

Cell phones take parents' attention away from kids on playgrounds

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Parents who take their kids to the playground may be tempted to pull out their cell phone to send a quick text or check Facebook. It may be more prudent, however, to stay focused on their child to ensure he or she plays safely, according to two studies to be presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) annual meeting in San Diego.

More than 200,000 children ages 14 and younger are treated in U.S. emergency rooms each year for playground-related injuries, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Previous studies have shown that parents who are distracted at home are less likely to supervise their kids. Electronic devices are a growing source of distraction, but their impact on parental supervision at the playground has not been studied.

To examine the types of distractions, including electronic devices that can interfere with supervision, two researchers observed [caregivers](#) and children at seven New York playgrounds. They also sought to determine whether children took more risks when their caregivers were distracted.

The researchers randomly selected caregivers with only one child who appeared to be between the ages of 18 months and 5 years. One researcher observed the caregiver for 10-20 minutes and recorded four behaviors every two minutes: visual supervision, auditory supervision, engagement with the child and distraction. The other researcher observed how often the child took risks.

The researchers observed 50 caregiver/child pairs and recorded 371 two-minute episodes. Caregivers were distracted during 74 percent of these episodes. Most of the distractions, however, were considered mild, with the majority of the adult's attention focused on the child.

Surprisingly, cell phones were not the biggest distraction. Talking with other adults accounted for 33 percent of all distractions, while [electronic devices](#) such as cell phones were responsible for 30 percent. The remaining 37 percent of distractions included eating, drinking, looking in a book bag/purse, reading and other activities.

"Caregivers in general are doing a fine job supervising their children on the playground. However, increased awareness of limiting [electronic distractions](#) and other activities that may interfere with supervision should be considered," said study author Ruth Milanaik, DO, director of the neonatal neurodevelopmental follow-up program, Cohen Children's Medical Center (CCMC), New York.

Meanwhile, 30 percent of the children engaged in risk-taking behaviors, including walking up the slide, throwing sand, sliding head first, pushing other children and jumping off moving swings. Children whose caregivers were distracted were significantly more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Researchers observed five falls, three of which occurred while a caregiver was distracted. None of the children was seriously injured.

"This study demonstrates that children regularly engage in risk-taking behaviors regardless of the distraction level of their caregivers. They are, however, more likely to do so when their caregivers are distracted," said study author Anna Krevskaya, third-year fellow in the Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics Department at CCMC.

In addition to focusing on their child, caregivers should discuss proper

use of playground equipment to help decrease accidents and increase playground etiquette, Dr. Milanaik said.

"Sometimes [children](#) will get injured despite the closest supervision, and this is a part of natural growing and learning," Dr. Milanaik said.

"However, all efforts should be made by caregivers to keep these incidents to a minimum."

Dr. Krevskaya will present "Playground Observation Study: Come, Play, Put Your Electronic Device Away" from 9-9:15 a.m. Saturday, April 25, and "Relationship between Caregiver Distractions and Children's Risk Taking Behaviors on a Playground" from 8:30-8:45 a.m. Sunday, April 26. To view the study abstracts, go to http://www.abstracts2view.com/pas/view.php?nu=PAS15L1_1165.5 and http://www.abstracts2view.com/pas/view.php?nu=PAS15L1_2175.3

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