

Playgrounds below standard

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About 70 per cent of playground equipment in city parks fails to meet national standards contained in a plan to upgrade every playground in the country by 2000.

The plan, launched Tuesday by the Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, is designed to reduce the number of injuries suffered by Canadian children in playgrounds.

But the fact that only 30 per cent of the more than 160 sets of swings, climbing bars and slides enjoyed by Hamilton children meets these new standards doesn't mean city playgrounds are unsafe, says the chairman of the city's parks and recreation committee.

"Council in Hamilton sets a high priority on playground safety," said Alderman Bernie Morelli. "Anything unsafe, we fix it or remove it."

Indeed, the \$2.5 million the city has spent on playground improvement over the past seven years puts it way ahead of most Canadian cities when it comes to playground safety.

"We're way ahead of everybody, but we've still got a long way to go," said Werner Plessl, parks development co-ordinator.

National estimates say about 10,000 children are hurt every year in playgrounds. Most injuries requiring hospital admission involve falls.

In Hamilton, so few calls are received about playground injuries that no statistics are kept.

In 1996, Hamilton dismantled and replaced play structures that were deemed unsafe in 10 parks, according to the guidelines.

They include replacing grass beneath a swing with absorbent material such as wood chips, fine stone or rubberized asphalt to ensuring gaps in equipment are less than 90 millimetres or greater than 225 mm to prevent head entrapment.

This year, council is being asked to provide another \$300,000 to upgrade equipment in an additional six parks and, in May, six city employees will attend a course to qualify them as playground safety inspectors.

Plessl estimates upgrading all playground equipment to the new standard would cost \$5 million.

He said city staff repeatedly get calls from other municipalities asking for advice on how to achieve Hamilton's level of safety, which has been achieved largely through an innovative program of community partnership in deciding on the type and scale of playground equipment.

John Norris is the manager of Mountainview Residents for Recreation in Hamilton Inc., a non-profit group that has donated \$220,000 to municipal park projects since 1986.

His organization was instrumental in lobbying council to end a year's moratorium on parkland dedication fees, which meant the waiving of money paid to the city by developers for development of parkland. The organization also persuaded council to make up the \$500,000 lost to the moratorium out of city reserves with the result that city parks didn't suffer as a result.

``If (councillors) hadn't, that would have terminated playground equipment funding," Norris said.

``When something comes to their attention, they do something, which is more than most municipalities do."

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