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For immediate release

Safety Risks and Health Benefits of Playgrounds

Play is an essential part of childhood. It assists children in developing physical skills such as strength, coordination and balance as well as cognitive and emotional skills. Playgrounds are common areas for children to play and when compared to other settings, are considered to be a safe environment. Although playground injuries account for only a small number of injuries to children, a significant proportion result in hospital admission.

Playground injuries can be attributed to behavioural and environmental factors including:

- Lack of appropriate adult supervision
- Use of equipment not suitable to the age or stage of development of the child
- Inappropriate use of equipment
- Over-crowding
- Poor design or layout of equipment
- Lack of maintenance

Over the past decade nature playgrounds have become increasingly popular in Australia, particularly within an early learning and primary school context. Despite the increase in nature playgrounds, there is limited research within Australia investigating the health benefits and safety risks in comparison to manufactured playgrounds.

In 2015 Kidsafe Western Australia with support from the Department of Health Western Australia, developed a research project to compare the safety risks and health benefits between manufactured playgrounds and nature playgrounds within a school environment. Results showed that both manufactured and nature playgrounds are perceived to be safe or moderately safe for children. The potential risks of injury or harm are perceived to be similar for both types of playgrounds with falls and collisions considered to be prominent risks.

The benefits of both manufactured and nature playgrounds were recognised with physical activity, motor skill development and balance identified as key benefits for both types of playgrounds. Body and core strength were associated more commonly with manufactured playgrounds, however communication, cooperation, problem solving, creative play, imaginative play and team building were more commonly associated with nature playgrounds.

Overall schools had very few serious injuries that occurred on their playgrounds, with minor injuries more frequent. Of schools that had nature playground facilities, almost a quarter recorded zero minor injuries and nearly three-quarters recorded zero serious injuries.

It is important to find a balance between risks within playgrounds and the benefit they have towards childhood development. To achieve this playgrounds should be designed and installed to minimise hazards, with regular maintenance to ensure their continued safety. In Western Australia there is no regulatory requirement to comply with Australian Standards relating to playgrounds, however these are widely regarded as the minimum standard.

To view the full report visit: www.kidsafewa.com.au/other-research-professionals

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