

Playground safety checks

by

Samantha Critchell
Associated Press Writer

Taken from: The Advertiser; 5/15/01

NEW YORK (AP)- Danger on the playground is a problem that shouldn't be there. But the reality is many of the nation's playgrounds get a failing grade when it comes to safety, says Susan Hudson, the educational director for the National Program for Playground Safety.

A recent study of more than 3,000 playgrounds across the country conducted by the Playground Safety program resulted in the overall grade of C. Potential hazards can be found on school grounds and in town parks and backyards. A child visits an emergency room for a playground-related injury every 2-½ minutes, according to the Playground Safety program, which cites the statistic by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's National Electronic Injury Surveillance System.

The biggest culprits are hard surfaces under the play equipment, and loose ropes and strings. "Most deaths on the playground are suffocation or strangulation," Hudson says. These deaths can be caused by ropes that kids use to climb or by loose strings on clothing. Even the bicycle helmets children wear to the playground need to come off before they hit the jungle gym or slide, Hudson says, because the helmets get stuck in places meant for kids' smaller heads, not the larger helmets.

Improving the safety standards for playground sounds like a no-brainer, but it is complicated on many levels, Hudson says. First, there is the question of who passes the bill for the improvements since they are not required by law. And sometimes parents are reluctant to make upgrades to equipment that was "good enough for them," Hudson observes, even though they'd likely wonder why their kids were using the same textbooks from 30 years ago. Hudson urges Parents and caregivers to evaluate every piece of equipment their child is playing on using the following:

SAFE guidelines:

- **S is for supervise.** Make sure there is an alert adult observing children play. "It only takes seconds for tragedy to strike," Hudson says.
- **A is appropriate developmental design.** Can the child reach the equipment on his own? If a child can't reach, he's not ready. "Get the image out of your head that one piece of play equipment is for all children."
- **F is fall surfacing.** What would your child land on if he fell? Dirt, grass, asphalt and concrete pose immediate dangers, Hudson says. Better choices are sand, 3/8-inch pea gravel, wood chips, mulch, chopped rubber or the poured rubber used on some runners' tracks. The softer surface material should be at least 12 inches deep and extend 6 feet beyond the actual equipment in all directions. Parents also

should consider how far their child would fall. Hudson advises equipment for preschoolers are no higher than 6-8 feet. Equipment higher than 6 feet doubles the probability of injury, she says.

- **E stands for equipment and surfacing maintenance.** Check for wear and tear often. “Just like changing the oil in your car, inspect and maintain the playground. There is no such thing as a maintenance-free playground.” Be on the lookout for loose or protruding bolts, Hudson says, which will be more common on equipment made before 1981- and you’d be surprised how much of that 20-year-old play equipment is still in use.

Does your playground make the grade?

The National Program for Playground Safety suggests the following yes-no questions for rating the safety of the play equipment used by children.

Supervision

- Are adults present when children are on equipment?
- Can children be easily viewed when on equipment?
- Can children be viewed in crawl spaces?
- Are rules posted regarding expected behavior?

Age- appropriate design

- Do playgrounds have separate areas for ages 2-5 and 5-12?
- Are there signs indicating the age group for equipment provided?
- Do platforms allow change of directions to get on/off structure?
- Do platforms have appropriate guardrails?
- Does equipment design prevent climbing outside the structure?
- Are children prevented from climbing on the supporting structure?

Fall surfacing

- Is appropriate surfacing provided?
- Does the 6-foot use zone have an appropriate surface?
- Is the appropriate depth of loose fill provided?
- Are concrete footings covered?
- Is the surface free of foreign objects?

Equipment maintenance

- Is equipment free of broken parts?
- Is equipment free of missing parts?
- Is equipment free of protruding bolts?

- Is equipment free of noticeable gaps?
- Is equipment free of head entrapments?
- Is equipment free of rust?
- Is equipment free of splinters?
- Is equipment free of cracks/holes?