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SYRINGES IN THE SANDBOX

NEIGHBOURHOOD MOTHER CALLS FOR MORE POLICE PRESENCE AFTER HER CHILDREN STUMBLE UPON USED NEEDLES WHILE PLAYING IN MARIE CURTIS PARK /P7

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PRE-SCHOOLER WAS 'SCARED'

PUBLIC URGED TO CALL CITY STAFF OR POLICE AND NOT TOUCH DISCARDED NEEDLES

CYNTHIA REASON
creason@toronto.com

Little Jorjah Smyth and a friend were happily building a rock village on the beach at Marie Curtis Park beach a few weeks ago, when the pair made a troubling discovery amid the trees.

"My friend, she was trying to climb the tree and she saw a needle - and there was blood in it," the four-year-old, soon-to-be kindergarten student recalled last week. "I was scared. I don't like needles."

After being summoned by her screaming daughter that day, Jorjah's mom, Lilah Coles, first ushered the girls to safety, then returned to find several other used syringes littering the ground around the same tree.

"Some of them weren't capped, and the girls almost stepped on them," Coles told The Etobicoke Guardian on Friday, July 20, noting that this wasn't the first time she'd come across used syringes down at the south Etobicoke waterfront park.

She also recently found a cluster of syringes in the sandbox her younger daughter Reign, one-and-a-half, likes to play in.

"Jorjah's only four, but she keeps asking what's going on - why we have to check the sandbox every time we come here, and why she and her sister have to wear shoes around the splashpad," she said.

"What are you supposed to say? I didn't tell her there's drug addicts in the park, because then she'll never want to come to here again, but that's the reality."

According to Toronto Public Health (TPH), there

were 303 opioid overdose deaths in Toronto in 2017 - 63 per cent more than in 2016, a 121 per cent increase in deaths compared to 2015.

In response to the ongoing opioid crisis, TPH opened the city's first permanent supervised injection service downtown near Yonge and Dundas streets in November 2017, and has since opened three others.

The sites - none of which are located in Etobicoke - provide safe and hygienic environments for people to inject pre-obtained drugs under the supervision of qualified staff, reducing overdoses and also limiting the spread of HIV and hepatitis C related to unsafe injection practices.

At Marie Curtis Park, Coles said she was fearful of disposing of the syringes she found that day due to the risk of infection. She didn't have any gloves or access to a sharps container, so she informed an on-duty lifeguard - only to be told that because the syringes were found in the unsupervised beach area west of Etobicoke Creek there was nothing they could do about it.

Still concerned, Coles called the info line 311 to report the syringes and was told someone would come to dispose of them as soon as possible. But when she returned to the site and found them still there a week-and-a-half later, she called Coun. Mark Grimes' office and had an hour-long discussion with the Etobicoke-Lakeshore council representative.

Coles said an apologetic Grimes - who could not be reached for comment by Guardian deadline - gave her his personal cellphone number and told her to call



Dan Pearce/Metroland

him if ever she found another syringe in the park.

In the meantime, Coles also took to Facebook on July 9 to post a photo of one of the syringes, along with a warning to other local moms to remain vigilant.

"I posted on Etobicoke Moms, Lakeshore Moms, Long Branch Neighbourhood Watch - absolutely anywhere I could think of," she said.

"A lot of people, they're not aware of their surroundings. So, I thought maybe with me letting everyone know (about the syringes we found), maybe it'll be a warning for them to look around and keep their eyes open. And maybe it could even save someone, because if you or your child get pricked, who knows?"

TPH spokesperson Dr. Rita Shahin, the associate medical officer of health, said the chances of acquiring a blood-borne infection such as hepatitis C or HIV from contact with a used needle is low. However, she urged caution when dealing with discarded syringes.

"Individuals who find or come into contact with needles in city streets, parks or school property should not touch or try to remove the object," she said.



Lilah Coles/photo

Lilah Coles looks for more syringes after she and her daughter found needles at Marie Curtis Park recently. In the front page photo, her daughters Jorjah Smyth, 4, left, and Reign play in a sandbox where needles were also found.

Needles found in city parks like Marie Curtis should instead be reported "at once" by calling 311, so that the park supervisor can be informed and have them removed as soon as possible.

That advice was echoed by Toronto Police Staff Sgt. Doug MacDonald, the manager of the Community Response Unit at 22 Division.

"Folks should not touch them, but call us or city staff who have the proper containers for the needles," MacDonald said in

an email response to Guardian questions last week, noting that police had not received any reports about used syringes found at Marie Curtis Park this summer.

"Our officers do patrol the park, though, and I will bring this issue to their attention."

Coles, meanwhile, said she'd like to see increased police patrols at Marie Curtis - especially at night - to help curb drug use in the park.

"Maybe if we had that, people would be too scared

to come here to do drugs anymore," she said. "We love this park and we want to keep coming here, but we've never, ever found a needle anywhere else - just in this park."

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Metroland Media Toronto's Editor-in-chief Georgia Balogiannis saw Lilah Coles' Facebook warning about used syringes found at Marie Curtis Park and assigned a reporter to look into the issue.