



GuideOne Center for Risk Management Playground Safety Guidelines

Facts

- * In the United States, a child is injured on a playground every 2 1/2 minutes.
- * More than 200,000 children each year are treated in emergency departments for playground-related injuries.
- * More than 75% of playground injuries occur on a public playground.
- * Most playground injuries involve falls, and over half of the time the child's head and face is hurt.
- * Most of these injuries are preventable with proper supervision and safer playground equipment and design.

You can make the playground a place that's entertaining and safe for children by checking equipment for potential hazards and following some simple safety guidelines. In addition, teaching kids how to play safely is important: if they know the rules of the playground, it's less likely they'll become injured.

Adult Supervision

Adults can help prevent playground accidents by taking some precautions ahead of time and ensuring adult supervision and age appropriateness of any outside equipment on which the children play.

Adults should *always* supervise the children during trips to the playground. The CPSC estimates that *almost half* of injuries to children could have been prevented with proper supervision. Young children (and sometimes older ones) cannot always gauge distances properly and aren't capable of foreseeing dangerous situations by themselves.

Adult supervision can help prevent injuries by making sure kids don't engage in unsafe behavior and improper use of the playground equipment. But in the event that an injury does occur, adult supervision also allows for quick action to be taken. Before you install a playground, make sure that play areas are designed to allow adult supervision with a clear view of children on all equipment.

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This material is for informational purposes only. It is not intended to give specific legal or risk management advice, nor are any suggested checklists or actions plans intended to include or address all possible risk management exposures or solutions. You are encouraged to retain your own expert consultants and legal advisors in order to develop a risk management plan specific to your own activities. For more information, contact the GuideOne Center for Risk Management at (877) 448-4331, ext. 5118 for Church and Schools, or ext. 5175 for Senior Living Communities.

Safety Guidelines

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funds the National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS), which works to prevent playground-related injuries by establishing detailed guidelines for safe playgrounds. According to the NPPS, the most important factors in evaluating the safety of any playground are **surface**, **design** and **spacing**, **equipment installation**, and **maintenance**.

Surface

A proper playground surface is one of the most important factors in reducing injuries - or severity of injuries - due to falls. The surface under playground equipment must be both soft and thick enough to absorb the shock of falls.

- ❑ Acceptable surfaces are loosely filled with materials like wood chips, mulch, sand, pea gravel, or shredded rubber. These surfaces help to cushion most falls. Surfacing mats made of safety-tested rubber or rubber-like materials may also be used.
- ❑ Concrete, asphalt, and blacktop are **unsafe** and **not acceptable**. Neither are grass, soil, and packed-earth surfaces because their shock-absorbing ability is affected by weather and wear.
- ❑ Surface materials must be at least 9 to 12 inches (23 to 30 cm) deep and must not be packed down because this will lessen any cushioning effect.
- ❑ The playground surface should be free of standing water and debris that could cause a child to trip and fall, such as rocks, tree stumps, and tree roots.
- ❑ There should be no dangerous materials present on the surface such as broken glass or twisted metal.
- ❑ The best surfaces to allow anyone in a wheelchair to access a playground are wood chips and rubber mats.

Design and Spacing

Playground equipment is designed and manufactured for two age groups: 2 - 5 year-olds (preschool children) and 5 - 12 year-olds (school-age children). Equipment built after 1994 should have a sticker indicating which age group it is meant for - look for this sticker whenever possible.

Younger children must never play on equipment designed for older kids because the equipment sizes and proportions won't be right for small children and can lead to injury. In the safest playgrounds, play

areas for younger children are separated from those meant for older children to avoid confusion about the age appropriateness of the playground equipment.

Surface materials on any playground need to cover appropriate-sized **fall zones** (the areas surrounding any equipment where children could possibly fall). Fall zones recommended by the NPPS include the following:

- ❑ *Climbing equipment:* a minimum of 6 feet (1.8 m) in every direction.
- ❑ *Slides:* a minimum of 6 feet (1.8 m) in every direction - and adding 4 feet (1.2 m) to the height of the slide gives a good estimate as to how much surfacing should be beyond the exit slope of the slide.
- ❑ *Swings:* in front and back, two times the height of the swing set, and 6 feet (1.8 m) on either side of the swing set support beams.

Heights

Climbing areas should be no taller than the recommended maximum height for each age group:

- ❑ No higher than 5 feet (1.5 m) for preschool children.
- ❑ No higher than 7 feet (2.1 m) for school age children.

Swings should be made of rubber or canvas, not wood or metal, and there should be

- ❑ At least 8 inches (20 cm) between suspended swings and between a swing and the support frame.
- ❑ At least an 8-inch (20-cm) clearance between the ground and underside of swing seat.

Important: No surfacing materials are considered safe enough if combined height of playground and child (standing at top platform) is greater than 12 feet (3.7 m).

Spacing

Spacing of play equipment is also an important safety consideration when it comes to playgrounds.

- ❑ Play structures more than 30 inches (76 cm) high should be spaced at least 9 feet (2.7 m) apart.
- ❑ Guardrails should be on elevated platforms more than 30 inches (76 cm) above the ground.
- ❑ Swings, seesaws, and other equipment with moving parts should be located in an area that is separate from the rest of the playground. A child should never have to cross directly in front of or behind the swings to reach other equipment.

Equipment to Avoid

The following types of equipment are not meant for safe playgrounds:

- ❑ Animal figure swings and/or spring loaded equipment.
- ❑ Glider swings that hold more than one child at a time.
- ❑ Merry-go-rounds.
- ❑ Swinging ropes that can fray, unravel, or form a noose (any kind of rope attached to play equipment poses a strangulation hazard, so never let your child tie jump ropes or leashes onto the equipment).
- ❑ Exercise rings (as used in gymnastics) and trapeze bars.
- ❑ Metal slides.
- ❑ Monkey bars: Although people use the terms monkey bars, jungle gyms, and climbing equipment interchangeably, actual monkey bars are a specific type of climbing equipment with interior bars onto which a child may fall from a height greater than 18 inches. In the early 1980s, the CPSC stated that monkey bars were unsuitable for playgrounds.
- ❑ Trampolines: These are never appropriate for safe playgrounds.
- ❑ Seesaws.

Installation and Maintenance

Playground equipment should always be well designed and made of durable materials that won't fall apart when exposed to the elements. Follow the manufacturer's instructions when installing play equipment, and inspect all equipment and surfaces regularly to identify any loose nuts and bolts, sharp edges, corrosion, or deterioration.

- ❑ Take an inventory of the equipment. Check for objects that stick out on equipment and could cut a child or cause clothing to become entangled, including the following:
 - ❑ Hardware that forms a hook.
 - ❑ Open S-hooks or protruding bolt ends (all S-hooks should be closed).
 - ❑ Rungs that protrude outward from the sides of climbing structures.
 - ❑ Sharp or unfinished edges on any equipment.

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- ❑ All hardware on equipment should be secure with no loose parts or broken equipment. Plastic and wood should show no signs of weakening, and there should not be any splintered or rusted surfaces. If a part seems worn out, loose, or in need of other maintenance, designate it off limits immediately and report the problem to your maintenance staff.
 - ❑ All openings on equipment (for example, rungs on a ladder) must measure either less than 3 1/2 inches (9 cm) so kids can't get their heads in or greater than 9 inches (23 cm) so kids' heads can't become trapped.
 - ❑ Playground equipment with moving parts should be checked for pinch points that could pinch or crush a child's finger or hand.
 - ❑ If a sandbox is to be installed, check to make sure that sandboxes contain sand that is intended for playground purposes only; other types of sand, such as sand used in construction, may contain hazardous materials, such as asbestos. Check for hazardous debris such as sharp sticks or broken glass, and be sure that the sand is free of bugs. Sandboxes should be covered overnight to prevent contamination from animals, such as cats.
 - ❑ The playground should look clean and well maintained.
 - ❑ There should be no broken equipment.
 - ❑ Wooden equipment should not be cracking or splintering.
 - ❑ Metal equipment should not be rusted.
 - ❑ The fence surrounding a playground should be in good condition to prevent children from running into surrounding traffic.
 - ❑ Surface materials on the playground need to be maintained regularly to keep the surfacing loosely packed and covering all appropriate areas, especially the fall zones surrounding playground equipment.