

By: Sandra libby

About twelve years ago my daughter Megan was almost 2 and we were enjoying going to the local playground, Kid's Konnection, located in the center of our town, Billerica, MA. We were sitting on the fire engine pretending to drive. This was an old structure with wooden planks that had an open platform with a steel frame around the outside. Suddenly my daughter got up and ran down the plank to the end. I knew right then that she was headed for the fire pole, would not be able to reach it, and I feared that I would never make it to her in time. Sure enough, she fell on her face in the sand and bumped her head on the pole.

As I consoled her, I began to look around. This playground needed some attention. I thought, my mother's group, Mom's and Tot's just might be the team of parents for the job. We formed the Friends of Billerica Recreation and began getting advice from local sales representatives and writing grants. After several years of volunteering, I realized that I loved playgrounds and wanted to do this for a career. Getting certified as a Playground Safety Inspector really opened my eyes! Also, getting to know all the companies in New England helped. Doing business with a local company that comes to us and is available to meet our needs seemed important. I learned about writing RFP's and doing bids and worked on numerous local projects.

Later I learned that, the playground that my daughter was hurt on, was being overseen by the Billerica Recreation Department. However, like many sites, it was initially put in and paid for by volunteers, so there wasn't a person trained or assigned to providing for the maintenance. They decided to hire me four hours a week to maintain all five town-wide playgrounds. One of the main reasons this was done is to cover my liability. It is important to have the CPSI on your staff and covered by your policy, or to have their own coverage, which can get very expensive.

To set up our program, we turned to the book "Playground Safety is No Accident" by Kenneth Kutska. This book was an invaluable resource and provided that link from the CPSI exam to practical applications on our sites. We began by establishing the policies and procedures, and spelling out how we do everything. We have requirements for companies and the equipment we purchase, requirements for installers, and a full maintenance plan with audits, inspections, site checks and plans for dealing with all issues. Finally we do supervisor trainings and safety programs for kids, parents and staff every year.

About three years ago our playground plans were put to the test. A young girl was hurt near the playground, not on the equipment, but nearby. The end result has been that, since we had all this documentation that clearly outlined our plans, the town has been able to directly show "due diligence" in how they were managing the site. Also, immediately after the incident, we came together as a team and were able to quickly address the situation. As things go, a large grant was received right away and a donation from a local company came in because of the incident. This addressed this issue and others, which helped everyone. Unfortunately accidents do happen that are beyond our control but the town was not at fault.

At this time, as the Town of Billerica's Playground Coordinator, I spend 15 hours a week developing and maintaining the six town wide playgrounds. The sites have grown every year and this spring we are adding a skate park and adult fitness circuit. Last year we took in the most donations ever at \$71,000. This does not include the hundreds of volunteer hours that were managed with companies, scouts, and House of Correction Work Release Crews. Having a plan and utilizing the tools given us in "Playground Safety is No Accident" has made it happen. The playgrounds have become a valuable, safer and more beautiful part of our community.

More and more playgrounds go up all the time. If you have sites already or are putting in a new one, I encourage owners to look at your maintenance and safety education. Get someone on your staff that is a CPSI and utilize the Fourth Edition of "Playground Safety is No Accident", which even comes with a CD now to help you. It may be more cost effective for you to get outside assistance. In that case, there are many CPSI's out there that can help and that use this resource. Find someone with some experience in the industry and that does not have the conflict of interest of selling their own line of equipment. Also, adding the playground safety education to your program can be done several ways. The National Program for Playground Safety is a good place to start. They train people to teach supervisors and have resources that you can purchase off their site. The bottom line is this will make your playgrounds safer, easier to manage and more beautiful, which needs to be done, for the kids sake.



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**Sandra Libby's Playground Safety Action Plan:**



## *Action Plan to Make our Playgrounds Safer*

1. Be sure new equipment purchased is age appropriate and meets current safety guidelines and standards.
2. Be sure the equipment is installed properly with proper surfacing provided.
3. Have an action plan for maintenance and do it properly with regular safety checks.
4. Provide proper supervision of children with safety trained staff.
5. Educate the children on playground safety.

These five components are all dependant upon each other and if done together make a powerful and complete plan.

