

New school playgrounds prove safer

Upgraded equipment has significantly reduced children's injuries, study finds

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The controversial decision to raze and rebuild more than one-third of playgrounds at Toronto elementary schools because they were deemed unsafe appears to be paying big dividends.

New research, published in today's edition of the Canadian Medical Association Journal, shows that the number of children injured was reduced by almost half after playground equipment was upgraded, while the injury rate increased at playgrounds that were untouched.

"The impact on injury prevention was spectacular," Andrew Howard, an orthopedic surgeon at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children, said in an interview.

"The school board stuck its neck out on this one because they wanted to create a safe physical environment for children, and they seem to have succeeded."

In 2000, the Toronto District School Board decided to act on a report that found 136 of its 398 school playgrounds did not meet safety standards and needed to be replaced. Another 250 playgrounds were deemed safe.

The unsafe playgrounds had equipment such as slides and monkey bars from which children could fall from a height of more than 1.5 metres onto a hard surface. More than \$6.3-million was spent on the safety upgrades.

The new study focused on the 86 playgrounds that had been completely rebuilt by the end of 2001. Researchers compared injury reports before and after the upgrades.

Dr. Howard and his team found that, at these schools, the injury rate was 2.61 per 1,000 students per month before the playground was upgraded. After upgrades, that rate fell to 1.68 per 1,000.

That translates into 550 injuries that were avoided during one school year at the 86 schools, Dr. Howard said.

During the same time period, the injury rate at schools where equipment was not changed increased to 1.81 per 1,000 students per month from 1.44 per 1,000. Researchers were not sure how to explain that change, except to speculate that the equipment is growing older.

More than 25,000 Canadian children are treated each year in emergency rooms for injuries suffered in playgrounds, according to data published last year by the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

The majority of the injuries were orthopedic -- broken wrists, arms and elbows -- but there were also a large number of serious head injuries, and even cases of strangulation.

"Of course, not all playground injuries are preventable. Injury during childhood is part of growing up," Dr. Howard said. "But playground equipment falls are preventable."

The Toronto District School Board said it is pleased by the findings of the new research.

"It is important for us to see the tangible, positive results our facility upgrades have had on safety and injury prevention in our schoolyards," Sheila Penny, executive superintendent of facility services, said in a statement.

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