Are schools safer for children than public places?

A K Maitra, G Sweeney

Abstract

Objective—To investigate the frequency and severity of accidents to children in schools.

Methods—Retrospective analysis of accidents occurring in school over a six month period and resulting in attendance at an accident and emergency department. Comparison was made with accidents occurring in public places.

Results—During the study period there were 127 school and 251 public place accidents causing fractures or dislocations requiring hospital treatment in 3–16 year old children; 22–4% (127/567) of all injuries at school resulted in fractures or dislocations, as opposed to 20–8% (251/1197) of those sustained in public places.

Conclusions—Injuries at school are a cause for concern as they occur in a supervised environment and this should be the target of accident prevention measures.

Key terms: school; accident; prevention; fractures/dislocations

Accidental injury to children is a common occurrence; however, accidents in schools have not been as widely investigated as those occurring at home or in road traffic accidents. In 1969, Dale et al1 raised questions concerning safety at school. Since then several studies2–4 have described the nature and causes of school accidents in children, have found that fractures and dislocations occur frequently, and have suggested preventive measures.

We retrospectively investigated the frequency and severity of accidents to children in schools where the environment is assumed to be safe and activities supervised compared to those sustained in public places, where children are not generally supervised so as to further highlight the importance of dealing with these serious injuries in schools.

Results

During a period of six months, 567 school and 1197 public place accident victims attended the accident and emergency (A&E) department: 127 (22–4%) school and 251 (20–9%) public place accidents caused fractures or dislocation.

The mean and median age (years) of the children was 11–2 and 12 (school) and 10–4 and 11 (public place), respectively. Older children (11–16 years) were more involved in school injuries (figure). Among girls, the 11–16 year olds sustained more injuries in school (67–4%) than in public places (33–7%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site of injury</th>
<th>School (n = 127)</th>
<th>Public place (n = 251)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head/neck</td>
<td>4 (3–2)</td>
<td>4 (1–6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arm/shoulder</td>
<td>7 (5–5)</td>
<td>21 (8–6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forearm/elbow</td>
<td>10 (7–9)</td>
<td>28 (11–2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrist</td>
<td>36 (28–3)</td>
<td>99 (39–4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand</td>
<td>12 (9–5)</td>
<td>19 (7–6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digit</td>
<td>36 (28–3)</td>
<td>41 (16–5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trunk</td>
<td>9 (6)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower limb</td>
<td>2 (1–6)</td>
<td>9 (3–6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankle and foot</td>
<td>20 (15–7)</td>
<td>30 (11–9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P = 0.02.
Fractures and dislocations may require a prolonged period of treatment, can cause morbidity in children due to growth plate involvement, and result in loss of school time for educational, recreational, and sporting activities.

Measures are required to prevent or substantially reduce these serious school injuries. A target reduction of 10–20% of these fractures/dislocations might be achieved at individual school level by closely monitoring the causes of these injuries and increasing awareness. By involving everyone, including the children, sensible preventive measures could be formulated, without the need for extra resources.

Practical preventive measures may include targeting specific age and sex groups (older girls), when, during school hours, the majority of accidents happen (during lessons, break-time, and so on), geographical areas of school frequently involved in accidents (gym, playground), surface (for example, wood, concrete), and specific activities (for example, football, netball).

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London WC2A 3PN
For further information contact: Ms Sally Jenner, Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland, 9 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3RA. (Tel 0171 631 1650.)
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