

TEXAS

Recreation & Park Society

M A G A Z I N E

Playground Supervision

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“Unfortunately, more than 200,000 children are treated in U.S. hospital emergency rooms each year for injuries associated with playground equipment. Most injuries occur when children fall from the equipment onto the ground”

Ann Brown, Chairman U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission

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

Who is the Supervisor?

A supervisor of a child at a playground isn’t always a parent or a paid staff member. Almost anyone can be a supervisor: a teacher, teacher’s aid, recreation leader, another child’s parent, an older sibling or a friend. Often, at some locations, there are no supervisors or the supervisors are not knowledgeable in playground safety. This type of situation can lead to an injury or fatality.

SUPERVISOR TRAINING

There are many issues involved with the training of supervisors of children at playgrounds. Supervisors should understand equipment, surfacing, children’s development stages, behaviors, rules, and hazards brought onto the playground. This type of training is available from the National Parks and Recreation Association, the National Program for Playground Safety, and private companies. Supervisor training should be continuous due to staff turnover, new products, and additional safety information.

EQUIPMENT

Equipment should be of the correct type. It should be commercial grade (with International Play Equipment Manufacture Association - IPEMA - certified components) and not residential. Equipment should also be in good condition. If parts are damaged or loose then play should not occur on the equipment and the condition should be reported to the appropriate authority. The supervisor should inspect metal equipment to avoid the possibility of children being burned. Supervisors should learn the intended use of a piece of equipment. An example of a safe piece of equipment being improperly utilized is when chin-up bars are used for twirling. It is important to understand what type of activity the equipment is designed for, on some types of equipment the use is not always apparent.

SURFACING

Approximately 80% of injuries occur from falls to the surfacing. Surfacing should be soft and shock absorbent. If sand or pea gravel is used it should be like at a beach, difficult to walk through. If wood fiber, tiles, or poured-in-place materials are used then you should feel like you are walking on a soft, pliable area. All concrete footing should be well below the surface so a child can not fall onto the footing. All debris (trash, animal waste, or drug paraphernalia) should be removed and disposed of properly. This may require contacting a local health or fire organization.

RULES AND SIGNS

There is a difference between planned (school or program) use and drop-in (after school or parks) use of a playground. Rules and signs should reflect those differences. Rules should be instructive (where you place your hands and feet) without limiting creativity (going down a slide face first, instead of feet first). Rules should be general in nature and should be limited in number. Too many rules will cause the children to be overwhelmed and follow none of the rules. Both the supervisor and the child, at the playground, should review all use/rule signs prior to use. Although you may not have the children's full attention, this is an excellent review time. Repetition of the rules may help to reduce the chance of injury.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Child development is vital to understanding a play area. Play is not only for recreation but also essential for learning and individual growth. The ASTM and the CPSC have developed recommendations regarding division of playgrounds by age of users. The recommended age separation is 2-5 year old children and 5-12 year children. Each of these user groups has special needs and the playground should be put to use and designed accordingly. The age of a child should be used as a benchmark, but a supervisor must be mindful that not all nine-year-old children have the same abilities. A supervisor must also understand how children play. Children will use all of their senses on the playground and supervisors must be aware that if an item is on a playground it will be put into someone's mouth. If possible, a supervisor should learn the aptitudes of the specific children they supervise. A word of caution, some parents expect too much from their children in terms of physical ability. The parents' overly high expectations may place the

child in a precarious position, altering a positive activity into an activity of disappointment and injury.

BEHAVIOR

The supervisor should review children's behavior and use of equipment. If possible, issues of how equipment is to be played on (for instance – jumping out of a swing) and how children should interact with others (for example – no pushing) should be addressed prior to arriving at the playground. It is also crucial to remember that children need some time to be children and being loud, running and chasing, as well as playing tag should be permitted on playgrounds. If a supervisor is uneasy regarding a specific action they should stop that action. Sometimes our instincts are warning us of danger and the old saying; “better safe than sorry” does apply at the playground.

HAZZARDS BROUGHT TO THE PLAYGROUND

Sometimes it's not the playground that creates hazards; instead it is the item the child brings to the playground. When a child bring a bike helmet, a hooded or stringed garment, a necklace or a pair of binoculars to a playground there is a chance that the object may become wedged or loop around an apparatus and strangle the child. Additionally, objects such as jump ropes are often attached to equipment by the children and can create hazards. It is extremely important that these objects be removed prior to using the playground equipment.

ADA

Does the playground meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)? Unfortunately, there are no simple answers regarding equipment, accessible routes, and surfacing when dealing with playgrounds. It is important to remember that not only the child may have accessibility needs, but also the supervisor. Each person will have to define what he or she is capable of accomplishing and if you feel there is an ADA issue not being met, you should contact the correct authorities.

BE ALERT

The world moves quickly and so can children. You may feel that you can turn away for just a moment, but that moment could be the critical moment in preventing an injury. Supervisors should be stationed at locations that allow the whole playground to be viewed. A supervisor must continue to oversee the assigned playground area while interacting with a child. When a child asks for your attention (to talk or demonstrate something to you – not during an emergency) it is essential that you not provide them with your undivided attention, but to some extent, keep your attention on the rest of the playground. Supervisors are not “on break” and should not converse about personal issues with each other during the times they have been assigned to supervise the playground. Always make supervising the children a dedicated activity.

BE CAUTIOUS OF OTHERS

Unfortunately, some people cause harm to children. There have been an alarming number of children who have been seized at playgrounds. Pay attention to others at the

playground and if you observe any suspicious behavior, report it immediately to the proper authorities.

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 training for maintenance and supervisory personnel, 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, 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 maximize your resources, and enhance the playground experiences.