



Playground Safety

Each year more than 200,000 children visit hospital emergency rooms because of playground injuries. Many playground injuries can be prevented. Use this guide to examine your children's playground so that they can run, jump, swing and slide to their heart's content—safely.

Soft surface

Because nearly 79 percent of playground injuries are caused by falls to the ground, improper surfacing is the first thing parents should watch for when they inspect a playground. Wood chips, bark mulch, wood fibers, sand, pea gravel, shredded tires and rubber mats cushion falls well. Avoid concrete, grass and dirt, they're too hard. A minimum depth of 12 inches of material surrounding each piece of equipment in a 6-foot fall zone is recommended. And regular maintenance is also crucial; if not daily, then at least monthly.

Swings

Swings are the pieces of moving equipment that are most likely to cause injuries to children. Animal swings have caused several deaths and should be removed from playgrounds. Metal or wooden seats should be replaced with soft seats. Swings should be set far enough away from other equipment so that children won't be hit by a moving swing. Only two swings should be in each supporting framework, and they should be at least 24 inches apart. Full-bucket seats are recommended for younger children. Half-bucket seats are dangerous because babies and toddlers can slide out of them.

Smooth sliding

Slides should be well-anchored, have firm handrails and good traction on the steps. There should be no gaps between the slide itself and the platform. There should also be a bar at the top of the slide so that children have to sit before they go down.

One of the greatest dangers with slides occurs when drawstrings on children's clothes get caught at the top of the slide. Although most children's clothing manufacturers have quit making drawstrings, many children have older clothes.

Safe seesaws and merry-go-rounds

Spring-loaded seesaws are best for young children. Avoid adjustable seesaws with chains because children can crush their hands under the chains. A traditional type seesaw should have a tire or some other object under the seat to keep it from hitting the ground. Merry-go-rounds, or "whirls" or "roundabouts", are best for school-age children. They should have good hand grips, and the rotating platform should be level, free of sharp edges and have adequate clearance to prevent crushing or severing limbs.

Climb carefully

Forty percent of all playground injuries are related to climbing equipment. More children are injured falling off climbing equipment or horizontal ladders than anything else on the playground. Children under 4 shouldn't play on this equipment. However, climbers are great for encouraging upper body strength. Watch older children when they're climbing, check that steps and handrails are in good condition, and make sure a guardrail or barrier surrounds raised platforms. Any climbing ropes should be secured at the top and bottom. The number of injuries caused by monkey bars is so significant that many experts recommend that they be removed from all playgrounds.

Playgrounds for all children

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that new playgrounds make appropriate accommodations for disabled children. The most important issue is how the children get into the space. The ADA requires a 60-inch pathway that is firm, stable and slip-resistant. Rubber tiles and matting are good for accessibility, while loose-fill material like sand and wood chips are not. An easy fix for a playground is to add an adaptive swing, but ideally much more can be done. It's important to provide diverse and stimulating play experiences for children of all abilities.

Improve your playground

If your child's playground is unsafe, report problems to the owner/operator. There are no national mandatory standards for playground equipment, but Texas, California, New Jersey, Michigan and North Carolina have laws that require playgrounds to follow standards of the American Society for Testing and Materials. Some states require playgrounds to follow standards set in the Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) *Handbook for Public Playground Safety*.

Top 10 Checklist for Playground Safety

1. Surfaces around playground equipment should be filled with at least 12 inches of loose fill, such as wood chips, mulch, sand or pea gravel.
2. Most stationary equipment should have at least a 6-foot use zone in all directions.
3. Any openings that can trap children (in guardrails or between ladder rungs) should be less than 3.5 inches apart or more than 9 inches.
4. Guardrails should surround all elevated platforms and should be at least 29 inches high for preschool-age children and 38 inches high for school-age children.
5. Look for exposed concrete footings, tree roots or rocks that could trip children.
6. Check for sharp edges and dangerous hardware, like open "S" hooks or protruding bolts.
7. Make sure your child plays on age-appropriate equipment.
8. Playgrounds should be maintained regularly. Report any problems.
9. Remove hoods or drawstrings that can get caught on equipment.
10. Supervise children while they play.

