

PLAYLAND

At Playland, safety's definitely not just fun and games

Amusement parks may be great family entertainment, but they also have a serious side, as large workplaces where employees and members of the public interact in and around massive high-speed machinery.



This aspect is rarely thought of by visitors to Playland in Vancouver, but safety is never forgotten at the 9-acre operation on the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) site. The PNE is the province's largest employer of young workers — 2,500 employees work seasonally to supplement the 1000 year-round employees. In particular the Rides Department in Playland has a work force that jumps from 150 employees in April to 350 employees in July and August. Approximately 90% of these employees are under the age of 24.

With approximately 1,360,000 guests visiting Playland each year, it is surprising how infrequently injuries occur. Each year there are approximately 50 guests and 15 employees who are injured on-site. According to Adam Hamzagic the park's Manager of Rides, the vast majority of these incidents result in minor injuries.

The PNE has developed a training program for Rides employees that features safety as a key component. The PNE believes that this training program is a key reason why injury rates are so low. Last year, the PNE received an award sponsored by WorkSafeBC from the Canadian Society of Safety Engineering under the category Best Training/Orientation Program for Young and New Workers.

Hamzagic knows first-hand how important proper training is for new employees. He started his career at Playland as a 16 year-old ride attendant in 1979, became a foreperson five years later and moved into his current position in 1990. In that time, training has gone from “minimal” to award-winning.

“It took years of fine-tuning,” says Hamzagic, “but we now have a formal training program in place where rides employees receive 16 hours of training on both practical issues and theory. Each new worker then spends two full shifts with an experienced employee before being tested by a foreperson,” he explains. The trainers receive six hours of preparation, to understand how individuals learn differently and to reach out to them.”

Included in this training program, each employee also receives a training manual that covers everything from general corporate guidelines to very specific department safety requirements.

“We don’t rush new employees because they need to be comfortable,” says Hamzagic. If they don’t grasp something at first, it doesn’t mean they won’t be good employees. But if they’re not comfortable and knowledgeable, you’re setting yourself up for potential problems.

“Safety is non-negotiable”, he emphasizes. “Our employees keep that in mind, and everything follows from there.”

New Playland workers can be overwhelmed by the scale of the operation, with some rides attracting 10,000 people a day, especially at the height of the season.

While some new employees may have the skills to operate Kiddyland rides, most start by taking tickets and loading and unloading rides. They need to grow into operating “high-level rides” like the roller coaster, according to Hamzagic.

For anyone near Playland’s 48-year-old wooden coaster, that’s good news. But it shouldn’t be a surprise, given the park’s solid safety record for both workers and visitors.