

## Parental vigilance urged on playgrounds

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IT HAS been more than three years since four-year-old John McLeod was found hanging from a skipping rope tied to a playground slide.

Since then, partly as a result of the Toronto youngster's tragic death and a coroner's inquest that followed, municipalities and various groups have increasingly made safety a priority in and around play structures at parks, schools, child-care centres, churches and homes.

But some 10,000 children are still injured annually on playgrounds, says Safe Kids Canada, and it's essential that parents and caregivers be vigilant and ensure playgrounds are safe. "There already has been an increase in (hospital) treatments for bones broken (since the winter) and it's exactly what we see every year at the beginning of the summer," says Sonya Corkum, Safe Kids' executive director in Toronto. "Different pockets of the country have taken the issue on, but overall there hasn't been enough attention to ensuring playgrounds are safe."

Part of the problem is there are no federal standards for playgrounds. Different municipalities and individual playgrounds have different sizes, makes and designs of structures and surfacing. But the Canadian Standards Association has guidelines that many municipalities follow voluntarily, says Corkum. There also are more videos, manuals and courses aimed at both builders, supervisors and users of playgrounds than ever before.

After the McLeod death in March 1995, there was an inquest that called for improved emergency training for child-care workers and thorough inspections of playground equipment.

John's death is one of many in Canada resulting from choking, which is the most common cause of death on playgrounds. Falls account for the majority of non-fatal injuries, including head or internal-organ trauma.

In Edmonton in June 1994, a toddler died when a drawstring on her jacket snagged on a slide, prompting parents, school officials and community representatives to study playground hazards. It also resulted in a kit outlining safety hazards and maintenance by the Alberta Medical Association and Alberta Safe Kids.

As well, Safe Kids Canada is working with Health Canada to have drawstrings banned on children's clothing, said Corkum.

Other stepped-up actions in recent years include: n At the Children's Hospital in Winnipeg, an injury prevention program entails staff reporting any playground injuries to the playgrounds so they can take appropriate safety action. n A playground inspector course by the Canadian Parks-Recreation Association in Ottawa is being offered at several centres in the next six months. n The Canadian Standards Association is distributing a Safe Kids

Canada playground safety guide for day cares, schools and communities.

The 17-page guide, called Child's Play, is filled with illustrations of appropriate equipment design. It's accompanied by a 15-minute video that focuses on three major playground components - surfacing, equipment and supervision.

The challenge for playground designers is to make structures safe and age-appropriate. But nothing beats a good set of eyes and quick reflexes, stresses Corkum.