

Vigilant adults still required; Safer Playgrounds; CHECKLIST

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It's 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 bodies have made safety a priority in and around play structures at parks, schools, child-care centres, churches and homes.

About 10,000 children are still injured annually on playgrounds, says Safe Kids Canada, and it's essential that parents and care-givers be vigilant and ensure playgrounds are safe.

"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 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 are also more videos, manuals and courses aimed at 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.

A recent call to the office of lawyer Richard Worsfold, who was representing the family in a lawsuit against the day-care centre where John died, found the suit has been settled. Worsfold and the family were unavailable for comment.

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:

- A playground inspector course by the Canadian Parks-Recreation

Association in Ottawa is being 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 parks department 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. Safe Kids also has a consumer playground tips line (888-723-8477).

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 farther 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 care-givers 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, but proper depths and regular maintenance go a long way in ensuring safety, 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 five, a parent or care-giver should always be standing nearby and not just sit and read a book."*

CHECKLIST

Here are some tips for parents and care-givers to help prevent playground injuries before they happen. Parents should also report any concerns to the owners and operators of the

playground involved:

Check the children:

- Remove drawstrings from clothing, ensure skipping ropes aren't tied to swings or slides, and don't let kids wear bike or other helmets on equipment.
- Don't allow kids on equipment with bare feet, which can get burned on hot surfaces and cut by debris. Toes can also get caught in equipment gaps and spaces.
- Take off scarves, tie and tuck in shoelaces, and remove loose clothes if possible.

Check the playground for:

- A quality surface under and around the playground equipment that will reduce the chance of injuries due to falls.
- Adequate guardrails and handrails to prevent falls.
- Spaces where a child's head or neck can become trapped.
- Equipment parts that can tangle clothing or anything else around a child's neck.

- Pieces of play equipment that are located far enough apart from one another.

n Safe swings made of soft impact-absorbing material. Toddler seats should provide support on all sides and have no movable parts.

- Safe slides with guardrails at the top platform, no entanglement points between the top platform and slide, continuous handrails from top to bottom.

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