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Children denied chance to develop 'resilience' by too strict health and safety rules, warns Ofsted chief

[26](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/05/children-denied-chance-develop-resilience-strict-health-safety/?WT.mc_id=tmg_share_em" \l "comments)

School trip pupils and adults wearing high visibility jackets on visit to The Tower of London Credit: Alamy/Alamy

* [Christopher Hope](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/christopher-hope/), Chief Political Correspondent

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Children are being denied the chance to develop “resilience and grit” because of schools’ over-zealous health and safety policies, the chief inspector of schools says.

Amanda Spielman said schools must stop trying “to wrap them in cotton wool” because it leaves them ill-prepared for the challenges of later life.

Schools had to do more to “distinguish between real and imagined risk”, she said, adding that Ofsted will now train its inspectors to ensure schools are not rewarded for overbearing policies.

Ms Spielman, who took over as chief inspector in March, said children must stop being forced to wear hi-vis jackets on school trips “like troupes of mini-construction workers minus the hard hats”.

Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Ms Spielman said an “over-cautious culture has developed in our schools” that was holding back children and limiting their experiences.

This “deprives children of rewarding experiences, of the opportunity to develop resilience and grit and which makes it hard for them to cope with normal everyday risk”.

Ms Spielman cited examples of school teachers popping children’s balloons and throwing them away because they were dangerous. In another case a sports day was cancelled because of “dew on the grass”.

Ms Spielman has now ordered Ofsted officials to prepare new guidance for schools inspectors this September which will ensure they only focus on actual safeguarding of vulnerable children.

She said: “I want Ofsted to make sure that schools are properly focused on pupil safety but that it doesn’t come at the expense of opportunities to broaden and enrich young minds”.

This over cautious approach can “obscure real safeguarding issues. Every minute spent enforcing a ban on conkers and yo-yos is a minute away from tackling the multitudes of real issues we know schools face”, she said.

She added: “My message to schools is this: keeping children safe from harm should always be your overriding concern, but in doing so, make sure you distinguish between real and imagined risk.

“Trying to insulate your pupils from every bump, germ or bruise, won’t just drive you to distraction, it will short change those pupils as well - limiting their opportunity to fully take advantage of the freedom of childhood, and to explore the world around them.

“I look forward to seeing more eager young faces on school trips from September onwards. I just hope fewer of them will be auditioning for Bob the Builder.”

Safeguarding is part of Ofsted’s routine schools’ inspections and is used to assess leadership, the impact on the personal development, behaviour and the welfare of children and learners.

Next month more than 1,800 inspectors will take part at sessions titled “when is safe, safe: what really matters” around the country.

The materials will reinforce that “inspectors should focus on practice and impact - what is actually happening/and is it working - not policy and process, or ticking boxes”, sources said.

An early indication of the new policy came in April when an outdoor nursery that lets children clamber over trees, roll around in the mud, saw wood, chop vegetables and cook lunch on an open fire was given an outstanding rating by Ofsted inspectors.

David Green, a director of the right of centre thinktank Civitas, said: “Three cheers for Amanda Spielman for drawing a distinction between the real and imagined dangers children face in school.

“Some schools have allowed themselves to be paralysed by fear that they will be blamed if something goes wrong in a sporting competition or on a field trip.

“Sometimes they claim that they are responding to the public-liability clauses in insurance contracts, but their ultra-cautious interpretation has never been a legal requirement.

“When they grow up, children will face the full panoply of life’s risks and the sooner they learn to be resilient in the face of adversity the happier their lives will be.”

Frank Furedi, [a sociology professor at  Kent University who originally coined the term “cotton wool” kids](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/4690916/Swap-the-cotton-wool-for-a-mud-pie.html), added: “It's great that the Chief Inspector recognises the damaging consequences of the safety-at-all-cost and risk averse regime that prevails in far too many schools.

“Perhaps we will see the return of a more adventure oriented culture that does not panic when a pupil picks up a snow ball or when a bunch of kids decide that climbing a tree is real fun.

“However it will not be easy to overcome worse-case thinking about physical activities in schools. The current trend is to expand the regime of safety - contact sports are likely to be the next big target.”

Prof Furedi added that “the threat of litigation has promoted a mood of defensiveness in schools. It has also provided a pretext for cancelling outdoor activities in many schools”.

He added: “Schools that have been educated to be risk averse during the past three decades are not going to change their ways overnight.

“It will require a fundamental change in attitude towards the question of 'what it means to be safe'. Will the Chief Inspector be bold enough to let schools off the existing 'health and safety' leash?”