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PLAYGROUND SAFETY AND SUPERVISION

Safe playgrounds contain four elements:

- 1) Proper Supervision. Proper playground supervision begins with maintaining appropriate staff to child ratios on the playground at all times. Staff members need to be aware of how many children are outside with them. If a staff member has to take a child inside, he or she should take as many children with him or her to maintain the ratio on the playground. There should never be fewer than two staff members on the playground at any time. This provides for coverage in an emergency. One staff member can attend to the situation, while the other can get additional aid if needed. Having the appropriate number of staff members on the playground is not enough. The staff must actively supervise the entire playground area. Staff members should appropriately disburse themselves throughout the playground so that all children can be seen and directed. Actively supervising does not have to mean hovering over children and interfering with their free play. Be inconspicuous, but be aware of every student's actions at all times and be close enough to react if you see a dangerous situation about to unfold.
- 2) "Soft" Fall Zones. Fall Zones are the areas around any part of the playground, which require a child to take his or her feet off of the ground. Fall zones should be covered with a material that would provide cushioning if a child should fall. To create a soft fall zone, materials like certified playground mulch, sand, and shredded rubber, make excellent cushions. Regulations vary from state to state, but the general rule is the material should be approximately twelve inches deep and extend out from the equipment in all directions a minimum of six feet. (Swings require more fall zone space in the front and back. A general rule would be two times the height of the swing set).
- 3) Age-appropriate equipment. Providing playground equipment that is appropriate to the age and physical development of the children who use it, also decreases injury. When analyzing the age-appropriateness of your playground, consider, height, width of platforms, grip size of the students and the open spaces in equipment. Generally, the height from one flat surface to another flat surface should be no higher than the child can reach. It is recommended that the overall height (from ground to top) of the equipment be no higher than seven to eight feet for pre-school children. The width of each platform should provide adequate room for a child to sit, turn around and climb back down. When considering the grip of the child, staff members should be looking to see if the child's hands are large enough to hold on to railings, platforms and rungs. The open spaces in playground equipment beckon children. To prevent a child's head from getting in, but not out, equipment openings should be no less than three inches or more than 10 inches wide.
- 4) Regular equipment and play area maintenance. Playground maintenance is the final and most important key to playground safety. Child care providers can build or purchase a playground fulfilling all of the above safety guidelines, but if the equipment and area are not maintained, daily risks for injuries increase. The percent of playground injuries attributable to improper maintenance is a shocking forty (40%) percent. When considering plans to renovate or replace a playground, consider the maintenance required to keep the area safe. Develop a plan for continued maintenance. Staff members should inspect equipment daily for protruding bolts, rust, ropes which are not secured at both ends, and sharp edges. High traffic areas in the fall zones should be raked daily to prevent compacting (especially under swings and at the bottom of slides). New material should be added occasionally to maintain the recommended twelve inch base.