

Day-care staff need cell phones jury urges; [Final Edition]

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TORONTO STAR

January 25, 1996

An inquest into the playground strangling death of a 4-year-old boy has recommended equipping day-care staff with cellular phones for off-site trips and improving their emergency training.

The jury also reiterated the recommendation - never implemented - of a 1992 inquest into the similar death of a 5-year-old Mississauga boy. It called for a government-produced instructional video on playground safety.

The recommendations, following six hours of deliberations, cap a three-day inquest into the death of John McLeod, who was strangled by a skipping rope on a spiral slide last March 14 while three adults were nearby.

John and 11 other children at the Happy Day Child Care Centre had been taken by two staffers and a student volunteer to the playground of the nearby George Syme Community School, on Pritchard Ave. in the City of York.

Lawyer Richard Worsfold, acting for the boy's family, said they were pleased the jury "came back with some recommendations that hopefully will prevent anything like this from happening again."

He said the family plans to proceed with a civil suit against the day-care centre.

"The family is very disappointed with the conduct of the day-care. I was disappointed. Obviously, if you have charge of children, you have to be very vigilant," Worsfold said.

"You have to maintain constant visual supervision, particularly when they're on climbing apparatuses, because these things can happen very quickly.

"And in this case, it would appear it was some time even after John was in trouble before he was discovered," Worsfold said, pointing to the pathologist's evidence that John was hanging on the slide from two to five minutes before he was discovered.

Coroner Alex Jones warned the jurors prior to their deliberations that their "recommendations must be practical and must be inexpensive to implement in view of today's government obsession with budgetary cutbacks."

Among the recommendations:

- * That federal and provincial governments jointly produce and distribute an instructional video about playground safety and supervision and make it available to day-care centres, schools, parks and recreation departments and colleges that train day-care workers, among others.
- * That day-care staff be equipped with mobile phones for off-site emergencies.
- * That "situational training" be given to day-care staff at least once a year to give them "a firm understanding of their individual roles in an emergency."

The inquest was told that day-care worker Karlene LaTouche, who was in charge of John and the other children, ran for help upon seeing his lifeless body. A day-care worker from another centre actually administered cardio-pulmonary resuscitation.

- * That a minimum of three adults (including at least two day-care staff) accompany children on

off-site trips and that one adult be solely responsible for monitoring children's play on playground equipment.

* That all playground equipment be certified by the Canadian Standards Association and, until that time, all such equipment on public property should be labelled if not suitable for pre-school children.

Compliance with the association's 90-page set of guidelines is on a voluntary basis now, the inquest was told.

* That a bulletin issued in 1993 by Health Canada on strangling hazards on playground equipment be widely distributed to day-care and other children's centres, and that posting the bulletin prominently be a condition of licence renewal.

* That staff at the centres sign a log book indicating they have read and understood the bulletin's contents.