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playing it SAFE

Playgrounds inspire smiles, laughter and learning, but they require planning, inspection and thoughtful policies.

By Michele Molnar

When families started defecting to another playground outside its community, the Winterset 1B Homeowners Association board in Owings Mills, Md., knew it was time to replace its 15-year-old wooden play structure.

“It seemed no matter how much we repaired it, kids were getting splinters, or nails would start sticking out. Wood is a lot of upkeep—with power washing, sealants and trying to make sure it’s safe for the kids,” says Angela Ally, board vice president at Winterset 1B, which has 151 townhomes.

PLAYGROUNDS CAN BE a valuable community amenity, but there are safety, liability and accessibility concerns, in addition to budget constraints. However, there's a stronger argument for playgrounds now than ever before. Simply put, they are critical to the health and development of children, and community associations can help lead the charge.



The 2008 *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*, the first comprehensive guidance on physical activity ever published by the federal government, recommend that children and adolescents perform 60 minutes or more of physical activity daily. In 2009, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reported that more than 24 percent of

U.S. children ages 2 to 5 are overweight or obese.

The climbing, jumping, pulling up and swinging that children do on playgrounds helps them gain physical agility and ability, get stronger and stay healthy. It's on playgrounds that children can learn the joy and habit of moving that lays the groundwork for a lifetime of physical activity.

There's an academic benefit as well. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education cites research connecting students' physical abilities and test scores. In a 2009 study, physically fit public school students in New York City demonstrated higher academic achievement than their peers. An extensive evaluation of 2.4 million Texas students in 2007 and 2008 found that those who were physically fit did better on statewide tests, attended school more often and had fewer discipline issues.

A playground is one of the first places that children learn to play together, fostering the development of their own emotional and social intelligence in areas like sharing, helping one another and taking turns.

Winterset understood the importance of its playground to the community, so it hired Sport Systems, Inc., from Ijamsville, Md., in December to install a brightly colored, cheery

playground. So far, the children love it, and their parents value its safety. "I've been receiving a lot of positive feedback, and we believe it adds value to the community," Ally says.

PERILS OF PLAY

Playground dangers—even with new equipment—are well documented.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that more than 200,000 injuries requiring emergency room treatment occur every year on public playgrounds across the country. Whether it's on home or public playground equipment, about 80 percent of injuries are due to falls.

But that's not the only way children can hurt themselves. In 2010, an 18-month-old in Des Moines, Iowa, wound up with second degree burns on her hands from a plastic slide that had been baking in the sun, according to *KCCI CBS 8*.

In fact, slides that face south or west—especially—should be in a shady area, says Donna Thompson, executive director of the National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS) and a faculty member of the University of Northern Iowa School of Health, Physical Education and Leisure Services.

Being curious, playful and inquisitive, children—and even teens—sometimes adapt play equipment for purposes it was not intended. Tying jump ropes, leashes or cords to playground equipment causes injuries every year, says Patty Davis, a spokeswoman for CPSC, which pushes for adult supervision and equipment inspection before children start playing.

Barefoot play is another hazard. In New York City, a woman allowed her son to run around on a black rubber surface on a sunny, hot day, burning his feet. "There's no way a child should be running around a playground with bare feet. That's a common-sense issue to me," says George Herberger, vice president of Ben Shaffer & Associates, Inc., a Lake Hopatcong, N.J., firm that designs and inspects playgrounds.

AGE APPROPRIATE

Today, most new playgrounds are organized like Winterset's—with areas distinctly divided for age-appropriate play.

NPPS promotes a segmented approach because children at different ages and stages explore their worlds in different ways. "Ideally, playgrounds will have separate sections for children

under the age of 2, for those who are 2 to 5 and another for kids who are 5 to 12,” says Thompson.

The “under-2” set needs a spot where they can safely move and explore, while perfecting their crawling, walking and standing. Preschoolers are ready to climb or walk onto low platforms that they can access with ramps and ladders. They need places where they can play in sand and water and manipulate materials. The preschool group also enjoys tricycle paths with various textures, flexible spring rockers and short slides no taller than 4 feet, according to NPPS.



child to be allowed to play on the playgrounds.

When he counsels association clients, Wilson-Hoss recommends that they use a waiver of liability for settlements or verdicts over the available insurance policy limits for playgrounds and similar activities within the community. “What associations want to do is provide added value to people’s living experiences, and that always carries risk. First, they should address, ‘How do we create a safe place and supervise it so it (remains) safe?’ With that, 99.5 percent of problems are avoided,” he says.

After that, community associations need to decide how to

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Once they are in school, children are ready to tackle rope or chain climbers on angles and clamber over horizontal bars. They also enjoy cooperative pieces such as tire swings, slides and sliding poles.

Each age zone should be separated by space and marked with signs that inform adults which age group the play equipment is intended to serve. Thompson describes how one Florida community posted signs that indicated “Easy,” “Intermediate” and “Advanced.” A 3-year-old was seriously injured in a fall from a piece of playground equipment there, and ambiguous signs could have been a contributing factor, Thompson says.

Another issue on playgrounds is parents’ eagerness to “stretch” their children’s abilities by encouraging them to play on equipment that is beyond their level.

With precise signs, parents are at least notified where a child should be playing.

SUPERVISION POLICIES

Homeowners associations must make playground supervision an expectation. “I’ve never been on a case that didn’t have a supervision problem,” says Thompson, an expert witness in lawsuits involving serious playground accidents.

At a minimum, associations should place signs around the playground explaining the rules of the equipment and the requirement that play be actively monitored by adults. Attorney Robert Wilson-Hoss, principal of Hoss & Wilson-Hoss in Shelton, Wash., has advised homeowners associations for 25 years. In his own community, parents must sign a release once a year for a

handle incidental risk with their own legal advisors, who have their own risk tolerance and an understanding of laws in their state.

ACCESSIBILITY

State law also is important as community associations consider the accessibility of playgrounds for children with disabilities.

Almost all playground equipment manufactured in the past five years meets Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards, but some state provisions are more stringent, says John McGovern, president of Recreation Accessibility Consultants in Hoffman Estates, Ill.

The bigger problem for most community associations is inadequate access to playgrounds, which makes children

in wheelchairs unable to reach them from the nearest paved surface. “There’s still a lingering belief that grass is an accessible surface,” McGovern explains.

Most playground manufacturers are well versed in accessibility. McGovern says they should know what needs to be

installed and where it needs to be placed.

Keith Lively, sales manager at Sport Systems, the manufacturer of Winterset 1B’s new equipment, says the company is always happy to design playgrounds with disabilities in mind. “Many homeowners associations have a play area (that was)

put in years ago by the builder, and the site itself is not accessible. The hill may be too steep for a wheelchair, or a path has steps instead of a ramp,” he says.

PLANNING

When planning a new playground, Lively recommends children of various ages be asked to create a “wish list.” They know what fun equipment looks like, and their expert recommendations will result in the community making wise choices.

Popular features on playgrounds are changing constantly. Today, there’s a push toward free play, rock climbing and boulders, nets and wire climbs that don’t look so traditional. “Still, nothing substitutes for climbing, sliding and swinging,” says Lively.

Community associations that want to evaluate their playground can start by getting a copy of CPSC’s *Public Playground Safety Handbook*, considered the “holy grail” of playground design, says Herberger, the New Jersey playground designer.

Updated in November 2010, the book covers topics from playground surfaces to use zones. CPSC’s Davis says updated safety guidelines in this version offer more specificity on age differences for equipment and new shading recommendations.

Playground manufacturers and installers should be licensed and certified. And Thompson suggests association employees, volunteers and parents take NPPS courses, including online education, on how to supervise and inspect playgrounds.

The Sunriver Owners Association in Sunriver, Ore., trains and prepares key staff members for incident response. For example, paramedics are called if a child falls off a piece of equipment, but the association responds too. “Without interfering with any work of paramedics on site, our key goal would be to ascertain what happened, and what happened with any of our equipment or any of our facilities. We would inspect the equipment and interview people who are nearby,” says Hugh Palcic, CMCA, AMS, assistant general manager.

combining forces for playground SUCCESS

IF YOUR COMMUNITY WANTS SUPPORT with playground upgrades and maintenance, you might consider a creative solution: approaching your local government about a joint-use agreement.

The public-private partnership may require open access to playgrounds for any child within municipal limits, but it has been working well in Greenbelt, Md., since the 1980s, when the city first partnered with a planned community.

Windsor Green Homeowners Association recently took advantage of the city’s offer. Under terms of the agreement, Greenbelt covers 75 percent of costs for new equipment, new surfacing materials and periodic replenishment of surfacing; the association covers the remaining 25 percent and is solely responsible for landscaping, trash, lighting, fencing and benches.

Several years of planning and coordination preceded the upgrades, but each of Windsor Green’s five major neighborhoods now has a new playground, one of which gained a paved pathway to make it wheelchair accessible.

“We have had quite an increase in the number of kids using the playgrounds. You can imagine why. The equipment went from being rusty and unappealing to new and attractive,” says Derek Thompson, who served as president of Windsor Green three times and now serves as a member of the CAI Maryland Legislative Action Committee.

It isn’t only the children who notice. Thompson believes the playgrounds have provided the community with a valuable amenity that has improved the marketability of homes.

The city is pleased with the arrangement too. “It’s provided us an opportunity to assist those communities in upgrading their playground equipment, but also opened those playgrounds to everyone within the city,” says Greenbelt’s Assistant City Manager David Moran.

Producing this kind of win-win is being promoted by two national organizations: KaBOOM!, a nonprofit dedicated to saving play for America’s children; and The National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN). Together, they are working on a joint-use agreement toolkit that soon will be available on NPLAN’s website. The toolkit will include templates for legal documents, a guide of best practices and webinars.

For more information about the Greenbelt collaboration and agreement, visit kaboom.org/docs/documents/pdf/playmatters/Play_Matters_Greenbelt.pdf.

To learn about the NPLAN toolkit, visit www.nplanonline.org. —M.M.

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The association's public works department writes a report, and if a piece of equipment needs to be red-tagged, or a repair is necessary, they take care of it.

A certified inspector should inspect all association-owned playgrounds annually, says Thompson. During the season when playgrounds are used (year-round in warm climates), the play areas should be examined at least once a week—if not daily—to make sure they are clean and safe and that the surface beneath the equipment is still deep enough to break falls.

In cold climates, the playground may

need to be closed in the winter. "Your last line of defense is your surface. Once the ground is frozen, no one should be using your playground," Herberger says.

The lifespan of a playground is generally 10 to 15 years, depending upon how well it has been maintained. Replacing playgrounds is part of many communities' plans. Under Virginia law, homeowners associations are required to complete a scheduled replacement reserve study—including playgrounds—every five years, according to Jen Darwin, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, senior community manager for Sequoia Management

Company in Chantilly, Va.

Foxborough Homeowners Association in Gainesville, Va., one of the 13 communities Darwin oversees, replaced an existing tot lot and expanded it with new swings and equipment for older children last year. "The community's response has been great," says Darwin.

The adults appreciate its bright appearance and safety, and the kids love the new equipment. Score another victory for extending outdoor, unstructured play for kids today. **cg**

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