area of transport and mobility, cycling and horse riding are two further high risk activities that many children indulge in, with the active support of their parents. Again, risks are accepted because benefits are perceived.

Because the concepts of risk and safety are difficult, care must be taken not to concentrate unduly on options such as regulation, where preventive activity can be readily translated into action. Regulation may become an intrusion into an adult's right to judge the balance between benefit and risk for a child. Child

injury statistics are always tragic, but they do not tell the story of developmental benefits gained. Might adults have fewer accidents if they had had more experience of risk taking as children? Hazards are real enough, and the undesirable outcomes of exposure to hazards — accidents and injuries — can readily be observed, but these arise from allowing people the freedom to manage their risks. Prevention is not synonymous with prohibition, the risk taking needs to be seen in a positive as well as negative light.

DISSENT

Regulating risk to children

Stephen P Teret

The comments of Malcolm R Barrow suggest that children need to be exposed to certain risks in order that they may learn to manage risk effectively in their adult lives. The comments further suggest that the regulation of risk by government may therefore confer a disadvantage in that the child could lose the opportunity to learn from exposure to existing risks.

For years, members of the injury prevention community have wrestled with the issue of regulating risk. The debate, which has occurred among individuals but also within some individuals' internal value systems, is whether we ought to impose our injury prevention will on the decision making capacity of others through the legislative or regulatory process. This is somewhat different from asking whether our law allows us to regulate (for example, asking whether, in the US, it would be constitutional to pass a law requiring the use of motorcycle helmets), or whether regulations would be effective in reducing the incidence or severity of injury. It is possible to answer both of these questions in the affirmative (that is, that a specific regulation like mandated motorcycle helmet use would be both constitutional and effective), and still be left with the issue of whether we as a society *ought* to be regulating the particular behavior or product.

But most of the time, the debate involves the regulation of adults' behaviors or products. With regard to children's behaviors or products, we traditionally have been more willing to accept a higher level of regulation. The argument that government is being too paternalistic has not been persuasive when dealing with children; children need paternalism.

Now, however, the argument is raised as to whether government ought to provide that paternalism. Is protection of the child only within the province of the parent? Ought the government to keep its hand away from the relationship between parent and child by refraining from regulating children's behaviors

and products? Do children, as suggested by Malcolm Barrow's commentary, need exposure to risk in order to develop properly?

I am not aware of any study that compares children who are exposed to injury risk to those who are not, and that follows these children into adulthood, measuring their adult injury rates. Thus supportive evidence that a reduction in childhood exposure to risk increases adulthood injuries is, to my knowledge, missing.

There is, however, a convincing argument why we must regulate children's products and behaviors. Many children do not have the luxury of being born to parents who have the inclination or skill to titrate their child's risk exposure and to intervene at the exact point when risk begins to overtake benefit. For example, the risk-benefits ratio of a very young child being able to ambulate with the help of a baby walker begins to change drastically as the child approaches a downward flight of stairs. An ever vigilant parent can monitor the change in this ratio, and intervene before a tragedy occurs. But the child born to a less watchful parent should not be sentenced to a life of disability after a fall down a flight of stairs. Society can protect against this potential disability by trying to train all parents to be superb at their job, or by regulating the product so that the very young child is not given the artificial ability to approach the stairs. Generally, the latter has proved to be a far more effective method of injury prevention than the former.

But perhaps this appeal to protect the at risk child through regulation does not adequately respond to Barrow's argument that children might need to learn safety by being exposed to risks. Assuming for the moment that this argument has validity, is there any reason to believe that the risk has to be real? Might it be possible, in this age of incredible technology, to create virtual reality risks to which the child can

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be exposed, and thereby learn the rewards of safety? Perhaps video arcades could be transformed into childhood injury prevention arcades, presenting children with artificial situations simulating high risk activities. Is the learning process to which Barrow refers triggered by the perception of risk, or is the argument that the only teachers are actual trauma and pain?

We now live in antiregulatory times. The cost of regulation, it is argued, is too high for commerce to bear. But the cost of injury, measured in currency and suffering, must be given its adequate weight. And when weighing the cost of injury to children, our moral duty as adults to protect children should enter the equation and shift the outcome to one in favor of regulation.