

## **A Comprehensive Playground Safety Program – “Walking the Talk”**

Testimonial by Pete Cralidis, CPSI

For quite a few years now there has been increasing interest and effort to build more, better, & safer facilities, particularly for the youngest members of society – our children. This interest and effort has encompassed everyone from local, state & federal governments to private day care providers, summer camp groups, and others involved with children.

Of particular interest are playgrounds that not only have newer, safer, and more diverse designs, but also provide previously inaccessible play opportunities for children with disabilities including children who may be wheelchair-bound! These children can now play and enjoy the same opportunities on many playgrounds right alongside their friends who may or may not have a disability! Playgrounds can readily provide children with more diverse equipment and activities which present increasing challenges for them to test their abilities while having a lot of fun! **Now...how do you keep the fun environment for the children safe and going strong...or create it for them in the first place?**

A most essential aspect of operating any playground for children is having an established and functioning playground safety program in place. It is not enough to just be able to show a written document and say, “this is our playground safety program”, or to say, “Yes...we have a safety program and maintain our playground on a regular basis.” Neither of these statements are going to “make the grade”, so to speak, and certainly not in a civil action related to a playground injury/incident. You have to be able to **“walk the talk.”** This is where the knowledge and expertise of a Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI) is an invaluable tool.

I am the CPSI for a county Division of Parks and Recreation in the State of Virginia. At the time I first obtained my CPSI certification in 2003, the Division of Parks and Recreation did not have any type of playground safety program in place – written or otherwise. At the request of the Superintendent of Parks and Facilities, I began work on developing one. I will describe how I proceeded with its creation.

I had actually been given the task of inspecting our playgrounds a year before taking the CPSI course. After taking and passing the course/exam...I began finding a whole host of hazards/non-compliance’s which I would never have found had I not taken the CPSI course and studied the supplemental reading text, *Playground Safety Is No Accident*.

The primary source material I utilized for guidance in the development process was the *Playground Safety Is No Accident* book published by the National Recreation and Park Association and to a somewhat lesser extent, the CPSI Course binder for Certified Playground Safety Inspectors. Both these texts are part of the CPSI certification course materials and **reading them carefully are most essential** if you are to develop and maintain an effective playground safety program.

I utilized almost verbatim the example(s) given in the *Playground Safety Is No Accident* handbook to word the **outline for a written public playground safety program** (This outline is included in our program manual within the table of contents) and the **Public Playground Safety Policy Statement**. In the case of the **policy statement**, it was necessary to re-word some parts of the suggested sample shown since the sample’s wording would be applicable for a countywide or municipal-wide program of involvement. In our case, the playground safety program is

applicable only within the Division of Parks and Recreation (i.e. a Division-wide program). Each objective (or goal) statement made in the **policy statement** is then qualified by a section within the playground safety program manual which details specifically how we will accomplish the objective.

In drafting the Division's Playground Safety Program, I reviewed each part in the *Playground Safety Is No Accident* handbook for guidance and the suggestions given for addressing each of the stated goals outlined in our **policy statement**. I then drafted each section of our **Division Playground Safety Program** in such a manner as to reflect it being **applicable to Division Parks and Facilities Personnel**, with a few exceptions. Such exceptions might include volunteers or outside contractors, for example, who may be performing work on, or services for, any or all of our Division playgrounds.

Throughout all our entire program documents, I endeavored to word each section in such a manner as to be explicit enough in what I was describing, but yet "generic" enough so as to reduce future needs to have to go back and frequently revise the written program unnecessarily. One example for instance, is instead of using the term "weekly or daily" to describe our high frequency inspections; I use the term high frequency. This allows for possible future changes in the inspection frequency schedule without having to go back and reword the Playground Safety Program Manual just to accommodate the inspection frequency change.

**In designing the inspection forms** for both the **HIGH** frequency and **LOW** frequency inspections, I felt the examples in the *Playground Safety Is No Accident* handbook were quite thorough and extensive. Given the size of our Division, however, I chose to utilize a somewhat less complex format. This format simplicity I've found to be more readily understandable for those staff members performing inspections, as well as, parks & facilities management staff that may be reviewing or referencing the inspection documentation.

To enhance our playground maintenance, in June 2007, after consultation with my supervisor, we instituted a **Yearly Surfacing Replenishment Program** to further ensure that each playground has the correct amount of recommended surfacing. This is an essential part of our playground safety program particularly since seven of our eight playgrounds utilize a wood product for surfacing material.

As an adjunct to our playground safety program, I created a computerized **Central Data File** which contains specific information about each of our playgrounds. This helps provide more rapid access to information than having to go searching through a file cabinet every time we may need some information on a particular playground whether it be an inspection report, playground injury/accident report or other related data. We also maintain hardcopy files of each playground's inspection reports, etc. in secured file cabinets. This is also in adherence to the provisions of our playground safety program regarding the **security and storage of playground documentation**.

In conclusion, I have found the book *Playground Safety Is No Accident* in particular; provides an excellent source of information on how to proceed with developing a playground safety program. It is well written such that it provides the basic guidelines with which to draft a safety program and yet there is the leeway to modify the content of the material to accommodate the needs of our particular agency, both now and in the future. I've found the **CPSI Course Manual for Certified Playground Safety Inspectors** to be of immense help particularly as a reference

source as well. The clarity and expertise of the written material contained in both documents are a most definite credit to the authors!

*(As a little side note, I always carry BOTH documents with me when I am out inspecting any playground – for reference).*

**About the author...**

**Pete Cralidis is a CPSI who has been with the James City County Division of Parks & Recreation in Williamsburg, Virginia since 1994, having spent the last 5 years as the Division's CPSI. He is also a member of the Virginia Recreation and Park Society.**