



# Risk Management Considerations for Playgrounds

**A** three year old child fell eight feet from a slide and sustained a brain injury. The slide did not meet Canadian Standards Association (CSA) standards when it was installed nine years prior to the incident. The municipality failed to take any corrective action and was thus liable for the injury.

The owner of the premises and playground structures has a duty, as an occupier, to keep the equipment and property in a safe condition to accommodate its intended purpose. The Canadian Standards Association produces guides outlining the minimum suggested standards for playground equipment. Obtain and keep a current copy of the standards for your reference when inspecting and maintaining municipal playgrounds. Comply with this standard as it forms the basis of litigation.

## Major liability concerns with playgrounds include:

- Equipment in need of repair.
- Play surfaces where falls can happen on hard surfaces.
- String and toggle entanglement.
- Head and neck entrapment.

## On playground surfaces the most commonly found hazards include:

- Exposed concrete footings.
- Tightly compacted surfaces.
- Too shallow surfaces.
- Eroded surfaces.
- Unsanitary surfaces.
- Surfaces requiring replenishing.

## Creative Play Structures

Creative play structures bring a new set of hazards. Creative play structures are those in which “two or more playstructures [are] attached or functionally linked to create one integral unit that provides more than one play activity” (CSA Children’s Playspaces and Equipment Guide Z614-07). An example of a creative playstructure is a combination climber, slide and horizontal ladder.

## The most common hazards found in creative play structures are:

- Exposed end pipes.
- Protruding nuts and bolts.

- Sharp edges.
- Cracked or vandalized tube slides.
- Lack of/ineffective guard railings.

## Statistics

- Every day 23 children visit emergency with injuries sustained in a playground (2004-2005). This equalled 8,734 hospital visits in 2004-2005.
- 44% of playground injuries occur in June, July and August (2004).
- 31% of injuries occur due to maintenance issues (2004).
- 54% of those injured are between the ages of five and nine years (2004).
- 58% of those injured are male (2004).
- Orthopaedic injuries (broken arms and legs) are the most common injury at 51%, with broken arms, wrists and elbows showing up most often (2007).
- Head injuries account for 22% of injuries sustained at playgrounds (2007).

## Risk Management Considerations

### Location of the Playground

- The location of the playground needs to be well thought out.
- The playground shouldn't be close to any natural hazards, such as natural bodies of water, drop-offs or cliffs.
- Playgrounds should not be located close to busy roadways.
- There shouldn't be any large wooded areas near the playground, as children can easily get lost in them and it provides a natural cover for predators.
- Bushes, shrubs, and other foliage should be trimmed or removed from the playground area to eliminate hiding spots for predators, muggers, vandals, etc.
- The path to get to the playground must be free of hazards.

### Purchase/Installation of Equipment

- All equipment purchased should meet current CSA standards.
- Any necessary replacement parts should also be CSA approved.
- Equipment should be installed by a licensed technician with knowledge of CSA standards.

- Call the playground equipment manufacturer if you have any questions regarding the equipment and whether it is up to date with CSA standards.
- Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for equipment that does not meet the CSA standards.

## CSA Standards

- Always follow the standards provided by the CSA.
- CSA standards change – ensure your equipment meets the most current standards.
- Remember, the CSA standard will form the basis of litigation.

## Swings

- S-hooks should be fully closed at all times and never re-used.
- Be aware of what is around the swing. Properly distance play equipment so that swingers aren't in danger of hitting anything else.
- Wooden, hard plastic or metal swing seats should not be used.
- Approved cloth or rubber sling style swings are safer and more forgiving if the seat hits a child.
- The vertical distance between the underside of a swing seat and the protective surfacing should not be less than 12 inches.
- The horizontal distance from side-by-side swing seats should not be less than 24 inches.

## Inspection

- Establish a comprehensive policy regarding playground facility inspections.
- Perform regular, if not daily, inspections of the playground.
- Create a standard playground inspection checklist and have inspectors document everything they inspect and file it with the municipality.

## Maintenance

- Establish a comprehensive policy regarding playground facility maintenance. An example of this would be:
    - Comprehensive Maintenance Plan
1. Check the entire playground for hazardous debris and litter.
  2. Check all equipment for damage.

3. Check for broken or missing handrails, guardrails, rungs on ladders, etc.
  4. Check for damage to fences, benches, etc.
  5. Check for and remove strings or ropes of any kind, especially if they're attached to equipment.
- Create daily, monthly, and seasonal maintenance schedules and follow them strictly.
  - Provide immediate repair and replacement where necessary and remove all hazards.
  - If a hazardous or unsafe condition is discovered that cannot be repaired immediately, set up barriers to prevent children from using the equipment.
  - Dispose of any and all homemade equipment that may appear.
  - Document all maintenance and other actions taken and keep a record of them.
- Signs must be maintained and should give information such as:
    - Children should be supervised.
    - The age group the equipment is designed for (i.e. 5-12 years old).
    - Location of the nearest telephone – 911 is a free call.
    - Who maintains the playground and municipal contact information. Make sure you acknowledge all calls.
    - Warnings of any danger.

### Signage

- Signs should be posted around the playground in highly visible locations.
- Signs should be written in simple language so that children can read and understand them.
- Use language such as “don’t” and “no” rather than “caution” and “warning” so children understand.