

Free UAB service to help parents advocate for safer playgrounds, gyms

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Simple tools developed by researchers in the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Department of Human Studies will help parents and teachers identify potential dangers on playgrounds and in gymnasiums and give them the means to lobby for safer conditions.

The tools consist of two checklists that list a series of questions about the conditions of facilities and equipment on playgrounds and in gymnasiums. The checklists are available at no cost on the UAB Center for Educational Accountability [Web site](#).

"Our intent is to make the checklists available to anyone for free so that parents, teachers and others can advocate for safer playgrounds at PTA, PTO, school board or city council meetings," said UAB Professor of [Health Education](#) Brian F. Geiger Ed.D., FAAHE. "Parents also can use it to take action if it is a home play area that needs improvements for child safety."

Estimates of annual emergency room visits to treat children's playground injuries range from 50,000 to 200,000, according to a 2005 U.S. Consumer Product & Safety Commission report.

Disturbed by the high rates of playground injuries, UAB researchers and their physical and health education students developed a service-learning activity in which they examined 52 school and community playgrounds and 45 gyms across Alabama. The research team identified safety hazards at nearly all of the locations they visited, Geiger said. The results

were published in the *Californian Journal of Health Promotion* last year. The project eventually led the UAB faculty to make the playground and gym safety checklists available to the public.

Many of the public and school playgrounds they surveyed had broken or missing equipment and poor maintenance that may lead to serious injuries, Geiger said. The researchers found playgrounds that were built over asphalt or concrete rather than surfaces that can cushion a child's fall. Other hazards included broken or missing rungs on ladders, swings in which a child's hair or clothing could become entangled, exposed metal slides in direct sunlight that could lead to burns, sandboxes littered with broken glass, needles or other trash and playground equipment with excessive rust, splintered wood and exposed hardware connectors.

In gymnasiums, broken bleachers, blocked fire exits and inoperable fire alarms are also safety violations to watch for, said UAB Assistant Professor of Physical Education Sandra K. Sims, Ph.D.

"It's important, for example, for school gyms to have a place where students can get hydrated after a physical education class," Sims said. "Oftentimes in gyms you will see water fountains that are not in working order or they are filthy."

Geiger said he hopes that the assessment tools will bring more attention to [playground](#) and gym safety to ensure that more children are able to play in safe environments.

"Parents are the first health educators for children, and we as parents want our children to be active and not at risk for obesity or chronic diseases," said Geiger. "So we also have the responsibility to make sure that where we send them to be active is safe."

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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