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Guidelines for Effective Playground Supervision

Who Should Supervise the Children?

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Supervision of children on playgrounds is a hot topic in child care centers. The National Program for Playground Safety receives questions about supervision of children on the playground more frequently than almost any other topic. Actually, the question asked most often about supervision is: "What is the correct or ideal ratio of supervisors to children?" Other questions include: "Do children need to be supervised?" "Should supervisors be trained?" "If supervisors need to be trained, what training do they need?" Some answers follow.

Why Worry About Supervision?

It is estimated that over 40% of playground injuries may be related to inadequate supervision (King, 1991). Also, it is reported that 60% to 80% of injuries in schools occur when children are playing on playgrounds (Thompson & Bruya, 1998). Thus, proper supervision should occur whenever children are on the child care center playground or even when children are taken to the park for a special event sponsored by the

child care center. The opportunity to explore should only happen in the presence of an adult.

L. R. Bruya (1998) reports that minor injuries occur about one time per play period for groups of 350 players or more. This amounts to approximately 60 minor injuries per month on the playground for a normal elementary school of 350 children. Further, it has been found in studies conducted on school playgrounds that the presence of trained adult supervisors can signifi-

cantly reduce injuries. Where the children and the teachers received safety training, the injury rate to the children was reduced to 8% of the original number of injuries (L. R. Bruya, 1998).



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Thus, it is clear that supervision by trained supervisors do reduce the injuries received by children on the playground. Unfortunately, there is not the same current data available regarding child care centers, but it is safe to assume that trained teachers will reduce injuries in preschool settings as well as in elementary schools.

Ratio of Supervisors to Children

What is the ideal ratio of supervisors to children on the playground? The playground is an outdoor classroom. Children should have the opportunity to explore the environment in a meaningful way to increase their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual skills. They should have time to develop their strength, enhance their enjoyment of moving, extend their ability to share with other children, and augment ways to explore answers to problem solving in relation to the playground resources provided. Therefore, the appropriate ratio of adults to preschoolers should be the same outdoors as indoors, as recommended by NAEYC.

For school-age children, there should be the same number of adults outside as inside, too. However, there should be no fewer than two supervisors on the playground at any given time. This would permit an adult to take care of an injured child and allow the remaining adult to supervise the other children. Thus, if there is one adult for 20 children inside, there needs to be one adult plus one other on the playground. It is critical that such a ratio occur in order to provide appropriate supervision for the safety of children.

The ratio of supervisors to children should be employed whether or not the children are engaged in direct

teaching or in free-time activities. Even though direct teaching may not occur, learning does happen in the exploration opportunities that are provided during free time. Thus, it is important to supply appropriate numbers of supervisors on the playgrounds.

Supervisors Should Be Trained

Merely having teachers present on the playground doesn't mean that supervision is taking place. They need to be trained regarding what to look for, how to actively move throughout the playground, and how to respond in case an emergency arises.

What to Look For

A supervisor needs to be aware of age-appropriate settings for children, be able to identify hazards which may endanger children, and adhere to the rule structure for the area. Attending to each of these issues will increase the safety of children on the playground.

■ Age appropriate settings.

According to the CPSC Handbook (1997), the playground should be divided into settings that are appropriate for different ages of children. As a result of research that CPSC has done, it is recommended that there be a minimum of two settings to separate children and accommodate for their needs. Those settings are for children from ages 2-5 and another for children from ages 5-12.

In child care settings, it may be useful to consider dividing the area further in order to accommodate the differences in children's interests and needs. This further division of settings may enhance play and prevent fights. If space is available, there may be an area for children

from ages 2-3 and another area for children ages 4-5. Certainly the children who are ages 0-2 will be separated from the toddlers. The division of the children will also make supervision easier.

In any setting, then, the supervisor must recognize the appropriateness of the equipment in terms of the developmental needs of the child and guide the children to use equipment which fulfills their needs. Placing or encouraging a four year old to use equipment not suitable for her age level is an inappropriate supervisory practice.

■ **Identification of equipment and surfacing hazards.** It is important for the supervisor to identify hazards on equipment as well as on the surfaces before the children arrive at the playground scene.

Hazards that arise from the equipment itself or its location on the playground include: openings which are between three and a half and nine inches wide, the space that might entrap a head; trip hazards in use zones where children might fall and hit a piece of equipment; or hazards that might result in minor injuries such as splinters.

Children themselves can introduce hazards. They may be wearing clothes with strings around the neck or waist which could get caught in crevices. Check the equipment for such v-crevices.

Surfacing under and around the equipment can also be a source of hazards. Prior to children playing, the supervisor should look for proper loose-fill surfacing proportionate to the height of the equipment in each of the use zones under and around the equipment. We recommend 12 inches of loose fill materials such as wood products, rubber products, sand, or gravel. In



addition, the supervisor should look for pop tops, glass, metal, or needles. Children should never be allowed to use the equipment if the surface is not appropriate.

■ **Adherence to the rule structure for the area.** It is the responsibility of the child care center supervisor to enforce the rules that are made by the administration. It is the responsibility of the administration to have made some rules for children to follow while they are in the child care setting including the playground. It is best to review those rules in the fall and again in the spring. It is useful if the children, playground supervisors, and administrators have a role in rule setting. Including the children in the process serves to increase the likelihood that the rules will be internalized by them.

The National Program for Playground Safety (Bruya & Thompson, 1998) suggests the following with regard to playground rules for children:

1. Allow the children to help make the rules. This gives the children ownership and responsibility for behavior on the playground.
2. Make no more than three rules for the whole school for preschool children.
3. Make no more than five rules for the whole school for school-aged children.

Rules may be general and may be applied to the whole preschool environment rather than be specific to the playground area. For example, one might be to "Respect your classmates" or "Wait your turn." It may also be a good idea to display written rules in prominent locations. This will make it easier for the

children and adults to be reminded of the rules to be followed.

How to Actively Move Through the Playground

Effective supervision requires:

■ **Open sight lines.** It is critical that the supervisor be able to see the children while they play in order to deal with injury or the potential for children to be hurt. Thus, the supervisor must be able to have visual access from several different angles. The area must be open so that neither the equipment nor the vegetation block the sight of children (Bruya, 1985).

In addition, it is important that the supervisor be able to see any point on the playground from at least two directions. That will allow a supervisor to respond to an emergency with efficiency. This also assumes that the supervisor moves through the playground regularly. Thus, the lines of sight become extremely important.

■ **Proximity control.** The supervisor must move through the playground and be near to each child periodically. When supervisors practice this technique, children will know that adults are paying attention. In addition, supervisors must provide eye contact with children and be responsive to their needs. They must watch children carefully. Just giving them "the eye" will prevent unwanted behaviors in most cases. Further, when children ask for assistance or need attention, supervisors must be available and attentive to children's needs.

How to Respond

A good supervisor has a communication system, a supervisory kit, and a reporting system.

■ **Communication system.** The supervisor should have a system set up to communicate with both the other supervisor and with the main office. This system should be a whistle, walkie talkie, or cell phone as well as hand signals or a color card system to use in case of an emergency.

■ **Supervisor's kit.** The supervisor's kit should include bandages, scissors, gauze, gloves, pencil and paper, and a short incident form to fill out if an injury occurs. The kit can be a fanny pack worn by the supervisor or a small box taken out to the play area during recess or other play periods.

■ **Reporting system.** The supervisor should be prepared to make a quick cursory report on the spot and then a longer, more detailed report inside. Items to remember for the reporting system include:

1. Quick outside report. Supervisors must be prepared to jot down the gist of an incident that involves injury on the scene. As a result, the adult should have a short form to make note of the name of the injured, the equipment or surfacing on which the injury occurred, the cause of the injury, the date and time of the injury, weather conditions, and condition of equipment or surfacing.
2. Accurate incident report. After the injured child has been attended to, the supervisor should make a more detailed report. The sooner the report can be made, the more accurate the data is likely to be. Many states have standardized report forms. However, in addition to that form, it is a good idea to have pictures of the playground equipment in the nurse's office or secretary's office in order to increase the accuracy regarding the actual



piece of equipment involved. This will reduce the likelihood that all pieces of equipment will be called "monkey bars." It is important to trace what pieces of equipment and conditions might be causing or involved with incidents where children are injured.

Conclusion

Supervision is a bigger job than most adults anticipate. However, if adults are properly trained, they will be able to live up to the expectations of children for assistance and approval. Well-trained adults will help reduce the incidents of injuries to children on the playground because they apply good supervisory techniques and practices.

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Resources

Videos

ABCs of Supervision (1997). Cedar Falls, IA: National Program for Playground Safety.

A video to train adults to supervise children on playgrounds.

Sammy's Playground Pointers (1997). Cedar Falls, IA: National Program for Playground Safety.

A video for children from K-3 to educate them about playground safety.

SAFE Playgrounds (1998). Cedar Falls, IA: National Program for Playground Safety.

A video for adults about Supervision, Age-appropriate design of playgrounds, Falls to appropriate surfaces, and Equipment maintenance.

Written Resources

S means supervision (1997). Cedar Falls, IA: National Program for Playground Safety. Brochure about supervision of children on the playground.

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