

Child stuck by hypodermic needle in Panhandle playground

PARK PANHANDLE

Rec and Park, police say more funds needed to ensure safety

BY KAREN POJMANN

Neighborhood Correspondent

The increasingly infamous playground in the Golden Gate Park Panhandle became a renewed source of worry among neighbors recently when two children found a hypodermic needle while playing in the playground sand.

According to the Panhandle Residents Organization, one of the children was poked with a needle, and a syringe was found in the other child's mouth. Both were rushed to an emergency room for treatment and blood tests, and both are reportedly in good health, though they will have to undergo blood tests for the next several months to rule out possible contraction of HIV, hepatitis, and other diseases.

The incident upset Panhandle-area residents, many of whom have long complained about the proliferation of drug use and drug dealing on the long strip of greenery that runs between Oak and Fell streets.

"This is no longer a safe place for children," said Mary Helen Briscoe of the Panhandle Residents Organization.

Though few hypodermic needles discarded in the area actually puncture or injure the casual park-goer, the incident is certainly not the first time a needle used for intrave-

nous drugs has been found in the playground. In an effort to reduce risks to residents, the PRO has requested city government-initiated improvements and crime deterrents in the park, including better lighting, increased police patrols, and — if possible — surveillance cameras.

"This park is owned and run by the city, and the city should be held responsible," Briscoe said.

But what some Panhandle parents want and what city departments can actually provide are different matters. Representatives from both the Police Department and the Department of Recreation and Parks said they're underfunded and understaffed and do what they can to ensure park safety using the resources they have.

Park Station police captain John Newlin said officers keep a regular watch on the Panhandle.

"We have officers there day and night," Newlin said. "We run patrols constantly."

Police officers also make frequent arrests, station undercover officers in the area, and observe activity from parked cars.

Local laws also provide a safeguard against illegal activity in playgrounds by prohibiting adults from entering the playground unless accompanied by a child — an offense to which police respond first with a warning and then with a citation.

Marijuana arrests most common

Newlin said that while intravenous drug use undoubtedly takes

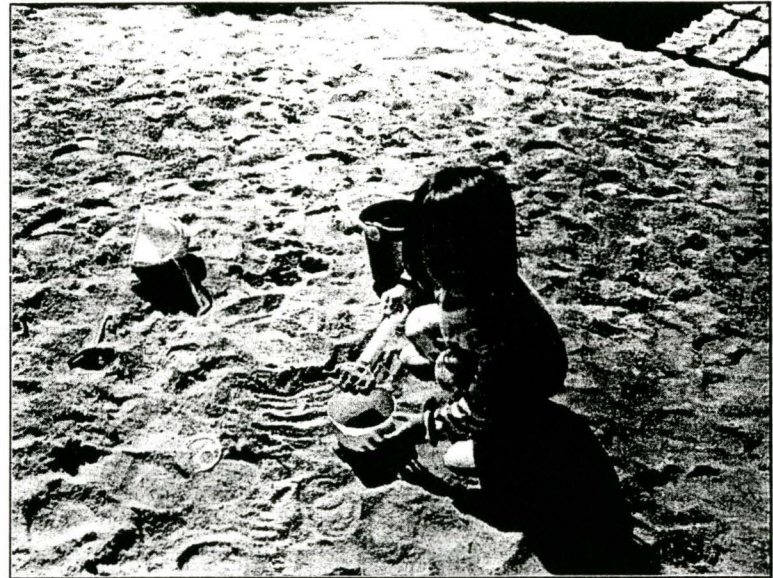


PHOTO: RORY MCNAMARA

SAND LAND: Two-year-old Cheryl Lee plays in the sand at the Panhandle Playground, near Ashbury Street.

HAIGHT ASHBURY VF

PLAYGROUND: Needle stick worries parents

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place in the Panhandle, most area drug use does not involve hard drugs. About 95 percent of drug-related arrests in the Panhandle are for marijuana use, possession, and, less frequently, sale, he said.

Jim Cooney, assistant superintendent of parks, agreed that though any incident of a needle found in playground sand is a serious problem, it's not a particularly frequent occurrence. The sand in the Panhandle playground is inspected daily, and Rec and Park gardeners are provided with special equipment for disposal of needles and other dangerous objects. Most are also trained in hepatitis prevention.

"It's a fact of life not just in the Panhandle or Golden Gate Park but in all neighborhood parks — the problem of hard drug use and the

needles that accompany it," Cooney said. "We have a legal and moral responsibility to keep our units as clean and safe as possible."

The needle incident is the latest in a series of problems that have afflicted the Panhandle playground. Last summer, the old, wooden playground was torn down and replaced with the current Saturn Corporation-donated plastic structure, which was supposed to meet current safety standards and be easily adjusted to meet with Americans with Disabilities Act standards. Since then, countless neighbors have complained that some parts of the playground don't work or that the new, swingless

playground is less fun than the old one. In March, Rec and Park employees tried to install mats to make the equipment meet ADA standards, closing the playground for a month, but found that the equip-

ment had been incorrectly installed by Saturn and neighborhood volunteers. Rec and Park plans to install swings on the Panhandle and to make another effort at accessibility within the next few months.