

The Politics of Play

Editor's Pick. Written by Jay Griffiths.

Aged fourteen and without his parents' approval, the future King Henry II hired a band of mercenaries, sailed from France to England, and failed to take two minor castles. In the realm of fiction, the audacious and adventurous Huckleberry Finn, only "thirteen or fourteen," rebels against the mores of the time and decides not to betray Jim, the runaway slave. Had either Henry or Huck been born into a risk-averse society, they would have been enfeebled.

Attempting to take two minor castles may not feature on every child's to-do list, but lighting fires, making shelters, using knives, and coping with darkness should: this is how children learn to paddle their own canoe—both actually and metaphorically.

Nevertheless, I've seen barriers erected around a fire on Bonfire Night with notices saying, STAND BACK—DANGER, as if children must always take their orders from the signage of authority rather than use their own judgment. Some schools forbid children to play in the snow for fear of legal action in the event of an accident. We live in a litigious age, but this is about far more than that: it is about the kind of children we are creating.

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