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promoting the value of play

FOREWORD to AS4685, Australian Standard for Play Equipment 2004

Supervision to the degree that prevents or controls potentially harmful interactions between children and playground equipment is neither possible nor practical; injury prevention strategies are necessary.

Intervention strategies aimed at protecting children must recognize that children are not little adults. Children's susceptibility to injury, and the nature of their injuries differ from those of adults. Children interact with playground equipment in a way that reflects normal child behaviour, which will vary according to the child's age and level of development. Therefore, intervention strategies intended to protect children may differ from those intended to protect adults.

The primary aim of a playground should be to stimulate a child's imagination, provide excitement and adventure in safe surroundings, and allow scope for children to develop their own ideas of play. Ideally playgrounds should encourage development of motor skills and present users with manageable challenges to develop physical skills and to find and test their limits. In order to provide these challenges, a balance must be found between risk and safety. Professional advice should be sought, and children should be involved in planning, to ensure that the playground satisfies children's ideas of play and not those of adults.

A playground injury that leaves a child permanently disabled is not acceptable. Playground designers, manufacturers, importers, distributors, retailers, consultants and those involved in the maintenance and certification of equipment must take every possible care to identify and eliminate unacceptable playground risks and reduce hazards. However, it should also be understood that children often lose interest in equipment that does not challenge them, and that children will experience minor injuries as they grow and learn, in playgrounds and away from them.

Although there continue to be differing interpretations of the statistics on playground related injuries, children will continue to fall from playground equipment. Falls are the most common event associated with significant injury arising from the use of playground equipment. As equipment height increases, additional protection is required, and should be provided by increased use of protective measures.

The challenge is to develop products, structures, installations and services in a way that minimizes the potential for injury to children. Prevention of injuries can be addressed through design and technology, legislation and education.

The minimum free height of fall for horizontal climbing equipment has been reduced compared to other equipment, in recognition of research data on injuries from use of such equipment.

This Standard does not purport to address all the hazards associated with playgrounds. The Standard's existence alone will not necessarily prevent injuries. Like other physical activities, the use of playgrounds involves the risk of injury. However, developing and maintaining a playground in accordance with this Standard will help minimize the risk of injury occurring and the severity of any injury that may occur.