, swing, run and explore, forcing them out of their comfort zones and learning important skills.

### Decade of improvements

The 2008 and 2012 Clean and Safe Neighborhood Parks bonds — together worth \$312 million — have ushered in a decade of improvements to more than 27 parks and playgrounds. The 2012 bond also led to a \$15.5 million failing-playgrounds program, which will repair more than a dozen of San Francisco's 135 playgrounds.

The notion of managed risk is a hard sell — especially under fear of litigation or injury. But it's an important one.

"There has been a lot of discussion about playgrounds becoming too safe and too boring," said Dawn Kamalanathan, Rec and Park's director of capital and planning. "We are trying to balance the totally understandable desire for a safe play experience but also one that packs the thrill we used to get on the playgrounds of my youth."

The net tower at the Fulton Park playground — which was added when a \$4.2 million renovation of the park was completed in early 2013 — is an example of that, she said. The net tower allows older children to climb higher, building confidence and a



Meryl Press and Vida Huegel, 4, play on a swing at the S.F. Zoo, which is trying to add adventure to playtime.

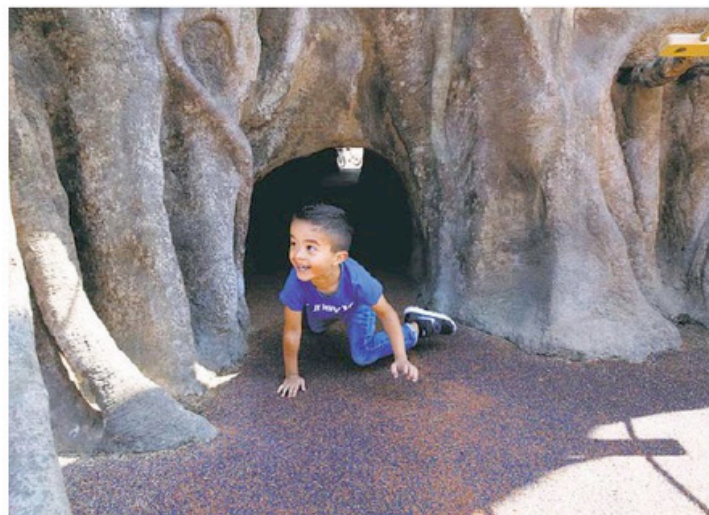
sense of independence.

## Confronting challenges

Without those opportunities, children have trouble learning to control strong emotions such as anger or fear, a series of case studies on school playgrounds in Berlin shows. The Natural Play Project, a charity in England, studied nine aspects of Berlin's playgrounds in 2012 and found that risky and physical play did not correlate to a rise in major accidents.

Instead, the case studies found, children learned to work with one another to challenge themselves safely. They also became more aware of their own abilities and the consequences of their actions.

Risk-taking may even serve



Ryan Hernandez, 4, crawls through a tunnel at the zoo's playground, which is designed to foster crucial life skills.

an evolutionary necessity, Susan Solomon explained in her book, "The Science of Play." When children have the opportunity to overcome a fear, like of heights,

they end up learning skills at an appropriate age.

Ron Holthuysen, who designed San Francisco Zoo's Elinor Friend Playground, said it's how

he and his friends developed valuable life skills growing up in Amsterdam. They played in old pallets, climbed trees and built tiny stick rafts in the canal while his mother supervised the activities from their apartment balcony.

"We think of a playground as only plastic and steel," Holthuysen said. "There's a long list of rules and limitations that limits the environment where kids are allowed to play. We have to get rid of that notion in order to give children what they deserve."

## Feeling 'sense of adventure'

At the zoo, that means uneven surfaces, long tunnels and tall slides. The structures are all safe and compliant with the Ameri-

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OCTOBER 19, 2015 / PAGE 3 OF 3

cans with Disabilities Act, he said, but they also give children an adrenaline rush.

“A child has to be able to jump off something to prove they can do it,” Holthuysen said. “You take all the regulations and study them, and then figure out how far you can take managed risk-taking on the playground. Over the last 13 years, I have had a wonderful test specimen — my own child — and I would watch how he played.”

The Rec and Park Department has turned to parents, such as Weldon, to find playground designs that residents are comfortable with. It has led to imaginative solutions, like the party slide at Helen Diller Playground at Mission Dolores Park, where a gaggle of children can all go down the slide at the same time.

“The experience of height and view and being with little friends is what makes it exciting,” Kamalanathan said. “We have a mandate to create a sense of thrill and incorporate risk and more natural features.”

Weldon agrees, especially when it comes to equipment that encourages imaginative play.

“They need to feel that sense of adventure,” she said. “That helps them build confidence and a sense of accomplishment. Playgrounds are a place to learn, and you can’t do that when everything is 100 percent safe.”