

## Are children attending child play areas at risk of infectious diseases? What can be done?

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**Aims:** Child play areas can pose a risk to children of infectious diseases. The prolonged presence of micro-organisms in the environment has already been established. In order to quantify this risk, specific studies are required when carrying out a risk assessment.

**Methods:** In order to assess the microbiological hazard in play areas in Malta, a study was performed during 2005, which consisted of an examination of the hygienic practices carried out in play areas by means of face-to-face interviews; inspections of the premises; environmental sampling and testing, and a study on the awareness and attitudes of parents to risk factors (face-to-face interviews). Follow up studies were performed after recommendations on risk management were provided.

**Results:** Overall, the hygienic practices in play areas were satisfactory. Of the premises 66% were licensed, 55% of the food handlers were registered, appropriate cooking and cooling facilities were available for most of the premises, temperature control records were available at 80% of premises, 60% were using disinfectant for cleaning play area surfaces and monitoring of refrigerated vehicles was carried out by 60%. There was an overall improvement after recommendations were given.

At the first inspection, 67% of the premises were categorized as being fair and 33% as being good. On repeat inspection, after recommendations were made, the grading of the premises were: excellent 7%, satisfactory 33%, good 53% and fair 7%.

The results of the environmental swabs taken had low counts of indicator organisms indicating a good overall hygienic condition.

Parents stated that 58% of the areas were in good hygienic condition but lacked adequate hand-washing facilities for children. All parents agreed with the importance of hand hygiene and that infectious diseases can be transmitted via contaminated objects and from one person to another.

**Conclusion:** An effective control strategy needs to be implemented involving all stakeholders to ensure that effective hygienic practices in play areas are available to protect children from infectious diseases.

**Key Words:** Child play areas • control strategies • infectious diseases • risk assessment