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A myth in the past was that you could buy playground equipment, put it in the ground and never have to think about it again. The truth is that a lot of equipment on today's playgrounds does not meet the federal guidelines such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Equipment that does not meet the guidelines can result in injury or death for the children playing on it.

The process of renovating your playground should begin with an audit of your playground. This audit should be done by a certified National Playground Safety Inspector (NPSI) either in-house or by a qualified independent company. The audit should include an inventory and examination of existing structures and surfacing, materials/manufacturers, playground layout, and accessibility. It should also include a listing of all violations of all the guidelines, and photographs of each piece of playground equipment. Completed audit information guides maintenance activities, describes play value, and may recommend specific actions to be taken to insure playground safety. Additionally, the audit can be used in legal proceedings as a record describing the state of your playground.

Now that we know what's wrong, what do we do? The major mistake I have seen across the nation after an audit is complete is the owner removing the equipment that does not meet the guidelines. This can be a waste of past and future moneys as many times the equipment can be modified and brought into compliance. The appropriate step after an audit is completed is to evaluate, with the manufacturer's representative, what and how equipment problems can be corrected. The reason for meeting with the manufacturer's representative is twofold: First, you as the owner are not as familiar with the equipment and could spend more time than necessary discovering what equipment needs retrofitting or replacing. An example of how the specific knowledge of the representative can help the owner is if a slide is removed a new slide may not fit in the same place, but a panel which costs less and offers a different play activity may fit. Second, the manufacturer's representative will have the manufacturer sanction the changes and thereby keep the product liability coverage intact.

Product liability - save now spend later! Many of our organizations have maintenance personnel who are skilled laborers and we count on them to fix everything from our air conditioners to our playground equipment. This can be a mistake. Maintenance personnel often aren't aware of or don't understand playground safety guidelines. With the best of intentions, through incorrect actions, the maintenance personnel can violate additional guidelines and endanger children.

When you are choosing replacement equipment or components, the owner should have an end result in mind. If you are choosing or purchasing equipment for a public entity (park, school or day care facility), then you should limit your choices to equipment designed for public use, this would eliminate the small structures from department or toy stores which are designed for home use. You should purchase equipment that is International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association (IPEMA) certified. As a purchaser, it is important that you understand what IPEMA is and what the certification means to you. You want to insist that the components of the equipment have been certified by the IPEMA, not that the company is a member of IPEMA. A Company can be a member of IPEMA and not have its equipment IPEMA certified. It is also important to understand who is using the equipment. Purchases should follow the ASTM and CPSC recommendations regarding division of playgrounds by age of users. The age separation recommended is 2 - 5 year old children and 5-12 year old children. Each of these groups have special needs and playgrounds should be designed accordingly.

How do you meet ADA guidelines? The ADA is a law requiring all public properties to be accessible to

people with disabilities. Unfortunately, there are no simple answers regarding accessible routes and surfacing when dealing with playgrounds. One word of caution, the law is currently being reviewed and changes are coming in the near future. It is important in the design phase of a playground to incorporate the ADA requirements. It is imperative that the playground designers are knowledgeable of current and potential future ADA requirements. By incorporating items such as a transfer station, specially designed steps to access a playground structure, an owner can significantly reduce the cost of future modifications and stay within the spirit of the ADA.

Who should make the changes, your crew or the professional installer? Often, we attempt to save money by using our own crews to install, modify or remove playground equipment. Although this may save money initially, it may cost more in the long run. Many agencies are now using NPSI Certified professionals to insure that the changes are correct. An additional benefit to outsourcing this service can be found in the legal arena. Another benefit to the owner is that you can have a contractual fixed cost. By requiring your contractors to be certified professionals, the owner demonstrates its commitment to safety. This gives the owner an additional layer of defense. The time required to make necessary changes to your playground is reduced through the use of outside contractors and your staff can focus on their primary responsibilities. If an agency decides to use the community built playground plan, individuals from the community install a playground, a professional contractor should oversee the project.

Well great! Now we know what's wrong, how are we going to pay for the necessary changes? This is the question I would be asking if I were you. Here is the answer. Be creative! There are many ways to obtain funding for playgrounds. It is important that you be sincere, committed and have an understanding of the funding sources you approach. Use the audit to explain what is wrong and how the funds you acquire will be used to make the playground safer for children. Common funding methods from your organization are general funds, capital improvement funds, general obligation bonds, and matching funds (for example: neighborhood/city cooperative efforts). Less frequently used funding sources are grants, scholarships and contests are available through state and federal government, private foundations, corporations and businesses. Local businesses, civic organizations, neighborhood associations, state and national associations, partnerships (schools/cities), may also be utilized to fund new or renovated playgrounds. Adopt-a-Spot Programs or sponsorships are other resources for funding playgrounds. You must have a detailed, developed plan before approaching funding sources. Find out the time lines for submitting funding requests, the goals of the funding source, and detail in your request how your playground project fits in. In your proposal, concentrate on the value and benefit of the project to the entire community. A consolidated plan will make your dreams a reality. In addition to the physical requirements for your playgrounds, qualified supervision (by professionals at schools or daycare's, or parent in parks) is a necessity.

A final note! None of us want to see a child hurt or killed, and no one wants to experience the litigation and emotional devastation of a playground accident. If you, as the owner, have had your playground audited by a certified inspector, purchased or renovated equipment with IPEMA certified components, have had a certified installer make the changes or installation, have had training for maintenance and supervisory personnel, and have tried to stay in the spirit of the ADA, your organization will be able to avoid or lessen injuries as well as defend your organization's actions in court more successfully. Professional planning, design and implementation of playground safety issues can help minimize hazards, maximize your resources, and enhance playground experiences.