

Skipping rope death puts focus on child care safety

Inquest stresses need for better training, rules, researcher says; [Final Edition]

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TORONTO STAR

January 27, 1996 pg A.2

For parents of young children everywhere, the inquest into the death of 4-year-old John McLeod earlier this week was the stuff of nightmares.

As the three-day inquest struggled to take lessons from the horrifying details of his death on a playground slide last March 14, it also underscored the weaknesses in our day-care system.

Martha Friendly, a researcher with the University of Toronto's Centre for Urban and Community Studies child-care resource unit, says the inquest pointed out a desperate need to improve safety training and the regulations that govern day care in general.

"There are lots of things that are more regulated in this country than the care of our children," Friendly says. "I don't know how many more kids it takes to be killed on a playground before that changes."

Among other things, the inquest jury called for yearly on-the-job emergency training for day-care staff and mandatory distribution to day cares of bulletins warning of playground hazards.

John was among a group of 12 children at the Happy Day Child Care Centre, a private day care in the City of York, who went on an excursion to the nearby playground at George Syme Community School.

Two day-care staff - an early childhood education graduate and a child-care assistant - provided the supervision. A 19-year-old high school student accompanied the group as part of a child-raising class assignment.

During the 40-minute play period, someone tied a skipping rope to a bar at the top of a spiral slide. The other end was tied into a loop.

The rope somehow became tangled around John's neck, asphyxiating the boy. Two to five minutes passed before any of the staff noticed.

One fact was established almost immediately at the inquest: that the ratio of staff to children was better than the 1-to-8 requirement of the Day Nurseries Act, the legislation regulating child-care centres in the province.

The day-care centre "met the regulation standards, but that still didn't save the child's life," said Robyn Gallimore, executive director of the Association of Early Childhood Educators - Ontario.

But evidence at a inquest pointed out that despite the day-care centre's policy of not allowing toys on its own playground equipment, senior day-care staffer Karlene LaTouche allowed children to play with the skipping rope on a slide.

LaTouche even joined in the play at one point, using the skipping rope brought from the day care to pull children - among them John McLeod - up a slide.

The inquest also heard that high school student John Ganji noticed the rope tied to the slide 20 minutes before John was found hanging.

But Ganji, with no training in child care, did not perceive the danger posed by the rope.

LaTouche testified her first reaction upon seeing Ganji carrying John's lifeless body toward her was to run to the nearby school to call 911, instead of immediately applying cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Testimony by Dr. Charles Smith, the pathologist who performed the autopsy, suggested that CPR would not likely have been effective. In Smith's opinion, John had been hanging for two to five minutes or longer, causing irreparable brain damage.

People in the field of child care and child-care education say John's death points to a need for better training.

"This whole scenario suggests a lack of experience and a lack of training," says Kerry McCuaig, spokesperson for the Ontario Coalition for Better Day Care.

Both LaTouche and Sophia Broomfield, the child-care assistant with her that day, were relative newcomers.

LaTouche had graduated from George Brown College's two-year early childhood education program in February, 1994, and had been working for about 13 months.

Broomfield had even less experience and training, graduating from a five-month child-care assistant program at Yorkdale Adult Learning Centre, a high school level re-entry program for adults, in February, 1995. She had been one the job a month when the death occurred.

At the inquest, Professor Barbara Pimento, a long-time early childhood education instructor at George Brown, testified that outdoor safety takes up only four to six hours of a 64-hour course on health, safety and nutrition.

The course's written material doesn't specifically mention the hazards of skipping ropes.

The point is academic since LaTouche testified she remembered nothing about that part of the course.

Broomfield made a similar admission.

"I don't really remember anything about playground safety," she testified.

But McCuaig said course training is only part of what makes a good day-care worker.

"Early childhood education gives you a good grounding in child care," she says. "But it's like any job - you learn on the job. So it becomes a management responsibility to make sure staff are well-trained.

Day care supervisor Anne Miller testified "staff awareness" meetings are held every six weeks.

"We go over safety measures all the time," she said.

But she said the focus at the time of John's death was on winter safety issues, like the hazards of scarves and drawstrings.

"Skipping ropes weren't a priority in winter," she said.

Gallimore and McCuaig agree more training and professional development need to be implemented and are sorely lacking in the child-care field.

"But this probably is the profession where there are the least opportunities for professional development because it's underfunded," McCuaig says.

And with government cutbacks, the situation will only get worse, she says.

Gallimore said the association has contacted the provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services ``offering to take the lead in development some sort of training program on safety."

``One of the things we . . . are looking at is ongoing professional development," she said.

Gallimore said the association supports the concept of a regulatory body for day care workers.

``If we had a college of early childhood educators . . . like a college of teachers, we would have ongoing professional development training, including health and safety. Coming out of an inquest like this, that would be a high priority," she added.

But U of T's Martha Friendly said she is pessimistic about the inquest will improve the state of child care regulation in the province.

``The Day Nurseries Act is the minimum. So there's a whole question of: Is the minimum good enough?" she said.

``And I think this is really important right now from a political point of view. Because we're not going to be improving on the Day Nurseries Act under this regime.

``If anything, we're going to be struggling to keep it in place."

For example, the act does not spell out specifically the requirement to have a designated staff worker supervising playground equipment when children are playing on it - something the inquest jury recommended.

``I don't think the Day Nurseries Act is detailed enough," Friendly said.

``Even though I think it's a good minimum, it's not detailed enough to ensure quality or even safety."