

Supervision on the School Playground

A Pro-Active Leadership Approach to Reduce Injuries and Headaches

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Abstract

The Consumer Product Safety Commission has reported that each year 205,860 children receive emergency medical treatment for playground-related injuries (O'Brien, 2009). In attempting to increase student accountability and ensure academic success of all students, it becomes important for school educators and leaders to take a pro-active approach to injury prevention and make a concerted effort to examine the role of the outdoor environment. The purpose of this article examines supervision best practice philosophies associated with educational communities. The article will discuss a pro-active leadership approach to developing playground policy and supervision training for educational communities.

It is half past the noon hour at Sunnyside Elementary School—120 children, kindergarten through second grade, and the playground is a near-circus, full of endless energy. The school bell rings, kids are spilling from the backside of the one-story brick school building eager to begin hanging on the horizontal ladders and climbing to the top of the spiral slide. Running, jumping, climbing, screaming, and laughing can be heard simultaneously as children play together in groups of two, three, or four during their brief break. Inside all of this commotion are two teachers who are sitting on the bench right outside the classroom

sipping their afternoon coffee while discussing their morning activities. Analisa, 9 years old, comes running up to the teachers and in a frightened voice says, “Martinez is hurt and won’t open his eyes!”

Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death among children ages 14 and under in the United States (Consumer Product Safety Commission [CPSC], 2011). CPSC has reported that each year 205,860 children receive emergency medical treatment for playground-related injuries (O’Brien, 2009). The recent CPSC study indicated 76% of the injuries happen on public equipment. A study conducted in 2001 by Phelan, Khoury, Kalkwarf and Lanphear reported children ages 5 to 9 have higher rates of emergency department visits for playground injuries than any other age group and most of these injuries occur while children are attending school (Phelan, et al., 2001).

In attempting to increase student accountability and ensure academic success of all students, educational communities have invested substantial amounts of resources in curriculum, building design, and technology. At the same time, unfortunately, the role and impact of the outdoor physical environment in which students spend a portion of their day remains largely ignored. If school communities are committed to educating the whole student to meet today’s changes and challenges, then it becomes important for school teachers and leaders to take a pro-active approach to injury prevention and make a concerted effort to examine the role of the outdoor environment.

Educational research overwhelmingly supports outdoor play during the school day as much more purposeful and meaningful to the child than simply having fun with friends. As Kathleen Burriss and Barbara Boyd (2005) highlighted in *Outdoor Learning and Play*, outdoor play offers physical, social, emotional, and intellectual learning and development for school-age children. The outdoor environment is a place for children to develop, socialize, express ideas, problem-solve, and engage in meaningful relationships. The purpose of this article is to bring to light that the outdoor physical environment, often referred to as recess, is more than a time of day where children burn energy or release steam. It is an open-ended experience that challenges a child’s mind and body. However, this experience requires supervision as it often includes highly active behavior on the part of children. This article examines supervision best practice philosophies associated with school communities. We propose the term supervision in the school setting as the comprehensive responsibility of multiple school personnel including teachers, administrators, and staff. Additionally, the article will discuss a pro-active leadership approach to developing playground policy and supervision training for teachers.

What is Supervision and Why Does it Matter?

Educational communities involve educational leaders who promote the success of all students by providing safe outdoor environments for students to actively

learn. Therefore, school communities need to embrace a pro-active approach to reduce injuries and headaches through appropriate supervision practices on the playground. Supervision is a broad term implying a responsibility for the safety of areas and activities that take place during structured and unstructured outdoor programs. Drawing on children's unintentional injury statistics, a definition of supervision was proposed by Morrongiello and Schell in 2010. According to their definition, three dimensions of teachers' behaviors are considered: attention (e.g., extent of watching and listening), proximity (e.g., within versus beyond arms reach), and continuity of attention and proximity (e.g., constant/intermittent/not at all). Therefore, they are proposing supervisors should be actively paying attention to the children through vision, listening, and movement.

According to van der Smissen (1990), approximately 80% of legal cases involving community recreational programs allege lack of supervision or improper supervision as the result of injury. There is a legal obligation and responsibility for safety and security when children are involved in educational programs. Supervision is recognized as one of the most important areas in the relationship between risk management and physical activity and has been raised in many negligence lawsuit cases (Dougherty, Auxter, Goldberger, & Heinzmann, 1994; van der Smissen, 1990).

The implication may be that educational communities can be found negligent if they are not properly supervising the children. For instance, a negligence claim may arise if a teacher decides to gather balls, jump ropes, and sidewalk chalk inside the school building and an incident occurs with the unsupervised children outside on the playground. A "reasonable and prudent" teacher would have known the children should not be left unsupervised; thus, such action would generally qualify as negligence under the law (Black's Law Dictionary, 1978, p. 930). Teachers who are responsible for children in the outside play environment should be able to make good decisions, including when an injury happens, regarding inappropriate use of equipment, or when bullying takes place. Then, how can we as a school community take pro-active measures to ensure safety on playgrounds? We propose a comprehensive plan of developing playground policy and supervision education.

What is Policy and Why Do We Need It?

When more than one person shares a space, we informally develop rules or procedures on how things are done. In a family context we might say "this is how we do it in our house"; in a sports or community club, we create rules of expected behavior; but, as the size of a school expands, communication gets challenged and organizations require universal rules that everyone is expected to follow. These rules are then referred to as policies and procedures and are put in writing and clearly communicated so that anyone entering the organization has a clear understanding of what to do and how to do it.

However, in order for an issue to become worthy of becoming a policy, individuals or groups of individuals need to view it as important. If an issue has little value, worth, or impact, the likelihood of it moving past the concern level is minimal (Anderson, 2003; Cochran & Malone, 2010). For example, if children are not getting hurt on school playgrounds, the assumption is that the playground is safe, and there is no concern. However, if individuals or groups begin to see a trend in injuries, they will begin to identify a problem, see the need for change, and become invested in creating a solution to reduce injury. This becomes the impetus for developing a supervision policy. However, teachers and educational leaders should not wait for injuries to occur; rather, they should be pro-active in providing safe quality outdoor environments for children to learn and grow. One approach for preventing playground injuries is developing supervision policies. Supervision policies effectively create the blueprint for how staff members are to proceed in order to prevent and/or reduce injury risk to children.

When policies are created in organizational structures, such as educational communities, it is important for the people most affected by the outcome to have a say in its creation (Bolman & Deal, 2003). This concept is particularly important when considering all of the issues surrounding playground safety in a school community. When creating policies, a playground committee should be developed and individuals with varying perspectives should be invited to be involved.

- The **principal/administrator** is the first key player of the team of individuals as he or she has the ultimate understanding of the mechanics of the school, is familiar with the personalities of the staff, and has the overall responsibility of enforcement of the policies within the organization. In addition, he or she knows how to move issues up the chain of command within the school community to become adopted by the board. Also, the administrator can initiate staff training for safety and supervision and ensure that the maintenance plan developed is followed. In general, the administrator is responsible for understanding the components of playground safety himself or herself and implementing and enforcing the overall policy within the school.
- **The teacher** is often involved in class supervision and rule enforcement on the playground making his or her contribution significant to keep consistency from the inside classroom to the outside environment. Teachers also supervise children during outdoor times.
- A **nurse/health educator** has the medical training to respond to an injury on the playground. This person has a critical voice on the team to help the other committee members' link the procedures of an emergency response to injury and to support the value of incident reporting.
- A **playground supervisor** is a grassroots member of this team. This person has the practical understanding of the "hot spots" of potential injury, is responsible for supervisory preventative actions on the playground, and is ultimately the first responder to an onsite emergency.

- **Maintenance personnel** are responsible for the building and grounds that include the playground. If that individual does not repair any broken equipment himself or herself, he or she knows whom to contact within the community to get things repaired.
- **The parent/caregiver** can contribute an external recommendation that is a perspective that can be valuable in building community relationships. The parental component to playground safety within the community can involve playground committee participation, fundraising activities for equipment and surfacing materials, and, oftentimes, can include playground supervision volunteer.

Creating policy on playground safety and supervision within a school community is defining the “who, what, where, and when” of an action plan (Thompson, Hudson, & Olsen, 2007). If the policy planning committee consists of a variety of different perspectives and voices including the administrator, nurse, playground supervisor, maintenance person, teacher, and caregiver, there is a greater chance of creating a policy that is comprehensive in its goal of reducing injury risk to children and to creating consistent supervision practices with the teachers who are responsible for supervision.

Elements of Supervision Policy

The number of child injury lawsuits is growing rapidly throughout the United States (Olsen, Hudson, & Thompson, 2010). Prior to a child stepping foot on the playground, school communities can set the stage for safety by addressing the elements that support environmental controls and supervision. Therefore, the first element to follow is the safety standards. For instance, educational leadership needs to be aware of the Consumer Product Safety Commission’s (CPSC; 2011) *Public Playground Safety Handbook*. The CPSC produces playground guidelines to address the hazards that result in playground-related injuries and deaths. The guidelines can be downloaded at <http://www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/325.pdf>.

Second, an emergency protocol plan should be included in supervision policy. This protocol should include a clear sequence of action to be taken when any type of emergency occurs on the playground (such as child injury, intruder, natural disaster). Communication devices and supervisory equipment should be included (Philpott & Serluco, 2010).

Third, injury documentation is a critical element to determine how an injury occurred, the medical protocol followed, the sequence of events leading up to the incident, the injury sustained, and the action taken. This documentation should be clearly defined, completed accurately, tracked and analyzed, and filed for informational or litigation purposes (Christiansen & Vogelsson, 1996). Reviewing the injury statistics in a manner that can evaluate the playground safety practices used will enable schools to make long-term improvements.

Finally, training teachers and staff on proper supervision techniques is critical. Supervisors should be on the same page as to staff behaviors, children's behaviors, proper use of equipment, emergency preparedness, communication techniques, incident documentation, and the rules of the playground. This universal training will provide supervisors with the tools needed to do their job and create consistency among personnel within the school.

Providing Staff Supervision Training

The subject of supervision training deserves attention, because the lack of quality supervision is repeatedly mentioned as one of the biggest problems in helping prevent injuries (Frost & Sweeney, 1996; Bruya, 1998; Hudson, Olsen, & Thompson, 2008; Schwebel, 2006; Thompson & Hudson, 2001). School communities need to consider providing supervision training for all teachers and staff that will ensure consistency in teacher and staff interactions with each other and with the children. Training is a procedure that allows everyone within the school community to universally understand playground safety guidelines (Frost, 2001), behavior management, and anti-bullying techniques (Horn, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003), and to understand emergency preparedness strategies (Olsen, Hudson, & Thompson, 2008).

Based on the literature review, the authors propose supervision training to include four components. Playground supervision training should include: (1) review of injury data and injury documentation, (2) staff consistency, (3) supervisors' best practice, and (4) emergency plans. Table 1 summarizes the playground supervision components.

Preparation for playground safety is important to determine prior to youth using the playground. When a teacher has been provided a clear plan of action to prevent injuries and address emergencies, actions will be more productive and effective. Playground supervision training components are discussed to provide a guide for community educators to strengthen supervision practices and reduce playground headaches.

Review Injury Data and Injury Documentation

There are two injury related elements for administrative leaders to address. First, administrators should review injury data. Unfortunately, even under the best circumstances injuries do occur. Administrators should understand the ages of children getting hurt, when injuries happen, and where injuries happen. This information can be critical in addressing long-term safety issues and affect future planning. Second, there should be a clearly defined system for staff members to report injuries. Administrators can take a leadership approach by understanding the problems and headaches that occur and be there to ease the stress of supervisors.

Table 1 Components for Playground Supervision Training

<i>Components</i>	<i>Content for Staff to Discuss</i>
Review Injury	—Leadership role in evaluating injury data.
Data and injury documentation	—Components of incident reporting: age and gender of injured child.
Emergency Plan	—A plan is identified on how to handle emergencies. —Identification and definition of emergency situations. —A system for communication (with other supervisors, administrators, EMTs, law enforcement). —A system for responding to an injury. —A system for contacting the primary caretaker.
Staff Consistency	—Identifying the role of the outdoor environment within the organization. —Developing a forum to support the voice of the supervisors. —Identifying strengths and weakness of staff behavior.
Best Practice	—Identifying appropriate staff behaviors (such as moving around assigned area, removing distractions, appropriate dress). —Identifying appropriate child behaviors (such as respect others, respect property, use appropriate words). —Discussing equipment hazards and the reporting procedure.

Emergency Plans

Are supervisors prepared for an injury, bullying behaviors, natural disaster, or an unknown adult on the playground? All educational communities must be prepared to respond to injuries and emergencies. Emergency plans are crucial components in the overall risk management plan of educational communities. In a 2006 study of playground practices in elementary schools, school nurses indicated only 23% of their schools had an emergency plan in place (Hudson, Olsen, & Thompson, 2008). Emergency plans should be developed during a time of non-crisis and discussed amongst all staff members and children.

Staff Consistency

Evolving from staff who may not value the importance of the outdoor environment to a school community that believes that outdoor time is part of the children's total learning means teachers, staff members, administrators, and students must change their beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Educational communities must ask themselves, "What is the purpose of the outdoor environment?" Supervision training should allow time for teachers and staff to discuss concerns and express ideas. Teachers and staff should identify their own strengths and weaknesses regarding outdoor behaviors. Allowing and encouraging teachers and staff to

communicate can empower everyone to feel that their responsibility as playground supervisors is important to the overall school district.

Supervisors' Best Practice

Supervision training should also include discussion of the activities and behaviors that are appropriate and are not appropriate for teachers and staff to use when working with children. Staff training could include a discussion surrounding expectations for supervisor's behaviors, as well as the rules and expectations of the youth. Educational community staff members need to develop and communicate rules for activities, games, free play, and teacher-facilitated programs. Rules should be consistent among all the administrative leaders, teachers, staff members, and youth participants. In addition, teachers need to be aware of the developmental abilities of the children on the playground in order to know when and how to intervene in play to prevent injury. Supervisory best practices on the playground also include hazard identification, which involves looking for environmental- and equipment-related potential hazards on a daily basis before the children enter the playground.

Conclusion

A strong case can be made for the importance of developing playground policy and supervision training for school communities. Supervision is more than being present when the children are outside. It involves understanding child play patterns, knowing safe and unsafe play behaviors, being pro-active and stopping unsafe actions, and understanding and enforcing playground rules. Many educational leaders and teachers view outdoor time as a break in the day or use the opportunity to socialize with other adults. Those behaviors are inadequate and ineffective. The outdoor time should be viewed as an extension of the classroom and children should be given opportunities to develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

Educational leaders, teachers, and staff can be instrumental in helping to keep children safe in the outdoor play environment by preparing supervisors with proper training. It is time for action, and educational leaders and teachers are essential in leading the change in helping make outdoor play areas safe and enjoyable for children.

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