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Thrill is gone

By MICHAEL PLATT

I've been hanging around playgrounds. No, not like that -- there's no need to call the police, or keep your children locked indoors.

Maybe what I should say is we've been hanging around playgrounds.

You see, I have my own little girl, so my presence among the slides and swings is perfectly legitimate. Like any dad, I'm a slave to my wee one's thrill-seeking demands.

I push, slide and climb, both to make her happy, and to ensure she's safe.

I've found myself wedged inside playground tubes too tiny to comfortably fit a dachshund, and I've smacked my head on steel bars, while helping her onto slides designed for kids and circus contortionists. I hardly even notice the park gravel anymore, as it trickles into my shoes.

It's all in a day's work for a dad. And my daughter loves playgrounds, or at least the swings. The sheer rush of being a 26-lb. pendulum leaves her giggling and wanting more.

No ride makes her day like a good old-fashioned swing-set, and it's the same story for a lot of kids. Swings are the place to be, while the rest of the playground -- a spaghetti of wood, plastic and old rubber tires -- is usually neglected.

The basic swing, the only ride left over from my childhood (and the childhood of anyone raised before basic safety gave way to parenting paranoia) is now the most popular playground attraction.

It wasn't the case back then: swings were fun, but not like the skyscraper-high monkey bars, or slides that required a serious hike to the top, before shooting you back to the ground so fast your stomach felt a full second behind.

I don't have the heart to tell the truth to my daughter, even if she was old enough to understand.

She can't read, so it's safe to print it here. Modern playgrounds are boring.

Seriously -- they're tedious.

Since my playground knowledge contains a gap of about 20 years, can someone please explain what happened to all the good rides?

At what point, between 1985 and 2005, did someone step in and take the fun equipment away, replacing it with safe-and-dreary designs capable of thrilling no one, except over-protective mothers?

I miss things like merry-go-rounds; those spinning platforms kids would whip into a near-blur, before jumping on, clinging to the bars for dear life. We'd hang off the edge, face-down, playing "dropped-it/picked-it-up" with a twig or popsicle stick. Falling off meant nasty, dirt-filled scrapes, and every child had the scars to prove it.

Monkey bars were works of art: There were rocket ships, airplanes, chuckwagons and abstract towers. They were high, cold and dangerous -- and there was no better place to play tag. If you fell, you returned with a cast, or an angry bruise, ready to climb again.

The slides were impossibly tall, and built to ensure the ladder was only one route to the top. Scaling the actual slide, or the metal scaffolding, was far more daring. Especially in winter, when the steel was coated with ice.

As well as slides, there were fireman's poles, which took strong nerves and stronger ankles -- the landings were hard.

The old parks also had horses. Most hung like swings, but one rare type was the pre-motorized equivalent of a mechanical bull.

Long and low, with a row of seats, such horses would buck wildly, as six kids fought to hang on.

And there were see-saws. Nothing like the feeble plastic designs found on today's parks, these were massive planks of wood, rising six feet in the air.

Woe be the child whose partner jumped off, leaving the weighted end to crash down.

There were others, but my memories are hazy. Suffice to say, the best rides combined fear with immense fun, and kids loved them.

Today's playgrounds are low to the ground, with round edges with safety bars and soft gravel all around. It's no wonder many kids prefer to play video games at home -- broccoli gets the blood pumping faster than most modern parks.

Of course, I'll keep taking my little daughter to her swings, so she can laugh, and tell me to push harder.

And someday, when she asks me what the playgrounds were like when I was little, daddy will pretend he can't remember.

I wouldn't want to make her sad.