

***This article appeared in
Child Care Business, The Magazine For Successful Childcare Centers,
Volume 4 Issue 2 February 2003.***

**SAFETY IS EVERYONE'S
RESPONSIBILITY –
A CHILD'S ROLE**

Childhood is one of the greatest gifts we are given in this life. A child's early years are filled with joy and frustration that develop the characteristics and personality traits we exercise as adults. Most grown-ups have fond memories of their time spent at the playground. Perhaps the good memories are mixed with some not-so-good times. Perhaps you experienced an embarrassing moment that caused your friends to laugh at you. Maybe you were involved in a serious accident at the playground that required treatment at the emergency room. Maybe you were victim to a bully's endless taunting and teasing.

Experiences at the playground are as unique to a child as their personality. Likewise, each park and play area has its own characteristics that make it unique to a community. A park setting is a reflection of the values of a community. For example, a city park with rundown unsafe play equipment is a reflection of a town that does not value playgrounds and play spaces. While a neighboring town may see real value in providing places for children, families and friends to congregate as evidenced by the activity of laughing children playing on newer, up-to-code and well maintained equipment in a clean and cared for park setting.

Today's prefabricated playground equipment is nearly perfect in design. Manufacturers are required to address every safety concern imaginable. When built according to manufacturers specifications and set in a location to best meet user needs, playgrounds are the setting for real experiences and small triumphs. The little people visiting our playgrounds should not have to worry about being safe. But yet, do they not have a responsibility to be aware of their part in maintaining safe play activity?

There are three indicators of potential playground hazards. They include the equipment, the environment, and user behavior. It is the duty of designers, manufacturers, and playground owners to examine theories, review statistics, and observing the playground setting beyond the actual equipment identify and eliminate playground hazards. It is the duty of all of us to gather this infor-

mation and impart it to the children. As the playground industry is dynamic, always in motion, playground safety information should be supported by case studies and documents that are specific to these three indicators.

THE EQUIPMENT –

Much as been written and said about know hazards of play such as tripping and falling. Additionally, children need to be taught about safety surfacing, protrusions, entrapments, and things that relate directly to the play equipment. This information is readily available to anyone willing to learn. >From public documents such as the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commissions Handbook for Public Playground Safety to technical documents released by the American Society for Testing and Materials, today's playgrounds are made safer and built safer than ever before. Imparting of this information, up until recently, has been mostly to the adult population. But, we are beginning to see programs designed to make the users, the children, more aware of these things from very local grass root efforts to national programs.

ENVIRONMENTAL DANGERS

User awareness of environmental dangers, such as weather, water from ditches or lakes, electricity, vehicles, or other situations outside the immediate play area are also worthy preventative measures that should be taught. A prime example of an environmental issue is the weather. Going indoors during a thunder and lightening storm may be self-evident to an adult, but this is something that must be taught to children.

BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

Teaching safety awareness about social issues includes dealing with strangers, peer pressure, what to do in an emergency, and of course bullying. Awareness of safety hazards such as the bullying and being bullied is essential. When bully-victim relationships overtake the playground, it is not safe. Greater awareness and the ability of adults to recognize and take an active role in preventing bullying can make it possible for our children to learn positive and productive responses to bullying behavior.

We have briefly visited all three indicators of a potential safety hazards at the playground. Looking beyond the boundaries of the immediate equipment is essential. Include environmental and behavior characteristics of the playground when teaching playground safety awareness to children and adults. Become familiar with the resources of information readily available. The National Playground Safety Institute, (NPSI) who makes layman sense out of the design, construction, and maintenance safety criteria. Also, The National Program for Playground Safety, (NPPS) offers adult playground safety awareness education program to supervisors that includes an excellent training and certification program. The International Playground Equipment Manufactures Association, (IPEMA) and The National Playground Contractors Association, (NPCA) are also nationally recognized organizations whose focus is to educate and provide information for a better built playground and safe play.

SLYDE The Playground Hound has emerged as a national playground safety icon whose sole purpose is to promote playground safety awareness to children ages 2 to 12 years. Through the medium of board games, storybooks, cartoons and assemblies, children are exposed to SLYDE's safety messages. In a document, Guideline for Drawstrings on Children's Clothing, the CPSC warns equipment manufacturers, retailers, and consumers of the dangers of drawstrings and calls for a voluntary effort to eliminate drawstrings on the neck of children's upper outerwear, such as jackets and sweatshirts. The most effective way to prevent these injuries is to teach the children. One of SLYDE's safety messages is "Tuck It In, Or Take It Off" to help children remember their role in preventing injury.

Local planning and zoning departments are also good resource for information on hazards outside of the bounds of the equipment itself. Input from the fire and police departments and local service clubs or medical organizations such as the American Orthopedic Surgeons Association are worthy of note. Each has a perspective on children and child safety that can contribute to your awareness and that of the children you teach making memories worth remembering.