

Winter Playground Use Advisory for Child Care Facility Operators

Statistically, the most common causes of playground injuries are a result of falls from play equipment to the surface below and entrapment in playground equipment. Winter environmental conditions such as temperature, freezing rain, ice and snow all increase the likelihood of playground injury. Winter clothing is another contributing factor to the increase in the potential for playground injury.

WINTER HAZARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Environmental components:

1. **Freezing temperatures** result in the **protective surfacing** under play equipment to **freeze**. Very few types of protective surfacing remain resilient under freezing temperature. Once the protective surfacing is frozen, it will not provide the same degree of impact absorption if a child falls from the equipment. If the ground cover is frozen, the elevated play equipment is **NOT** safe to use and children should not be allowed to play on the structures.
Note: With loose-fill surfacing such as pea gravel, wood fiber, etc., even if the first few inches are loose, the base layer may be frozen and will not provide proper impact absorption.
2. **Freezing rain** and **ice** make a play structure including hand rails, stairways, platforms, slides, etc. very slippery, therefore increasing the risk of slippage and falls. Ice can also create sharp points on the play structure. Ice should not be allowed to build up and should be removed from the structure. During times of freezing rain or if there is ice on the structure, the playground should not be used.
3. **Snow** can conceal objects such as glass, needles, etc. both on the structure and on the surface of the ground. Snow can also make the play surfaces very slippery. Another concern is that snow may build up at the end of tube slides or similar structures, which could cause a suffocation hazard. Snow should be cleaned off the play structure prior to use.

Winter Clothing:

1. Winter clothing is more bulky and often has more drawstrings than summer clothing. Another component is the use of **scarves** in the winter. Drawstrings and scarves represent an **entanglement hazard** since they can get caught in playground equipment and result in strangulation. It is recommended that children wear neck warmers over scarves. If scarves are worn they should be tucked in so that there are no loose parts that can get caught in equipment.
2. **Nylon ski pants** can be very slippery and increase the rate of acceleration to a dangerous speed when going down slides or sliding poles. It is important to keep this in mind, especially when the ground surface below may be frozen. Nylon ski pants offer very little, if any impact absorption if a child falls from an elevated play structure. Strict supervision is required if using playgrounds in the winter and certain playground equipment should be avoided if wearing ski pants.

Summary and Conclusion:

- Over the past few years in Alberta, there have been documented playground injuries resulting from falls from elevated play equipment to the frozen ground surface below.
- Manufacturers of playground surfacing advocate that no one should be allowed to use the playground equipment when the surfacing beneath is frozen. Many companies upon selling their product will issue a warning that life threatening injuries may occur when a child falls onto a frozen surface.
- Some school boards in Canada and the United States have policies in place that do not allow the use of playground equipment during the winter months, since they cannot be operated safely under winter weather conditions.

In conclusion, Alberta Health Services, Environmental Health does NOT recommend the use of elevated play equipment when the protective ground surfacing is frozen. If playgrounds are used in the winter strict supervision is required and consideration must be given to the hazards presented by the winter clothing children are wearing.

References:

Alberta Health Services Playground Safety Manual

<http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/InjuryPrevention/hi-ip-pipt-playground-safety-man.pdf>

Certified Playground Inspections

The Playground Corner, Alberta Winter Playground Safety, March 21, 2013

http://certifiedplaygrounds.com/category/playground_corner/

Diamond Street Recycling, Certified Playground Surface

www.diamondstreetrecycling.com/?page_id=280

Fibar Playground Surfaces

<http://www.fibar.com/playgrounds/install300.htm>

Ontario School Boards Insurance Exchange: Playground Safety – Winter Use Advisory <http://osbie.on.ca/risk-management/advisories/playgroundsafety.aspx>

Peter Ventura, March 4, 2013

6 Ways to Keep Your Child Safe on Playgrounds During Winter

<http://www.peterventuralaw.com/personal-injury/6-ways-to-keep-your-child-safe-on-playgrounds-during-winter>

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www.playgroundmag.com

Safe Kids, USA

Playground Safety Tips

<http://www.safekids.org/tip/playground-safety-tips-pdf>

Stillwater Enterprises, 2009 Bark Mulch

<http://www.stillwatermulch.com/safetyguardguide.html>

Sof' Fall – Sof' Fall Owners Manual Engineered Wood Fiber, Page 7

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Tom Peeples, Peeples Playground Safety Consulting, LLC.

“Cold Weather Temperature and Playground Safety”

<http://www.jensenswing.com/resources/Cold>

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission

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<http://www.cpsc.gov/PageFiles/122149/325.pdf>

For more information, please contact your nearest Environmental Public Health office.

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