

Incorporating Facility Controls

Gerald J. Merola
Amusement Entertainment Management, LLC
12/24/00

When I was a child growing up in a metropolitan area, my parents didn't have to think twice about allowing me to venture about in large retail stores or amusement parks. It seemed as though there wasn't much concern about the risk of abduction or inappropriate outside influences. Times have changed, however, and as a parent of a lively 2 1/2-year-old, I can say with much certainty that such childhood freedoms have been greatly curtailed. Maybe it's a general feeling of uneasiness caused by the media's greater presence in detailing events involving children, or perhaps a heightened sense of responsibility in protecting the young and innocent. Whichever the reason, I believe most parents today share in this sentiment.

Enter the world of family fun centers. Without a doubt, the fun center concept offers parents a welcome venue at which to enjoy some leisure time with their kids. But let's not forget that we live in a world of strangers, which add to this sense of anxiety when visiting a busy facility on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Today I speak from the vantage point of the parent, in sharing concerns and observations regarding fun center operations. The areas most important to me are:

Good Visibility

Nothing is more stressful to the parent of a young child than the struggle to keep a youngster in view. Many facilities have addressed this problem by placing seating areas and benches near popular attractions that are geared toward younger age groups. This is critically important, as most parents expect to remain in their child's line of sight. When this becomes unavailable to the parent, the attraction becomes unavailable to the child.

Competency of Staff

A thriving economy has caused great challenges in our industry in obtaining not only experienced, but seasoned staff members. Nothing is worse than putting your child in the hands of an individual that knows little, or cares little, about safety. I've observed too many ride operators that fail to check each child's restraint strap, close the entrance gate, or announce the start of a ride. Many of the incidents ("accidents") that have occurred over the years may have partially resulted from operator error. As a parent, I'm aware of this fact, and therefore expect the staff at a chosen entertainment facility to address the issue of safety as priority one.

Presence of Management

As we're all aware, a facility will not run itself. In fact, a facility's staff is only as good as the managers that control it. As a patron, the presence of managerial staff members on the attraction floor is a reassuring site, as it tells me that the facility has adopted standards that are under close scrutiny. General and assistant managers offer their greatest impact when communicating with guests and working alongside other staff members. In cases where I've experienced a problem, such as a lost coin, ticket, or merchandise item, a quick-thinking manager always seems to resolve the problem swiftly and effectively. In instances where a manager has not been available, some of the smallest issues have either gone unresolved or created a lengthy delay before resolution. Clearly, today's consumers expect prompt service without the red tape associated in not dealing with a "decision maker".

Establishing Safety Standards

Not all attractions are created equal. As such, a facility operator must carefully shop and compare not only the "entertainment value" associated with a component, but the "safety value" as well. Most manufacturers of late have done a good job of creating a schedule of minimum height or weight requirements necessary for a patron to participate in the ride or attraction. These are only effective, however, if the facility's staff have been trained to follow these standards. Other influences have an effect on safety, such as patrons that are inebriated or under the influence of controlled substances. These individuals represent a hazard to all participants, including the facility's staff. Any individual that appears "out of sorts" must be prevented from utilizing a facility's attractions, and if necessary, escorted from the premises. There is no level of spending from such an individual that can compensate for the potential damage to equipment and/or potential safety hazard to others. It's just not worth it.

Safety Training

We all hope that it never happens, but if an accident or injury occurs on premises, a well-trained staff is your best defense against such events. Every staff member, whether full-time, part-time, or seasonal, must know what to do when an incident unfolds. Two-way communicators appear to be the quickest method of alerting management to such conditions, and allows supporting team members to each complete their particular roles simultaneously. While there is no substitute for actual experience, frequently staged safety practices allow the facility's staff to act upon their training and perfect their skills.

Team members should be evaluated constructively during these exercises and provided with tips on improving response times, reducing distractions, and controlling other patrons. Most importantly, every team member has a function during an emergency, whether it be direct aid to the injured, communication with local first aid services, patron control, or media control. Media control? Yes, if left to the media, even a minor mishap can be turned into tomorrow's cover story. When possible, a specific team member should be assigned to handle media relations, and be prepared to comment on the facility's safety program. The only thing worse than experiencing an accident on premises is leaving it to the press to interpret the facts.

Ask The "Eyes and Ears" What They Think

While we can all speculate about what the parents of today search for in the way of safety, the best way to narrow down the list is ask them. Simple questionnaires, face-to-face conversations, and even "focus group" get-togethers with frequent facility users can reveal a great deal of much needed information from the people most important to us. They can tell us information about the facility's staff and attractions that we may never see, or worse, falsely assume. So, as we launch ourselves into a new year, please take some time to review the safety controls in your facility; after all, the safer our industry becomes, the greater the likelihood that we will each prosper.