WHEN SAFETY COMES FIRST

HEIGHTENING SCHOOL SECURITY MAY HAVE GRAVE DEVELOPMENTAL EFFECTS, SAYS ANDREW DON

ONE OF MY daughter's friends was once followed by a man in a van after school outside the main gates. The frightened child ran back to the perceived safety of the school, but her assailant drove through the open gates and waited for her to emerge from the building. After several minutes he lost patience, or his nerve, and drove away, but the incident highlighted the vulnerability of children at the school and made my child anxious.

The headmistress of the school raised the issue at the governors' premises committee meeting that same month, but although she said she hoped to secure funding for an electronic security gate "in the future", nearly a year later that future has yet to arrive.

By contrast, my youngest child's school has electronically controlled gates manned by guards who challenge me as frequently as I change my look. Despite feeling uncomfortable with the guards' suspicious inspection, I know which of the two extremes I prefer.

At least I know my daughter is safe. But are such security measures, although reassuring to the parent, necessarily the best for the child?

Next month Wylde Green Primary School, in Sutton Coldfield, and Eastbourne Comprehensive, in Darlington, will install new equipment as part of a £4.6 million Home Office "crime reduction" pilot. Staff will be given PIN-operated swipe cards to open and shut external doors to let children in and out. Panic alarms, CCTV and security lighting are included in the package.

Brian Harrison-Jennings, the general secretary of the Association of Educational Psychologists, who has researched the psychology of life in schools, gives warning of the long-term impact of Fort Knox-style security on children. "I would want to know what evidence there is for needing it in the first place. It reduces the quality of life against an event that might be non-existent. Some children might perceive that they have a loss of control and trust. They will not be able to go in and out of school as freely as they could."

For although the children might feel more secure initially, in the longer term, he says, not being trusted and being more heavily scrutinised and controlled will outweigh the benefits. "I would lay even money that the Home Office won't be looking at the psychological effects of these pilots, only the practical effects," he says. According to a Home Office spokesman, "there will be before-and-after surveys looking at how people feel about the fear of crime. Children and staff will be interviewed."

Laurie Doust, the vice-chairman of the Association of Security Consultants, notes that few schools have high security apart from Jewish establishments and some inner-city schools. "The difficulty is persuading teachers that security is a problem that they should be aware of because they naturally concentrate on teaching."

For those parents who remember the tragic events at Dunblane Primary School on March 13, 1996, when Thomas Hamilton entered one of six entrances and shot dead 17 children and one teacher, a school can never be too secure. The public inquiry into the incident said it would be unacceptable to carry measures to the point where schools were turned into fortresses.

"A balance has to be struck ... whatever measures are to be taken, it is unrealistic to expect that the risk of a violent intruder gaining access to a school can be eliminated. All that can be done is to take whatever measures are reasonably practicable," it found.

Seven years on, Janet Martin, an officer at the Professional Association of Teachers South East region, says that levels of security run the gauntlet of extremes throughout the country. "Some security arrangements are detrimental to the good working practices of schools. Schools want to be as welcoming as they can be but you have tremendous responsibility with the care of children."

She says planning for the madman does not make for good practice. "There are a few mad people in the world and one hopes that they won't come along and do anything too dire. You do what is reasonable. It is not reasonable to spend so much on fences that there is not enough to buy books."