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TORONTO STAR

May 18, 1993 Sec. C. pg. B.1

THE OLD-STYLE teeter-totter is teetering toward extinction. Those merry-go-round platforms are spinning into oblivion. And the kamikaze 20-foot spiral slide has all but slipped out of sight.

The generation that made car seats mandatory, bike helmets commonplace and banned baby walkers now is turning its attention to the hazards in neighborhood parks.

Indeed, the old playground, with its often rusty, sharp edges, hard concrete surface and wobbly equipment is gradually being replaced by solid adventure-style structures with soft sand beneath and canopies above, that encourage imagination as much as daredevil thrills.

Take the teeter-totter. After generations of thrilling kids with the fear of flying or being slammed to the ground - while having their spine jarred, jaw clipped and fingers pinched - the old-style see-saw has at last been declared dangerous by a society increasingly concerned with children's safety.

Many parks are removing them altogether or replacing them with a kinder, gentler model that is accessible to disabled children, big enough for a parent to straddle with a nervous child - and whose spring lock prevents that catapult action daredevils loved so well.

They're not the only casualty in the tough new safety approach to playgrounds. Those old-style twirling merry-go-round platforms also are discouraged because of the risk of kids being flung off. For example, the City of Toronto has removed them from its 161 public parks along with those giant spiral slides.

These changes follow sweeping new playground safety guidelines released three years ago by the Canadian Standards Association, which many cities, school boards and manufacturers are choosing to follow, even though they are not required to by law.

And the guidelines are needed, says Phyllis Durnford, co-ordinator of the Hospital for Sick Children's trauma program. She has begun to keep track of the number of kids admitted to hospital for playground injuries.

Last year 98 children were admitted to Sick Kids from such accidents - and studies suggest this may represent only 5 per cent of kids actually taken to hospital after being hurt in the playground.

"Thirty per cent of all injuries among preschoolers occur on playground equipment - and falls are by far the biggest culprit. They account for more than 70 per cent of all injuries," says Durnford.

Preschoolers usually fall off slides, whereas school-age children fall off monkey bars. To get a broader sense of where the danger lies, the hospital's research department just got approval to gather figures from other Metro-area hospitals, Durnford says.

Across Canada, a study of children treated at 10 pediatric hospitals shows that 41 per cent of playground injuries are to the head - including eyes, ears, nose, jaw, lip, face, cheek, scalp and skull.

And while 59 per cent take place in school playgrounds, injuries in public playgrounds

account for 35 per cent, while day care and nursery school playgrounds account for the remaining 6 per cent of injuries.

"The most important thing parents can do is to go and look at the playground their child will be playing in," Durnford says.

"And I don't mean stand at the edge and look from a distance. I mean get up close and look for rough edges that could cut, or parts of equipment that need repair.

"And parents should use common sense, too. Don't put your 4-year-old on top of a 12-foot-high climber."

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