

Don't play around with safety

A staggering 75.6% of playgrounds checked in a study are in bad condition. Fortunately, a new set of standards are in place to promote safety for our children during their play time.

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PLAYGROUND or danger zone? The lines could easily be blurred, if areas for children to play and socialise turn into safety hazards due to poor maintenance, faulty equipment and badly designed layouts.

For public playgrounds in Malaysia, most (75.6%) are in a bad state, according to a recent study on 40 parks.

Rusty swing hooks, missing handhold bars and leg rests, broken spring rockers and big gaps in pathways are just some of the findings by the Playground Safety Association of Malaysia (PSAM).

Almost half of the equipment is spoilt and in need of repair.

Over 50% of playground equipment and park furniture are also rusty, posing a danger to children, says the study.

But the most common problem, plaguing 64% of the playgrounds, is the surfacing or flooring in play areas.

They are uneven, damaged, rotten or caked with fungus, completely worn out or unfastened from concrete floors.

"This is an important factor because 78% of injuries by children in playgrounds are due to falls," according to the study made available to *Sunday Star*.

Such surfacing helps absorb the shock of falls but if they are damaged, it could even be the cause of a child to trip and get hurt.

Other main problems include damaged slides, broken swings, uncut grass and areas littered with hazardous items like broken bottles and trash, says PSAM secretary-general Noriah Mat.

"This is a long-standing problem in Malaysia because the know-how on playground maintenance and safety is still rather new here.

"But it's high time to start training contractors to build safer playgrounds with proper layouts," she says.

An example of poor layout is placing the jogging track or walkway too close to swings. Accidents may occur if the child on the swing collides with people walking on the path.

While safety is a shared

Survey on 40 playgrounds

Problems

64.1%
of playground surfacing is in bad condition

33.4%
of park furniture requires repairs

- > Benches
- > Tables
- > Waste bins
- > Fencing
- > Signage

Suggested solutions:

> Increase thickness of surfacing material from 25mm to 100mm

> Entire play area to be covered with rubberised surfacing material, instead of only landing areas

> Annual audits of playgrounds by local authorities

> Malaysian Standards on playgrounds should be applied in landscape planning permission stage

> Advocacy programmes to deter vandalism

Sources: Playground Safety Association of Malaysia and Public Complaints Bureau

46.7%
of equipment requires fixing



Common playground equipment in bad conditions:



63%
Balance beams



51%
Free standing climbers/slides



58%
Track rides



47%
Swings

responsibility in the community, Noriah says local governments are responsible for ensuring public areas are safe for use.

"Local authorities should carry out audits of playgrounds, identify the problems and solve them.

"They should engage certified playground safety inspectors (CPSI) to work with contractors in the installation and maintenance of playgrounds," she says.

The study by PSAM, conducted for the Public Complaints Bureau, surveyed public playgrounds in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Negri Sembilan in July last year.

During a national seminar on playgrounds last year, Public Complaints Bureau director-general Datuk Harjeet Singh had said there were a total of 11,231 complaints regarding playgrounds received by local authorities between 2015 and 2016.

Based on data from the Health Ministry, 530 children were discharged from public hospitals after suffering from falls involving playground equipment between 2014 and 2016.

Harjeet suggests that local authorities carry out mandatory yearly audits on parks.

"The findings of such checks should be the reference for local authorities to allocate budgets in repairing, upgrading and maintaining playgrounds," he says.

The bureau also suggests that each local council have officers who are qualified CPSI and for advocacy programmes to be conducted to deter vandalism.

To set a benchmark on safety nationwide, the Department of Standards Malaysia has updated standards that public playgrounds should adhere to.

Three Malaysian Standards on playground equipment and surfacing were approved in January last year.

National Landscape Department deputy director-general (development) Rotina Mohd Daik says the new standards are a comprehensive update to the 2001 version.

One of the changes is increasing the minimum thickness of surfacing material from 25mm up

to 100mm, depending on the fall height.

"Thicker surfacing will result in less impact for children and reduce risks of head injuries.

"Ideally, the whole play area should be covered with rubberised surfacing instead of just certain places like the landing areas for slides," she explains.

The play area for swings should also have sufficient space between other equipment.

"The space between the swings and others should be double the height of the swing. So, if the swing is 2m tall, then the minimum clearance between the swing and other people or equipment should be 4m in length," Rotina says.

While the standards are in place, the next step is to engage local authorities so that they will apply it to playgrounds nationwide.

"We plan to meet all 149 local authorities nationwide by this year to get them to use the standards in the planning permission stage for playgrounds.

"We want them to embed these standards in the contracts for

developers and contractors. If they can do that, it will be a very good start in boosting playground safety," Rotina says.

Department of Standards Malaysia director-general Datuk Fadilah Baharin says the new standards were developed to ensure the quality of playgrounds.

"Standards not only protect users, but also manufacturers of playground equipment. Should there be any legal disputes, manufacturers can defend themselves by falling back on the standards which they have adhered to," she says.

It is currently not mandatory for local authorities to impose the standards but Fadilah hopes that they will consider it in their plans.

Noting that there is low awareness on playground safety, she urges parents to always supervise their children when they are at playgrounds.

"Parents should also ensure their kids are dressed in proper attire. Loose clothing or necklaces can get caught in the equipment," she says.



Potential danger: A see-saw with a protruding metal stand is a safety hazard for visitors to this public park.

Drug syringes and suspicious characters

SOME parents have become wary of bringing their kids to playgrounds after finding their conditions to be below par.

Mother of two boys, Jasmn Choy, has even found drug syringes in a playground.

"It is very thin, something that some parents may not be able to notice," says Choy, who is an administrator of Facebook parenting group Malaysia Education Info.

She says an added danger is the exposed rusty metal in many playgrounds.

"Based on my experience, parents will accompany kids to the playground and they know which ones are faulty. So they will stay away from it.

"Such unused playgrounds will then become wasted resources," says Choy, 46.

She also notices the uneven flooring in play areas, which could put children at risk of injuries.

Suggesting that playground sets be equipped with awnings to provide shade, Choy points out that doing this will enable kids to play much longer.

"I was in Sydney with my kids and I loved the awnings used to keep the sun away. I think kids need that.

"Playing builds imagination and muscles," she says, adding that playgrounds in Australia also came with fences to prevent the little ones from running out onto busy roads.

Tailor and father of two Lee Kian Loong finds public parks to be rather rundown and isn't comfortable with the idea of bringing his children there.

He says he normally brings his kids to the private playground in his guarded community, which is well-maintained.

"Most public playgrounds do not look safe, especially if the equipment is rusty.

"Who knows if the metal chains may break while your kid is sitting on the swing?" he says.

Lee, 33, also claims that some public playgrounds are frequented by suspicious-looking characters, which may put off families from going there.

Fomca secretary-general Datuk Paul Selvaraj says the poor state of playgrounds should be addressed quickly as Malaysians want their children to play in somewhere safe.

"I have seen many playgrounds in dire conditions. Often times, the equipment is rusty, while some are broken and have sharp edges jutting out.

"The springs on see-saws and rockers are sometimes uneven, making it questionable whether they can bear a child's weight," he says.

While resident associations can lodge complaints about the bad conditions, he says it is up to the local authorities to act on them.

"Local councils should make playground safety a priority.

"People will avoid playgrounds which are defective as parents won't feel safe bringing their kids there.

"This defeats the purpose of why they are set up in the first place," Paul says.