

Is Your Playground Safe?

Playground safety is something all schools need to take very seriously. Last year, a school district that I work with had some students who were out of sight of the playground supervisor. These middle schoolers found their way into a ravine that was next to the school. One of the boys thought it would be fun to throw some rocks while in the ravine. Another student was seriously injured when hit by one rock in the head. The parents filed a claim with the school which was sent to their insurance company. The parents claimed the school was negligent as the students were not properly supervised which thus contributed directly to the injury. After the insurance company completed a thorough investigation, the claims adjuster concluded there was negligence, and a settlement of \$25,000 was reached to pay the medical bills and for pain and suffering for the student.

As I was visiting with a school this past week, I looked out my window on my way to meet with the business manager, and I saw a seventh-grade boy picking up a large rock he was attempting to throw through some ice that had formed in a low area next to the playground. I looked around and did not see a playground supervisor. It was cold that day and this was over the lunch hour. When I met with the business manager and noted what I saw, he contacted the building principal to prevent a claim from happening. I reflected on the very unsafe activities that I engaged in when on the playground at Darlington Middle School many years ago. Playing tackle football on the ice, king of the hill on the snow pile and the best one I remember: jumping off the balcony in the gym at the middle school into a pole vault pit while supervised by a staff member.

My point in sharing the real-life scenarios above is that these incidents can happen so fast and staff needs to be diligent in supervising students on the playground. Statistics for student injuries (State of Utah) note that the grade level with the most injuries is the fifth grade with the number one injury being a fractured bone. Below are some quick tips (not all inclusive) on making your playground as safe as possible:

- Establish playground safety rules (such as no pushing, crowding, or shoving) with consequences for breaking rules.
- Have trained adult supervisors present who are ACTIVELY supervising. This does not mean playing with the children but enforcing the rules and following safety protocol.
- Find areas that enable sight from one end of the playground to the other.
- Walk around the entire perimeter of the playground on a regular basis.
- Develop a playground inspection and equipment maintenance checklist.
- Check that playgrounds have soft material under them such as wood chips, or mulch, or rubberized chips that have an approved depth.
- Be sure to provide first aid training for school staff

There are several areas of resources for public schools. Many of the insurance companies that provide your liability insurance have safety specialists that will come and assess your playground equipment and provide recommendations for preventing an injury. The equipment supplier of your playground equipment, many times, will come and provide free inspections. A good

resource on the health concerns with wood and rubber chips is <https://www.epa.gov/chemical-research/federal-research-recycled-tire-crumb-used-playing-fields>. A liability claim at a Minnesota school occurred when concerns were raised about the safety of the chips used. Please read this article for some additional information on the material used below playground equipment: <http://www.duluthnewtribune.com/news/4237194-minnesota-lawmakers-eyeing-rubber-mulch-playgrounds>

As the weather is changing to winter, now may be a good time to inspect playground areas and make sure the entire perimeter is walked by staff.

Please feel free to contact me with further questions.

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Resources Below

- Children's Safety Network
www.childrenssafetynetwork.org
- Concussion ABCs
www.cdc.gov/headsup/schools/index.html
- Public Playground Safety Handbook
www.cpsc.gov/PageFiles/122149/325.pdf
- National Program for Playground Safety
www.playgroundsafety.org
- Safe Kids Worldwide
www.safekids.org/tip/playground-safety-tips
- Kids Health – Playground Safety
www.kidshealth.org