

# THE RISK OBSERVER

FOUNDED 2006 — VOL. GLXI

PROFESSIONAL UNDERWRITERS

DAILY 5 CENTS, SUNDAY 15 CENTS

## PLAYGROUND SAFETY

### INTRODUCTION

Parents, educators, and child development experts concur: play is a fundamental part of childhood. Playgrounds can help children develop physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. Playgrounds and outdoor play equipment can provide children with fun, fresh air, and exercise, but they can also pose some safety hazards. Faulty equipment, improper surfaces, and careless behavior are just a few of the dangers that cause children on playgrounds to visit hospital emergency departments.

In the United States more than 205,000 children each year receive emergency hospital treatment for injuries received on public and private playgrounds according to the Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC). In 2003, the CPSC data estimates this number to be more than 220,000. Approximately 76% of those injuries occurred on public playgrounds and nearly 45% of the injuries involving equipment on public playgrounds occurred in schools, the majority to children aged 5 to 14. Overall, 79% of the injuries that occurred on public equipment involved falls primarily due to the surface below the equipment; 53% of these injuries occurred on climbers.

About 15 children aged 14 and under die from playground-related injuries each year. Almost half of these deaths result from strangulation, and about one-quarter are from falls to the playground surface. More than one-third of all playground-related injuries are severe—fractures, internal injuries, concussions, dislocations, and amputations.

Many of these deaths and injuries could be prevented if playgrounds were designed with greater attention to safety. Compliance with playground safety standards can reduce the risk of serious injury and death. There are currently no national mandatory standards for playground equipment, but many states, including Texas, California, New Jersey, Michigan, New York, and North Carolina, have enacted some form of legislation that requires their playgrounds to follow the voluntary standard of the American Society for Testing and Materials—ASTM F1487 and/or the standards set forth in the Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) Handbook for Public Playground Safety.

The CPSC handbook contains voluntary safety recommendations for playground equipment and surfacing as well as recommendations for the layout, installation and maintenance of playground equipment. The ASTM standard is a detailed, technical document intended for use by manufacturers, designers, engineers, and serves as the technical counterpart to the CPSC handbook. It also provides safety recommendations relating to equipment labeling and the accessibility of play areas and play equipment for children with disabilities.

### RISK FACTORS AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES

This report addresses the issue of playground safety by examining the major causes of playground accidents and suggesting methods that may prevent accidents from occurring. It is intended to be used as an aid in evaluating your current playground safety program and in planning for the future of your playgrounds.



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The most effective injury prevention measures are those that create a safe environment. Whether playground injuries are caused by falls or other types of contact, attention to these major factors can help to reduce the incidence of injury: playground surface, playground design and spacing, equipment installation, inspection and maintenance, and supervision.

## **PROTECTIVE SURFACE**

Because falls are the most common type of playground accident (approximately 80% of all playground-related injuries and 20% of playground-related deaths), special attention must be paid to preventing falls and lessening their severity. Children fall because they slip, lose their grip, or lose their balance while playing on equipment. Often they are hurt not only by the fall, but by being struck by the equipment as they fall. Protective surfacing, lower equipment heights and adequate fall zones under and around playground equipment can reduce the severity of and even prevent playground fall-related injuries.

Protective surfacing is one of the most important safety factors on playgrounds. Shock absorbing surfaces can help disperse the impact of a child's falling body or head and reduce the risk of life-threatening injuries. The risk of injury in a fall onto a non-impact-absorbing surface such as asphalt or concrete is more than twice that of falling onto an impact-absorbing surface. Thus, an important aspect of reducing playground injuries is to provide cushioned surfaces beneath and around equipment at depths appropriate to equipment height. Protective surfacing must be maintained throughout the fall zone for each piece of equipment.

The surface under and around the playground equipment should be soft enough and thick enough to soften the impact of a child's fall. Obviously, hard surfaces such as asphalt, blacktop, and concrete would result in the most severe injuries, and are unsuitable under any playground equipment. Soil, packed dirt, grass, stones and turf are also unsafe for surfacing as their shock-absorbing ability can be affected greatly by weather conditions and wear.

The severity of injuries can be reduced by using softer surfaces. Wood chips, bark mulch, wood fibers, shredded rubber and rubber mats, sand, and pea gravel cushion falls well. These loose fill surfaces, if properly maintained, are better able to absorb shock from a fall. Shredded rubber performed best in a test of loose-fill playground surfacing materials according to a study by NPPS and CDC published in 2000. Sand, wood fibers and wood chips also performed adequately, with little difference among the three. Pea gravel provided the least resilience, making it a poor choice for playground surfacing. Although sand is acceptable playground surface cover per the CPSC, sand invites insects, animal excrement, and other litter that can cause contagious illness in children. Pea gravel and sand should be considered only after all other acceptable options have been ruled out. \*\*

A fall zone is literally the area under and around equipment where a child might fall. This area should be free of other equipment and obstacles onto which a child could fall. CPSC and the CDC-funded National Program for Playground Safety suggest that stationary climbing equipment have a fall zone extending a minimum of 6 feet in all directions. For swings, ensure that surfacing extends, in back and front, twice the height of the suspending bar. Swings should have a fall zone, in the front and in the back of swing seats, that is two times the height of the suspending bar. A minimum depth of 12 inches of protective material surrounding each piece of equipment in a 6-foot fall zone is recommended. *No surfacing materials are considered safe if the combined height of playground and the child (standing on the highest platform) is higher than 12 feet.*



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Protective surfacing requires care and maintenance; daily inspections should be performed. Organic and inorganic loose materials are effective only if they are properly maintained. This requires frequent grading and leveling in order to maintain the required depth. A soft fill depth that is sufficient in April may not be sufficient in August if it is not replenished and maintained.

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, like broken glass or twisted metal.

## **EQUIPMENT HEIGHT**

The risk of injury is four times greater if a child falls from playground equipment that is more than 5 feet high than from equipment that is less than 5 feet high. Limiting the height of playground equipment can also reduce the severity of a fall injury. According to the CDC, if the maximum fall height of all playground equipment were reduced to less than five feet, the number of children attending emergency departments from playground injuries could be reduced by as much as 45%.

## **DESIGN AND INSTALLATION**

The safety of playground equipment and its suitability for use depend on proper assembly and installation, good inspection practices and maintenance. Playground equipment should be well-designed and made of materials proven durable when exposed to the weather. Manufacturers' instructions for proper assembly, installation and spacing should be followed carefully and maintained in a permanent file.

Play areas should be separated by age group, type of equipment, and active or passive play. Allow adequate space for children to exit equipment. Avoid any equipment or other installation (e.g., benches) made with angles or openings that could trap a child's head or any part of a child's body.

Playgrounds should be separated from adjacent streets with fences, shrubs, or other barriers. The border will keep children within the grounds and prevent them from running into the street. The border should not be so high, however, that it prevents children who are leaving the playground from having an adequate view of oncoming traffic or that obstruct the view of supervisors. If chain-linked fencing is used, the top edge should be knuckled or covered with protective surround so that it does not cut or jab children climbing over it. A jagged edge will not prevent children from attempting to climb over a fence.

Pathways should give direction to children regarding the routes to take when moving from one area to another or from one piece of equipment to another. Pathways should link activity areas, provide easy access from one piece of equipment to another, and offer unobstructed vision from a child's height. Open fields should be located so that children can run freely without colliding with other children or equipment. Zones for popular activities should be separated to avoid overcrowding.

Playground development takes careful planning. It is important to listen to various points of view, to consider professional expertise, to observe children's needs, to evaluate the current site and to work with playground equipment manufacturers or custom designers of play areas. The standard of care component of playground planning necessitates that school administrators work closely with PTA representatives and fundraising representatives prior to any "community" installations. It is imperative that written materials on playground safety be obtained in order to know and understand what guidelines



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and standards must be met. Designers, planners, and installers should provide evidence that their plans, materials, and equipment meet the CPSC guidelines and the ASTM standards.

## **AGE APPROPRIATE PLAY**

A key to many playground injuries is the fact that children are developmentally different in size and ability and many children are playing on equipment not designed for their age. Most injuries related to age inappropriateness involve children aged 0 to 4 playing on equipment designed for children aged 5 to 12. The National Program for Playground Safety recommends that playground owners be proactive in selecting age appropriate equipment and developing separate play areas for different age groups – specifically, ages 2 to 5 and 5 to 12. Play areas and equipment for younger children should be separated from those meant for older children and signs should clearly designate each area to avoid any confusion.

Under good supervision, age appropriate, well-designed, and appropriately used playgrounds should help create positive emotional development for children, encourage the development of perception and physical skills, and provide a time for children to explore, be creative and make their own decisions.

## **MAINTENANCE**

We have all seen playgrounds that were beautiful when they were new, but have not been maintained and have now deteriorated. Not only are these places unappealing to play in, they are dangerous and may invite vandalism and other mischief. It is estimated that 30 to 40% of accidents on public playgrounds could have been avoided if a good PM program were in place. Maintaining a playground is as important to a safety program as planning and installation.

A method is needed to document compliance with the standard of care being applied and this standard of care should be applied through a systematic written checklist documenting all aspects of the program and the known hazards associated. The current standard of care is the CPSC Handbook for Public playgrounds and ASTM.

A thorough safety inspection checklist, with rationale for the inspection frequency, will create a sturdy foundation for a playground safety program. The manufacturer's maintenance instructions and recommended inspection schedules should be strictly followed. According to the CPSC guidelines, after assembly and before its first use, playground equipment should be thoroughly audited by a qualified person. Ongoing site inspections should be completed in a systematic manner by trained personnel.

The frequency of inspections will depend on the type of equipment, the amount of use, and the local climate. Special attention should be given to moving parts and other wear components. Check for objects like hardware, S-shaped hooks, bolts, and sharp or unfinished edges that stick out on equipment and could cut a child or cause clothing to become entangled. Look for hazards such as hardware that is loose or worn, protrusions and projections, exposed equipment footings, splinters, large cracks, decayed wood components, damaged swing sets, handholds and guardrails, and deterioration and corrosion on structural components which connect to the ground.

Ensure all hardware on equipment is secure, with no loose or broken parts. Plastic and wood should show no signs of weakening, and there should not be any splintered or rusted surfaces. If repairs cannot be made immediately equipment should be removed from service until repaired.



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If your playground has a sandbox, 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.

Records of all maintenance inspections and repairs should be retained in a permanent file, including the manufacturer's maintenance instructions and any checklists used. A record of any accident and injury reported should be retained. This will assist in identification of potential hazards and dangerous design features that should be investigated and corrected.

## **CHANGES OR ADDITIONS TO PLAYGROUNDS**

A permanent durable label that identifies the manufacturer, unit model, month and year of manufacture should be affixed to each unit. This will allow you to reach the manufacturer for maintenance and repair information. Schools should not independently perform alterations, modifications, upgrades or maintenance to their playground equipment without first consulting with the manufacturer. This could null and void any equipment warranties. The manufacturer should also provide written instructions to the school if the repairs will be completed in-house. New playground equipment should be acquired from an approved vendor, and installed by an approved contractor with the appropriate credentials and certifications.

## **SUPERVISION**

The CPSC estimates that over forty percent of all playground injuries are related to inadequate supervision. The play area should be designed so that adults can observe children at play. The supervision of the playground environment directly relates to the overall safety of the playground environment. Young children are constantly challenging their own abilities, very often not being able to recognize dangerous situations and hazards. Adults need to identify potential hazards, observe children playing, intercede and facilitate play when necessary, and be available in case an injury occurs.

Adult supervisors can help prevent playground accidents by taking some precautions to ensure that any equipment being played on is appropriate to the student's age and maturity level. Adult supervisors can help prevent injuries by making sure children properly use the playground equipment and do not engage in unsafe behavior around it.

A supervision plan is an essential component of any schools' policies and risk management plans. Topics to consider when preparing your plan:

- Ratio of children to adults. There is no magic number for the ratio of children to adults, but a school should be consistent with or more stringent than other schools in the district. One suggestion is that the ratio should be the same as for an indoor classroom. For example, if there is one adult to 20 children inside, the same ratio should be applied outside.
- Training for adults. Adults should be trained annually to supervise the playground setting—both the children and the equipment. Placement and movement of supervisors among children is crucial in order for the children to know that the adults are present and available. It is recommended that supervisors have conflict resolution training to help deter potential problems.



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The best safety policy is good supervision and instruction, as well as constant review of playground guidelines and rules. For the most part, general supervision of the playground is sufficient; however, when new equipment has been added to the playground or other changes have been made, more specific supervision is desirable. Initially, supervisors should give pupils direction as to the use of the equipment and pay attention to how it is actually being used. Supervisors should be asked to note any unanticipated or dangerous uses.

Supervisors should also inspect basic aspects of playground safety on a daily basis, checking to see that: equipment is anchored well into the ground, the equipment has no cracks, the ground cover is in place under the equipment, and the ground cover is free from debris. If problems are found, they should be reported in writing and submitted to the building administrator. If a piece becomes disabled, it should be cordoned off so children cannot use it until it is repaired.

## **EDUCATION AND SAFETY RULES**

Admittedly, kids will be kids, but it is possible to control their behavior without inhibiting their creativity. This can be accomplished through education, both off and on the playground. There should be rules and guidelines for the children to follow in order to ensure their safety. Children are more likely to abide by the rules if they understand their purpose. Children of all ages are capable of understanding and following rules if they are clearly explained, enforceable and enforced.

User education and supervision on school playgrounds has been documented to reduce the frequency of accidents. It is also documented that once supervision is stopped; the frequency of accidents will increase.

Assemblies on safety are extremely beneficial. These should be scheduled on a periodic basis to review any new playground equipment and any new playground guidelines that are to be implemented. Walk the class through a safety course on the playground the first day of the school year. It is also advisable to review this information with the children again in the spring.

Many accidents are caused by the unintended use or misuse of equipment by children. Children use playground equipment in the standard manner until it no longer challenges them and then they will explore other ways of using the equipment. While these explorations are diverse, they are also generally predictable. Playground rules should be developed with these expected, but dangerous uses in mind.

## **SIGNS AND SAFETY DURING NON-SCHOOL HOURS**

If the school playgrounds are accessible for public use when school is not in session, there is a potential for accidental injury at this time as well. While you cannot directly supervise the use of the playground when school is not in session, you can take some steps to prevent injuries that may occur.

Be sure that the grounds and equipment are well maintained and conform to generally accepted standards. This requires frequent, documented inspections to see that the condition of the playground has not deteriorated.

Although signs alone have not been proven to reduce accidents on public playgrounds, it has helped to educate and raise user awareness. CPSC recommends that playground areas be signed, at a minimum, indicating the age group for which they were designed. Other typical playground signage includes rules



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for use, attentive supervision of children, hours of operation, safety warnings, and a name and phone number to report safety problems.

It should be noted that now as a standard practice, most playground equipment manufacturers provide age labels for their products and many of these labels contain a reminder that children should be supervised. Manufacturers may also include signs about age appropriateness and supervision in the total new equipment packages.

Post signs at all entrances to the grounds with clear, concise rules. If you need to design your own signs, many professionals recommend that it be on a yellow background with a text of contrasting colors. The color yellow is the universally recognized color for caution. Print the rules in letters large enough to be easily seen. Be sensitive to language differences in your area. If necessary, post the signs in the prominent language of the community in addition to English, or use universally recognized symbols.

Inform the community of the rules for playground usage and your stance regarding claims by newsletter or newspaper articles. Also ask the community's cooperation in immediately reporting any violations of the rules or unsafe conditions that may be observed.

It is up to the owners of public playgrounds to raise public awareness about playground safety. The use of signs is one way to control the playgrounds and demonstrate a commitment to provide a safe play environment for all children.

## **ACCESSIBILITY AND PLAY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL CHILDREN**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1991 requires that new playgrounds make appropriate accommodations for disabled children. Play areas should be planned or modified to give children with disabilities an opportunity to play on play equipment with other 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. Transfer stations on equipment will aid physically-challenged children to get off and on equipment. Five-foot wide paths, wheelchair parking spaces adjacent to the play structures, wider platforms and walkways will help children using wheelchairs. Rubber tiles and matting and pre-engineered wood fiber protective surfaces are good for accessibility, while loose-fill materials like sand and wood chips are not. Using different textures and colors for paths and hand rails can help visually-impaired children.

The Recreation Advisory Committee of the U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board has guidelines on accessibility and playground equipment. The guidelines specify the minimum level of accessibility required in the construction and alteration of play areas covered by the law. Additional information can be obtained from the Access Board at [www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov).

## **PRESSURE TREATED WOOD**

A relatively recent concern for playground safety is playground equipment made of pressure treated wood. Pressure treated wood is wood that has had chemical preservatives forced deep into the cellular structure of the wood. This allows the wood to maintain a chemical barrier against termites and other pests, as well as against general decay for long periods of time. The most common wood preservative and pesticide used for this process is chromated copper arsenate (CCA), which contains arsenic, a human carcinogen.



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Many backyards, parks and playgrounds throughout the United States have decks, picnic tables and play sets made of wood. In 2002, it was estimated that 90% of these types of outdoor structures were made from CCA-treated wood.

Widely used since the 1970's to protect the wood from rotting, CCA continually releases minute particles of arsenic to the wood's surfaces. Young children, in particular, are at risk of ingesting small portions of arsenic when they put their hands in their mouths after touching arsenic-treated wood on the play equipment or on loose surfacing surrounding the equipment.

The Safe Playgrounds Project provides recommendations on ways to minimize exposure to arsenic from pressure-treated wood found at schools, child care facilities, public parks, and backyards. The website, [www.safe2play.org](http://www.safe2play.org), provides important health and safety information about the dangers posed to young children and the general public from the use of CCA-treated wood. Information about their arsenic test kit can be obtained from this site.

It should be noted that in February of 2002 the EPA and the treated wood industry announced a voluntary agreement to discontinue use of CCA wood meant for use in fences, decks, playground equipment, and boardwalks in homes and playgrounds by December 31, 2003.

## **LEAD PAINT HAZARDS**

Testing by the CPSC and various state and local jurisdictions has shown that many school, park, and community playgrounds across the U.S. have metal and wooden playground equipment that present a potential lead paint hazard primarily for children six years old and younger. Children this age are at risk since they put their hands on the equipment while playing, and then put their hands in their mouths. Determine this hazard on a case-by-case basis, considering such factors as: the condition of the paint, the playground equipment's age, location, use condition, and overall safety, and the regulatory requirements of individual states, cities, and localities.

## **SUMMARY**

Play is an important part of your child's physical, social, intellectual, and emotional development. A risk free playground does not necessarily make a successful playground. Risk and challenge are important components of the playground environment. Accidents will occur in the safest of environments, especially when children are involved. Providing a safe yet fun setting for children that provides opportunities for them to develop at their own pace can only be accomplished when all elements for success are present: a safe setting, age appropriateness, and standard of care compliance. The challenge is to take the available information, evaluate and document the existing condition of your playgrounds, and begin to develop and implement a plan of action.

If you have any questions or comments, or would like assistance in developing a playground safety program, we would be pleased to have you contact Professional Underwriters at (888) 855-4782.



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**\*\*Special note for NJ Playgrounds:** All construction or alteration of playgrounds, playground equipment and surfacing that are subject to the Playground Safety Subcode shall comply with the applicable provisions of the Barrier-Free Subcode (N.J.A.C. 5:23-7). Also, in accordance with N.J.A.C. 5:23-7.18(d) and ICC/ANSI A117.1-98, Sections 302 and 303, surfaces of all routes and spaces required to be accessible shall be stable, firm and slip-resistant. Sand and gravel shall therefore not be used as surfacing materials when new equipment is being installed, or a new safety surface is being put in place, and the barrier-free sub-code is applicable.

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National Recreation and Park Association  
[www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org)  
Center for Environmental Health's Safe Playgrounds Project  
[www.safe2play.org](http://www.safe2play.org)

EPA  
[www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)

KaBoom! A national non-profit organization committed to building safe playgrounds for America's children.  
[www.kaboom.org](http://www.kaboom.org)

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Atlanta, GA  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

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All statistics are based on 2002 data obtained from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS). NEISS collects only playground product-related injuries that are recorded in more than 90 hospital emergency departments located throughout the U.S. Thus, only emergency room injuries are recorded, and the national statistics are estimates.



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