

Full impact of playground fall felt

New playground safety standards that came into effect in July will address the installation, use and maintenance of playground equipment. It is hoped they will prevent some of the 1000-plus hospitalisations that occur each year in the five to 14 age group as a result of falls from playground equipment. One thirteen-year-old Aucklander has spent the last four months discovering first-hand the full impact of a playground fall:

Tom's story

"I climbed a mountain with no safe route of return and fell, as many adventurers do. It was a cold, stormy afternoon in Thames. While Mum was grocery shopping I decided I might just have a play in the playground. As I reached the summit of the man-made mountain I realised the steps down were too small to use. In a minute of desperation I made a run for it hoping to have a nice landing. Suddenly I was on the ground and I could hear the snap of my leg. I called to my sister, 'I think I broke my leg.'

"Since then I have had thirteen weeks in plaster. During the first six or seven of these weeks I couldn't get into a car, have a shower, or get changed without help. When I got my knee-high plaster things became slightly easier. I could move around by myself but, because I had been in the longer plaster, my knee had seized up making it hard to move. As the weeks went by my knee began to feel better and I could walk small distances without my crutches. During the term I had my plaster on I couldn't do PE or play sport. I had to miss out on playing hockey for the whole year as the session finished this term. Trying to get through the corridors on the slippery vinyl floor at school was horrible: amongst the crowd people

can't see that you have a broken leg and you get swept away and pushed around.

"As the day came to get my cast off I thought I would be able to walk and run in a couple of weeks. The days rolled by and I still couldn't walk properly. After one week Mum decided I should have physiotherapy to speed up the healing process. Six weeks down the track and I'm still having physio to loosen up my ankle. I am just beginning to be able to run as the muscles in my leg are getting stronger but my ankle is still sore when I walk."

Tomas Ussher (13)

Safe challenges needed - a mother's perspective

"When Tomas fell in the Thames playground I put it down to playful exuberance, a young boy wanting a challenge and climbing a 'mountain'. However, when I later discovered that there had been no safe route down barring the run and jump that cost him four months of pain and discomfort I decided to follow it up. My main concern had been the lack of depth of bark in the surface of the playground, which may have contributed to the severity of Tomas's injury.

"When initially contacted, the Thames Council was slow to respond but after a follow up e-mail from me at work I received the following advice: 'The council's consulting engineers have examined the "mountain" and compared its dimensions to NZ safety standards and have found that for it to fully comply it will require extensive modification such as the addition of rails and a reduction in height. An initial consideration was given to immediately removing the mountain. As the community was involved in its

construction through service organisations our interim measure has been to arrange for the mountain to be barricaded off with warning signs erected. The community will then be consulted to determine the mountain's future.' The issue of the depth of the bark however, was not addressed.

"A month later came a further response. Ross Pennington, Area Manager, Thames Council stated that 'after the mountain was temporarily barricaded off one of our engineers provided us with a specific report as to what modifications were going to be required to bring the mountain up to the required standards. The raft of modifications required, mainly because of its height above ground, meant that they would substantially change the nature of the apparatus. This, together with the cost of the modifications, led the community board to decide that the mountain would be removed completely and replaced with new apparatus designed with current safety requirements. Even properly barricading the apparatus off until it could be modified was going to cost an estimated \$900, money considered to be better spent on new equipment.' He concluded with this statement. 'We were in the process of planning for a new skateboard park near the area of the mountain. Most of them are specifically designed to "challenge" the users - how far should this challenge go? How do communities provide "safe" challenges for some that are not for others e.g. younger/lesser skill levels?'



Weeks of pain, discomfort and loss of independence were amongst the after effects of 13 year-old Tom Ussher's fall

"I feel he brings up a very valid point. I can only conclude that if safety standards are followed then the severity of the injury rather than the risk is reduced. The measures necessary to ensure that public playground facilities are not dangerous could lead to taking all the risk-based fun out of the equipment. After all, kids need to learn about danger. What is needed is to construct equipment that in some way says to the user 'Hey! You need to take care' while putting in place measures that reduce the impact of any falls, such as ensuring that standards relating to surface characteristics are adhered to."

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