

## Foul Play?



by  
Brian Davies

**T**he year six primary group had just finished a canoe journey on the canal and were disembarking. The canal was meter deep, the grassy bank was a gentle location ideal for a young group to work together as a team to recover their equipment, load the trailer and return to the centre.

Sophie stood quietly on the bank dressed in her wet suit and buoyancy aid. Suddenly she found herself in the water. She stood up and smiled, the group laughed loudly and one small boy looked guilty having been observed to gently propel Sophie into the water. She was assisted out, the trailer loaded, the group changed and returned to the centre. The story was told during the evening and reported light-heartedly at the following morning's staff meeting. The incident was not unusual and exemplified a frequent occurrence when excited young people worked close to water.

The week finished two days later on a high and the school made the journey home having completed another successful and productive residential outdoor education course.

The following week the head teacher received a lengthy communication from the parents of Sophie...

**“... our daughter was pushed into the water.”**  
**“... she was between a canoe and the bank.”**  
**“... behaviour compromised our child's safety.”**  
**“... we believe this is a very serious matter.”**  
**“...the incident we find worrying, dangerous and totally unacceptable.”**  
**“... we feel this is a serious matter in regard to health and safety.”**  
**“... we would like a full explanation.”**  
**“... we would like the Governors to place it on their agenda and review policies in relation to such incidents.”**

The centre became involved in the full explanation process. In reality a group of excited young people were boisterously completing a successful day. Amongst them was a mildly naughty boy. Children have been excitable and occasionally naughty since Adam and Eve produced their offspring.

The incident illustrates the predicament our society finds itself in, there is a crisis of trust, a culture of suspicion. This infiltrates into the outdoor world where adventures are built on trust, a positive and professional interaction between the leader and the group. We seek to serve our clients conscientiously but we find our reputations and professionalism doubted.

Professionals have to work to ever more exacting standards with a relentless demand to record, report and be accountable.

Spontaneity and adventure is constrained by goal setting, targets and measurable outcomes. This results in defensive teaching, defensive instructing and defensive experiences which are limiting and stifling.

Children as well as adults need to be provided with appropriate and sympathetic opportunities which take them to the limit of their personal frontier.



The new accountability is not supported by a performance indicator of greater trust, indeed the opposite is true. The performance indicators are chosen for their ease of measurement and control rather than articulating accurately the quality of performance and experience.

We become more accountable to the public, but who educates the public? The media should be capable of doing so, but the media inform the public to mistrust professionals whilst at the same time demand a service for which they set higher and higher targets. In this modern context it would no longer be acceptable to climb Everest because it is there.

What has become of professional judgement?

Professionals must

be freed to serve their public but not the paymasters. We need to return to an acceptance of professionalism based on intelligent accountability and self governance. Where intuition, creativity, risk and judgement are removed from the process of constant reporting and accountability. The intrinsic requirements of good teaching and instructing are firmly based on trust. How do we transfer that back to the children of Thatcher? ■

## References

Playing and Exploring  
by R.A. Hodgkin

## Author Notes

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## Photo Info.

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