



Children Fall Through Suspended Ceilings



INCIDENT

Two separate, potentially fatal accidents have occurred involving children gaining access to suspended ceilings in retail stores and falling through.

CIRCUMSTANCES

On two separate occasions children have entered areas in retail stores giving them access to suspended ceilings. On both occasions the children have climbed over barriers and onto the suspended ceilings, only to have the ceiling collapse under the children's weight. The children may have perceived that the suspended ceiling was a solid structure, strong enough to take their weight. On the first occasion the barrier that two children (aged six and ten years) climbed over met the Building Industry Authority, Acceptable Solution F4/AS1 for barrier heights and construction for a building that is frequented by young children. In this incident the ten-year-old child fell through the gib-board ceiling to the fruit and vegetable section of the supermarket below. There was free access by stairs that allowed children to climb the barrier. No doorway restricted access to the barrier, and hence to the suspended ceiling. The area in question was not routinely used by members of the public, however the public had been granted use of the staff toilets in this area for a period of six weeks. This was occurring while renovations were undertaken, which prevented use of the public toilets in the retail area.

The second incident occurred in a children's goods retail store. A child entered the storage area at the rear of the public retail area. The child then travelled up stairs to a landing. Once on the landing, the six-year-old child climbed over a barrier onto the suspended ceiling. The child then fell through the ceiling tile to the public retail area below. A doorway restricted access to the stairs, barrier and hence the suspended ceiling. However, there were questions as to whether the door was closed or open. The area in question was not routinely accessed by members of the public, hence not regarded as an area likely to be frequented by children under the age of six. The area the child was likely to have climbed over complied with Building Industry Authority, Acceptable Solution F4/AS1 for barrier heights and construction for part of a building that is unlikely to be frequented by young children (under the age of six).

INVESTIGATION

The investigation by DOL found that there were a number of factors that led to these accidents. In brief, in both cases unsupervised children, ranging in age between six and ten, climbed over a barrier designed to prevent access to suspended ceilings. In both cases the children entered areas where it was not anticipated that members of the public would be likely to frequent, especially young children. To a young child a suspended ceiling may appear to be a solid structure that can sustain the child's weight.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DOL recommends that all workplaces where young children are likely to frequent:

1. Review their access to suspended ceilings and storage areas. Depending on what hazards are identified, entry to these areas needs to be managed so children are unlikely to access them.
2. Ensure that health and safety manuals identify the risk that storage areas and suspended ceilings pose to young children, highlighting the controls that may be implemented to ensure that young children do not have access. Employees should be made aware of these.
3. Ensure that the building complies with the New Zealand Building Code, especially Acceptable Solution F4/AS1. Given that young children frequent the workplace, it is important to anticipate that children may pass through entrance ways to gain access to areas not intended for them to frequent. Because of this it is recommended that barriers in these areas comply with barrier height and construction suitable for areas likely to be frequented by children.
4. Alternatively, measures can be taken to ensure that children do not have access to areas not intended for them to frequent. Keypads and locks on self-closing doors are one example. However, please consider that some access ways are designed as fire exits and as such they are not permitted to be locked, or access to them restricted. Barriers are still required to prevent falls from height but they may not necessarily be of that height and construction for areas likely to be frequented by children.



5. The preferable option is combining the controls found in points three and four. Firstly, constructing barriers in accordance with areas that are likely to be frequented by children as discussed in point three. Secondly, ensuring children are unlikely to have access to these areas by implementing controls discussed in point four.

For further information, contact your local DOL regional office.

Note: This material has been prepared using the best information available to the Department of Labour at the time of publication. Information may change over time and it may be necessary for you to obtain an update. This material is also only intended to provide general advice and does not constitute legal advice. You should make your own judgement about action you may need to take to ensure you have complied with your workplace health and safety obligations under the law.

