

Taken from the Albuquerque West Side Journal on Tuesday March 3 1998

## WEST SIDE Playground Safety Company's I

It probably happened to you or someone you know at some point in your life.

The scenario: A child, enjoying a free-spirited romp on the monkey bars at a local park or school suddenly slips and falls to the ground.

The result: A little blood on the knee, a few tears and maybe some damaged pride.

But suppose that same fall causes a concussion or a broken leg, or leads to a chronic back injury.

Prevention of such accidents was the impetus for [PlaySafe](#), a company started by three local businessmen to help schools, neighborhood associations, municipalities - any entity with a playground - to modify its equipment. The goal is to reduce the risks for children.

"If you got hurt on the playground, then you got hurt - it was almost expected," says Hep Prezzano, a licensed contractor in New Mexico since 1973 and one of [PlaySafe](#)'s partners. "Playgrounds should have some element of challenge, but there shouldn't be a penalty to that challenge or that risk."

[PlaySafe](#)'s creators include: Hep Prezzano, who has a background as a playground installer; Sam DeFillippo, of Taylor Ranch, who has 16 years' experience with the Rio Rancho Parks and Recreation division; and P.J. Perry, of Paradise Hills, who has a degree in physical education and is Rio Rancho's aquatics coordinator.

"All of us had arrived at this idea separately," says Prezzano. "The people I had expressed it to didn't think it was real viable, so it was sort of a stroke of luck that we all sort of met one another and had this common idea".

When they finally put their heads together, they laid out their plan for a company that would focus on playground safety and bringing playgrounds into compliance with the national standards.



PLAYING IT SAFE: Hep Prezzano, of PlaySafe, checks out an overhead ladder at the Valle Vista Elementary playground. The company is monitoring playground safety at Albuquerque schools.

"We're trying to focus on that," says Perry, of Paradise Hills. "We want to increase safety awareness and responsibility for the facilities - to have people be more proactive than reactive."

DeFillippo, who has a master's degree in recreation and administration, says [PlaySafe](#) addresses a wide spectrum of problems.

"We noticed that a lot of issues weren't being covered in the private sector," he says. "We noticed that a number of them, like at churches and schools, aren't in compliance with the federal guidelines."

[PlaySafe](#) can "take someone through all the steps," says DeFillippo, including designing a playground, getting funding (applying for grants or finding local funding) and installing and maintaining equipment.

Billing is done by hour or by the project; the final cost depends on the customer's requirements. In May, a national playground safety workshop will be held in Albuquerque.

Donna Thompson from the University of Northern Iowa and director of the National Program for Playground Safety is scheduled to be keynote speaker. Of the many problems with playgrounds, the most recurring defect is surfacing.

"They have the wrong sand, or the wrong (amount of sand) for the equipment," DeFillippo says.

Several materials can be used as a surface, he says, depending on the height of a certain piece of equipment.

Where sand is the base, Prezzano says, anywhere from two to six inches is common. It should actually be closer to 12 inches, he says.

"In some places," he says, "we're seeing nothing."

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, 70 percent of playground injuries are the result of falls.

DeFillippo says spacing between playground equipment also is sometimes a problem. The minimum spacing distance between most structures should be six feet.

"A lot of people don't know about the (federal) rules," DeFillippo says. "They take a reactive view."

Prezzano says any playground built before 1990 "is probably not in compliance with the current standards."

[PlaySafe](#) recently picked up Albuquerque Public Schools as a client and is checking campus playgrounds. It is also branching out to serve customers in California, Nevada and Texas.

PlaySafe plans to concentrate on management strategies and technical assistance for aquatic operations - Perry's strength.

Perry says PlaySafe ultimately should benefit playgrounds and aquatic facilities.

"We've tended to put them in and not worry about them," he says. "And they're ok. Until something happens."