

It may be kids' play, but keep it safe

Backyard play is an integral part of summer fun, but parents need to ensure the area is safe for active kids

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With the warm weather now upon us, kids are eager to play in the backyard. That's great, as long as the backyard is kid-safe. The problem is, many aren't.

"According to the Canadian Pediatric Society, 28,500 children are treated in emergency every year for playground-related injuries," said Carlo Galli, trauma coordinator for Montreal Children's Hospital trauma programs.

"Many of these injuries happen at home, in backyards where parents think their kids are safe."

There are a lot of unexpected dangers that can be found in the average fenced-in backyard. For instance, "people think that grass is a safe, impact-absorbent material that will protect kids when they fall from play structures," Galli said. "But grass is only a thin coating on top of usually hard earth. That's why kids get injured falling onto grass, and why many playgrounds are replacing grass with wood chips, sand or special foam pieces."

Backyard swing sets - They can be a danger if they aren't properly attached to the ground. "The safer sets have heavy duty metal legs that are placed into holes and then filled in with cement," Galli explained. "The reason is that kids will be kids; someone will start swinging as high as they can go.

"If the swing set is just sitting on the ground, it will rock and possibly tip over. Meanwhile, if the kid jumps off the swing, they can hurt themselves - unless the ground around the swing set is impact-absorbent."

Speaking of swing sets and play structures in general, provide a six-foot (two-metre) buffer zone around them and any other objects. The reason: If a brick wall is too close to a play structure, children could hit it when they fall.

And make no mistake: Children fall regularly from play structures. This is why constant parental supervision is a must; why openings in the equipment should be checked to make sure they cannot trap arms, legs or heads; and why drawstrings should be removed from all "hoodies" and coats so they cannot catch and strangle the wearer.

One last word of advice: Wearing bicycle helmets while on play structures is actually dangerous for kids. This is because the helmet can catch on protruding edges, causing neck injuries or strangulation.

On the subject of swimming pools - In-ground pools must be surrounded by lockable protective fencing. But above-ground pools also pose a threat, even with the ladder removed, if kids can climb up to them.

And kiddie wading pools can prove fatal if a child falls into a full one while unattended by an adult.

"Children can drown in just a few inches of water," Galli warns, "so the rule of thumb is to drain the wading pool after each use. That's the only way to ensure that drownings don't occur."

Home trampolines - Carlo Galli has a word of advice for parents thinking of buying one: "Don't."

He's not alone. The Canadian Pediatric Society, on the website www.caringforkids.cps.ca, says "parents should not buy trampolines to use at home. Trampolines should not be used by children at home for play. Trampolines should not be considered play equipment. Trampolines should not be part of outdoor playgrounds."

Why such a hard line against trampolines? "They're just not safe for kids to play on," Galli said. "Just last year, the MCH treated over 80 kids who were injured on trampolines. Even putting a railing around them to prevent falls isn't enough."

"There are too many ways that a child can fall badly and hurt themselves while bouncing around."

"Forget the idea that someone can 'spot' for them. All that seems to happen is that the child bounces off the trampoline at a place where the spotter isn't. And when two kids are bouncing together and smash into each other? You can have very serious injuries as a result."

To sum up - A backyard playground can be safe if the equipment is properly mounted and professionally designed/made. "Homebuilt structures can have lots of unforeseen danger points," Galli said. "It is also important that the equipment is age-appropriate; don't let 4-year-olds on equipment meant for older kids. Swimming pools need to be properly fenced in and ... wading pools should be drained after (each) use. As for home trampolines? Don't buy 'em."

Finally, nothing can replace parental supervision, Galli said. "Until they can take care of themselves, your children need you watching them as they enjoy the fresh, outdoor air."

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