

Safe Playgrounds, Safe Children

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Children look to playground equipment and play areas as attractive, fun and yet challenging places to express themselves. Parents and teachers also encourage these growth experiences as part of the school experience, yet are properly sensitive to the need for safety.

Are there important questions that school leaders should ask and have answered to ensure that playground equipment, associated surfaces and the surrounding play areas are safe? The answer is yes. The following series of questions and answers are provided to help parents and teachers make sure these unique areas are available for fun and safe play.

What are the basics to playground and equipment safety?

There are a number of important steps to consider when concerned about playground, play area and associated play equipment safety. The process of reviewing the playground should begin with an audit of the playground area and equipment. This audit should be performed by a certified National Playground Safety Inspector (NSPI). The audit should include an inventory and examination of play structures, surfacing materials, playground layout and use the Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility requirements. All non-compliant issues (if any) of the American Society for Testing and Materials F1487 (ASTM) and the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) "Handbook for Public Playground Safety" Publication Number 325 documents should be identified with associated photographs of the equipment or structure. The completed audit should include a renovation play plan that details if structures or equipment should be removed, repaired or maintained. Detailed record keeping is a must. There are a number of key areas important to have assessed. They include items such as: (1) surfacing materials; (2) use zone spacing; (3) age appropriateness of equipment and use of rules; (4) protrusion identification; (5) entanglement hazards; (6) wear and breakage of moving parts; (7) identification of tripping hazards; and (8) identification of neck and head entrapments.

Supervision is another key element to playground safety. Correct equipment incorrectly used by children can harm a child. Ongoing training of staff is an invaluable tool. The National Program for Playground Safety can be a superior resource.

All of this may seem a little overwhelming but it is basic to a NSPI trained inspector. They can identify and help resolve any concern areas.

Is playground safety a serious concern?

Unfortunately, most older playgrounds and play equipment do not meet existing safety regulations and in some areas the law. The severity of injuries varies and can happen at playgrounds located at parks, schools, day care centers, apartments, private sport facilities and

even fast food restaurants. One study found the following: Injuries occur from use of all types of equipment: climbers (53% of injuries); swings (19% of injuries); slides (17% of injuries); seesaws and composites (11% of injuries). Some hazards are brought to the play area; these include bike helmets, stringed garments, necklaces, binoculars or jump ropes. Play equipment is designed to accommodate children's bodies and these other items introduce new potential hazards such as strangulation risks. These concerns are not meant to alarm but represent areas that can be audited and resolved.

What if a concern is found?

There are a number of actions that school leaders should take to best protect children who use these areas and the associated equipment. One immediate tendency is to remove the equipment and shut down the area considering that the risk is too great to bear. This is not necessary, and in fact, may be poor use of fiscal resources. The key is to evaluate and determine what modifications and corrections are necessary. The first step is to make good use of the NSPI inspector. After the inspector has completed the audit, request that a Playground Safety Action Plan be developed. This plan will answer a number of important questions and will provide the needed direction. Besides other components this plan will consider the following four questions:

- Is the right equipment in place for the intended user group? Is it possible that residential equipment has been installed at the school site? By purchasing equipment from only International Play Equipment Manufacturer Association (IPEMA) members with components that are IPEMA certified and using ASTM and CPSC recommendations, can the school be assured of the proper equipment to user compliance.
- Has the end result and use purpose of the play area and equipment been made clear and understood? The plan will determine play value, age appropriateness of equipment, space dimensions needed and disability accessibility requirements of both the intended users, potential users and the school's purpose for the play area.
- Has the manufacturer's representative been invited to be a part of any solution? In many cases, non-compliant issues can be rather easily resolved by the manufacturer's representative. They have replacement components, upgrades, new generations of products and recall compliance that can quickly bring the situation into a rather positive light. Also, by using the representative, the manufacturer sanctions the changes which keep the product liability coverage intact.
- Who should make the necessary repairs or changes, your maintenance crew or a professional installer? Often, attempts are made to save money by using existing in-house crews. With the need to comply with specific guidelines to speed up the process and to keep cost down, outsourcing to certified and qualified professional playground installers or training your staff up to professional installers levels is recommended. The International Playground Contractor's Association can assist with this aspect of playground safety.

Final Note

The purpose of playgrounds, play areas and the associated equipment is to attract children, provide enjoyment and allow for safe, enjoyable play. If the playground and equipment have been: (1) audited by a NPSI inspector, (2) purchased or renovated with IPEMA certified components, (3) installed or changed by a certified installer, and (4) maintenance and supervising personnel have been trained, and (5) made good faith effort to make the play area and equipment accessible to all, then the school is in good standing. Professional planning, design and installation of playgrounds, areas and equipment can bring safety to users and peace of mind to teachers and parents.

For free information or assistance contact: www.play-safe.com