

# Safety more than just child's play

**Lack of federal standards called a problem**

**By:** From Canadian Press

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It's been more than three years since 4-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, there has been a growing move to make 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.

John's death was 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.

“There has already 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 over all there hasn't been enough attention to ensuring playgrounds are safe.”

Part of the problem is the lack of federal standards for playgrounds, she says. There are guidelines for equipment and surfacing, set by the Canadian Standards Association, but those municipalities that follow them do so only voluntarily.

There are more videos, manuals and courses aimed at builders, supervisors and users of playgrounds than ever before.

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

Other stepped-up actions in recent years include:

A playground inspector course by the Canadian Parks-Recreation Association in Ottawa will be offered at several centres in the next six months.

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.

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. Safe Kids also has a consumer playground tips line: (888) 723-3847.

Members of Safe Kids Canada's playground committee include the Alberta Children's Hospital, the Montreal public health unit and the Yellowknife fire department.

The challenge for playground designers is to make structures safe and age-appropriate.

Equipment for school-aged children up to 12 is often higher and elements are spaced further apart than equipment for younger kids, notes Child's Play. But equipment should be inspected for gaps and spaces that may be a threat to young kids, and caregivers should ensure openings are either too big or too small to be a threat, the guide adds.

Safe surfacing also reduces the severity of injuries from falls. Both natural (sand, pea gravel or wood chips) and synthetic (poured-in-place rubber or rubber mats which tend to be more expensive) surfaces have their advantages and disadvantages, says the Child's Play guide.

But nothing beats a good set of eyes and quick reflexes, stresses Corkum.

``We push people to know their children, and put them on age-appropriate equipment," she says. ``If they're under age 5, a parent or caregiver should always be standing nearby and not just sit and read a book."

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