

Fact Sheet 23: Hazards in the school environment

A guide for teacher aides, teachers and other school staff

A central component of work health and safety is understanding hazards: what they are, how to identify them, how to assess the risk they pose, and finally how to control or manage them.

A hazard is simply something that could cause an injury of some kind. Often hazards are in plain sight and they may seem innocent at first. For example, who would think that a piece of paper on the floor could cause an injury? But it can, and while it may sound somewhat comical, many people have been injured slipping on paper. Other hazards are less obvious such as those that are partially or fully concealed, or those that can gradually harm a person such as exposure to medium-high UV sunlight.

Below is a list of hazards that you may come across in your work as a TA. As you can see, some are easier to spot than others. Some are even outside of your direct control and they will need to be reported. This list is by no means complete – children engage in a large number of activities in any given year; and each activity comes with its own unique set of hazards and associated risks. Examples of hazards include:

- tripping hazards such as school bags on the floor
- slippery floors due to spills, items or loose flooring
- children using equipment that is heavy, sharp or has moving parts
- activities that involve heating or cooking
- children playing in rough or dangerous ways
- children throwing things at each other
- a person not following a rule or procedure
- a child running on hard ground
- loud noises (e.g., machinery)
- chemicals and medications within the reach of children
- sharp edges and corners
- pinch points between heavy or moving objects (e.g., moving desks)
- a broken, degraded or worn piece of equipment
- areas where repair, maintenance or construction work is taking place
- sunburn (including through a tinted window)

- lack of access to fresh water on a hot day
- heat stress from physical exertion and temperature extremes
- bites from animals and pests such as wasps and ants
- chemicals (including fumes and gases)
- biological hazards (e.g., faeces, animal waste, virus, fungi or mould)
- manual-handling tasks such as lifting something to store it on a high shelf
- working at heights (including using a ladder or a portable step)
- unprotected or damaged electrical wires
- violent or aggressive students, parents or intruders
- tasks that are highly repetitive or that involve an awkward posture
- procedures for a task that are improperly designed (or not designed at all)
- tasks that involve driving or being near traffic
- tasks you are not trained to undertake
- using equipment in ways it wasn't designed to be used
- strangers or intruders on school grounds
- a stressful or traumatic situation or event
- a traumatic event or series of events
- activities at unfamiliar or unusual locations (e.g., a zoo, historical site, etc.)
- water bodies (especially deep or fast water, and rips)
- psychological hazards (e.g., poor leadership, bullying, overwork, harassment).

Hint

Never give medication to a student (even a paracetamol or lozenge – you don't have permission from his or her parents to do so and you also don't know what allergies the student might have). Students requesting paracetamol should be sent to their teacher who will almost certainly send them to the front office.