

Cotton-wool kids - or free-range children? The title of an article (really worth reading), by Stephen Moss, in the current National Trust magazine, which lists some curious statistics. Since the '60s the average distance children are allowed to roam independently has decreased by 90 per cent; fewer than one in ten regularly play in wild places; the incidence of obesity in children has tripled in the last decade; an increase in short-sightedness and asthma; a decrease in heart and lung fitness; one in nine youngsters between 11 and 17 have been diagnosed with mental health problems; 40,000 British children are prescribed anti-depressants. As a naturalist, Moss makes a strong case for the need to get our screen-bound kids back outdoors - naturally!

Two dangers are mostly quoted by parents for the cotton-wool treatment. The first is that roads are far more dangerous than ever they have been. Fair enough, we need to think that one through. The second is "stranger danger." However, danger to children from strangers, albeit a harrowing fear, is in reality quite a rarity. In the great majority of incidents when children are harmed, the perpetrator is a person known - even related - to the victim.

For our younger people it can be a fantastic world of discovery and adventure - bugs and bogies, trees and tumbles, wet and warm, fright and fun. Some of our youth club discovered this last month - and they're all still alive! (A pity there weren't a few more there; perhaps next time...)

The point is this: what an irony it would be to smother our children with a protective "house arrest" in a part of the country where the glory of God's creation is more immediately apparent and available than almost anywhere else. Now summer is here (at least the rain is warm), it is a prime time to give our children some freedom - the greatest gift after love, indeed the greatest gift **of** love.

Yes, it is all a risk (although more children are taken to hospital with injuries from falling out of bed than from falling out of trees!), but how else will they come to understand and judge how to take the risks life will eventually demand of them. So let the kids build dens, get muddy, play for the joy of it - for, as Jesus said, to such belongs the Kingdom of God. We might even be reminded that we also were such, once.

Come to that, get your wellies out and jump in a puddle, too!