



The health and well-being of children depends on the safety and quality of their physical and natural, built, and social environments — at home, school, and in the community.¹

Thousands of children visit emergency rooms across Canada every year as a result of accidents involving playground equipment. Injuries can range from minor cuts and bruises to fractured bones and severe head and spinal injuries. The statistics speak for themselves:

- Each year an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 children in Canada are treated in hospital emergency departments for playground injuries and, of those, about 1,700 will require admission to hospital.²
- According to the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program (CHIRPP) database for 2000, of 4,225 records of injuries associated with playground equipment and sustained by children under the age of 14, 36% took place in schools.³

Minimize risks, prevent injuries

Play is not just a way for children to pass the time. Rather, it is how children of all ages grow, develop, improve, challenge, and stimulate their minds and bodies.⁴ Playgrounds play an important role in a child's physical and social development, so it is important to understand potential hazards and take action to minimize them. With diligence and vigilance, serious injuries are preventable.

In fact, using Canadian Standard Association (CSA) guidelines (see below), a study was conducted in Toronto in which hazardous equipment was identified in 136 elementary schools. The equipment was removed from 86 of these schools and replaced with safer equipment. As a result, the rate of injury in intervention schools decreased from 2.61 per 1,000 students per month to 1.68 per 1,000 students. This translated into 550 injuries avoided in the post-intervention period.⁵

Be proactive, be prepared

The safety and wellbeing of students is the first and most important goal of any school. To that end, it is important to have a comprehensive playground safety policy.

The following are suggested steps to take:

- Appoint a safety coordinator who will be responsible for all aspects of playground safety
- Develop policies for playground supervision and emergency procedures

- Establish procedures and checklists for regular playground checks
- Engage a certified inspector to inspect your playground and equipment on a regular basis
- Hire a qualified contractor to repair and/or replace equipment
- Ensure that all equipment meets CSA standards
- Develop a "how to play safely" program that teaches students about safe playground use.

When it comes to your school's playground safety, there are four key areas to address:

1 Age-Appropriate Design

- Separate play areas with appropriate size equipment for different age groups (e.g. children under 5 should stay off of equipment higher than 5 feet)
- Signage that clearly identifies age group for equipment
- Suitable supporting structures, platforms, and guardrails
- Adequate spacing between structures for children to fall safely
- Appropriate spaces between swings.

2 Playground Surfacing

- Sufficient safety surfacing to reduce the severity of fall injuries
- Appropriate impact-absorbing surfacing material
 - The right depth of loose fill
 - Concrete footings covered
- Surfaces free of debris and foreign matter.

3 Inspection and Maintenance

- Inspections of facilities conducted on a regular basis,
 - Daily “walk throughs” to look for debris, broken glass, etc. and assess damage to equipment — for example, sharp edges or protruding bolts where clothing can get caught.
 - Monthly inspection of equipment — s-hooks, bolts, bearings, guard rails, etc. — to determine signs of wear, deterioration or other damage.
 - Annual inspection of all playground facilities by a certified inspector.
- Logs kept of all inspections and maintenance that have been performed.

4 Adequate supervision

- Ensure there is an acceptable supervisor/child ratio.
- Provide training sessions for playground supervisors: teachers, staff, and volunteers.
- Check children for potential hazards prior to beginning play. Items such as bike helmets and scarves as well as any other loose items such as drawstrings, cords, skipping ropes, and mittens with strings that can become caught or lead to strangulation should be removed or tucked away. Ensure they are wearing appropriate footwear with adequate traction to prevent slipping.

Playground Standards

The CSA's "Children's playground equipment and surfacing guidelines" has been adopted by the Safety Council of Canada. This comprehensive document (the 6th edition was released in 2020) provides guidelines for the safe design of playground equipment and includes detailed information on maintenance plans as well as a suggested inspection checklist.

Although generally considered the industry standard, the CSA guideline is not law and compliance is voluntary unless cited by relevant legislation or adopted by a regulatory body, such as a school board or a provincial/municipal licensing body. A copy of the latest, 2020 edition can be obtained at www.csa.ca.

Protect your organization

It is vitally important that regular inspections are performed by qualified personnel and documented appropriately. Certified playground inspectors can be found through various organizations, including Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA), Ontario Parks Association, and Institut National de

Santé Publique du Québec. If you are leasing space to a tenant with a playground, make sure your contract contains a hold harmless clause in your favour and that the lessee is carrying liability insurance with adequate limits.

References and Resources

- 1 PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA: SAFE, HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/dca-dea/allchildren_touslesenfants/she_main-eng.php
- 2 SAFE KIDS CANADA
www.safekid.org is the national injury prevention program of The Hospital for Sick Children —
www.sickkids.on.ca
- 3 CANADIAN HOSPITALS INJURY REPORTING AND PREVENTION PROGRAM (CHIRPP)
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/injury-bles/chirpp/injrep-rapbles/pdf/playground_e.pdf
- 4 MONTY CHRISTIANSEN
Professor Emeritus Penn State University, Executive Director of the International Playground Safety Institute (IPSI).
- 5 ANDREW W. HOWARD, ET AL (2005)
"The effect of safer play equipment on playground injury rates among school children" vCMAJ 172 (11).
May 24, 2005 www.publichealth.gc.ca

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