

Safer Playtime

Wise managers can do a lot to minimize playground hazards as well as association liability.

BY JULIE WARREN



According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than 200,000 children are treated in emergency rooms across the country every year for playground-related accidents. More than half of those injuries occurred in public or home playgrounds.

Common areas that are attractive, functional and accessible to residents can add a lot of value to a community, whether these items include a club house, swimming pool, golf course or just a peaceful outdoor area with a garden bench. But a community's shared features also need to be safe—particularly for children.

GUIDE THE BOARD

Managers can help prevent serious accidents and injuries on community playgrounds by guiding association boards on best practices for purchasing, installing, inspecting and maintaining safe structures and surfaces.

According to Chris Ruthruff, CPSI, commercial playground consultant with EcoPlaygrounds in Georgia, a manager can start by helping the association identify a reputable company that builds a quality product. “It’s going to make their job easier,” Ruthruff says. “The association will have fewer maintenance issues over time.”

KNOW AND INSPECT PLAYGROUNDS

Once a playground is in place, it needs to be monitored regularly to keep it safe for the kids. John Damyanovich, CPSI, owner of Playground Police in Arizona, says playgrounds change every day, so frequent inspections are essential.

“There are so many things that can affect the safety on a playground,” says Caroline Smith, CPSI, senior manager of professional development at the

National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in Ashburn, Va. She agrees that conditions in a playground can change quickly, and emphasizes that any inspection is “just for that moment in time. The minute the inspector walks away, something else—a group of kids or weather conditions—will cause wear and tear.”

Three essential components of a playground include:

- Structure, which typically is constructed of wood or a steel frame coated with plastisol
- Surface area of either sand, engineered wood fiber (EWF)—not to be confused with mulch or wood chips—or other material that minimizes injuries from falls
- Shade, like fabric awnings, particularly in southwestern areas

The condition of all components can be affected by regional climate, weather

and use. Moisture can cause wood surfaces to deteriorate quickly; vinyl coating can wear away and expose sharp edges or rust; and salt air can accelerate corrosion of metal parts, like bolts and other fasteners.

According to Ruthruff, deteriorating plastisol can sometimes leave behind pieces that are potential choking hazards. Surface materials, particularly sand or EWF—a popular surface material—can get kicked out of place and need to be raked or replenished often.

Entanglement and entrapment are some other common playground hazards to watch for, according to Damyanovich. Even wearing a bike helmet on a playground is hazardous, he says.

Because most playground injuries are from falls, Damyanovich tells association managers, “The cheapest insurance you can get for a playground is to have adequate surfacing material.” He also stresses that surface materials need to be installed correctly.

EWF, for instance, “has to be leveled and compacted to specs,” according to Damyanovich. “Most people want to fluff it up, and that’s the exact opposite.”

CALL IN THE PROS

Jordan Lynde, CPSI, owner of Play It Safe, a playground equipment manufacturer in Arizona, recommends that managers contract with a reputable maintenance company.

PLAYGROUND SAFETY CHECKLIST

According to the National Program for Playground Safety, “Nearly 70 percent of all playground injuries are related to children falling to the ground. Acceptable surfaces include engineered wood fiber, poured-in-place rubber, rubber mats or rubber tiles. Playground surfaces should not be concrete, asphalt, grass, blacktop, packed dirt or rocks.” This is just one of 10 safety guidelines available on the NPPS website at www.playgroundsafety.org/safety-tips/checklist.

Because playgrounds are prone to vandalism—like graffiti or broken glass—he also suggests that an association employee or even a volunteer inspect playgrounds frequently—perhaps even daily—between service calls.

Most playground manufacturers and maintenance companies will provide checklists to guide managers or volunteers who inspect community association playgrounds.

One such list, *The Dirty Dozen: 12 Playground Hazards*, is available free on the NRPA website.

FIND RESOURCES

Equipment for public playgrounds is built to very specific standards published by the American Society for Testing Materials (ASTM) and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), says Ruthruff. The International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association (IPEMA) certifies playground structures before they are installed.

According to Smith, the *Public Playground Safety Handbook* is available from CPSC. This comprehensive document covers topics like site selection and shade as well as how to prevent entrapment hazards.

Both CPSC and ASTM standards and state requirements are available at www.nrpa.org/cpsi. Compliance with these guidelines isn’t regulated by the federal government, although some states may require it.

Several other resources are available from NRPA, including brochures and online information. The organization also offers a three-day Certified Playground Safety Inspector Certification course, which Damyanovich teaches.

The course is available to anyone—including managers—seeking the CPSI credential, which Ruthruff, Lynde and Smith have earned. While a CPSI credential isn’t required, Lynde says, “It’s a nice feature that shows our customers we know what we’re talking about.”

INCLUDE RESERVE STUDIES

With a price range from \$5,000 to more

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES:

- National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) www.nrpa.org
- International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association (IPEMA)—www.ipema.org
- National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS) www.playgroundsafety.org

than \$200,000 in some large associations, playgrounds should be included in association reserve studies, according to Ruthruff, although many are not.

“A couple of reserve specialists I’ve talked to say it’s a good idea (to talk to a playground consultant) if they get in a situation where they need to assess a playground for longevity, maintenance or replacement costs,” he says.

“We often have people call us after something breaks or someone has been hurt. If there wasn’t a reserve study or any planning, there’s no money for (repairs or replacement). At that point, the community may not be able to get the playground they want, or they have to settle for something cheaper because they’ve got to do it at the last minute.”

“Keeping records is another important issue especially with homeowners associations,” says Ruthruff.

Lynde and Smith agree that inspections and regular maintenance can help associations keep playgrounds in good repair. Documenting those actions are useful to “show you are implementing risk management,” says Smith.

“Forget the whole legal end of it, though,” says Lynde. “We’re talking about a child’s health and safety.”

Damyanovich agrees and reminds managers to be proactive, not reactive.

“If (associations) keep the kids safe and playgrounds safe and meet the standards and guidelines, there won’t be any liability.”

Julie Warren is editor of Community Manager.