"BEST PRACTICE" Opinion: Winter Use

Question: Shall I be closing my playstructure/playspace during winter months?
Answer: Yes, No…er...Maybe?

Sorry, yet however simple that question is the answer is extremely complicated and subjective. Daily visual inspection of the playspace conditions should be included at all times throughout the year, however through the winter months this requirement is much stronger.

The Canadian Playground Standard, CSA-Z614, includes a simple clause within it's text that clearly and simply places the onus (and liability) of that decision directly onto the owner/operator to make.

CAN/CSA-Z614, National Standard of Canada for Children's Playspaces and Equipment

Section 10 – Surfacing
Sub-section 10.4 *Maintenance of Protective Surfacing*
Clause 10.4.10 *Winter weather conditions reduce the effectiveness of surfacing materials. These conditions shall be considered by the owner/operator.*

Section 11 – Inspection and Maintenance
Sub-section 11.3.2 *Daily/Weekly Visual Inspection*
A visual inspection shall be performed by the owner, maintenance inspector, caregiver, or custodian on a daily basis, if possible, or at least once a week, to identify defects or emerging problems.

Many factors contribute to the decision to close off your playspace/playstructure from use.
Note: calendar time of year is not one of them!

- ✓ **Temperature:**
  Below zero Celsius temperatures alone are not a significant factor. It is only when freezing temperatures are combined with water that icing of the playstructure and/or surfacing occurs.
  Note: It is a requirement of the standard (clause 15.17) that playstructures and play platforms shall be designed to eliminate the potential for "ponding" or water accumulation. Protective surfacing also has a requirement to drain water (clause 10.4.8) However; snow accumulation and rapid freeze-thaw cycles make ice build up inevitable on both the playstructure and the protective surfacing.
  Recommendation: If accumulated snow/ice is visible on either the playstructure or the surfacing than the playspace should be considered closed for use.
- ✓ **Snow Build Up:**
  Regardless of how well your playstructure is designed, snow accumulation will occur. This snow accumulation may lead to ice build up when compacted, and may also change the playstructure dimensions enough that significant hazards are present. (ie; railing heights, entrapment openings, stair tread heights, etc)
  Recommendation: If snow build-up is significantly present on your playstructure and/or surfacing than the playspace should be considered closed for use.
- ✓ **Wet/Damp Surfaces:**
  Wet/damp surfaces are commonly found all year. However, when combined with winter temperatures the hazards/risks are much higher. Climbing rungs are harder to grasp. Steps and platforms are more slippery. Slides are significantly faster. Firepoles become straight-down falls as grip-friction is an integral part of their safe design.
  Recommendation: Monitor the children at play. If their ability to use the playstructure "as-designed/intended" is significantly reduced, than the playspace should be considered closed for use.
- ✓ **Winter Clothing:**
  Bulky winter clothing is arguably one of the most serious hazards found on a playground. Synthetic materials slide faster. Mittens and gloves significantly reduce grip strength. Bulky clothing changes the anthropometric measurement limits that the structure is based on (ie, opening widths). Bulky clothing limits flexibility and severely restricts rapid recovery movement. Last, but not least…scarves, pockets, hoods, and drawstrings become significant and often critical (life threatening) entanglement hazards!
  Recommendation: Monitor the children at play. If the temperatures and/or conditions require them to be significantly "bundled up" than the playspace should be considered closed for use.

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