

# Six children killed in jumping castle tragedy in Tasmania, Australia

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Six children have died in an horrific incident at an end-of-year celebration at Hillcrest Primary School in Devonport, northwest Tasmania.

At 10 a.m. on December 16, a gust of wind caught a jumping castle and several zorb balls (large inflatable balls that a person can get inside), lifting them in the air. Nine children were thrown in the air, and fell from a height of about 10 metres in front of horrified parents, teachers and classmates.

Five children died on the day of the accident, and another died three days later in hospital. Two other children remain hospitalised in a critical condition. One other child has been allowed to return home to recover.

Tasmania Police, with the permission of the families, released the names of the deceased: Addison Stewart (11 years old), Zane Mellor (12), Jye Sheehan (12), Jalailah Jayne-Maree Jones (12), Peter Dodt (12) and Chace Harrison (11).

A young boy who witnessed the event told the *Mercury*: “It was our turn next. Grade five and six went first.”

As news of the tragedy spread, frantic parents rushed to the school, but were apparently forced to wait outside the school gates for hours with little information. One parent wrote on social media that as of 11:30 a.m. they still did not know if their children were injured.

Rescue helicopters were used to fly the children to hospital, while several ambulance teams and police attended the scene. A nurse who was involved in the response to the crisis wrote on social media that emergency health workers went “above and beyond their calling,” with doctors from other hospitals on their day off driving in to assist.

Police are investigating the causes of the calamity, under coronial direction. Tasmanian police commissioner Darren Hine announced the day after the tragedy that the investigation would “take some time,” due to the number

of witnesses to be interviewed, including about 40 children.

Worksafe Tasmania, the state’s work health and safety agency, is collaborating with the police to determine whether the castle was tethered to the ground safely and whether proper operating procedures were followed. The website of the company which supplied the jumping castle and Zorb balls, Taz-Zorb, has been disabled by the company.

Devonport is a working-class town, with a population of about 26,000. According to the 2016 census, 33.5 percent of all households in Devonport and its suburbs had an income of less than \$650 per week. The corresponding overall national figure was 20 percent of all households. The median weekly family income in Devonport was just \$1,172, compared with \$1,399 across Tasmania, and \$1,734 nationally.

The area also suffers from disproportionately high unemployment rates. The official rate (which grossly understates the real level of joblessness) for Devonport in June 2021 was 8.9 percent. That compared with 6.4 percent across Tasmania, and 6.2 percent nationally. In 2019, northwestern Tasmania was ranked among the 20 regions in Australia worst afflicted by youth unemployment, with an official figure of 15 percent.

In a message on social media, a relative of one of the dead children portrayed the burden of grief and hardship her family will now endure: “My niece was tragically taken in the accident at Hillcrest Primary. I’m hoping to raise some money for my brother and sister-in-law to help pay for funeral costs and pay off some bills for them while they try to navigate life without their precious daughter. They have another daughter and son to take care of and I’m hoping to alleviate some of the stress of their bills.”

The tragedy has seen an enormous outpouring of sympathy and support for the devastated families.

Young families from other towns drove to Devonport to pay their respect. Hundreds of mourners have visited the school, with strangers in tears consoling each other. Hundreds of flowers, toys, candles and messages of support have been left outside the school, extending for 50 metres along the street. Locals have organised food drops to the grieving families.

A Go Fund Me page has already raised \$1.2 million from ordinary people across Australia to assist the families and community. This is nearly equal to the entire government funding response.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced special emergency funding of \$800,000 to provide trauma counselling for those involved: \$250,000 for the first responders, and \$550,000 for the community at large to be paid over 18 months. Another \$500,000 in funding was announced by the Tasmanian state government.

There is a long record of injuries and fatalities associated with jumping castles, both in Australia and overseas.

In 2001, an eight-year-old girl died in South Australia after a jumping castle lifted into the air. The subsequent coronial inquiry established that the castle had not been tethered securely enough, causing the device to break away from its anchor plates.

In the UK in 2016, a seven-year-old girl was killed when a gust of wind wrenched a jumping castle away from its moorings. Two people were subsequently convicted of manslaughter for gross negligence.

In 2019 in China, two children were killed and 20 were injured when a jumping castle was blown into the sky by a small whirlwind. Just last year in Tabbita, New South Wales, two children had to endure emergency surgery after being badly injured when a jumping castle was blown seven metres into the air.

An article in the prestigious *BMJ* medical journal in 2010 reported: “Collective data suggests as many as 2,200 children across Australia were injured in the period 1996–2006.” The article also raised concerns about inadequate regulation of the manufacture, sale and use of commercial inflatable jumping castles.



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