

The Redwoods Group Insurance Program for YMCAs

RISK MANAGEMENT ALERT

TOPIC: Preventing Monkey Bar Injuries

Monkey bars build strength and dexterity for children and can be an important part of their development, but they also have been the leading instrument of playground injury for associations insured by The Redwoods Group in a recent seven year period (and 25% of *all* bodily injury and medical payments claims for two of those calendar years). Some proactive protocols are necessary to keep kids from being hurt on this basic childhood apparatus.

Understanding how children fall is helpful in reducing playground injuries. Two factors combine to produce a large number of upper body and extremity injuries. Younger children's centers of gravity are relatively high so they are prone to landing head-first, especially if falling from a height that allows any body repositioning. Instinctual self-preservation reflexes that are meant to protect them from serious injury often result in lesser but significant hand, wrist, and arm injuries.

Addressing Monkey Bar Injuries:

Eliminate the exposure

- **for younger kids** (kindergarten through second grades) – five to seven-year-olds generally have insufficient upper body strength to traverse monkey bars safely and their size increases the potential for injury, especially on taller equipment. *Removing this exposure just for this age group would have eliminated most of the frequency and severity of playground injuries we have seen during the last seven years.*
- **all together** – obviously an extreme action, but children are not hurt by equipment they do not use

Reduce the exposure by utilizing the following...

- **only use age-appropriate equipment** – younger kids should use equipment under 60" tall with bars no more than 12" apart; older kids can have 84" tall equipment with bars spaced up to 15" apart. Bars must be at least 9" apart to prevent entrapment.
- **maintain appropriate surfaces** underneath the equipment – CPSC's *Public Playground Safety Handbook* suggests nine inches of resilient surface to prevent serious head trauma – while this is important it may not reduce fractures or lesser injuries
- **by appropriate guidance** – establish and enforce rules for safe use of the equipment
 - use the equipment only when it is dry – check it before use and wipe it off if necessary
 - maintain adequate space between users – eliminate any pressure to move too quickly
 - use the equipment only as designed – no standing on top, hanging upside-down, or games that try to knock others off of the equipment
 - keep the area under the equipment clear of other activity when it is in use

- **by using spotters** – children who are fourth grade or younger who are allowed to use monkey bars should be spotted by staff members. Such action may seem impractical but it allows the equipment to be used without endangering the children in your programs and also eliminates any injury-associated costs. A spotter will be able to catch them as they start to fall and bring them to the ground safely (but will be unavailable for other concurrent supervisory duties).
- **by adequate maintenance** – inspect equipment for damage and the surface underneath for adequacy and compaction of resilient material at least weekly
- **control unattended use** – fence and lock the area to prevent unattended use or post appropriate warnings; remember that kids cannot be expected to read signs so self-closing, self-latching gates with high latches may be wise to control use by smaller children who are not with their parents

Many cities and school districts have removed monkey bars from existing playgrounds and will not include them in new playgrounds being built. If they are still on the playgrounds used in your programs, review your current practices and add whatever new protocols you need in order to prevent unnecessary injury to your kids, especially the younger more vulnerable ones. Playgrounds develop children's creative and physical skills and are an important part of growing up. Please make sure that when your kids are on them they are as safe as possible.

Please call us at 800-463-8546 to discuss this or any other risk management safety tip, or visit our web site at www.redwoodsgroup.com to learn more about YMCA risk management issues.