

Family Entertainment Centers

VOLUME 3: SAFETY, MAINTENANCE AND REGULATORY ISSUES



A rock-climbing wall at Big Don's in New York. See page 6 for more on climbing-wall safety.

FECs

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The Price Is Right by Mike Bederka

FUNWORLD went into the field to ask FEC operators how they shop around for the best insurance rates and coverage for their facilities

Michael C. Getlan doesn't struggle when asked how family entertainment center operators can get the best insurance rates for their facilities. In fact, living up to his colorful job title, he barely lets the reporter finish the question. "The answer to that is very simple: You shop," says Getlan, director of enthusiasm and opportunity for Amusement Consultants Ltd., based in New Rochelle, New York.

He recommends three quotes as a "smart minimum"—a number echoed by Dorothy E. Lewis, vice president of marketing for Fun Station Associates in Danbury, Connecticut.

She also advocates soliciting all-inclusive carriers to limit the number of bills to pay. Certain insurance companies might not cover common activities such as roller skating or attractions such as inflatables.

In addition, contact industry-endorsed vendors first when doing the all-important shopping. "It's easier to use someone familiar with your business," Lewis

notes. "Others might not have the best knowledge of your industry and not give you the right coverage."

There's no need to reach out to a fly-by-night insurance company, Getlan adds. The amusement business has enough reputable, long-standing names that understand the intricacies and inherent risks of operating a successful FEC. "We're already speaking the same language," he says.

This language, however, may have different dialects.

After filling out numerous pages of paperwork, Companies X, Y, and Z will each give you a quote. If Company Z's figure soars above or dips well below the other two, take a close, hard look and examine all the details, Getlan stresses.

Make sure you're comparing apples to apples, and see what's covered and what the exceptions might be, he says,

because "you can't have one guy quoting you based on volume and the other guy on square footage."

The nature of the attractions and the number of customers constitute the two biggest factors that go into the prices a facility receives from vendors, Getlan explains. But, unlike amusement parks, most FECs are ungated, so sometimes the insurance companies may work from how much money you bring in.

He admits, though, it can be a bit of a mystery when you see the string of numbers that follow the dollar sign.

"For the most part, insurance is a blind item," Getlan says. "You don't really know why they come up with what they come up with."

However, don't be afraid to ask questions if you're displeased with the quote. Everything, to some extent, is negotiable, he says: "The rate may not be, but the conditions or criteria might."

If you're struggling with constantly high and headache-inducing bills, Lewis suggests working with

an insurance company that offers a safety and maintenance program. Some will do inspections to help make sure you're running your operation the safest way possible to help prevent future accidents from occurring. "It's in their interest to look at your track record, too," she says.

Finally, even after you sign a contract, it's always fair game to keep looking around at different vendors for any better deals that may be out there for the cost-conscious FEC operator, Getlan concludes.

"The wise person is constantly shopping," he says. "Complacency is a poor bedfellow. Always keep your ear to the ground and know what's going on."

Keep reading upcoming issues of FUNWORLD for our continuing coverage of insurance issues for FEC operators.

F.I.R.S.T. Program

IAAPA recently announced the debut of an insurance plan available to FEC members. The program, called F.I.R.S.T. (FECs, Insurance, Risk Management, Service, Training), includes the following: competitive insurance premiums, premium incentives for facilities with good safety and risk records, best-practices training, web-based claims reporting and tracking, on-site safety inspections and follow-up, plus more. For details, contact Dave Harris at American Specialty at +1 260/673-1115 or at dharris@amerspec.com.

Jump Around

by Mike Bederka

Inflatables have some family entertainment centers bouncing high

With inflatables, family entertainment center owners and operators hope their profits bounce along with their guests. That's exactly what's happening at Fieldstone Family Entertainment Center, where a 15-foot slide, part of an interactive play area for kids, has helped capture an audience too young for go-karts, laser tag, and many video games.

Chad Hooper, general manager of the Hiawassee, Georgia-based facility, believes the attraction has contributed nicely to the FEC's financial success. "It's another piece of the pie," he says. "I would hate to see it fail."

Doing some rough math, he estimates this play area, including a "foam factory" and inflatable slide, makes \$100,000 in 12 months. "If we would take it out today," Hooper says, "I think we would have a lot of customer complaints and probably a loss in business."

But what goes up must come down, and FEC management needs to be aware of the safety requirements, additional space, and maintenance issues that come along with these colorful, air-filled attractions.

Planning Ahead

Before Fieldstone even broke ground, an inflatable was in the blueprints. All FECs should try to have such forethought and have a designated spot in mind, experts agree.

"You can't make a spontaneous decision," stresses Phil Slaggert, president of Mobile Midway Safety Institute in Hobe Sound, Florida. "You can't just start planning on where to put it after you buy it."

Inflatables, whether a slide, obstacle course, or "moon bounce," have a large footprint, he reminds operators. In addition to the inflatable itself, space for the anchors, inflation tube, and exits and entrances must be factored in. Inflatables also have to be far enough away from other attractions and games in the FEC, so kids

Inflatable Rentals Dos and Don'ts

An inflatable can run owners thousands and thousands of dollars, but FECs can recoup some of those expenses by renting it out for backyard parties, corporate functions, or school events. For example, prices at Moonbounce Adventures in Pennsylvania start at \$225 for the day and go up from there. "The fancier, the more expensive it is," says owner Harry Bitzberger.

With rentals, though, FEC managers should be aware of some additional concerns, says Phil Slaggert, president of Mobile Midway Safety Institute. They may need more repairs because of the frequent set-up and tear-down. That's one of the reasons Bitzberger suggests buying higher-quality inflatables.

Plus, inflatable rentals are subject to local regulations as well as Consumer Product Safety Commission jurisdiction just like any portable amusement ride. "It's another layer of regulation they have to look out for," Slaggert says.

—Mike Bederka

don't bounce into other guests. Harry Bitzberger follows a general rule when talking about space allotment with other FEC operators. "If you want something that's really cool, it's going to eat up a couple hundred square feet," says the owner of Moonbounce Adventures, with three Pennsylvania locations.

Inflatables at IAAPA Attractions Expo

For more info on inflatables, check out Phil Slaggert's talk this month at IAAPA Attractions Expo 2007 in Orlando. The president of Mobile Midway Safety Institute will host the Inflation Insights Vendor Tour on Thursday, Nov. 15, from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. This event will "fast track" attendees to participating inflatable vendors who will demonstrate their products' benefits and features as well as discuss their service and finance plans. Participants also will receive a draft RFP for help in choosing the most appropriate vendor for their business needs. To see the full family entertainment center course track, visit www.iaapa.org/expos/attractions.

Facilities also must have enough ceiling space, notes Brian Field, president of Cutting Edge Creations Inc., an inflatable manufacturer in Eagan, Minnesota. Heights of 20 to 24 feet should accommodate most inflatables; anything less will limit options.

To aid owners with their designs, Cutting Edge will unveil a layout program at this month's IAAPA Attractions Expo 2007 in Orlando. This software will allow attendees to punch in their room dimensions, along with any center beams, doors, etc., and with 3-D graphics, they can tell which inflatables will fit where in a given FEC.

In addition to layout planning, operators must think early on about staffing issues that may develop. Laws vary from state to state, but some require one attendant per unit, Field explains. So even if four inflatables are all in one room, each one needs its own employee in the area. "You have to work that into your business plan," Slaggert says.

Maintenance and Safety

When considering the particular type of inflatable to purchase, Slaggert highly recommends checking to see if the manufacturer and the specific device are listed on the New Jersey Department of Consumer Affairs' web site for Inflation Amusement Ride Type Certification

(www.state.nj.us/dca/codes/ridesafetyunit/ridesafetyunit.shtml). The agency has read the inflatables' manuals and reviewed to see if they're compliant with ASTM standards for amusement rides, he says. It also looks at the supplemental documentation, such as pre-opening inspection and the maintenance checklist.

"They're doing a lot of the owners' work for them," Slaggert says. "It's one of the best consultants in the business. Do you know why? You don't have to pay them."


He also suggests operators check with their insurance companies before plunking down the credit card. Some won't insure inflatables or will require a higher premium.

Fortunately, inflatables' growing popularity has made it easier to get insurance now compared to a few years ago, Bitzberger says: "They're very safe if they're utilized appropriately." That's why his staff will instruct all the children and parents on how to act properly on the equipment; mom and dad also must stay at the facility. Some of the most common infractions: tackling (especially with the older boys) and going down the slide head first.

"What we like to say when we're briefing them early on: 'If you forget the rules, we'll come up and remind you,'" Bitzberger says.

To avoid "an accident waiting to happen," separate the kids, if possible, Field suggests. Put the units that attract the more rambunctious 10- to 12-year-olds in one room; younger children should go in another. For added safety measures, Field says, all inflatables should be anchored to either the floor, the wall, or the rafters. Also, make sure the equipment is free of wrinkles and tangles, and follow the manufacturers' recommendations on the number of guests allowed in the unit at one time. He also recommends buying a safety siren. This will sound if the power supply to the air blower cuts out, which does happen occasionally from either a pulled-out cord or a blown circuit. Some insurance companies offer a discount if you have a siren, Field notes.

With inflatables, seam fatigue tops the list of most common maintenance issues. "They're being consumed. They're going to get wear," Field says. "The customer has to be realistic. You're going to have repairs on these units, and they should budget for that."

Hooper agreed about the occasional annoyances with the material, but for the most part, he has no complaints about his inflatable. "It really is a necessity for this environment," he says. 

Steady as a Rock

FECs work to keep guests safe on their climbing walls

by Mike Bederka

What goes up, must come down, of course. The laws of gravity are quite clear on this. However, family entertainment center operators and staff can delicately work within these boundaries to ensure their guests have a good time and, more important, stay safe on their rock-climbing walls.

First off, it's critical to follow the manufacturer's manual regarding repair, maintenance, and parts replacement, which may vary from company to company, states the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Next, the government agency

said facilities must follow these additional key safety measures:

- Examine auto-belay cables, especially near pulleys, for wear, broken wires, deformation, and "fish hooks" (burrs/broken strands of wire cable).
- Lift or slide the plastic or rubber sheath over the auto-belay cable on the patron/harness end and examine for wear, corrosion, broken wires, and fish hooks. Replace cables if needed.
- Inspect daily the auto-belay cables for fish hooks, wear, and corrosion; replace annually or after 10,000 documented cycles, or earlier if necessary.
- Examine carabiners, swivels, and rings for proper functioning and locking; replace if needed.
- Examine harnesses for wear and tearing and replace if necessary.
- The maximum recommended weight per passenger is 250 pounds, or per manufacturer's recommendation.
- Make sure the required number of operators are present.
- Don't exceed the manufacturer's requirements for maximum loads for individual walls.

As for that last point, Ken Connor of ClubFX takes some extra precautions. With six stations, he'll max out on four climbers for his 23-foot wall.

"We're climbing kids as young as 5 or 6 years old," says the owner of the facility, located in Mooresville, North Carolina. "They're not so good about staying in their lanes. You want to give them plenty of room. You don't want them stepping on each other's fingers."



A rock-climbing wall at Big Don's in New York

Don Cullen follows a similar strategy. The owner of Big Don's Wild River Mini Golf in Cicero, New York, usually won't run more than two people at a time even though he has a 25-foot, five-climber wall.

Cullen also adds another layer of security to his wall by fencing in the area around it. That keeps other customers from wandering underneath the climbers.

Weighty Issues and Staff Training

Staff members at Big Don's rarely have to deal with plus-size guests at the wall (240 pounds is the limit for them), but they must contend with those on the smaller side.

Kids need to weigh at least 45 pounds. "If they're too light they wouldn't have enough weight to pull the hydraulic spring-loaded system down," Cullen says. "They could get stuck on the wall so to speak."

Young guests also may get stuck for another reason: fear of heights. It's not uncommon for kids to get halfway up the wall, look down, and then freeze, says Rocky McIlwain, owner of Fun Zone Skate Center in Dothan, Alabama.

When that happens, employees calm their skittish customers, explaining that if they let go, they'll be OK.

At ClubFX, staffers also play an active role with guests, looking for any potential problems. For example, just because a child meets the weight requirement (40 pounds), that doesn't guarantee a ride up the wall, Connor says. He may be too young and lack the "situational awareness" to climb.

In those cases, Connor might harness the child and lift him just a few feet off the ground, letting him swing around for a little bit.

"They feel like a big kid," he says. "That's all they usually want anyway."

For the real big kids—those over 200 pounds but not at the max—Connor suggests a test run. The rate of descent increases the heavier the person, so he has them go up seven or eight feet and then drop. This way, they'll know what to expect if they do it for real.

Just in case guests (of any size) fall awkwardly, there is a four-inch thick gymnastics-type mat to catch them.

The above situations show why staff preparedness plays a crucial role with rock wall safety. Cullen requires new employees to watch a training DVD, and then they're shown up close how to operate the wall. Management observes the first 20 to 30 times they hook up guests and send them skyward.

Five Tips to Make Your Rock Wall Successful

1 ■ Be sure you have the volume of people to make the wall a sound investment. "A much smaller segment of the population is going to be more interested than you think," says Don Cullen of Big Don's. For him, young kids (ages 5 to 13) climb the wall most frequently. Adults and older teens would rather go elsewhere.

2 ■ Keep the attraction as visible as possible, says Rocky McIlwain of Fun Zone. Don't tuck it away in the back of your FEC.

3 ■ Always include rock climbing in any birthday party package, says Ken Connor of ClubFX.

4 ■ Make the wall relatively inexpensive. For two attempts, Cullen charges \$4 if it's the first activity of the day, \$3 if it's the second. Guests pay \$2 a climb at Ted Jensen's facility, Southampton Sports Zone.

5 ■ Consider a mobile wall to help expand your audience. McIlwain plans to bring his second wall to area schools for fundraisers at no charge. "It puts you in good standing in the community," he says. In return, he hopes the administration will allow his FEC to post flyers around the school to promote special events.

—Mike Bederka

An Alternative

Ted Jensen, of Southampton Sports Zone, Southampton, Pennsylvania, says he doesn't have to worry about the typical safety problems with standard rock walls. Guests on his attraction could climb 40 to 50 feet but never really get more than a few feet off the ground.

Jensen's mechanical wall is a continuous conveyor belt that goes in a circular pattern; the rocks are screwed into the stainless steel panels.

A computer controls the level of difficulty, and guests have 15 different "mountains" to choose from. A monitor shows how high they've climbed.

Customers don't wear a harness, but the wall has built-in safety features. Sensors at the top and bottom shut down the attraction should customers try to climb over the top or fall off into the foam padding below.

He bought this wall five years ago because his ceiling only stands 16 feet tall, limiting his options. The wall's footprint is 144 square feet.

"It's a phenomenal attraction for the amount of space it takes up," Jensen says. ■

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Toy Story

by Mike Bederka

Family entertainment centers and redemption suppliers are on alert following recalls

With almost daily news reports about toy recalls, some parents now may be warily eyeing the baubles behind an FEC's redemption counter. Fortunately, leading suppliers to family entertainment centers say their products remain safe. The headline-grabbing recalls, however, still impact the FEC industry and stress the importance of merchandise safety and quality.

Easing Worry

Concern grew this past summer when toy giant Mattel announced some of its products manufactured in China had dangerous flaws. A Batman action figure contained a small magnet that could fall out and be swallowed, and the surface paints on "Sarge," a die-cast toy from the movie "Cars," could contain lead levels above federal standards. The company recalled millions of items by year's end.

Karyn Gitler, a member of IAAPA's FEC committee, says the scope of the recall as well as whom it involved came as a surprise to many. "When you think Mattel, you think Gerber. You think safe," says Gitler, director of merchandise at Irving, Texas-based CEC Entertainment Inc. "That just opened up the floodgates. This could happen to anybody."

Worried about their children's well-being, parents began contacting Chuck E. Cheese's. Many

other FECs probably have received similar calls, she says, and if they haven't yet, they probably will soon.

Management should handle these conversations, Gitler advises. Calm any anxieties by walking customers through your safety process. "We've faxed safety reports to guests to let them know these measures are in place," she says. "We want the public to know safety is a No. 1 priority for us."

Before FECs purchase any product, they should ask the vendor for the safety tests done on that piece and keep copies on file at the facility, she explains. Tests can vary, depending on the item, but some include age grading, battery operation, lead content, flammability, and stuffing cleanliness.

Heightened Scrutiny

For its products, Redemption Plus relies on certified third-party testing facilities that follow guidelines set forth by the Consumer Product Safety Commission, Food and Drug Administration, ATSM International, and others. The testing takes place before production, says Darren Wright, vice president of purchasing. If the merchandise isn't checked until it hits the warehouse and then it fails, "we just bought a bunch of defective goods," he says.

None of Redemption Plus' products have been recalled in this latest wave, but considering current events, the Lenexa, Kansas, supplier has added another layer to the inspection process. Redemption Plus buys some items from other domestic companies that may import its wares. "In the past, we've simply relied on their testing documents to make sure the products pass," Wright says. "Now, we are requesting an actual copy of those reports to keep in our own database. This way we are able to address any customers' concerns immediately instead of



Redemption Plus relies on certified third-party testing facilities that follow guidelines set forth by the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

either passing them along to our vendor or creating an unwanted delay in getting back to them.”

Sureshot Redemption, of Ontario, California, has fine-tuned its safety procedures as well, says Mike Lynch, vice president. (None of its products have been recalled, either.) In addition to inspections at factories overseas and the docks, the company has added more random once-overs to the process.

Time and Money

Even if companies haven't been directly impacted by the recalls, they most likely felt the pinch in other places. Increased inspections and closer product scrutiny have caused a 2 percent to 4 percent cost hike, Wright says: “It's not huge, but when you're really watching margins, it makes a difference.”

So the end consumer doesn't get hit too hard in the wallet, he tries to offset that expense by lowering costs elsewhere. However, with some products, no wiggle room exists and pricing may increase.

Longer lag times are another result of the recalls. Previously, Wright only needed three months to receive imported products; it now can take 120 to 160 days. His team members have to select merchandise a lot sooner in the cycle. As soon as one of

their catalogs comes out, they have to make decisions about the next. Meaning, slower-selling items might find their way into multiple catalogs. “It's kind of risky,” Wright admits.

A Name You Can Trust

Experts quickly point out that Chinese manufacturers don't deserve sole blame for the recalls, and blindly boycotting all products from the country is a foolish move, as merchandise from the United States and Europe gets recalled as well. “You just don't see the same press or publicity generated,” Wright says.

Generally speaking, the media have blown some aspects of the recalls out of proportion, Gitler says: “People shouldn't be afraid of every toy. They shouldn't be afraid of anything with paint on it. These were just a few of the extremes.”

Still, safety is a serious issue, she says, and the industry must continue to be vigilant. “Look for companies that have a track record, have a history,” Lynch says. “A lot of places pop up and then disappear.” ■

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David Novstrup, co-owner/
general manager of
Thunder Road in
Aberdeen, South Dakota

FEC: PLANNING

Preparing for the Worst

FECs should have policies in place for any emergency

by Mike Bederka

BE IT A FIRE, FISTFIGHT, OR FLOOD, emergencies will pop up if you operate a business long enough. Luckily, a calm head, proactive attitude, and established policies and procedures should allow most family entertainment centers to avert disaster.

Here's how some facilities prepare for the worst.

A Lost Child

When a child goes missing, parents panic. The staff at Fun Expedition in Johnson City, Tennessee, understands how scary that feeling can be.

As soon as Mom or Dad reports a lost child, the FEC goes into "Operation Safe" mode, explains Alan Kumpf, general manager. An all-page announces the situation, and the whole building locks down—nobody can go in or out. "All employees leave their station no matter what they're doing," he says. "They have a responsibility to fulfill."

Some staff will cover exits; others, armed with a description given by the parent, roam the premises, looking for the

young guest. It hasn't taken longer than five and a half minutes to find a child, Kumpf says proudly. They go into "Operation Safe" about three or four times a week—often due to parents letting their children wander away.

Weather Woes

All FECs can vouch for how important weather is in their business. Usually, rain clouds just dictate how busy they'll be. But what if something more serious looms on the horizon, like a tornado or a flash flood?

David Novstrup believes he has an edge. The co-owner/general manager of Thunder Road in Aberdeen, South Dakota, has taken several storm spotter training classes through the National Weather Service.

Now, he always keeps a close watch on the web site of a local weather station. By looking at the storm shape and how it moves, Novstrup has a good idea about where hail, tornados, or straight-line winds will develop. He also knows when the umbrellas and chairs should be put away as well as when guests should probably head home for safety reasons. "It's a more scientific way to look at things," Novstrup says. "It's not just a gut feeling."

Emergency Call Center Available

American Specialty offers a crisis response product that can be included as part of the IAAPA FEC Insurance Program. With this product, an FEC can have 24-hour access to an emergency call center that can handle up to 3,000 calls per hour from concerned family, friends, and media outlets.

Phones are manned by mental health professionals specifically trained to handle crisis situations. The product includes an insurance component to provide payment if the phone center is activated.

For more info, call American Specialty at +1 260/672-8800 or e-mail amer-spec@amerspec.com.

Handling a Holdup

Crime is an unfortunate reality of operating a cash business. To help avoid any serious situations, always have two people closing, advises John Sarantakis, owner of The People's Choice Family Fun Center, with a pair of Illinois locations.

Also, lock the doors when the last customers leave, he says, and keep an eye on any suspicious-looking people and vehicles outside. If someone does attempt to rob your FEC, make sure staff knows to give the crook all the money, notes Edward Mainardi Jr., owner of Laser One in Wantage, New Jersey. "You have a couple hundred dollars in the drawer," he says. "It's not worth someone getting hurt over."

"Don't hesitate," Sarantakis adds. "We're insured for that kind of stuff."

Fire Emergencies

When the fire alarm blares, it's often a mischievous child just pulling the lever. But sometimes the concern is real.

Sarantakis had a game where one of the chips started to burn inside. Smoke poured out, and a harsh smell emanated. In this case, just unplugging the machine fixed the problem—a fact they quickly realized. "You want to get someone to the situation right away to see what's going on and resolve the matter," he says. "You don't want people to panic. You don't want to put anyone in jeopardy."

Novstrup had an incident where a staff member overfilled the tank on one of the go-karts. The ethanol spillover was coming awfully close to the chlorine tank for the bumper boats. He called the fire department right away. "We didn't want to take a chance that something bad would happen," Novstrup says.

Detailed Response Plan Needed

During an emergency, FECs should have a response plan where each individual, position, or department has a clear role, says Rich Powers, vice president of risk services for American Specialty, a Roanoke, Indiana-based program underwriter.

While it's impossible to address every scenario that might occur, Powers says, at a minimum, facilities should have separate, detailed, and readily accessible plans for the following:

- park evacuation (including assisting guests with disabilities)
- ride/attraction evacuation
- severe weather
- bomb threat
- medical emergency (injury and illness)
- missing children
- fire.

By the end of the year, American Specialty will have educational materials available online to allow FECs to build their own crisis and emergency plan.

Family Disputes

On occasion, Sarantakis has had people come to blows in his facilities; usually, it involves ex-husbands, current boyfriends, and the like. He tries to step in and diffuse any situation before it turns physical; Sarantakis doesn't allow profanity, and he has no problem calling the police when people get out of control.

Kumpf also relies on the police, but he has them on his payroll. A uniformed officer patrols his location during the busy times in hopes of preventing of any disturbances among customers. "It does nip a lot of that stuff in the bud," he says. "The visibility of a police officer on site changes people's mind-set."

It's a serious expense, but the security it provides offsets the cost. "People feel safe when they come to our location," Kumpf says. "That's important. You can't put a dollar amount on that." ■

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Laying Down the Law

How the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act affects FECs and the industry at large

by Mike Bederka

THE CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2008 will change how family entertainment centers and other attractions, as well as redemption companies, operate, regardless of the operation's size or volume.

"There's a bit of apathy out there, (especially with single-location facilities)," says Jerry Venner, director of Fun Express Inc., an Omaha, Nebraska-based redemption supplier. "People think this is just a Wal-Mart, Toys 'R' Us, Chuck E. Cheese-kind of legislation. No, this actually applies to *you*."

Here are some highlights.

Lower Lead Levels

By Feb. 10, 2009, items designed or intended primarily for children age 12 and younger may not contain more than 600 parts per million (ppm) of lead. At the time of taking this article to press, the CPSC's general counsel has taken the position that existing inventory cannot be sold after this date, unless it complies with the new lead limits.

One year from enactment—Aug. 14, 2009—these products cannot contain more than 300 ppm of lead; the limit goes down to 100 ppm after Aug. 14, 2011, unless the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) determines that it's "not technologically feasible."

Some children's products may be exempted or excused from these new limits if a component part containing lead is inaccessible.

In addition, after Aug. 14, 2009, the act states that paint and similar surface-coating materials must be reduced from 600 ppm to 90 ppm of lead.

Third-Party Testing

The legislation imposes an additional third-party testing requirement for all products primarily intended for kids 12 and younger. Every manufacturer (including an importer) or private labeler must have its product tested by an accredited independent lab and, based on the testing, issue a certificate that the product meets all applicable CPSC requirements. Certificates must include info on the identity of the product's

manufacturer/private labeler, the testing lab, and the date and place of manufacturing and testing of the product. Products without the certificate cannot be imported or distributed in the United States.

The third-party testing/certification requirements are phased in on a rolling schedule. For example, "small parts" is February 2009 and 300 ppm lead content is August 2009.

Tracking Labels

The new law requires manufacturers to have a tracking label or other distinguishing permanent mark on any consumer product primarily intended for children 12 and younger. The tracking label must contain certain basic information: the source of the product, the date of manufacture, and more detailed info on the manufacturing process like a batch or run number. This requirement goes into effect after Aug. 14, 2009.

Nixing Phthalates

As of Feb. 10, 2009, it will be illegal to manufacture, sell, distribute, or import into the United States any children's toy that contains concentrations of more than 0.1 percent of di-(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP), dibutyl phthalate (DBP), or benzyl butyl phthalate (BBP).

There's also an "interim prohibition," beginning Feb. 10, 2009, on any toy that can be placed in a child's mouth that contains concentrations of more than 0.1 percent of diisononyl phthalate (DINP), diisodecyl phthalate (DIDP), or di-n-octyl phthalate (DnOP).

Phthalates, used widely as plasticizers and solvents, appear in many products, including building materials, personal care products, medical devices, and toys, according to the American Council on Science and Health.

The CPSC's general counsel has written an advisory opinion that says Congress did not indicate in the law that the phthalates ban applies retroactively. Unless Congress or the CPSC commissioners reverse this opinion, existing inventory is not covered by the ban.

How to Respond

As a result of the law, FEC owners and operators will now have more duties and obligations placed upon them, notes R. Wayne Pierce, a counselor with the Pierce Law Firm LLC, in Annapolis, Maryland. "Folks need a process on how they're going to respond."

Venner offers some tips and general advice on working with vendors:

- The supplier (importer) should be named on the report as the party requesting the testing, not just the manufacturer. Expect the supplier may not reveal proprietary information on the report (like the production factory name and address).

- Safety reports should be available upon request. “If [an FEC] can’t get that back in 48 hours, you have a problem,” Venner says.
- The test report should be dated in the past 12 months or at least done in conjunction with the last shipment of the item produced for the supplier.
- Testing must be done by an accredited independent third-party consumer products lab to all applicable requirements.
- The test report must have a detailed description of the item, the tests performed, and a photo of the samples is strongly recommended.

“FECs should feel empowered to be able to ask for this information,” says Kevin Klein, sales manager of amusement/redemption for Fun Express.

Serious Ramifications

The government offers some tough talk for failure to follow the new law, including “significant civil and criminal liability.”

“Realistically, is some guy going to show up in a dark suit

Costs to Increase

Add another consequence from the act: FECs can expect to pay more for merchandise.

“There is just no other way to say it,” explains Jerry Venner of Fun Express Inc. “There is a financial impact. Many of the substitute chemicals required to meet the new guidelines are simply more expensive. It will drive some cost increases.”

and sunglasses with an AK-47 and ask, ‘Are you compliant?’” Venner comments. “I don’t think it’s going to look like that.” Rather, he believes reckless FECs will come under the watchful eye of passionate consumer advocacy groups and those in the legal community.

The subsequent loss of customers and money, and the generation of negative press will be damaging. “You don’t want to be the lead story on the five o’clock news,” Venner says.

As this issue develops, please stay tuned to the IAAPA FEC web page at www.IAAPA.org/community/fec, the IAAPA blog at www.IAAPA.org/blog, and FUNWORLD for further updates. For more information on the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008, visit www.cpsc.gov/ABOUT/Cpsia/cpsia or call +1 301/504-7923. ■



FEC: SAFETY

Green Light

FECs keep guests safe on the go-kart track

by Mike Bederka

A LITTLE OVER DECADE AGO, Don Woodward brought his son around to area family entertainment centers to scope out the competition and glean some ideas for his facility being constructed.

While doing reconnaissance at one place, he saw an ambulance and fire engine roar up to the go-kart track. A bad accident had occurred and a car burst into flames.

No way, Woodward thought, would either he or his son ever buckle up there.

That incident has stuck with him and it serves as an important reminder when it comes to go-karts and overall FEC operation.

“If you have an unsafe park, it’s going to go bankrupt pretty quickly,” says Woodward, safety director of Adventure Zone Inc. in Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio. He also serves on the state’s Ride Safety Advisory Council.

Training and Equipment Checks

Having safe go-karts starts with the staff running them, Woodward says. Operators should screen their employees and look for certain personality traits like being attentive and authoritative, especially in cases where guests don’t follow the rules.

Once hired, folks at Neb’s Funworld in Oshawa, Ontario,

Canada, must study a specially created in-house manual on go-karts and pass a written test, explains owner Tom England. Managers quiz them on height requirements, payment, seat belts, how the car works, hair safety, helmets, and more.

The ultimate goal is to have all staff “singing the same song” when interacting with customers, England says. “I don’t want, ‘Go when Bill is working. He’ll let us do whatever we want.’”

As part of the training process and to further strengthen the venue’s ideals, rookie go-kart staffers start as helpers. They move up the cars, get people through the queue, and assist on the track with spinouts. Lead hands, a more senior position, run the race.

Like all rides and attractions, go-karts and the track should undergo strict testing to make sure they pass inspection. Staff, of course, play a vital role here as well.

Adventure Zone employees must review detailed daily checklists. Go-karts undergo a complete evaluation, including the gas cap, seat belt, fluid levels, tires, brakes, and fiberglass.

With the track, for example, staff look for debris and holes, test the functionality of the traffic lights, and examine the security perimeter fence and rails.

The track’s barrier, a five-inch high steel band mounted to 15-inch tires, prevents injuries by its strong resilience and impact absorption, Woodward says: “It’s heavy enough that it won’t jump up when hit, and it doesn’t allow the cars to climb over it.”

Preventing Injuries

Despite all the best intentions and precautions, crashes and injuries still can crop up, says Royce Stine, financial controller for Mesa Golf and Sunsplash in Mesa, Arizona. Bruises sometimes result when one car whips around another or a



person doesn't take a curve quite right.

In those situations, the go-kart's emergency cutoff system can help big time, he says. The kill switch allows the FEC to turn off one, several, or all of the cars to sort through the mess.

When one go-kart spins out, another will surely follow, particularly on a busy night, Woodward agrees.

"You have to shut down that track," he notes, "and if you don't have a fail-safe system, you're going to have problems."

England attributes the "NASCAR bump-and-grind mentality" as another common issue and cause of injuries.

At Adventure Zone, guests acting like Jimmie Johnson will be kicked off with no refund. "These are go-karts, not bumper karts," Woodward says. "We have zero tolerance."

England also has strong feelings about aggressive driving and used some creative means as a solution. He installed pressure-sensitive bumpers on all go-karts. If a driver hits another car, the guest is automatically slapped with a 10-second slow down penalty.

"We wanted to get away from having to say 'no' to customers," says England, who has R&D experience. "The car polices itself. When you drive like a moron, you get a penalty. They now have to drive strategically."

His innovation hasn't drawn the ire of any speed demons. In fact, just the opposite happened.

"No one has come up to me and said I hate this place because it has pressure-sensitive bumpers," he says. "Parents tell me they love bringing their kids here. It's the only place they [feel] safe." ■

For information about the IAAPA-sponsored FEC insurance program and go-kart safety, please visit www.amerspec.com, or call +1 800/245-2744.

10 Tips for Loss Prevention

- 1. Reference Materials.** Obtain a copy of ASTM F2007-07a (www.astm.org/Standards/F2007), the most current standard for go-kart track operation. Also, follow recommendations, guidelines, and restrictions provided by the go-kart manufacturers.
- 2. Fire Safety.** Prominently place extinguishers in the pit area and around the track. Designated refueling station should be away from patrons.
- 3. Secure Perimeter.** Have self-closing and latching access gates at pit entrance and exits points. In addition, there should be complete perimeter fencing.
- 4. Participant Communication.** Post safety, warning, restriction, and rule signage at the entrance to the queue and in the pit. Some FECs have guests sign waiver and release forms prior to participating. These documents can be a valuable tool to defend against a lawsuit claiming damages because of an injury. Rules also should be provided on an audible loop so guests can hear instruction while in line. Finally, as attendants buckle in customers, they can answer any additional questions.
- 5. Guest Safety.** Each customer must pass all restrictions prior to participation. Facilities should provide a helmet to guests who want one.
- 6. Staffing.** Ensure customers are secured and understand all rules; control guests as they exit the pit area and enter the track; observe all areas of the active track during race operations; control participants entering the pit area when their time is up; and keep people seated and secured until all customers have entered and stopped their go-karts in the pits.
- 7. Inspections.** Complete and retain daily documented safety inspections prior to opening for public operations covering the following: inspect condition of each car (frame, body, tires, driver's compartment, safety equipment, gas cap/tank), and test drive prior to putting into service. Check condition of fencing and gates, and ensure signage and audible instruction loops are in place, readable, and in working order.
- 8. Maintenance.** Complete documented maintenance including: all preventive maintenance and repairs; annual inspection, service, and maintenance of extinguishers from an outside fire services contractor; and all track surface/markings, bump rail, and fencing repairs.
- 9. Training.** Complete documented training of all operations and maintenance staff including the completion of inspections; maintenance responsibilities; standard operating procedures; and emergency and incident response procedures in case of injury, severe weather, etc.
- 10. Supervision.** Oversee amusement area to provide assistance to employees and guests as needed; monitor, audit, and improve employee behavior/performance; and enforce park rules.

Source: Russ Kietzman, assistant vice president in the loss control department for American Specialty Insurance and Risk Services in Roanoke, Indiana



FEC: SAFETY & MAINTENANCE

Up and Running

Maintenance crews keep FEC game rooms in check

by Mike Bederka

IF IT CAN BEEP, BLINK, FLIP, PUSH, OR SPIN in a family entertainment center's game room, it can probably break.

Out of order signs = lost revenue + annoyed guests. Mike Cappella knows the equation well. "I was always taught to never let a customer complaint get out of your building," says the director of building maintenance at Sports Plus in Cincinnati, Ohio. "Do whatever it takes to make them happy."

To avoid bad word of mouth (the nemesis of all attractions), people like Cappella stay busy. They constantly plan, tinker, and fix to keep their prized game floors running smoothly.

New vs. Used

Cappella's facility features roughly 125 games—many of them 10 to 15 years old. The price tag on newer games makes Sports Plus' management think twice about these larger purchases, he says. The most common issues for the older games include ticket jams, broken switches, and busted buttons from the constant pounding, Cappella says.

Game technician Scott Wise also has replaced a fair number of buttons in his two years at Rascal's Food and Fun. The

Allentown, Pennsylvania, FEC owns about 60 games, a mix of new and reconditioned.

"In hindsight, we should have bought more new games," acknowledges Rascal's operations manager, Geoff Spitko, citing fewer maintenance issues and a better warranty.

Cappella agrees newer games boast a big advantage: "They have one board instead of five. Those are easier to work on because you're not going through 10 different steps to find one problem."

But don't be so quick to toss the vintage "Pac-Man" to the curb, cautions Harvey Wells, maintenance supervisor at Party Central in Bossier City, Louisiana: "New games are just as apt to break as old ones."

Maintenance Protocols

Party Central relies on Wells to solve most mechanical problems. Frontline staffers only have the authority to clear coin jams, put in tickets, and turn on and off the games, he says. He designates one employee to work the arcade floor and look for glitches, and that person gives Wells a complete write-up of all issues to expedite the process. For the experienced technician, most fixes take only five minutes.

Rascal's follows a similar protocol, where employees just handle simple jams and cleaning. Before they close for the night, staff will compile a maintenance log, Spitko says. Wise arrives at 7 a.m. and gets to work on the jobs. "By the time the doors swing open at 11 a.m., we're rolling," Spitko says.

Managers also should rely on their card reader system to troubleshoot, Cappella says. Examining the revenues can reveal problems previously undetected. For instance, pay attention if one game normally brings in \$100 a day and

suddenly drops to \$25. “That raises a red flag,” he says. “Let me check it out. Is something not working? Or did we have a slow day?”

Stocking Up

Regular upkeep plays a big part in ensuring games stay in tiptop shape. “If it turns, keep it lubricated,” Wise says. “And always keep the games clean. Dust does a number on the wiring.” At Rascal’s, all games get wiped down on the outside at least daily, and he vacuums the insides once a week.

Smart operators also stock up on frequently used parts, Wise says. They have a running inventory of buttons, power supplies, and fuses. “If it’s a hot game, we have to get it running,” Spitko says. Above anything else, Wise wants to make sure all games are A-OK by the weekend. “If I can’t do that, it’s really frustrating,” he says. “But there’s not much I can do if I don’t have the part.”

Seventy-five percent of the time, Wells has the item needed to fix a problem; when he requires a pesky or hard-to-get part, he’ll usually order two of them to lessen future downtime. Sometimes, though, parts for older games just don’t exist anymore. That’s when Wells’ 25 years of experience in electronics comes in handy. “You’re going to be lucky if you

Handling Guests

When a game inevitably breaks and a customer inevitably becomes annoyed, staff must always remain calm. “That’s one of the biggest things I teach my managers and staff,” says Mike Cappella of Sports Plus.

FEC employees should do their best to explain the problem and how soon it will be repaired, adds Geoff Spitko, from Rascal’s Food and Fun. “You just have to be honest,” he says. “Explain we have a guy looking at it. We just ordered parts. I’ll even name the part, if I know it.”

Also, refer the guest to a game that’s similar to the broken one, Spitko says.

have a manual,” he notes. “You end up having to somehow fix it yourself. I’ve had to reengineer a couple games.”

Despite a technician’s aptitude, some games may not be worth salvaging, Cappella says. Again, management should keep a close eye on the money going into and out of a machine.

“Look at what it’s costing you on a day-to-day operation,” Cappella says. “Is the revenue really there to keep this game up and running? Or is it just five kids who play it?” ■

Choking Hazard

Protecting young guests from harm

by Mike Bederka

MICHAEL GETLAN IS ON A CRUSADE. He wants all toys that could possibly be a choking hazard removed from redemption centers and bulk vendors.

He compares offering young guests dangerous items, like a 27-millimeter ball, to operating an unsafe ride or attraction. “What’s the difference?” asks Getlan, director of enthusiasm and opportunity for Amusement Consultants Ltd. in New Rochelle, New York.

His mission has a history. About two decades ago, a 3-year-old boy died from choking on a toy that his older brother got at Getlan’s family entertainment center. “We were completely devastated and emotionally shocked,” he says. Because of the incident, Getlan removed all choking hazards from his facilities.

But as time passed and managers changed, those items slowly crept back into the redemption areas. Again, Getlan cleaned house, and now he has contacted others in the industry to help him with his campaign, including merchandise companies, and bulk vending, trade, and equipment manufacturers associations.

“The real issue is to remove these things from circulation,” he says. “I’m taking a strong stance. I don’t want anything like that in our facilities.”

Taking Precautions

While many small items still remain available for purchase, buyers at FECs must remain vigilant.

“A lot of times, the prizes have been taken for granted,” says Karyn Gitler, director of merchandise for Irving, Texas-based CEC Entertainment Inc. “The facility didn’t have someone focus on it. That’s a mistake.

“Each piece has to be looked at individually to decide what is appropriate for their facility,” adds Gitler, a member of the IAAPA FEC Committee. “Choking is an important issue, but it’s one of many out there today.”

To properly check their merchandise, all FECs should own a Choke Tester, Getlan notes. If an object fits entirely inside this plastic tube, then it’s considered a choking hazard for children under age 3, according to the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). (The company Perfectly Safe in North Canton, Ohio, +1 800/898-3696, sells the tester for \$2.95. The sales representatives for Fun Express, an Omaha, Nebraska, redemption supplier carry them as well.) Getlan has the choke tube right on his counter

when he does ordering.

“Our reps make sure they’re educated on all the safety legislation that’s in play, and they have the tools to work with our FECs,” says Kevin Klein, sales manager for amusement/redemption at Fun Express. “We consult with them to understand better who their target customer is, and then we try to bring in merchandise that’s in line with their audience. We have more than 10,000 items to choose from. We have a good opportunity to find replacement items that may not cause as much of a concern from a choking standpoint.”

The Fun Express redemption catalogue indicates what items might not be appropriate for certain age ranges, and the company follows all the guidelines outlined by the CPSC, explains director Jerry Venner: “Every single package of products we ship out the door has the appropriate age-grade warning label.”

Due Diligence

Venner wants facilities to use caution when buying their merchandise. “Shame on me, if I’m an FEC owner or manager and I have not done any due diligence to ask some questions to make sure my vendor is not asleep at the wheel,” he says.

Ask questions about the product testing and demand an actual copy of the test report (with a picture of the item)—not a 7-year-old, fifth-generation photocopy, he says. The report must be done by an independent third-party lab from at least the past 12 to 18 months, and vendors should provide the report in four days or less.

Venner also urges FEC management to be leery of the wheeling-and-dealing types who offer closeout or liquidation merchandise. “It’s important that someone doesn’t get sucked into the attractiveness of, ‘Boy, that’s half the price of what I’m paying now,’” he says. “It might turn out to be 75 percent lead or it might be a rejected shipment because it wasn’t labeled right and contained small parts.”

However, keep in mind that even with all the precautions taken by vendors and facilities, accidents still can happen, Venner says. For example, a 50-pound kid could jump on an all-ages toy and breaks it into small parts, or as described above, an older brother can give a 3-and-up item to a younger sibling.

“Then, the best-laid plans went out the window,” Venner says. “But clearly, we’re going to take incredible steps. We all have the responsibility to hold each other accountable.” **EW**