

From parks to back yards, play can be peril

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With the anxious eye of a father, a man watched as a 10-year-old girl perched precariously atop a three-metre wooden beam at a city playground.

But Louis Hugo Francescutti isn't the girl's father. He's an emergency-room physician at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton who has cared for hundreds of injured children, some of them hurt in city playgrounds. He calls himself an injury-prevention activist.

As the girl straddled the beam, Francescutti drew attention to a cluster of 10 wooden stumps - 34 to 90 centimetres high - almost directly below the child.

"If she falls and hits her head, all the emergency medicine in the world wouldn't help," he said.

Fortunately, the girl didn't fall. She's cautious, not like some of her daredevil friends who walked across the beam like tightrope walkers.

During an inspection of the playground, Francescutti checked various equipment against a 12-point checklist for parents on playground safety.

The safety guidelines by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission are distributed in easy-to-read checklists by several U.S. agencies.

The Canadian Standards Association has similar guidelines, but the information is available only in a technical 87-page document, at a cost of \$80.

No. 7 on the checklist warns parents against catch-points at the top of slides where clothing around a child's neck could become entangled.

A 2-year-old Edmonton girl died recently after a tied drawstring on the hood of her jacket became snagged on the top of a slide.

And each year 2,700 youngsters are injured in Canadian playgrounds, according to figures from the Children's Hospitals Injury Research Program in Ottawa. The program gathers only data from cities with children's hospitals.

Francescutti hopes other concerned parents will follow his lead by zeroing in on their own neighborhood playgrounds.

But he said parents shouldn't forget that many back yards are accident traps, riddled with toys and equipment that can be lethal.

Jackie Petruk, co-ordinator of Safe Kids, a program run by the Children's Health Foundation of Northern Alberta, said that unlike public playgrounds, which are regularly inspected and often monitored by parks staff, there may be no monitoring in backyard playgrounds.

And Petruk has found that parents often don't read instruction manuals and therefore don't install swings and other equipment properly.

For dangerous backyard toys, trampolines top the list.

"We're just waiting for a kid to get killed on a trampoline," said Francescutti, who would like to see a ban on the sale of trampolines for private use.

He has lost track of the number of local children who've been hurt on the equipment. In one recent weekend shift, he saw three people who injured themselves on trampolines.

More than 90 per cent of trampoline injuries occur in residential settings, and 46 per cent involve fractures, dislocations and sprains to the head and upper body, Petruk said.