

FAILING TO FLY, BUT FREE FALLING: JUMPING AS A FORM OF CHILDHOOD RELEASE

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Throughout my childhood, I was usually the responsible one. Indeed, I was THAT kid — the child who thought about what would happen if we got caught playing Ding Dong Ditch, pointed out how terrible it would be if we got lost in the local nature preserve after night had fallen, explained why we should not go to that keg party at the beach, and so on. Part of this was a serious fear of getting in trouble, but another aspect was the fact that I was never allowed to go anywhere or do anything by my extremely overprotective mother, so if I managed to discourage my peers from going to places I wasn't permitted (out in the neighborhood alone, the preserve, the beach, the mall, what have you), I would be preventing my own inevitable exclusion from such fun. However, despite my mother's best attempts to keep me safe from the world (I could write an entire paper on that alone), I still found ways to push the boundaries of dangerous play — my jumping games.

Although prevented from engaging in certain activities at home, while on the schoolyard I was able to experiment with the laws of physics on a regular basis. While it was most definitely not intended, the way in which my elementary school's playground was built easily facilitated a number of delightfully risky activities. Perhaps suffering from what Peter and Iona Opie termed "misplaced audacity," where children take risks with common objects such as "knives, swings, and roller-towels" (Tucker 2008, 36), my friends and I utilized a number of playground structures in our pursuit of thrills. The first of these was a metal, dome-shaped, web-like construction named "the spider hut." When we were little, our favorite thing to do was climb to the top of the "hut" (which was rather large, in retrospect), and drop our bodies through one of the spaces between the bars, dangling by our hands for as long as we could, and then letting go, falling six or seven feet to the ground below. This was a calmer form of jumping, because really, it was more of a carefully orchestrated drop and carried less risk than the variations we later engaged in. However, it was still quite high up and our parents would have had heart attacks if they had known about it.

When we grew older and moved to the "upper grades" section of the playground (since there were designated spaces for k-3 and 4-5), we upped the danger factor significantly. One favorite activity was to climb the acrobatic bars (which were two vertical metal bars with a single horizontal one held between them, and there were several of these structures at varying heights) and to jump, feet first, to the ground. These jumps ranged from three to probably ten or twelve feet in height, and there was concrete below (not a smart move on the school's part). The higher you were willing to jump from, the braver you were considered to be. That said, it was perfectly acceptable if a person was only willing to jump from so high. However, if people climbed to a higher point, made a big deal about it, and then seemed like they were going to "chicken out" they often found themselves pushed. It was far worse to be pushed because not only

was it embarrassing (since one lost quite a bit of credibility afterwards), but it was also significantly more dangerous, since there was less time to prepare the jump properly. With respect to my experience, heights didn't faze me, and the greater challenge was being able to climb the higher structures since I was so short. However, my taller friends were quite helpful in getting me up there, and when it came to jumping off, I was fearless. Occasionally I would get a scrape or bruise, and there were one or two of my classmates who got more seriously hurt (more than one sprained or broke a wrist), but that never really deterred us, since accidents usually happened with those who tried to jump from a certain height without experience or had not jumped properly. However, despite the fact we plummeted a full story on a regular basis, this was not the most dangerous variation of "jumping" that we engaged in. That was saved for fifth grade.

Every recess during our final year of elementary school, there would be a mad rush on the part of the girls (for whatever reason, this variation failed to catch on with the boys) to grab one of the swings at the far end of the playground, away from the eyes of the teacher monitors. The closer swings, well within their view, were not suitable for what we had in mind---swing bouncing. Swing bouncing was, and still is, an obsession at Forest Lake Elementary, and strangely enough, a tradition my year started, though I am told it is popular at other schools as well. The idea is to swing in a normal fashion, but at the same time try to swing as high as possible. Then, once maximum elevation is achieved, the swinger "bounces" off the seat and flies through the air, eventually landing several feet away. While dangerous in its own right due to the acceleration from the swinging, swing bouncing was particularly dangerous for us because of the five-foot-high metal fence that was set up several feet from the swings, running the length of the area, to protect passers-by from being kicked.

Although it was a well thought out protective measure in theory, all it actually did was create a challenge for us bouncers. The key was to place your jump short (landing a couple feet before the fence), or long (clearing the fence). However, it was extremely difficult to clear the fence, and only a few of us (mostly the smaller, lighter ones) pulled it off. But the pursuit of this goal was quite fun. Yes, people hit the fence on a regular basis, but with the exception of one large dent made by a friend of mine (which is still there ten years later and apparently revered as a warning sign), most people bounced right off of it. The real danger was if one landed on the fence, which never happened while I was there. However, someone from my brother's grade did break a leg on it four years later, so apparently it was possible. There also have been many attempts on the part of my old school to eradicate swing bouncing, but I still see it on the playground when I pass by during the summer.

When I think about why jumping and swing bouncing appealed to me so greatly, I always go back to the feeling that it created. The sensation of flying through the air, hurtling towards the ground, anticipating the impact — it was all exhilarating. There was something about being utterly free while falling that gave me a rush. I think there was the fact that when I jumped, I was completely in charge of myself. My life, my body, literally depended on my ability to land properly. Being raised in an environment where I was never in control of anything

and cooped up beyond all reason (to this day, I cannot walk around my incredibly white bread, suburban neighborhood alone ... at least as far as my parents know), there was something wonderful about flat-out defying every single rule of safety and toying with gravity. As mentioned in *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*, "dangerous games let children prove their courage and skill" (Tucker, 36), and I think that for me, jumping was my way of proving to myself that even if my parents did not believe so, I could handle myself in the outside world.

WORK CITED

Tucker, Elizabeth. 2008. *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*. Westport: Greenwood Press.