Indoor Playground Supervision

Indoor playgrounds are a popular fixture in many childcare areas and play spaces. While they provide a fun and unique environment for children, there are specific risks related to indoor (versus outdoor) playgrounds that require particular attention. This guide will help you understand many of the hazards associated with indoor playgrounds, and how to prevent them.

Equipment Safety
In order to provide a safe play environment for children, make sure that all equipment—large and small—is clean, up to code and in working order. Familiarize yourself with on and off-site playgrounds and eliminate any obvious safety hazards in advance. It's important to examine equipment before children enter the play structure, and to keep an eye out for any issues during a play period also. Keep in mind that it's important to both scan for hazards, and conduct hands-on equipment inspections in order to support safe-play.

Inspection
- Designate an adult who can safely maneuver through the entire playground to conduct inspections.
- Because children vary in size and are developmentally different, it's important to check structures for size and developmental appropriateness in advance.
- Inspect the equipment to make sure no sharp edges have been created by zippers or belt buckles digging into the plastic. Search for loose and protruding screws, bolts, or hinges that could impede the functionality of the equipment.
- Test the movement of the playground parts. Feel for places that are moving but should not be, and places that should be moving freely, but are not.

Preparation
- Familiarize yourself with the Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) regulations designed to prevent problems like head injury related to surfacing materials, and guidelines to help you determine if the netting in your indoor playground is secure.
- Netting dimensions account for the age and size of your climbers to prevent entrapment. CPSC netting guidelines are strict, and provide a distinction between containment netting (used to keep children inside the play structure), and climbing netting (for areas specifically intended for play). It is important to note that these types of netting are not interchangeable.
- Verify that there is a shock-absorbing surface under and around your playground that extends six feet in all directions to mitigate injuries from falls.
- Ensure all openings and spaces, like those on guard rails and ladder rungs are less than 3.5 inches apart or more than 9 inches apart to prevent children from becoming trapped.

Cleanliness
- Sanitize playground parts before and after playtime, paying close attention to items that encourage hands-on interaction. (Keep in mind common allergens found in cleaning products, and go with allergy free/green products when possible). After sanitizing, have children wait several minutes before re-entry to allow time for chemical fumes to dissipate—as these small spaces are partially enclosed.
- Following an accident involving blood or bodily waste, pause playtime and make sure children are removed from the cleanup site while you sanitize the space. Follow your Bloodborne Pathogens protocol.

Constant Supervision
Injuries from lack of supervision represent just one of those risks, and account for an estimated 40 percent of all playground injuries that occur. Providing adequate supervision in play structures and keeping a line-of-sight view of the children at all times is imperative to greatly reducing the risk of injury. Constant supervision also helps to prevent incidents of bullying, physical conflict and peer-to-peer child sexual abuse.

Consider the following measures to minimize exposure to abuse and other risks:
- Determine the maximum number of children you will allow inside the structure at a time, and be sure to monitor your numbers. Follow Manufacturer’s Guidelines or organization ratios.
- Have staff designate times of use for children of different age groups to keep larger, older kids separate from the smaller, younger ones. When designating times for use, take into account children with special physical and developmental needs. Plan ahead and make arrangements to provide additional supervision for these groups.
- Identify blind spots, or areas of the structure that make supervision difficult and scan these areas more often.
• Be aware of how much time each child is spending inside the structure, regularly checking parts of the structure that children seem to be frequenting.

• Notice whether the “flow of traffic” has slowed, and remind children to keep moving through the structure to alleviate inappropriate peer-to-peer interactions.

• Strategically place staff so that they have line of sight to all areas of the play structure. Remember to rotate staff frequently, to ensure that staff are actively engaged in supervision.

• Identify at least one other staff person to act as a flex-monitor to become available for supervision while an inspection or rescue is taking place.

**Note:** Because some indoor playgrounds are open for public use, pay close attention to the placement of adults that are not affiliated with your organization. Eliminate the opportunity for adults to prey on children by minimizing their presence inside of the play structure as much as possible.

**Playground Rules**

Create a Rule Board for kids to view upon entering the play structure and review the rules at the start of each play period. Going over rules (and not relying on children to read them on their own) will foster both understanding and cooperation. For example:

**Footwear:** Check your feet and ask if you should have on shoes or socks, or no shoes and socks.

**Check Your Clothes:** Tuck in loose shirts, take off hanging jewelry, tie your shoes and eliminate hooded sweatshirts with loose strings

**Wait your Turn:** Keep your hands to yourself as you wait patiently for your turn.

**On the Slide:** One child at a time. Go down feet first, facing forward.

**Ask for Help:** Your safety comes first. Call out for help when you need it, or if you see another climber that is hurt.

Indoor playgrounds are a fantastic resource, but they come with their own set of risks. By identifying and planning for the various exposures that indoor playgrounds represent, you are helping make sure that your organization can use these facilities to their full potential, while still keeping the safety of children at the heart of your decision making.