

High-risk bounce

Trampolines are back – bringing child deaths and crippling injuries

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The Gazette

Claudine and Marc Roy know about accidents. At 1½ their first-born, Bruno, was nearly run over by a lawnmower Marc was driving. Bruno had run outside without his father seeing him and the noise of the mower kept him from hearing him – until one of his feet got caught in its blades.

Bruno's parents rushed him to a hospital near their Marieville home, and doctors managed to repair the boy's mangled foot. Bruno grew to become a runner, a competitive soccer player and an all-around athlete.

Another accident, 15 years later, cost him his life. He was in a gymnastics class at school, trying a jump on a mini-trampoline he'd done successfully twice, when something went wrong and he fell, hitting his head on the rim.

Bruno died seven days later, April 22, 1997, in the intensive-care unit of the Montreal Children's Hospital, without regaining consciousness.

"It was an accident, a stupid, awful accident that took our boy away," said Claudine Roy, who is 38. "But that's what an accident is – something that could not have been anticipated."

Trampolines, popular in the 1960s, are back. Home sales of trampolines have been rising steadily in the United States and Canada: you'll find them in parks, playgrounds, campgrounds, schools – and your neighbours' back yards. Many consider them good fun, a chance to get kids outdoors during our fine, if short, summers.

But pediatricians and other health authorities have been warning for years that trampolines are dangerous.

They have caused so many serious head and neck injuries that the Canadian Pediatric Society and the American Academy of Pediatrics have cautioned against their use in schools and playgrounds. A recent report in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics called for a ban on the sale of trampolines for home use.

INJURIES NEARLY DOUBLE

The March issue of Pediatrics reported that children in the U.S. suffered 58,400 trampoline-related injuries in 1995, nearly double the 1990 figure. Although many reported injuries are relatively minor, many are worse: internal-organ injuries, head injuries and spinal-cord injuries.

Even before the study came out, the academy had recommended trampolines be used only with expert supervision and spotters to surround the trampoline and help block falls.

But even with supervision, there can be accidents. A Denver study showed, for instance, that 16 of 18 severe trampoline-related spinal-cord injuries, from which people became quadriplegic, happened in supervised settings with trained physical education instructors, and spotters.

Parents believe, erroneously, that "if



Marc and Claudine Roy with son, Jean-François, in the room that was Bruno's before his death last year in a trampoline accident at school.

ANDRÉ PICHETTE, GAZETTE

they supervise their children, follow the safety directions, that these things can be safely used in the back yard. That is a myth," said Dr. Gary Smith, author of the report in Pediatrics.

According to the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program, which collects data from the country's 10 pediatric hospitals as well as six general hospitals, 393 trampoline injuries were reported in 1996, mainly in children age 5 to 14. Most happened in summer, and mainly in children's own yards or someone else's.

The majority of the injuries were fractures, sprains and bruises. Mostly, they happened in falls on the trampoline, or off it, or because there was more than one person on it. Close to 10 per cent of the children were admitted to a hospital and 44 per cent needed to see the doctor again after leaving the emergency department. At the Montreal Children's Hospital between 1991 and 1997, 211 children were treated for trampoline injuries.

Trampolines are widely available in warehouse clubs, toy stores and mass merchandisers like Wal-Mart, and last year about 500,000 were sold in the U.S. Our population is about 10 per cent

that of the U.S., but because our winters are longer and harsher, Canadian trampoline sales are about 7 per cent of U.S. sales, said Ken Russell, vice-president of sales for Hedstrom Canada, one of the country's largest trampoline manufacturers and distributors.

There are, of course, dangers inherent in many children's activities, including swimming and cycling.

"A trampoline is like any other product a child will use: it's up to the parents to exercise the proper amount of care and supervision, so that they know it's being used safely," Russell said.

CAN CHANGE LIFE

It's true that many children and teenagers use trampolines without ever having an accident.

It's also true a trampoline accident "can change the course of your life," said Debbie Friedman, head of the neurotrauma program at the Montreal Children's Hospital. An improper landing, even in the centre of a trampoline, not on the frame or ground, can cause head or neck injuries with serious, sometimes permanent, consequences.

TRAMPOLINES WITH TOYS, DOCTORS WARN

INJURIES

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"I think that what happened with Bruno makes people aware that head injuries are potentially serious," she said. "In fact, they're a leading cause of death and disability in children and adolescents."

Viewing a trampoline as a toy is playing with fire because "there's such a narrow margin of error," Friedman said. "I think there are safer ways to have fun. When you see a child die and the pain of the family, you see clearly the reality of the dangers. You don't need for 100 children to die to know trampolines are not as safe as people think."

Yet the public is still generally unaware of the dangers, says Dr. Ronald Gottesman, medical director of the intensive-care unit at the Montreal Children's and a father of three.

At a warehouse store last year, he observed a few families buying trampolines. His daughter, then 6, wanted one. "I explained to her that many children get hurt and some even die accidentally when using trampolines," Gottesman said. "She took my hand and we continued on to the soccer balls. I urge all parents to follow the same path."

'A SETUP FOR INJURIES'

Dr. Emmett Francoeur, the new president of the Canadian Pediatric Society, is a Montreal pediatrician. Recently, when he was working in the emergency department at the Children's, a youngster was brought in with a spleen injured so badly in a trampoline fall that the bleeding could not be stopped and the organ had to be removed. Francoeur does not allow his own children to play on trampolines. They moan, he said: "Why do we have to have you as our father? We can't have fun! But the data is there. It's a setup for injuries."

Devon Leguillette, a longtime Montreal Children's nurse, has a 7-year-old son who is not allowed on trampolines. Leguillette appreciates how one friend, the mother of teenagers with a backyard trampoline they bought themselves, makes a point of asking parents whether they want their children to use it.

When Leguillette's son was invited to a birthday party at the home of a friend who had a trampoline, the trampoline was not mentioned, nor



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Children at Vinet Park enjoy bouncing on trampolines. But even with full supervision the equipment can be dangerous, health experts warn.

whether the children would be using it at the party. In a call to the child's mother to say her son was not to use the trampoline, Leguillette suggested that the woman ask the parents of each child invited to the party if they wanted their children on the trampoline.

"She was quite short with me on the phone," recalled Leguillette, who later phoned back to apologize if she had hurt the woman's feelings. She was not trying to be judgmental about the woman's abilities as a parent, she said. "Still, I would have liked to have been informed that there was a trampoline at the house. And I thought I was being helpful. To me, trampolines have a

high risk for injury. You can't protect your kids from everything. But some things you can do. Because of what I see, I have to be careful not to be overly cautious. But with the trampoline, there are just too many risks."

Leguillette said she realizes that the woman's attitude is probably typical of that of many parents who are unaware of the trampoline's potential risks.

Bruno Roy's tragic death prompted the Montreal Children's Hospital injury-prevention and neurotrauma programs to send a letter urging school boards, superintendents, principals, and municipalities to remove trampolines from all school premises. "We

must remind you," it read in part, "that trampolines are considered dangerous and do not belong in schools, regardless of the supervision provided."

Several schools and school boards responded, as did the Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations.

In his report on Bruno Roy's death, the coroner recommended to Quebec's Education Department that, if rigorous supervision is not possible in school gymnastics programs by trained instructors, the programs should not be offered.

The trampolines is no longer used at the high school Bruno Roy attended in Marieville, 35 kilometres southeast of Montreal, Msgr. Euclide Thiberge. Trampolines do not appear to be widely used in schools - there are none in schools of the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, for instance, or the Lakeshore School Board - but there is no official policy on their use.

Shirley Straughton, a nurse in the neurosurgical unit at the Montreal Children's, has observed, first-hand, the damage trampolines can cause. She's also the mother of two and coordinator of health issues for the Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations. "The more research I do, the more I'm convinced that trampolines don't belong in schools. You need one-on-one supervision and trained spotters and I don't believe the schools can provide that," she said.

Straughton drew up a resolution urging school boards and municipalities to remove trampolines from schools and playgrounds and parents not to buy trampolines for their children. It was approved at the annual general meeting of the Quebec Federation of Home and School Associations in May by a 94-per-cent majority.

"I know it's a piece of paper," Straughton said. "But if it sparks a few people to act, then it has done a part of what I want it to do."

ACCIDENT-FREE SUMMER

Observed Friedman: "We're trying to raise community awareness, not to discourage physical activities. We want kids to have a good summer, but we want for it to be accident-free."

There is no making sense of what happened to the Roy family, no way of knowing how Bruno's parents or his younger brother and sister have been affected. "A friend asked how we got through it and I answered that we didn't. We're still in it," Claudine Roy

said. "It changes everything."

The Roys are full of praise for the people who looked after Bruno at the Montreal Children's. They speak with reverence, almost, of the humanity and devotion of everyone involved in his care - nurses, doctors, therapists, social worker, chaplain - in the intensive-care unit and the neurotrauma program of the hospital, a designated specialized pediatric trauma centre.

Claudine Roy still keeps in touch with some of the people at the hospital. She notified Friedman of an unsupervised trampoline at a campground. Friedman, in turn, informed her when the hospital sent its advisory to schools.

The Roys don't believe trampolines should be banned. They just want people to be aware of their potential dangers. And if a part of their story moves a parent or a school administrator to do something that prevents another tragedy, they said, they will feel they have made some kind of difference.

Guidelines for 'tramps'

Jim Crampton, an American lawyer who became quadriplegic after a fall when he was playing on a trampoline in college - there were spotters in place and he landed right in the middle of the trampoline - observed: "I personally think trampolines are about like dynamite, in terms of safety."

That said, here are some guidelines from one Utah study that concluded that "private trampoline use continues to be a cause of considerable morbidity among children."

- Children under 6 should not be allowed on trampolines.
- Never use a ladder with a trampoline, because it provides access to children under 6.
- Make sure the springs, hooks and frame are covered with shock-absorbing pads.
- Children should not use trampolines without adult supervision.
- Only one person at a time should be on a trampoline.
- Don't attempt flips, somersaults or any advanced stunts. These often result in severe injuries when the jumper makes a mistake.