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Is it Safe for Children to Play in Outdoor Spaces?

Playgrounds and other play spaces are among the areas where injuries to children and youth frequently happen. An estimated 2,500 children under age 14 are hospitalized every year in Canada due to serious playground injuries. Children from low-income families are believed to be at higher risk for playground injuries.

The BC Injury Research and Prevention unit conducted a *Key Informants' Survey* focusing on vulnerable children and youth in Canada aged 6-12 years of age, aiming to describe current outdoor play spaces and identify safety issues associated with these play spaces.

Methods:

Surveys were completed online. To be included in the survey, the respondent had to be:

1. An adult who worked or lived in the vulnerable (low income) community, and
2. Aware of places where kids from those vulnerable communities played

Survey questions were designed to capture key elements of different play spaces and included the following:

- Type of community
- Available play spaces in the community for children 6 to 12 years of age
- Safety and risk elements in those play spaces
- Maintenance issues
- Children's preferences for play spaces
- Child supervision

A snowball method was used to disseminate the survey to participants who were knowledgeable about where children from vulnerable communities play. One hundred, seven respondents participated in the survey and 75 completed all questions. Participants included parks and recreation workers, playground inspectors, senior management, parents, teachers, coaches, community volunteers, child care workers and playground manufacturers.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze the survey results.



BC INJURY research and prevention unit

* Leaders in the production and transfer of injury prevention knowledge and the integration of evidence-based injury prevention practice in the daily lives of British Columbians

Respondents' concerns on safety issues related to playgrounds (school yards and public parks):

- Lack of good lighting (33–47%)
- Not fenced (24–34%)
- Inappropriately used by older youth and adults (11-22%)
- Inadequate depth of surfacing for fall protection (17-20%)
- Area not cleaned (13-16%)
- Close to traffic (7-13%)
- Not maintained/broken equipment (13-17%)

Traffic and poor equipment maintenance were more of a concern for the respondents from rural/remote communities.

Respondents reported that in addition to the playgrounds, children commonly play in:

- Natural places such as forests, beaches and riversides (70%)
- Open spaces such as streets, parking lots and alleys (68%)
- Outdoor skating or skateboard parks (61%)

Respondents' concern for safety issues related to natural and open play spaces

- Inadequate/no supervision (46-69%)
- Risk of falling to inappropriate surfacing (40-49%)
- Wild animals (35-37%)
- Risk of falling through thin ice (32%)
- Too close to water (12-29%)
- Risk of falling objects (27%)
- Too close to traffic (25-73%)
- Risk of falling from height (11-23%)
- Risk of dangerous items (needles, broken glass, etc.) (49%)

"Children play unsupervised in such areas with "canals, drainage ditches, old farm equipment, etc."

"The ravines are home to transients and vagrants" and wild life in many rural areas."

"It is important for children to play in nature even though there are dangers."



Results:

Almost 3/4 of respondents thought that parks and playgrounds provided children ages 6-9 years of age with the opportunity to manage risks and solve problems. However, 1/2 of the respondents felt that parks and playgrounds do not provide children ages 10-12 years old with the opportunity to manage risks and solve problems.

The majority of the respondents agreed that public parks were the most preferable places for both 6-9 year old boys and girls followed by outdoor skate rinks/skateboard parks/swimming pools for boys and by schoolyard playgrounds for girls. However, according to the respondents, among 10-12 year old children, a greater percentage of boys than girls preferred active play areas such as outdoor skate rinks/skateboard parks/swimming pools and basketball courts as well as open nature spaces such as river banks/lakes/seashore.

Playgrounds are mostly "geared for the younger children, 2-5 year olds, and have "limited" or "basic" play equipment which is not challenging."

"Most children lose interest in playgrounds after 9 or 10 years of age."

"Enough challenging opportunities for younger age group (6-9 year olds) but "nothing challenging or fun for the older group."

Limitations:

The survey findings are subject to several limitations.

- The questions were answered by adult key informants based on their best knowledge. No direct observations of children at play were conducted. Therefore, the responses may not be reflective of the real situation in those communities.
- The respondents were asked to provide information only about one selected public park and schoolyard playground they were aware of, which may be not reflective of all playgrounds or play spaces in those communities.
- The question regarding the differences between girls' and boys' preferences for play spaces had one limitation. One of the responses combined three types of playspaces into one group: skateboard parks, outdoor skate rinks and swimming pools. The gender differences might have been obscured by differential preferences for these three types of playspaces between boys and girls.



Respondent Recommendations:

- Add natural elements, such as rocks, sand, water, wood and living plants, to formal playgrounds
- Add challenging playground equipment
- Add interactive elements such as portable elements or equipment
- Improve lighting in play spaces in their communities
- Bring programming from different agencies, such as Scouts Canada, Girl Guides of Canada, Girls Inc., Canoe Club and marinas, to the play spaces to teach skills, risk management and safety issues to make play spaces safer and more fun

Call to Action

1. Further promote the play space safety assessment training tool developed by the Canadian Playground Safety Institute which is designed for community members in rural/remote communities.
<http://www.cpsionline.ca/index.php?action=cms.tr ainCpsiUpdate>
2. Raise awareness of the need for children to play in natural environments, particularly important in urban areas where access to nature is limited.
3. Encourage discussion on the tension between where children are allowed to play and where they want to play, and use this discussion to involve and inform play space designers (e.g. schools, Parks and Recreation, etc.) and policy makers.



Survey Responses: Common Advantages and Disadvantages of Play Spaces in Vulnerable Communities

	Public park playground	Schoolyard playground	Outdoor skating rinks/ skateboard parks	Open Spaces	Natural play spaces
Advantages					
Good maintenance	31%	23%	22%		
Safe supervised area	31%	28% (during school hours)			
Social interaction	19%				
Accessibility	16%	21%	32%	34%	
Free access	10%				
Opportunity for outdoor exercise				17%	
Creative playing				15%	29%
Exposure to nature/natural environment					21%
Disadvantages					
Limited challenging equipment	25%	25%			
Inadequate or poor maintenance	21%	14%			
Lack of supervision	15%	14% (after school hours)	22%	20%	38%
Presence of dogs and animals	13%				
Inadequate lighting	8%				
Risk of undesirable behavior (alcohol/drug use, bullying)			26%	38%	
Injury risk due to traffic, poor lighting, dumpsters, etc				66%	
Nature related hazards such as wild animals, risk of drowning, falling from heights and being lost					49%

A copy of the report entitled “Play Spaces Project Key Informants’ Perspective” is available at: http://www.injuryresearch.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Key_informants_survey_report_Apr-29-2013.pdf

References:

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2. Canadian Council on Social Development. The progress of Canada’s children. Ottawa (ON): Canadian Council on Social Development; 2001
3. Mack MG, Hudson S & Thompson D. A descriptive analysis of children’s playground injuries in the United States 1990–4. *Injury Prevention*, 1997, 3: 100–103.



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