

Supervised Play Areas

A false sense of security ?

by Margarita Kornell

Our children are the most precious people in our lives and looking after them is a demanding occupation with a high level of responsibility.

Many malls offer to lighten a parent's childcare load during shopping by providing supervised play areas for children. 'Supervised' is a strong, reassuring word, implying a sufficient level of safety with competent adult carers. Yet I have heard two tragic personal stories recently, which made me ask the question, "How safe are such supervised play areas really?"

A search for guiding principles

Knowing that the Swiss Daycare Association (*Schweizerischer Krippen-Verband*) has some guidelines for looking after children who are of a pre-kindergarten age (up to 4 ½ yrs), I had expected to find similar rules for supervised play areas. My search began at the federal level with the Swiss Council of Accident Prevention (*Schweizerische Beratungsstelle für Unfallverhütung BFU*). Not finding sufficient information, I continued to the cantonal level, then to the local level and was finally directed to an insurance company, who completed the circle by sending me back to the federal level. The results of my research became clear.

No security guidelines

Currently there are no security guidelines for supervised play areas in Switzerland, except for European regulations regarding equipment safety. This means that each shopping centre makes its own policy regarding supervision, admission, age range, suitable personnel, rules of acceptable behaviour, etc. The businesses are not obliged to adhere to the Swiss Day-care Association guidelines, nor are their policies checked by independent agents.

A shopping centre is a busy public place, with people from all walks of life, varying social levels and backgrounds. Its play area attendants typically do not know the children, nor vice versa. Nor do the children know each other. Effectively, a child in such a play area is among complete strangers. An environment of this type requires a high amount of caution. Therefore, one would expect an adequate level of organised supervision on the part of the shopping centre. However, because there are no guidelines, the level of supervision can vary considerably between each play area.

Common sense considerations

So how can parents be sure that adequate play area policies are set up and are being observed at a particular location?

My suggestion is for parents to be on the alert, use their intuition and check the play area each time before dropping a child off. Below are some common sense security considerations:

How many attendants are actively looking after the children?

One attendant is not enough, even at off-peak times, when there are very few children in the play area – there should be a minimum of two employees present, so that one person can fully tend to the children, while the other guards the entrance and takes care of administrative tasks such as check in or check out. That way, if one of the children needs urgent one-on-one care, all the other children are not left unattended.

Walking around the play area to actively check on children should be part of at least one attendant's job, so that potential conflicts or other serious issues can be sorted out, before they get out of hand.

Do the attendants look experienced and able?

Some play areas require their employees to have special qualifications in child care, but it is not obligatory. So it is worth while noting how the attendants behave towards the children.

The Carer:Child ratio is equally important.

In crèches, two carers need to be present for a group of 8-10 children. However, in some supervised play areas, one carer looks after up to 20 children, while in others more than 20 children per carer are allowed and the attendant is left to decide, when there are too many children. There should also be a limit for the maximum number of children on the play area premises, as well as an appropriate length of play sessions.

At peak times, when there are more kids, the attendants are stressed and there is a slightly higher risk of accidents happening. However, at off peak times, attendants may be less aware. In addition, when there are only a few kids, safety-in-numbers is reduced among the children. So there are fewer kids who could report unusual behaviour to the attendants.

What is the children's age range and the admission procedure?

Each play area has a slightly different age range policy. Some admit children from 2-7 years of age, some from 3-8 years of age, some may admit older children.

The problem with a wide age range is that some of the older children are capable of seriously hurting or mistreating the youngest children on purpose. Currently, most play areas do not require any sort of official identification to check the

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child's age, so a small ten year old could pass for an eight year old.

Also, only the person who checks a child into the play area should be able to pick the child up.

What is the play room layout like?

Are there any niches in the play room which are hidden from easy view of the attendants? If the attendants are not able to see how the children are playing there, it is very difficult to supervise them properly. How easy is it to obtain unauthorized access to the play area?

How are toilets supervised?

An attendant should be able to know quickly if a child or group of children "got stuck" there for some reason.

A video surveillance camera in the play area may give an extra sense of security, as it can be important in determining the sequence of events when trying to discover how a problem occurred. However, a video camera cannot and should not replace an attendant's job. In fact, a supervised children's play area may not be under video surveillance at all, as it might be considered a low risk place, even though other parts of the mall do have video cameras.

What is the policy about unacceptable behaviour from children?

Attendants must be able to see and identify inappropriate behaviour quickly. Would an attendant intervene if there is violence, racism, mobbing, or other unacceptable and unsafe behaviour, or are the children left to sort it out between themselves?

"But kids need to learn how to get on with others in life," I often hear in discussions. However, the approach of leaving children to sort issues out by themselves only works in situations where the children, their carers and their parents already know each other and understand a peaceful way of living. Because of the public nature of a shopping centre play area, where nobody knows anybody, there might be children on its premises who have been abused throughout their lives or who have witnessed serious violence first hand. Unfortunately, their behaviour is highly likely to reflect their life experience – they may pick a victim on whom to exert brutality or sexual abuse.

Small children are unable to defend themselves when faced with excessive violence from bigger kids, hence the understandable need for a responsible adult to protect the children and set the rules for acceptable behaviour. It should not be necessary to take a little child to the hospital emergency ward as a result of forced 'games' in a supervised environment.

Learning by shopping

If you feel that your children will not be adequately supervised or sufficiently comfortable in a play area on a particular day, spend some family time shopping all together instead. The children will see things, learn things and just as importantly learn patience as well as shopping – whether it be for

food, clothing or household products. They will learn how to behave in a shopping centre and enjoy the situation they are in. It is a continuing part of their learning experience.

To summarize

Currently the level of supervision can vary considerably between each shopping centre play area, as there are no common security guidelines, except for European regulations regarding equipment safety. So parents need to be aware of that, use their intuition and check a play area carefully each time. A supervised play area needs to be trustworthy and employ realistic and adequate security measures that fit to today's society, because although risks are part of life, the unnecessary risks can be reduced or eliminated.

"Children must be protected from ... injury or abuse ... including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents or ... any other person...."

Article 19 of the UNICEF
Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Links

The Guidelines of the Swiss Day-care Association
(*der Schweizerische Krippen-Verband, Association des Crèches Suisses*)

http://www.krippenverband.ch/FS_UeberUns.htm

"Kinderspielplätze" – Artikel der Schweizerischen Beratungsstelle für Unfallverhütung (BFU)

http://www.bfu.ch/pdf/s_handbuch/einzelne/kindersp.pdf

UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child

http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30160.html

Note: My research included four main shopping centres around the Zurich area. Because three of them are chains, my findings can be extended to the rest of the country. ■

About the author: Margarita Kornell is a mother, an IT professional and an independent writer specialising in articles about children and stories for children. She has lived and worked in Britain, Russia, USA and Switzerland. Currently she lives in the Zurich area with her family.