

Protecting Your Playgrounds

By Maya Avrasin

The prospect of retrofitting playground equipment can seem daunting for some parks and recreation departments, because of limited resources or lack of community support. But with new federal standards and suggestions providing our children with safe, accessible play areas, parks and recreation departments nationwide are completing the task—albeit slowly.

Since 1981, with the release of the U.S Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) guidelines, data has shown that our playgrounds are not as safe. According to the CPSC's National Emergency Injuries Surveillance System, which actively searches hospitals for injuries pertaining to a variety of reasons, including inappropriate playground equipment, 227,100 injuries were reported in 2002.

Throughout this year, many parks and recreation departments will fulfill their commitment to upgrading playground equipment in the hopes of reducing these numbers.

Steve Plumb, chair of the National Playground Safety Institute (NPSI) Executive Committee, says the areas of current concern are school playgrounds in smaller communities, because they are high-traffic areas that usually do not have the support from their local districts to aid in the necessary upgrades. NPSI, which is part of the National Recreation and Park Association, oversees a nationwide playground safety certification program.

According to the CPSC's Handbook for Public Playground Safety, there are four major causes of death or serious injury in playgrounds. Entanglement, such as when a child's sweatshirt catches on hanging nails, causing potential strangulation; entrapment, which includes openings not big enough for both a child's body and head, causing head contusions; falls, which can include a variety of hazards such as poor or inadequate playground surfaces, slippery equipment exteriors and the lack of guard railing; and equipment impact, which can range from running into swings or insufficient playground design.

Luckily, playground safety remains an issue that resonates with politicians, play manufacturers and park officials. Communities of all sizes are updating playgrounds to meet today's standards. From state-wide and federal grants, to local bonds, capital improvement funds and private monies, parks and recreation departments have options. And when money is secured, there are dozens of companies that provide the proper playground equipment.

"The playground companies are just as interested in making the playground safe as the parks and recreation organizations are," Plumb says.

To further the bond between manufacturer and playground official, in 1995 most major playground equipment manufacturers formed the non-profit International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association to conform to CPSC, American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) and the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) standards and guidelines. In 1996, IPEMA formed a third-party certification program to help customers decide which products were compliant with the safety and accessibility guidelines.

"It keeps us all a little more honest," says IPEMA Executive Board President Steve King, and chairman of Landscape Structures, a Minnesota-based playground equipment manufacturing

company.

Because he was involved in the development of the ASTM and CPSC safety standards since 1987, and the ADA guidelines since 1993, King says he was not surprised with the investments manufacturers made to meet the new standards.

“Of course there was a significant expense to do it, too, but we were ready when we [companies] had to be,” King says. King says he believes the one group not ready are park directors, “primarily because of budgetary restrictions, but some because of ignorance.”

Nearing Completion

The Archbold Parks and Recreation Department in Ohio has only one 20-year-old metal slide left to replace for its playground upgrade project, which has taken six years to complete. Its tread width and depth are no longer compliant with the recently revised codes, the stairs’ angle is too steep and the steps collect water after rain storms.

Jennifer Kidder, director of the village’s parks and recreation department says the Archbold park board, helped coerce the community and village council to support her department’s upgrade recommendations.

Early on, she says, “a lot of people didn’t understand the importance of being in compliance with the CPSC code.”

To spread her message, she worked with the local newspaper, which printed a series of articles explaining the need for safety in their playgrounds. Eventually, Kidder received \$200,000 to replace all six Archbold playgrounds—an immense commitment from a community with a population of 4,290.

While Archbold averaged one playground upgrade a year, a larger community (yet still considered small to medium in size by most standards) was able to upgrade nine playgrounds in three years.

Commerce City, Colo., will finish its project near the end of this month, upgrading the city’s predominately steel and wood playgrounds into colorful plastic structures. The \$500,000 project came out of the city’s capital improvement fund, in addition to a county-distributed open space grant that gave the parks and recreation department \$86,000 for a new playground.

Tony Jaramillo, parks superintendent for the department, says having a certified inspector on his staff helped make the necessary proposal to the city council. Since the initial proposal in 1999, the parks department’s six maintenance staffers have all completed a NPSI safety training course, and there are plans to implement a regular audit of their playgrounds. This will ensure his department has proper documentation of its upgrades in case of potential legal troubles in the future, Jaramillo says.

Inspection Decree

In Roanoke, VA, the parks and recreation department maintenance staff has kept records of every upgrade and replacement since they began their safety upgrade project in 1998, says Ray Bayse, maintenance coordinator. “We’ve always had a checklist or kept record of everything that we have done,” Bayse says.

Roanoke parks officials have installed 28 playgrounds, most of which replaced old, wooden structures, and hope to be finished with the upgrades by the end of 2003, according to Bayse. The city also recently hired a second full-time, maintenance person who is training to be a

NPSI-certified playground inspector. The two certified inspectors will help in maintaining the status of the playground equipment.

The Roanoke City Council approved the upgrades giving the parks department more than \$750,000 to update their playground equipment. What helped Bayse' department the most, he said, was a citizen-appointed board formed in 2000; a parks and recreation comprehensive plan presented and adopted that same year; and an extensive "wish" list of priorities.

"If you're going to do the right kind of job—out of the 36 playgrounds that we have—we've come up with is a priority list: priority one, priority two and priority three," Bayse says. For example, he said, a "priority one" issue would be something life threatening, such as if a platform is missing a bolt. A "priority two" would be if the wood chips on a playground surface are thinning and need to be resurfaced to prevent a fatal fall. A "priority three" would be if the back steps in a ball field need to be replaced to prevent tripping.

These priorities are audited and inspected differently as well. The higher the priority, the more often per year it is inspected, says Bayse.

Certifying employees has recently become a challenge among parks and recreation departments throughout the country, officials say. Now that many are nearing completion of their upgrade projects, the next step is ensuring that playground workers will continue monitoring and replacing equipment on an as-needed basis. This requires staff educated in public safety.

Mason Luedtke, a parks coordinator and NPSI-certified playground inspector for Henderson (Nev.) Parks Department, says there are so many details to consider regarding playground safety. Henderson, Nev., has 40 playgrounds that Luedtke and the five other certified inspectors have to keep updated. Before he was certified, Luedtke didn't think his playgrounds were potential liabilities, he says.

"When you walk by the areas every day you don't realize it, until one day after certification, and then you spot all sorts of things that are extremely hazardous," Luedtke says.

Luedtke's department makes weekly inspections of the playgrounds, taking note of everything they find not in compliance with the federal codes, says Nance Hoelker, another Henderson parks coordinator and certified inspector.

Keeping Tabs

Unfortunately, there is no record of how many parks and recreation departments comply with the latest safety standards; or how many safety inspectors are full-time hires in departments, says Fran Wallach, a NPSI board member involved in playground safety since 1974. She estimates that there are about 10,000 certified playground safety inspectors, which she says is a great improvement from just a decade earlier, when she could only account for about 50 certified inspectors.

"The problem is that you can't really identify numbers of how many are and how many aren't," says Wallach, who has been chair of the ASTM committee that developed the safety standards for public playground equipment. "We know that if the word has spread, that they [the numbers] will get better."

Wallach hopes that someday, either NPSI or an organization similar to NPSI will put together a survey and record all the information about playground safety nationwide.

New additions to the CPSC and ASTM codes are scheduled to be released in 2005 and 2004, respectively. And, according to Scott J. Wolfson, CPSC public affairs representative, the numbers generated from the National Emergency Injuries Surveillance System have decreased considerably since the first set of codes were released.

“We believe that overall playgrounds are becoming much safer,” he says. “The CPSC guidelines and the voluntary standard for playground equipment address the most serious hazards. We no longer see many deaths from entrapment or swing impact, or many severe head injuries from falls.”

To find out more about the National Playground Safety Institute Program, contact Roy Geiger, Manager of the National Playground Safety Institute Program, at (703) 858-2148, or e-mail rgeiger@nrpa.org. You can also log on to NRPA's Web site, www.nrpa.org, which includes a link to NPSI.