

# NO Playing Around

**The sound of laughing children is a sign of a vibrant community. But how quickly could that laughter turn to tears? Is your community kid-safe?**

Aaaah kids. Energetic and bursting with ideas.

Like how to turn fence posts and sod pallets into a fort complete with a “gift shop” sign. Or how to shimmy up poles and slide down a 20-foot-high canopy. Or scale a 6-foot-high concrete-block wall and jump into a shallow pool.

For community associations, the robins of spring are a reminder that playgrounds and pools can be real hazards to children. But experienced managers and children’s safety experts say there are plenty of ways to keep the fun and avoid the danger.

**By Tamara Lytle | Illustration by Russ Willms**

CHRISTI KELLER, PCAM, of Real-Manage, found the outlawed fort in one of the communities she manages in Cypress, Texas. Kids had clipped the pallets and some fence posts from behind a pump house at one of the parks. They painted the posts with bright hearts and flowers and added signs saying “welcome” and even “gift shop.” But the posts weren’t holding up the fence anymore.

Keller makes it a habit to walk through the common areas regularly. She found the fort when she arrived for a meeting with a contractor and inspected the area while she was waiting.

“Now I’ll have to watch (that area) all the time,” she says, though the fort has been hauled away and the fence replaced.

But even managers who walk the grounds regularly can’t see everything.

Christina Brown, community manager for RMI Management in Las Vegas, found out about the daredevil canopy surfers from residents who live near the park. She regularly reminds residents through the newsletter that vandalism and risky behavior at playgrounds not only cause injuries but can increase association costs. Homeowners respond quicker when you start talking about their dues, she notes.

Donna Thompson, a national expert on playground safety, says community association playgrounds are a particular worry. “It’s a problem. They tend to be not quite as safe because people don’t pay as close attention to them. Nobody is willing to maintain them,” says

Thompson, head of the National Program for Playground Safety at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls and a professor of physical education.

There’s plenty that associations can do proactively to make sure they have the right equipment, policies and maintenance for pools and playgrounds.

“People are going to get injured if you have a recreational amenity. But they shouldn’t be injured because of negligence or the type of equipment you have,” says Sherrie Knoepfel, CMCA, AMS, who runs an association of 10,000 homes near Houston that has 10 pools and 15 parks.

Homeowner Stephen Fisher of Bellflower, Calif., says the pool at his 10-unit condominium was just a little too tempting. It was next to a public park, separated by a 6-foot wall. “Children were climbing up the wall and diving in. And homeless people were climbing in and using it as a bath and a laundromat,” says Fisher, 66, a retiree. He and some other residents pressed their fellow homeowners to get rid of the pool, which was only 6 feet at its deepest.

“Most people felt if there was a problem, the insurance would take care of it,” he says. But, “it was the children that really upset me. I had visions of one of them dying or being a parapalegic.”

The cost of removing the pool was offset by a drop in water and gas bills and insurance premiums, he says. Now the area is a patio that hosts barbecues and the annual meeting.

But dangerous parks or pools also can be revamped.

When Knoepfel took over the parks at First Colony Community Association in Sugarland, Texas, she inherited the most dangerous park in the county. That’s what the emergency room staff called it, anyway. The centerpiece was a custom-built wood structure shaped like a ship.

“We called it the death ship,” says Knoepfel, now executive director of First Colony. “There was always someone getting splinters or falling off a deck that didn’t have a railing. It wasn’t appropriate for the kind of use we get at our public facility.”

Death Ship Park, as we’ll call it, was a textbook case of mistakes that associations make and how they can be corrected.



## THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

Wood playground equipment needs to be treated with preservatives yearly. The Death Ship not only splintered and had loose boards, but the nails that held it together snagged children. Plastic equipment can melt or split. Steel can rust. All of it needs to be maintained, Thompson says.

Knoepfel, who has a bachelor’s degree in parks and recreation, and safety experts recommend buying equipment that is made specifically for public use. Playgrounds made for homes just don’t cut it under the heavier use of an association park.

Thompson says that is too often a problem with homeowner association parks. When she gets calls from parents after an accident, photos of the park often highlight the problem: equipment made for homes, not heavy-traffic parks.

At public playgrounds (which is what community association facilities are considered), more than half the injuries happen on climbers, especially horizontal ladders, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).

Knoepfel’s management company will match money raised by residents for playground equipment. But residents are stunned when she tells them the \$900 they’ve raised won’t cut it. “It’s not as simple as running down to Wal-Mart and getting something,” she says, noting a swing set installed and outfitted properly can cost \$10,000.

One of the biggest factors in playground safety is the fall surface. And the technology has come a long way from the blacktop of parents’ youth.

The Death Ship had pea gravel. Perfect for toddlers to shove in their mouths or for school-age kids to pelt each other with. Not so perfect for breaking falls.

The CPSC recommends 9 inches of wood mulch under equipment with a play surface that’s 7 feet tall. But because it will compress over time, at least a foot of mulch should be installed at first.

Death Ship Park now has synthetic



mulch that is fluffed or refilled annually and inspected monthly.

#### A CLOSE EYE

Thompson and other safety experts say playgrounds should be inspected monthly. Mulch can be scattered by toddler feet or wind. Rubber tile mats can come loose. Swings get dry rot. Screws come undone. Vandals damage equipment.

## One common mistake that park providers make is assuming kids of all ages can play on the same equipment.

"A lot of people feel like there's nothing to maintain," says Keller. But her staff or a contractor looks at every playground monthly. That also helps spot problems before they get more expensive, she says. She uses her monthly inspection checklists to help budget for future repairs and as proof of proper maintenance in case a problem arises.

"If people could just get the mindset of preventive maintenance," says Keller, president-elect of the Houston chapter of CAI. "It saves not only money but downtime when the facility is closed because of problems."

Thompson's nonprofit safety group offers a \$495 online program to train managers, board members or volunteers as certified playground safety inspectors. One of Knoepfel's employees is participating in the training so her company has a certified inspector on staff.

One common mistake that park providers make is assuming kids of all ages can play on the same equipment. Equipment for preschool children should be 4 feet or lower, and for bigger kids 6 feet or lower, says Rachel Weintraub, director of product safety for the Consumer Federation of America.

Equipment also should be labeled so that parents know what is age-appropriate. That would not only help kids avoid accidents, but might reduce the potential for lawsuits.

One major disappointment for Thompson has been the shortage of equipment for preschool kids. She is active with the standards-setting group, ASTM International, and says that de-

spite new standards for equipment for tots, the industry hasn't designed much for that age. Park designers—whether associations or cities—often put the emphasis on older kids. That's backwards, Thompson says.

"It's parents who take their preschoolers to the park much more frequently than school-age kids," she says, advising associations to start their planning with the youngest kids.

Death Ship Park now offers separate areas for preschoolers and for school-age kids, separated by a picnic pavilion so that parents with kids in both age groups can see both areas at once. The preschool section has shorter slides and a cheery wave-shaped wall painted with fish. The bigger kids have more climbing equipment, but all of it meets CPSC standards, Knoepfel says.

"What's important is (to) get equipment that complies with national standards for safety or it's a liability if someone is injured," Knoepfel says.

ASTM publishes safety standards and sells the information through its website, [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org). The CPSC has a free handbook for playground safety (publication #325), which is available online

at [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov). "It tells you from start to finish what you should be doing with a playground," whether it's a new or existing park, says Celestine Kiss, the commission's engineering psychologist.

Standards and safety alerts must change as children's lives do. Kiss says bike helmets have become more popular, for instance. Though they help protect bikers, they can entrap children on playgrounds with equipment designed for helmetless heads. And the popularity of drawstrings on children's clothing has caused injuries when they get caught in equipment.

When North Carolina made federal standards for playgrounds the state law for child care centers, injuries dropped 22 percent, says Chrissy Cianflone, director of Safe Kids USA, a nonprofit educational group.

#### JUST THE STATS

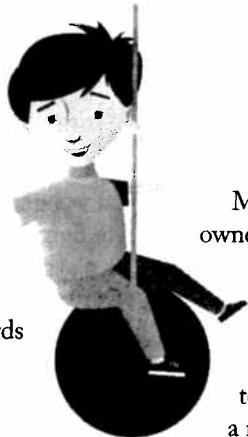
The CPSC figures for 2007 show an estimated 219,625 people were injured on playgrounds, and about 156,000 playground injuries required emergency room treatment in recent years. Almost 80 percent of those injuries were caused by falls, attributed to the increase in multi-use climbing equipment.

Between January 1990 and August 2000, the commission says 147 children under 15 were killed on playground equipment, the majority of them at home. More than half the deaths involved hanging, including cases in which drawstrings got tangled in equipment.

Overall, Thompson says, manufacturers have been making equipment safer during the past 10 years. A 2004 survey by the National Program for Playground Safety moved the grade for U.S. public playgrounds up from a "C" to a "C+."

But Cianflone says that for the smallest of frolickers, the statistics are alarming when viewed over nearly three decades. The number of children 5 and under who were injured on public playgrounds has doubled since 1980.





The statistics are helpful but many lawsuits over playgrounds and pools are settled out of court and the records sealed. Weintraub says that's a shame. "It's problematic because there's this information that would be useful for consumers to find out what a persistent hazard may be and how to prevent it," she says. "But unfortunately such information in a settlement agreement is often secret."

Pools are the second-leading cause of death for children 14 and under (after car crashes), Cianflone says. About 830 children a year drown in pools, she says. The CPSC keeps statistics for children 5 and under. Among that age, an average of 270 children drowned in pools annually from 2005 to 2007, and an average of 2,700 young children were injured in pools.

But as the number of pools in the country increases, the fatality number has stayed steady, says Carvin DiGiovanni, senior director at the Association of Pool and Spa Professionals, which represents builders, retailers and others in the pool business. "The word is getting out not to turn your back on pools and spas," he says.

Children under 5 are most commonly injured in pools and spas when adults lose track of them, according to the CPSC. In pools and parks alike, a major safety factor is adult supervision. Associations, Cianflone says, "need to remind parents to supervise their child. It's not enough to sit by the pool and read a book while your child is in the water. Accidents can happen in a second."

Newsletter reminders and postings at pools and parks are important. Parents tend to overestimate their children's intelligence, she says, and need to be reminded about the dangers of letting them play without close supervision.

Requiring constant adult supervision is especially important for preventing accidents caused by rowdy kids. "After a while, these kids make up games and they get bored and the games get more aggressive," DiGiovanni says.

Many states now require pool owners to use fences to restrict access to pools. Many insurance providers have recommended against diving boards because of the potential for serious injury. And a new federal law requires all public pools, including association pools, to install federally approved drain covers to prevent swimmers from being trapped underwater by the suction of pool drains.

Sometimes it's simple things associations need to worry about, like making sure the pool chemicals are correct. Risk-management consultant Barbara D. Wick, CIRMS, CPCU, ARM, AIS, of Northfield, Ill., says she heard about one resident who dived into a pool with the wrong chemical mix and came out with some pretty awfully colored hair.

Annie Clement, a professor of sport administration at the University of New Mexico and author of the book, *Legal Responsibility in Aquatics*, says lifeguards should be a top priority for associations, along with following local health and safety codes. Lifeguards can help enforce important rules against running and against diving head first, something that's often ignored by adults and teens, DiGiovanni adds.

Wick says she hopes that financial problems won't lead more associations to cut lifeguard budgets. Weigh carefully the savings of getting rid of lifeguards against the possible increases in insurance costs, repairs and downtime from damage done in an unsupervised facility, Keller warns.

Ron Foster learned a searing lesson about the importance of lifeguards. He recommends not only guards, but a professional pool management company to oversee all pool operations.

Twenty years ago, a 10-year-old girl's mother left her at the pool with others who lost track of her. "It was a hot, hot, hot day and a little 10-year-old girl went to the bottom and no one knows why," says Foster, president of Foster Premier Inc. which manages more than 200 Chicago-area associations.

The girl died. Foster says an amateur videotape made that day showed the lifeguards acted appropriately. The tragedy reinforced his belief that pool management should be left to professionals because, even though they can't prevent everything, at least the association will know they have the best people on the job.

"What do you tell someone whose child has died?" he asks.

Guards and pool management companies are worth every cent, he says. "It's so important to stay focused on what's the safest way to run the pool" and not just the cheapest, he says.

Wick tells her clients not only to comply with local and state laws but also with national standards, even if they're not required by law.

"As a board member with a pool or playground you want to see what you can do to reduce the risk of accidents. It's part of your fiduciary duty to provide for the safety and well-being of the people who use it," she says.

That's the approach Knoepfel took in rebuilding her park to national standards.

The Death Ship sails no more, and the park that replaced it won an American Society of Landscape Architects Award. **cg**

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**RESOURCES:** U.S. CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY COMMISSION, [WWW.CPSC.GOV](http://WWW.CPSC.GOV)  
NATIONAL PROGRAM FOR PLAYGROUND SAFETY, [WWW.PLAYGROUNDSAFETY.ORG](http://WWW.PLAYGROUNDSAFETY.ORG)  
SAFE KIDS USA, [WWW.USA.SAFEKIDS.ORG](http://WWW.USA.SAFEKIDS.ORG)

## ATA-GLANCE

The sights and sounds of playing children are evidence of a vital and thriving community. But potential hazards lurk in play areas, and it's the board's responsibility to make sure those areas are safe.

**THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT.** Buy play equipment made specifically for public use and have it professionally installed.

**A CLOSE EYE.** Inspect playgrounds and pool areas at least monthly and provide proper maintenance if a problem arises.

**JUST THE STATS.** Even with the best maintenance plan, adult supervision is required.