

UTAH LEISURE INSIGHTS MAGAZINE
SUMMER 2005
Volume 25 Number 3 page 8-10

**The Essentials
of
Playground Safety**

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Playgrounds represent a unique environment that is full of excitement, fun, challenge and a certain amount of designed risk. No one desires for any child, teen or adult to have a bad experience, hurt themselves or be concerned about their safety while engaged in appropriate use of the playground equipment.

Are there important actions that should or even must be taken to provide a safe environment for customers while using playgrounds and play equipment at your enterprise? The answer is yes. The following are a series of questions and answers that may be helpful in managing these unique and fun play features.

What is playground and play equipment safety inspection?

There are several high quality definitions of playground or play equipment safety and the majority of the existing statements highlight six critical components. Playground and play equipment safety involves: (1) the use of a certified playground safety inspector, (2) to conduct safety audits and inspections of playgrounds and equipment, (3) to search for use zone infractions; head and neck entrapments; crush, pinch and shear points; sharp edges; protrusions and other safety concerns such as proper surfacing materials. Additionally, the inspector assesses: (4) any installation errors, (5) compliance with existing safety codes, and (6) to design a renovation action plan when necessary. It is clear from this definition that this work is important, requires special training and has specific purposes.

What are the common problem areas?

Unfortunately, most older playgrounds and play equipment do not meet the existing protection laws, safety codes and installation and use guidelines currently in force. 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. 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; including, 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.

Many enterprises have maintenance personnel who are skilled laborers and are counted on to fix everything from air conditioners to playground equipment. These trusted workers often are not aware or do not understand playground safety guidelines. With the best of intentions, through incorrect actions, they may violate necessary and specific guidelines and endanger the users of the play areas.

What are the basics to playground and equipment safety?

There are a number of important steps to consider when concerned about the playground, play areas 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 (NPSI) either in-house or by a qualified independent company. The audit should include an inventory and examination of play structures, surfacing materials, play ground layout and use accessibility. All violations (if any) of guidelines should be listed 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,

IMPORTANT SOURCES

- American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM)
- Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC)
- National Playground Safety Inspector (NPSI)
- International Play Equipment Manufactures Association (IPEMA)
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

repaired or maintained.

SAFETY BASICS

- audit the playground structures and equipment
- use a NPSI certified inspector
- inventory and examine existing structures, surfacing materials, playground layout and accessibility
- identify and list all violations of guidelines with photographs of the equipment
- apply a renovation play that details removal, repair and maintenance activities
- keep a detailed record of the above

Detailed record keeping is a must. There are a number of key areas that are important to have assessed. They include: (1) surfacing materials; (2) use zone spacing; (3) age appropriateness 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.

How can I best protect the users?

There are a number of actions that management should take to best protect the users of 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 past and future money. 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? It is possible that residential equipment has been installed at a commercial based site. By purchasing equipment from only IPEMA certified vendors and using ASTM and CPSC recommendations can the enterprise 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 enterprises purpose for the play area.
- ✓ Has the manufacturer's representative been invited to be a part of any solution? In many cases, violations of safety codes and guidelines 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 generally keep the product liability coverage intact.
- ✓ Who should make the necessary repairs or changes, your crew or a professional installer? Often times, attempts are made to save money by using existing in-house crews. With the need to comply with specific guidelines, time and cost sensitivity outsourcing to certified and qualified professional playground installers is recommended.

A final note: The purpose of playgrounds, play areas and the associated equipment is to attract visitors, provide enjoyment to customers 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 enterprise is in good standing. Professional planning, design and installation of playgrounds, areas and equipment can bring safety to users and peace of mind to managers and owners.

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