

TIPS FOR PUBLIC PLAYGROUND SAFETY **Playground Safety Week – April 26 – 30, 2004**

Each year, about 200,000 children are treated in U.S. Hospital emergency rooms for injuries related to playground equipment. An estimated 148,000 of these involve public playground equipment and estimated 51,000 involve home playground equipment. Also, about fifteen children die each year as a result of playground equipment-related incidents. Most of the injuries are the result of falls. These are primarily falls to the ground below the equipment, but also falls from one piece of equipment to another. Most of the deaths are due to strangulations or falls.

WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

Most public agencies are now facing a real dilemma in their attempt to meet current playground safety guidelines, avoid potential legal liabilities arising from non-compliance with these guidelines, balance budgets, and still provide a reasonable safe, enjoyable playground environment for children in their communities. Some jurisdictions are now legislated to comply with a specified standard of care.

The first thing not to do is simply remove all existing playground equipment that does not meet the 1997 CPSC Playground Safety Guidelines or the ASTM F1487-01 Standards. Before you remove playground equipment, discuss your rationale with your risk manager, attorney, board, elected officials and community. The negative impact a mass removal of playground equipment would have on our communities would likely outweigh much of the injury potential that exists on most playground equipment. However, it is critical that public agencies take action to minimize non-compliant areas of concern on existing equipment that are known to cause serious injuries or death.

- The first step is to identify any equipment within your agency's jurisdiction that is known to have caused a reported injury because of poor maintenance, lack of repairs, or poor design that is not in compliance with the CPSC Guidelines and ASTM Standards. If the causes of these injuries have not been corrected, they should be corrected or the specific piece of equipment should be removed.
- Secondly, remove any existing playground equipment that is not recommended for use on public playgrounds in the CPSC guidelines and ASTM Standard. These include:
 - Heavy animal figure swings
 - Multiple occupancy swings (excluding tire swings)
 - Rope swings
 - Swinging exercise rings and trapeze bar swings
 - Swinging gate

- Giant strides (May Pole)

You should also:

- Cover or replace exposed concrete footing
 - Remove cement landing pads in use zones
 - Evaluate older playground equipment for presence of toxic substances.
- The third step is to ensure that adequate depths of surfacing material exist below each piece of playground equipment. It has been widely documented that almost 70% of all playground injuries can be avoided or minimized by providing soft landing materials of sufficient depth below playground equipment.
 - The fourth step is to identify any tall equipment that would require a landing surface that exceeds the maximum fall height of your underlying protective surfacing material. Agencies should consider removing this equipment unless a tested surfacing (ASTM F 1292) 200 G and 1000 HIC impact standard is available and placed below this equipment with an acceptable use zone.
 - The fifth step is to adjust playground borders and/or when possible relocate equipment to accommodate CPSC and ASTM Layout and Spacing Guidelines (use zone requirements).
 - The sixth step is to identify and repair areas of non-compliance on playground equipment by beginning or improving your regular playground inspection and maintenance program. A major playground equipment manufacturer study alleged that more than 30% of playground accidents were caused by inadequate maintenance practices by playground operators. Inadequate maintenance inspections and lack of follow-up corrective procedures are common causes of playground accidents. The resulting lack of inspections or poor documentation may be a basis for legal action against a public agency.
 - The seventh step is to conduct a comprehensive playground safety audit of each playground site to determine the adequacy of its compliance with the 1997 CPSC handbook and the current ASTM standards. This audit will assist agencies developing playground replacement schedules by identifying and prioritizing serious areas of non-compliance in existing playground equipment and park/playground sites as a whole. The results of the audit will also identify some conditions that are correctable by agency staff as well as those that may be abated by contacting manufacturers for retrofit upgrades. Because standards have changed throughout the last twenty years and maybe the law in some states, it is suggested that you review with your legal counsel which standards apply to your playgrounds.
 - The eighth step is to formalize your playground maintenance program policies and procedures.

- The ninth step is to establish a long-term action plan to upgrade playground sites that is reflected in your agency's capital equipment replacement program, existing staff resources and maintenance/repair budget.
- And, the tenth step, and the most important part of this project, is the ongoing commitment of each and every person who is actively involved in providing safe and challenging playgrounds in your community.

The steps represent a multi-year process, which should address all your playground safety needs now and in the future. Your written plan will not exempt your agency from liability, but it should minimize exposure to the court's larger cash awards or settlements, which threaten the financial stability of every entity. But most importantly, this process will avoid the likelihood of an unfortunate accident to some unsuspecting child.

For more information on playground safety inspections, or the Handbook for Public Safety contact Jim Hammontree CPRP/CPSI at 615-532-2233 or E-mail to jimhammontree@state.tn.us or Gerald F. Parish Jr. CPRP/CPSI at 731-512-1370 or E-mail to gerald.parish@state.tn.us

Contribution by Third Edition Developing a Public Playground Safety and Maintenance Program.