

Kids' playgrounds not all fun and games

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Sprains, strains, broken bones, abrasions, lacerations, concussions and knocked-out teeth -- it's not all fun and games in Canada's playgrounds.

These supposed havens of childhood delight are riddled with risks and it's time for a national upgrade, says the Canadian Parks/Recreation Association.

The non-profit organization has launched a national plan to upgrade every playground in the country by 2000.

``When it comes to children, playgrounds are a major component of their education," Neil Semenchuk, president of the non-profit association, said at a news conference at a Health Department daycare yesterday.

``Providing safe play spaces will lead to greater play value and, by extension, increased usage."

About 10,000 Canadian kids are injured every year in playgrounds, according to an estimate based on data from 16 emergency rooms.

Most injuries requiring hospital admission in 1996 involved falls, says the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program.

Since 1982, 16 children have died after being strangled with drawstrings or loose clothing caught on equipment or by skipping ropes. One child was strangled after his bike helmet became wedged in a playground structure.

The Canadian Standards Association is backing the safe-playground effort with an elaborate set of technical standards for the design and installation of playground equipment.

Among the standards:

- Gaps in equipment must be less than 90 millimetres or greater than 225 mm to prevent head entrapment.
- Soft protective surfacing is required beneath any equipment from which a child could fall.
- Regular inspection and maintenance. The standards association is launching a program to train playground inspectors.

The safety standards are voluntary but it is hoped that schools and municipalities will try to comply with them over the next three years.

There are no estimates on what this will cost, but Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson said his city spent \$100,000 to upgrade the safety of its playgrounds in recent years.

“Nothing we as a society or a government can do is more important than protection of our children,” said Watson.

Is there a risk that playgrounds will be so safe they are no longer fun?

“Reducing the space between two bars so a child can't get his head caught in them is not going to remove the fun of a play structure,” said Grant Carter, vice-president of the standards association.

He said the experts spent a lot of time watching children at play before drawing up the standards so as to find the best ways to improve safety without killing excitement.

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