The London Free Press, Tuesday June 10, 2008

Simple steps to keep sandboxes safe for kids

SAFETY

By HELEN BRANSWELL, THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO -- What little kid can resist the appeal of a sandbox, where a shovel, a bucket and an imagination give rise to all manner of make-believe?

The problem is, what looks like a perfect play environment for a young child looks like a toilet to some members of the animal kingdom. Cats, dogs, occasionally even raccoons can treat sandboxes as their potty.

If they do, children can end up encountering unpleasant parasites. And while those parasites are likely rare in a climate like ours -- where the winter freeze keeps populations down -- simple steps can make them rarer still, experts insist.

"There's certainly no indication that children should not go into sandboxes. These are extremely rare diseases that affect a very, very small number of people in North America every year," says Dr. Scott Weese, a veterinarian and expert in the diseases that animals and people can pass to one another.

"But it's the type of thing that even if it's very rare, (if) we can reduce it further, why wouldn't we?"

Kids at the earliest stage of sandbox play are also those going through the phase where everything, it seems, ends up in the mouth.

If the sand contains animal feces, children could inadvertently ingest hookworm eggs .

"Parasite eggs are the main concern. And some of those can be pretty nasty," says Weese, a professor and researcher at the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph.

In some cases, the hookworms will penetrate the skin, causing a condition called cutaneous larva migrans. In 2006 a summer camp in Florida reported an outbreak of cutaneous larva migrans involving 18 campers and four staff members. Cat feces in a sandbox was thought to be the source of the infection.

Cats pose the greatest risk of sandbox contamination, says Dr. Andrew Peregrine, a veterinarian specializing in parasites who also teaches at the Ontario Veterinary College.

That's because felines are most likely to use a sandbox as a litter box. And because cats bury their feces, it wouldn't be immediately evident a sandbox might contain more than sand. As time passes, animal stools will break up, making feces even harder to spot.

"It's thought that about 90 per cent of all the pooping that occurs in sandboxes by cats occurs at night. So a lot of people probably don't know it's happening," Peregrine says.

Dogs would less commonly use a sandbox as a place to poo and they wouldn't bury it.

Raccoons like to relieve themselves in elevated areas -- the crook of a tree, on a deck or into a window well. They generally wouldn't use a sandbox, though it's not unknown.

About a third of raccoons are believed to be infected with baylisascaris -- the parasites that cause the raccoon form of hookworms.

"It can be a very serious disease, a devastating disease, if someone does get it," Weese says. Neurological damage is common in survivors.

Eliminating the risk a sandbox will turn into a litter box is pretty simple, experts say.

"Covering the sandbox is the biggest thing, easiest thing to do. If the cat can't climb in it, it's not going to contaminate it -- full stop," says Weese.

Commercially available sandboxes come these days with a fitted cover. Keep the cover on when the kids aren't in it. For homemade sandboxes, a piece of plywood weighed down by a rock works.

Kids shouldn't eat or drink while in a sandbox and should wash their hands as soon as play is done.