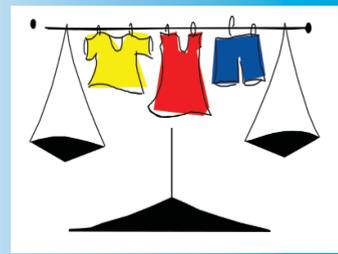


# 14 Playground



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# Out Of The Blue

Suzanne Johanson crouched at the bottom of the slide, coaxing her toddler. It was a sunny April day and Suzanne brought her children-two-year-old Rachel and five-year-old Patrick-to Pine Log Park for some healthful fresh air and exercise. The county park was just a half-mile from home and was equipped with swing sets, slides, a sandbox and jungle gym. Beautiful trees, silhouetted against the blue sky, surrounded the play area. It should have been an idyllic afternoon. But Rachel never reached Suzanne's outstretched arms.

She had no way of knowing that the lovely trees had a disease that cuts off circulation to some limbs, causing their sudden collapse. This had occurred so often that the park's maintenance crew set aside space at the corner of the park and dubbed it the "tree limb graveyard." Supervisors typically instructed workers to simply wait until the tree limbs fell on their own, then move them to the "graveyard."

However, there was one tree limb that had been scheduled for cutting twice-the limb hanging high above the slide. Without warning or reason to suspect danger, the limb crashed to the ground. It landed on Rachel's head, crushing her skull and pinning Suzanne to the ground. The helpless mother could only cry for help.

Rachel was flown 30 miles to a children's trauma center where doctors diagnosed "multiple skull fractures, severe subdural hematoma with exposed brain tissue." Rachel fought valiantly for 5 days, lapsing in and out of a coma, until she died with her family at her bedside.

## LEGAL ACTION and OUTCOME



Rachel's death was completely preventable. Our investigation after her death found that falling tree limbs in playgrounds are common nationwide. Safety experts even have a term for it: the "three Dsl"-diseased, dying and dead trees. These limbs are widely understood to require immediate removal to protect the public.

Pine Log Park had no maintenance manual and no policy regarding the inspection or removal of tree limbs. Ironically, taxpayers had twice paid for a park supervisor to attend safety seminars that specified the need for maintenance manuals and attention to the three Dsl.

In Rachel's case, the wrongdoers were held accountable for her death. Suzanne and her husband, Niles filed a successful lawsuit against the county. Sadly, it was their daughter's death that forced the Park's Department to implement a strict maintenance schedule.

# Statistics Tell The Story



Part of a normal childhood includes accidents. But no playground should harbor serious threats of injury because adults neglected the safety of children. A child dies from a preventable injury on our nation's playgrounds every month.

What are the causes of death?

- ⇒ 56 % occur when a child is accidentally hanged
- ⇒ 21% are the result of falls involving head trauma
- ⇒ 16% occur when equipment tips over or collapses

A child is rushed to an emergency room with a playground injury every 2 ½ minutes, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. That is more than 200,000 preschool and elementary children a year in the U.S.

How are they hurt?

- ⇒ 79% involve falls
- ⇒ 10% cuts from sharp edges and pinch points
- ⇒ 8% impact with equipment

# Laws and Regulations



**W**hen it comes to playground safety, don't assume your child is protected. Playground safety laws and regulations are as varied as a toddler's mood swings. For example, many cities will have safety codes, but counties will not, even though the city and county playgrounds are close together. On the state level, the patchwork is even greater. A few states specify standards based on the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) Handbook for Public Playground Safety. Most, however, rely on "working groups" or other well meaning, but toothless groups to present "educational programs" on playground safety. At the lowest end of the rankings are states that provide no laws except those that protect manufacturers and operators of playground equipment from lawsuits. There is some hope at the federal level. A bill pending in the U. S. House of Representatives would provide \$1 million grants to states that pass laws or already have laws that follow CPSC safety guidelines.

# Taking Action

"Playground safety is not rocket science," says Dr. Frances Wallach, past president of the National Playground Safety Institute, part of the National Parks and Recreation Association. Inspired by Dr. Wallach and other experts, the Keenan Kids Foundation decided to take action with a public advocacy program. According to Dr. Wallach, even an 8-year-old should be capable of recognizing unsafe conditions with some simple guidance.

The advocacy program became the safety Report Card project of the Keenan Kids Foundation. The grading system is simple and strict-Pass/Fail. A playground fails with one safety violation. Volunteer teams of one child over the age of 8 and one retired adult used the Report Card to evaluate 30 Atlanta playgrounds during the summer of 2003. Shockingly, 29 playgrounds failed.

Half the parks had dead tree limbs. Nearly all-90 percent had unsafe fall zones and sharp surfaces. Two playgrounds had deadly exposed electrical wires.

The Report Card project attracted "The Today Show" and Atlanta media. An Atlanta TV crew filmed city workers in one park hauling off dangerous playground equipment. The Report Card works! It worked in Atlanta and it can work in your community.

Check out the "Getting Started" chapter then use our 10-point Report Card to evaluate every park where your child plays. Report any defects to park, city, or county officials and keep track of results. Send a copy of your completed Report Card to your local newspaper, too. Your neighbors will thank you. If you aren't sure what to say to the newspaper, we have form letters in the Getting Started Kit. Maybe you'll even be inspired to do what we did and investigate all the playgrounds and parks in your area.

The Getting Started Kit and other information is also available on our website: [www.KeenansKidsPlaygroundSafety.com](http://www.KeenansKidsPlaygroundSafety.com)



# The Report Card

The following report card is used by volunteers of The Keenan's Kids Foundation. We purposely designed the report card to be used by children over the age of 10 years old.

REPORT CARD		
SUBJECT		GRADE
1	Condition of equipment	
2	Surfaces must be smooth	
3	Trip hazards eliminated	
4	Tipping of equipment prevented	
5	Fall zones adequate	
6	Gaps or spaces absent	
7	Electrical wires secured	
8	Dangerous tree limbs removed	
9	Surface areas safe and uniform	
10	Hazards removed	

SUBJECT	GRADE

**THE REPORT CARD**

Each category receives either Pass or Fail.  
 To make your decision, answer the following questions:

### 1. CONDITION OF EQUIPMENT

- ⇒ Are there broken or missing components, or any damaged structure
- ⇒ Is paint chipping or peeling? Small children can put in their mouths.
- ⇒ Are swing seats made of heavy or rigid material, such as wood or metal?  
 They can seriously injure a child-and should be rubber or canvas.



SUBJECT	GRADE

**THE REPORT CARD**

## 2. SURFACES MUST BE SMOOTH

- ⇒ Are any surfaces rough or ragged?
- ⇒ Are there sharp points or corners, edges, nails or splinters?
- ⇒ Are there protruding nuts or hooks?



REPORT CARD	
SUBJECT	GRADE

**FAIL**

## 3. TRIP HAZARDS ELIMINATED

- ⇒ Are there any objects children might trip over?
- ⇒ Are there exposed footings, anchoring devices or environmental obstacles, such as tree roots?



REPORT CARD	
SUBJECT	GRADE

**FAIL**

SUBJECT	GRADE

**THE REPORT CARD**

#### 4. TIPPING OF EQUIPMENT PREVENTED

- ⇒ Is any equipment not properly secured and might be tipped?
- ⇒ Are the foundations of slides, monkey bars and swings loose and movable?



#### 5. FALL ZONES ADEQUATE

- ⇒ A fall zone is the softened area around the equipment where a child could fall.
- ⇒ Are there buried foundations in the fall zone?
- ⇒ Does surface material extend at least 6 feet from the equipment in each direction?
  - For slides, surface must extend the height of the slide, plus 4 feet.
  - For swings, surface must extend twice the height in front and behind swing.



SUBJECT	GRADE

**THE REPORT CARD**

## 6. GAPS OR SPACES ABSENT

- ⇒ Are there any gaps or spaces in equipment in which a child could get caught or catch his clothing?
- ⇒ Are there any open spaces in S hooks? You should not be able to insert even a dime or credit card into the space.
- ⇒ Are there gaps or protrusions in slide areas, elevated walks etc. that could snag clothing or allow a child's limbs to be caught while playing?
- ⇒ Could a child get caught in between ladder rungs? This space should be smaller than 3 ½ inches or larger than 9 inches.



## 7. ELECTRICAL WIRES

- ⇒ Are there exposed electrical wires in or around the play ground?



SUBJECT	GRADE
<b>THE REPORT CARD</b>	

## 8. DANGEROUS TREE LIMBS

⇒ Is there evidence of diseased or dying branches overhanging or surrounding the play area?



## 9. SURFACE AREAS

- ⇒ What is the surface around the play equipment?  
(Circle the answer) Wood chips, sand, grass, cement/pavement, other Substance
- ⇒ Does the surface cover the play area uniformly? Check for erosion in high-traffic areas or exposed grass/dirt.
- ⇒ Is the surface covering at least 12 inches deep of wood chips, mulch, sand, shredded rubber, pea gravel or safety-tested rubber mats?



SUBJECT	GRADE

**THE REPORT CARD**

## 10.HAZARDS REMOVED.

- ⇒ Are any of the following found on the playground?
- ▷ Animal or glider swings--these are very heavy and can injure a child.
  - ▷ Unsecured climbing ropes
  - ▷ Swinging trapeze bars
  - ▷ Exercise rings
  - ▷ Trampoline
  - ▷ Old-fashioned monkey bars with interior bars onto which a child may fall from a height greater than 18 inches are unsafe.



Keeping playgrounds safe for children takes diligence. Fill out a Report Card on your playground regularly. And take whatever steps are necessary until you get a perfect 10.