

## **Your Outdoor Play Area - Is It A Safe Place?**

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According to research conducted by the *National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS)*, each year over 205,860 children are treated for playground related injuries in emergency rooms across the nation. This number demonstrates a critical need for early care and education professionals and families to learn more about how they can help prevent children from being injured.

One of the most important requirements for maintaining a safe outdoor play area is active supervision by adults. This is vital to preventing injuries from occurring while on the playgrounds. Unfortunately, the NPPS research shows that almost 40% of injuries from the playground relate to inadequate supervision by adults. This means that Head Start and Early Head Start staff must stay close by and know where all children are at all times. It is very important to make sure that children always can be seen while they are playing on the playground.

The Office of Head Start (OHS) issued an Information Memorandum (IM) in August 2009 focused on health and safety in Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms. Of course, these safety and supervision measures apply equally to outdoor spaces as they do to classrooms. The IM references Head Start Performance Standards 1304.52 (g) (5) and 1304.52 (h)(1)(iii) regarding supervision, the fact that no child should be left alone at any time, and that all areas be supervised in ways so the child's safety can be easily monitored and ensured. This IM was published specifically to ensure that programs understand their responsibility for maintaining appropriate supervision to all children at all times and to ensure that they do everything possible to prevent injury and to minimize risks to children.

What does this mean for Head Start and Early Head Start programs? This means that all staff and volunteers working with children must be actively aware of where the children are playing at all times. Adults should work together, as a team, to strategically place themselves around the playground, continually moving at all times, while also engaging children in learning. They should be aware of the children constantly... counting heads and staying close to them. It also means that programs are to make sure that the outdoor play areas are designed to prevent children from leaving the premises. Most often fencing is used to meet this standard; however, programs should be aware of any state licensing regulations that impact them or other criteria, such as quality rating systems or accreditation systems, to ensure that all requirements are met.

The NPPS studies show that 79% of playground injuries occurred because of a fall where the surfacing material was inappropriate or inadequate. Any type of equipment on which a child

stands, sits, or climbs (anything they could fall off) should have a safe zone of appropriately resilient surfacing. The Office of Head Start issued a Program Instruction (PI), in February 2007 which instructed Head Start and Early Head Start programs to provide for the safety and security of outdoor play areas, specifically the maintenance of equipment and playground surfacing to reduce the risk of injury to children. This PI encourages Head Start and Early Head Start Programs to use the Public Playground Safety Handbook published by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to ensure that safety measures are in place on the playgrounds. The handbook can be accessed at <http://www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/325.pdf> and is free of charge.

What else does this mean for Head Start and Early Head Start programs? Programs must ensure that swings, slides, balance beams, merry-go-rounds, climbers, rocking animals, and other equipment have some type of approved surfacing material under and around the equipment. Approved surfacing materials include loose fill materials such as pea gravel, wood chips, sand, or shredded rubber. Loose fill materials should be at least 6-9 inches deep in the safe zone. Other types of approved surfacing material are synthetic products such as rubber tiles, rubber mats or poured-in-place surfacing.

In addition, it is important that Early Head Start and Head Start programs have separate play areas for the infant/toddler program and the preschool program. The Head Start Performance Standard 1304.53(a)(4) states that "...outdoor space in Early Head Start or Head Start centers in use by mobile infants and toddlers must be separated from general walkways and from areas in use by preschoolers." Therefore, Early Head Start playgrounds must ensure that the Early Head Start children are playing in areas with equipment recommended for that age group and that are separate from the preschool outdoor play space. The recently revised Playground Safety Handbook outlines regulations, as well as equipment recommendations for playgrounds specifically designed for children birth to two-years-old; two to five-years-old; and five to twelve years-old.

*The National Program for Playground Safety* also has information available on-line to help families and early care and education professionals understand the importance of playground safety. They offer checklists and grade cards that you can use to rate the playgrounds on which your children are playing. This information can be found at <http://www.playgroundsafety.org>

Staff members from Training and Technical Assistance Services (T/TAS) are available to offer technical assistance and/or training, not only in the area of playground safety, but also related to best practices, rules, and regulations.

#### References:

- National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS) - <http://www.playgroundsafety.org>
- Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) - <http://www.cpsc.gov>

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