

End of year clean up and relocation

The end of the year is typically a peak period for strain and sprain injuries due to the increase in clean up and furniture relocation tasks. Careful thought and planning is needed to develop the safest and most efficient way to undertake these tasks. Cleaners and Schools Officers have physically demanding jobs and take on extra manual handling jobs at the end of year e.g. rubbish disposal and moving equipment and furniture. Specific measures should be implemented for these employees as they are most at risk of injury. A number of tasks are directly linked to injuries and these are important to note.

Rubbish disposal – moving heavy wheelie bins

Overloading of bins during the end-of-year clean up presents a major risk of strain and sprain injury for employees moving the bins. Back and shoulder injuries are common due to pushing, pulling and emptying of heavy wheelie bins. The following strategies will help to minimise the risk of injury:

- Teachers and others should be advised early (e.g. October) to undertake a progressive clean up during the last few weeks of the term rather than in the last couple of days of the year.
- Spread heavy loads between wheelie bins. Half fill bins if necessary.
- Consider other waste disposal strategies e.g. take rubbish directly to industrial bins in manageable loads.
- Ensure others will not be harmed by any item placed in a rubbish bin, e.g. sharp objects, glass or wire can injure staff who are emptying bins or carrying rubbish bags. These items should be wrapped well in paper or disposed of directly into industrial bins.

Help your Cleaners, Schools Officers and Grounds staff during the year by remembering a few simple tips:

- Don't overfill waste paper or desk bins – remember that we expect small bins to be light to pick up. Placing heavy books or items in these bins increases the risk of injury for the person emptying the bin.
- Some workplaces encourage staff to place their bins on chairs or desks at the end of each day – this saves a lot of repetitive bending for the cleaner.

Relocation of furniture and teachers' equipment

At the end of the year, Schools Officers and maintenance teams are frequently asked to 'relocate' classroom furniture. These staff often do not have appropriate equipment, assistance, time or training to complete these tasks safely.

Any manual handling task involving heavy or awkward loads should only be carried out after thoughtful planning of the task and assessment of identified risks. Options to minimise the risk of injuries include:

- Eliminating movement of furniture and equipment where at all possible:
 - standardising furniture in classrooms is a good investment – this means that desks, cupboards or bookshelves do not need to be moved from room to room
 - files that are required should be moved in smaller bundles; full filing cabinets should not be moved.
- Changing how the task is performed:
 - moving of personal items should be managed by the teacher/employee in consultation with others to assist; move only personal items rather than desks and filing cabinets
 - utilising professionals to move heavy items is efficient and inexpensive when compared to the human and financial costs of an injury to a staff member
 - large scale moving activities should be planned like any other major project. The people involved, e.g. the schools officer and cleaner need to be consulted.
 - make sure there are adequate people available to assist on the moving days. Consider engaging a casual employee if you need extra help.
 - ensure equipment (e.g. a furniture trolley) is appropriate for the job is available, has been maintained and people know how to use it.

Supporting your Cleaners, Schools Officers/Grounds and Maintenance staff

- Supervisors/administration team finalise and advise of classroom/workshop moves as soon as possible.
- Provide reminder notices about preparing for any relocations.

- Administration consult and prepare a plan/timetable for the moving days. This will help to:
 - schedule times for each move to avoid clashes, provide time to prepare and minimise rushing;
 - ensure teachers are available at the agreed time (i.e. not in class) and that all equipment and assistance is ready for the move;
 - allow everyone to be ready for the move and be better able to contingency plan;
 - investigate contracting professional movers or the hire of trolleys or other equipment for very large, heavy or awkward items e.g. pianos;
 - keep the area clear of students and people not involved in the actual move. This helps the 'movers' concentrate on the job at hand and finish the job more efficiently.

All employees

Employees are to be reminded that their own safety is important especially toward the end of the year when there is even greater temptation to rush to achieve deadlines.

A few simple tips:

- Work with your colleagues and administration team whenever possible to manage major tasks such as relocation of classrooms.
- Plan the task; take five minutes to think about the best and safest way to do the job (e.g. organise assistance, get the right equipment, clear your path of travel) e.g. use the S.A.F.E booklet. For big or complex tasks, conduct a full risk assessment.
- Use the right equipment for the job; this equipment must be easily accessible and in good working order (e.g. use a small step ladder to reach items, not a chair or desk).
- Ask for help; there is a big difference between what you can lift and what you can safely lift.
- Spread physical tasks over a number of days and allow your body to 'warm up' in the morning before starting any heavy lifting tasks.
- Wear appropriate clothing and footwear for the job (e.g. bring spare 'work' clothes and suitable footwear for moving or 'clean up' days).

- Don't rush; spending the holidays recovering from an injury will not be worth the five minutes you might save.

Volunteers and helpers

The health and safety of our volunteers is just as important as that of our employees and students. Managers should be aware of any work or activity that is being undertaken with the assistance of volunteers. Equipment, information and supervision requirements for parents and volunteers will need to be managed for working bees, P&C projects and other activities that involve volunteers.

Preventing fires during vacations

Some 'clean up' rags with residues of solvents, paints or oils can auto-combust if inappropriately stored. The heat from the sun combined with heat produced by chemical reactions caused by inappropriate storage can be enough to ignite the solvents left on the rags. Industrial technology, art rooms and sheds/workshops should be checked for old rags.

Incidences of fire resulting from 'clean up' rags igniting have occurred at school sites.

What is spontaneous combustion?

Spontaneous combustion is a fire starting in an object by the internal development of heat without the action of an external agent. For example, oily rags discarded in the corner of a room can spontaneously ignite simply through a chemical reaction between the substance on the rag and the surrounding air.

FUEL + HEAT + OXYGEN = FIRE

Hot weather during the holidays can contribute to creating the perfect conditions for spontaneous combustion. Something as seemingly harmless as tossing aside an oily rag and forgetting about it can have disastrous consequences. A common scenario where spontaneous combustion can occur is when benches in workshops are refinished and stain-soaked rags are left in a heap on the floor. If there is air movement around the rags to fuel the fire, this can encourage and escalate the burning.

Actions

Check:

Areas such as workshops and manual arts, art, agriculture, science, cleaner/schools officers/maintenance sheds for rags that have been used with:

- paints/lacquers
- mineral oils/machine oils/linseed oil
- solvents/mineral turpentine
- petrol/kerosene.

Wash the rags thoroughly in water

Also wash the rags to be discarded, and allow to dry in a well-ventilated area e.g. outside.

Store rags to be re-used in a metal container with a lid

This provides a fire-retardant container and reduces exposure to oxygen (air) which can fuel a fire.

Store the container away from other flammable substances

e.g. in a different room or specific storage area.

Make sure that rubbish, debris and other materials no longer being used around the work site are stored away or removed from the grounds. These materials may act as accelerants, fuels or even as tools to start intentionally lit fires.

Further information

- [New year checklist](#)
- [Manual tasks and ergonomics](#)
- [Slips, trips and falls](#)
- [Waste management](#)