**BENNETT: A movement to let kids take risks**

PAUL BENNETT
Published May 12, 2015 - 4:53pm
Heather Hansen-Dunbar, the founder of Halifax’s Kids R Kids Day Care, could hardly believe her ears. Just recently, while explaining her early childhood development philosophy, a worried-looking young mother confided: “I would be happy if you bubble- wrapped my kid.”

Being responsible and caring parents is highly desirable, but growing numbers of today’s parents and families are carrying it to extremes. Sheltering and “bubble-wrapping” kids is now not only deeply embedded in parent and family culture, but reinforced by what Toronto policy analyst Marni Soupcoff has aptly dubbed “the parental state.”

Since founding her Bayers Lake child centre 10 years ago, Hansen-Dunbar has observed a real change. While providing “play learning” programs for about 100 kids daily from ages three to five, she encounters more and more parents seeking a “risk-free” environment and asking for homework and projects for their children.

Hansen-Dunbar is starting to draw the line in defence of playfulness and the joys of personal exploration, especially at an early age. “We are an emergent learning centre,” she says. “Our kids are expected to take the initiative. Here, we follow the children’s interests.”

This private Halifax day care centre is not alone in attempting to break the cycle of child overprotection. Since 1983, American Early Childhood Education (ECE) expert Bev Bos has been advocating play-based approaches incorporating reasonable risks to spark curiosity, build confidence and instil resilience in kids.

“Taking risks is a normal part of early childhood experience,” Bos reminds us. “You have to be adventuresome to learn such basics as reading and literacy.”

Up at Kids R Kids, Hansen-Dunbar believes, like Bev Bos, in allowing the little children to go barefoot. When overprotective parents periodically object, she points to this famous Bos axiom: “Children were not born to wear shoes.... Give children a break! Remember how good mud feels between the toes.”

As a leader in Nova Scotia’s ECE movement, Hansen-Dunbar is in the forefront of the North American movement to rethink child-rearing. A year ago, in April 2014, she hosted a Halifax visit by American parent activist Lenore Skenazy, author of the international best seller Free-Range Kids, and TV host of Bubble Wrap Kids.

That self-described “nervous New York mom” is famous for her parenting decision to agree with her nine-year-old son’s request to ride the subway home alone from ‘someplace new.’ Initially labelled by the tabloids as the “World’s Worst Mom,” Skenazy has attracted a huge mass following across the United States.

Skenazy wowed her 2014 audience of 227 early child-care educators with her outspoken presentation. Today’s society, she claimed, was obsessed with keeping children safe. She sprinkled her talk, interspersed with laughter, with pointed references to knee pads for babies to cushion crawling, and “walking wings” to help kids balance and cut down on falls.

Much of the recent research in child health and parenting supports Skenazy’s contentions that parents and families are going ‘soft’ and doing too much for their kids.

A 2013 Active Health Kids Canada report card revealed that, while 58 per cent of surveyed parents walked to school as kids, only about 28 per cent do so today. Between 2000 and 2010, the proportion of students aged five to 17 who were transported by vehicles rose from 51 to 62 per cent across Canada.

One of the world’s leading child-rearing authorities, Michael Ungar of Dalhousie’s Resilience Research Centre, connects research with practice, demonstrating the need for more resilience-oriented parenting. The titles of one of his recent books, Too Safe For Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive, neatly summarizes the latest research findings.

Nova Scotia’s early childhood education and parent advocate community is all abuzz over a much anticipated upcoming event. The leading figure in Britain’s movement to “rethink childhood” is about to touch down here in Halifax this weekend.

Gill’s public talk, Popping the Bubble Wrap: Celebrating Risk in Childhood Play, on Sunday at Halifax Central Library, will delve deeply into the critical issues raised by the changing nature of childhood, children’s play and free time in an increasingly “risk-adverse society.”

The early childhood learning centres being developed in incremental fashion by the Nova Scotia government are on the frontlines of this public debate. The founder of Kids R Kids Day Care puts it best: “It’s time for parents and early childhood educators to start thinking outside the sandbox.”

**Paul W. Bennett is director of Schoolhouse Consulting and a regular commentator on education issues.**