

TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO USE PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT: AN INTERVENTION FOR SAFETY



The Playground is a Classroom

Any playground and the equipment that is placed on it becomes an outdoor classroom for children to learn about themselves and how to work with other children. Children are taught proper behavior for the indoor classroom but many times the outdoor classroom is forgotten. This difference should not exist; learning how to use the outdoor classroom is as important as learning how to use the indoor classroom so that a safe environment is consistently maintained for the children.

A review of the literature on playgrounds and playground safety clearly shows a lack of concern relative to teaching children how to properly use the playground and the equipment that is placed on it. There is much information on equipment, design, surfaces, supervision and rules with hardly any information that addresses the educational component. This would indicate that most adults believe that children can simply be placed on the playground or the equipment and all else will take care of itself. If safety is of concern to parents, supervisors, administrators, teachers and others, educating children on how to use the playground is important.

Teaching children how to properly use the playground and playground equipment should be done on school time and at least one time per year for all ages and grades. This educational session should take place at the very beginning of the school year. It would be helpful for school officials to have at least one review session during the year on playground use and safety. These educational sessions should be based on the notion that when children understand the risks associated with injury on the playground, they are less likely to take such risks. It can be assumed that children do not want to intentionally cause themselves or others injury.



EDUCATION MAY REDUCE RISK TAKING





Guidelines for Educating Children on How to Use the Playground

School Officials and Teachers

School administrators, officials and teachers should make every attempt to make sure that the children they serve develop an understanding that the design of the playground and the equipment on it has a specific purpose for proper use. The following guidelines can be used to make sure that this educational experience takes place in timely manner.

- At the beginning of each school year, allow trained professionals to teach the children about the use of the equipment, playground rules and how to respect the playground. A session like this takes less than 45 minutes. Teachers can be trained to do this with their respective classes.
- Teach children about the injuries they could receive when not following the rules and proper safety procedures designed for the playground.
- Communicate to the children the consequences when they do not follow the rules or take risks that could cause injury.
- Discuss the meaning of the “fear factor” with the children. This means that it is okay to not use playground equipment when you are fearful of it.
- Make sure that the children understand that it is not appropriate to use equipment that is broken or damaged.
- Conduct a demonstration of proper and improper use for each piece of equipment. For multi-station equipment, each part of the station should be addressed. For example, teach children to sit in the middle of a swing seat. Do not share the seat with another child. Do not walk in front of a swing when it is being used. This type of demonstration should be simple with a lot of basic and common sense information.



- At the end of the educational session, conduct a question and answer session with the children. It is also appropriate to give a short and simple quiz to the children. The results of such a quiz should be used only to examine how much information the children retained and to determine if additional information needs to be conveyed.
- Younger children should have learning experiences that pertain to the equipment that they are to use on the playground. The same would be true for the older children. Playground equipment is designed for age and developmental levels.
- A review session should be conducted in the early spring of each year. This session should be similar to the session conducted at the beginning of the school year but using a more condensed version.
- Help the children learn how to be in control of the playground environment and to make good decisions about properly using the playground equipment. The ability to make good decisions is based on good educational experiences.
- Develop a reward system to recognize children who consistently demonstrate safe playground practices. This should be a system that is used throughout the school year and one that is well communicated to all of the children.

Parents

Parents should also assume the responsibility for teaching their children how to properly and safely use the playground and playground equipment. Parents tend to take their children to the playground during evening or weekend hours for play and physical activity. This can be a great experience for the children, but one where safety is a concern of all involved. There are a few simple things that parents can teach their children about proper use of the playground. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2000), it is a good practice for parents to teach their children the following:

- Teach the children how to use each piece of equipment in a way that it was designed to be used. For example, a swing is to sit in and swing.
- Children should be taught how to use the ladder to access any climbing equipment. For example, use the ladder to access the slide instead of using the surface of the slide. Always come down the slide while sitting on the hips.
- Teach the children to be aware of heat on the surfaces of some pieces of equipment. The sun can cause metal surfaces to get very hot which could burn the skin.
- Teach children under the age of four to not climb any equipment that is higher than they are tall unless there is an adult to assist them.
- Between the ages of three and five, teach the children to use a seesaw or like equipment only with other children of comparable age and weight.
- Provide experiences to help children that are younger than five to understand that it is not safe for them to play on equipment designed for older children.



- Talk to the children about the possibilities of falling on the playground or off of the playground equipment and the fact that a fall can cause an injury to them. Children can understand this type of information when it is presented to them in a meaningful manner.

Parents should take every possible measure to educate their children on playground safety. Children should be taught to understand that the playground and the equipment on it can be a great place to be physically active, grow, develop and have fun experiences. However, they should also be taught that there are risks associated with the playground and that when good decisions are made the risks are minimized. In this way, parents can reinforce the playground training that the children receive from the school officials and teachers.



EDUCATED CHILDREN WILL MAKE BETTER DECISIONS

