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Playgrounds



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Out of the Blue

Suzanne Johanson crouched at the bottom of the slide, coaxing her toddler. It was a sunny day in April, and Suzanne brought her children, two-year-old Rachel and five-year-old Patrick, to Pine Log Park for some healthy fresh air and exercise. The county park was just a half-mile from home and was equipped with swing sets, slides, a sandbox and jungle gym. Beautiful trees silhouetted against the blue sky and surrounded the play area. It should have been an idyllic afternoon. But Rachel never reached Suzanne's outstretched arms.

She had no way of knowing that the lovely trees had a disease that cuts off circulation to some limbs, causing sudden collapse. This had occurred so often that the park's maintenance crew set aside space at the corner of the park and dubbed it the "tree limb graveyard." Supervisors typically instructed workers to simply wait until the tree limbs fell on their own, then move them to the "graveyard."

However, there was one tree limb that had been scheduled for cutting twice. The limb was hanging high above the slide. Without warning or reason to suspect danger, the limb crashed towards the ground. It landed on Rachel's head, crushing her skull and pinning Suzanne to the ground. The helpless mother could only cry for help.

Rachel was flown 30 miles to a children's trauma center where doctors diagnosed "multiple skull fractures, severe subdural hematoma with exposed brain tissue." Rachel fought valiantly for five days, lapsing in and out of a coma, until she died with her family at her bedside.

LEGAL ACTION and OUTCOME

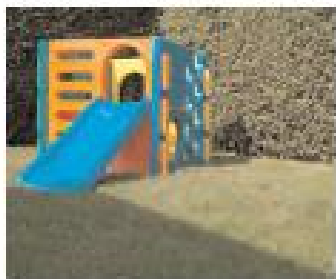


Rachel's death was completely preventable. My law firm's investigation after her death found that falling tree limbs in playgrounds are common nationwide. Safety experts even have a term for it: the "three D's"-diseased, dying and dead trees. These limbs are widely understood to require immediate removal to protect the public.

Pine Log Park had no maintenance manual and no policy regarding the inspection or removal of tree limbs. Ironically, taxpayers had paid twice for a park supervisor to attend safety seminars that specified the need for maintenance manuals and attention to the three D's.

In Rachel's case, the wrongdoers were held accountable for her death. Suzanne and her husband, Niles, filed a successful lawsuit against the county. Sadly, it was their daughter's death that forced the park's department to implement a strict maintenance schedule.

Statistics Tell the Story



Part of a normal childhood includes accidents. But no playground should harbor serious threats of injury because adults neglected the safety of children. A child dies from a preventable injury on our nation's playgrounds every month.

What are the causes of death?

- ⇒ 56 % occur when a child is accidentally hanged
- ⇒ 21% are the result of falls involving head trauma
- ⇒ 16% occur when equipment tips over or collapses

A child is rushed to an emergency room with a playground injury every two and a half minutes, according to the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission. That is more than 200,000 preschool and elementary children a year in the U.S.

How are they hurt?

- ⇒ 79% involve falls
- ⇒ 10% involve cuts from sharp edges and pinch points
- ⇒ 8% involve impact with equipment

Laws and Regulations



When it comes to playground safety, don't assume your child is protected. Playground safety laws and regulations are as varied as a toddler's mood swings. For example, many cities will have safety codes, but counties will not, even though the city and county playgrounds are close together.

On the state level, the patchwork is even greater. Few states specify standards based on the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) Handbook for Public Playground Safety. Most, however, rely on "working groups" or other well meaning, but toothless groups to present "educational programs" on playground safety.

At the lowest end of the rankings are states that provide no laws except those that protect manufacturers and operators of playground equipment from lawsuits. There is some hope at the federal level. A bill pending in the U. S. House of Representatives would provide \$1 million grants to states that pass laws or already have laws that follow CPSC safety guidelines.

Taking Action

"Playground safety is not rocket science," says Dr. Frances Wallach, past president of the National Playground Safety Institute, part of the National Parks and Recreation Association. Inspired by Dr. Wallach and other experts, the Keenan's Kids Foundation decided to take action with a public advocacy program. According to Dr. Wallach, even an eight-year-old should be capable of recognizing unsafe conditions with some simple guidance.

The advocacy program became the Safety Report Card project of the Keenan's Kids Foundation. The grading system is simple and strict: Pass/Fail. A playground fails with one safety violation. Volunteer teams of one child over the age of eight and one retired adult used the Report Card to evaluate 30 Atlanta playgrounds during the summer of 2003. Shockingly, 29 of these failed. Virtually the same results occurred in 2004 and 2005.

Half the parks had dead tree limbs. Nearly all, 90 percent, had unsafe fall zones and sharp surfaces. Two playgrounds had deadly exposed electrical wires.

The Report Card project attracted the *Today Show* and Atlanta media. An Atlanta TV crew filmed city workers in one park hauling off dangerous playground equipment. The Report Card works! It worked in Atlanta, and it can work in your community.

Use Keenan's Kids Foundation Playground Safety Handbook 10-point Report Card to evaluate every park where your child plays. Report any defects to park, city, or county officials and keep track of results. Send a copy of your completed Report Card to your local newspaper, too. Your neighbors will thank you. If you aren't sure what to say to the newspaper, we have form letters in the Playground Safety Project Volunteer Handbook. Maybe you'll even be inspired to do what we did and investigate all the playgrounds and parks in your area.

Other information on playground safety is available on our Web site, www.keenanskidsplaygroundsafety.com

We also wish to acknowledge the good works of the Kaboom organization (www.kaboom.org) in keeping playgrounds safer. Kaboom is a dedicated and well-organized national organization. Through its capable leadership, liaisons with local businesses and caring volunteers, many unsafe playgrounds have been greatly improved and new playgrounds have been built.

