

CFA PARENT CHECKLIST

How Safe is Your Local Playground?

Too many children suffer injuries on public playground equipment. It is estimated that nearly 150,000 children are treated in hospital emergency departments annually for injuries sustained while playing on public playground equipment. And sometimes these injuries are fatal; at least 15 children die each year because of playground-related incidents.

Extensive research has been conducted to identify the playground hazards which cause injuries and death. The following checklist can be used to evaluate the general safety of your local playground. Check the playgrounds where your children play -- including the equipment at your local schools, parks, community centers, churches, and child care centers -- to see whether they present dangerous hazards.

1. Is there a lack of protective surfacing under or around play equipment?

Protective surfacing is the most critical safety factor on playgrounds because approximately 75% of all injuries are caused by falls.

Hard, paved surfaces such as concrete and asphalt as well as earth surfaces such as grass, soil, and hard packed dirt are not acceptable for use under and around play equipment. None of these surfaces provides adequate protection against fall-related injuries. Falls onto concrete or asphalt from as low as 2 inches can cause life-threatening head impact injuries.

Acceptable protective surfacing materials include:

- Loose-fill surfacing materials -- such as wood chips, shredded bark mulch, sand, and pea gravel -- when installed and maintained at depths of at least 9 to 12 inches and provided that they are not wet or compacted.
- Unitary synthetic surfacing materials -- including some premolded rubber tiles and pour-in-place systems.

2. Are pieces of play equipment too close together? Is there a lack of protective surfacing where children might fall?

A fall zone is the area under and around a piece of play equipment where a child might fall. The fall zone should have protective surfacing and be free of other equipment or obstacles onto which a child might fall.

- If two pieces of adjacent stationary play equipment are no more than 30 inches in height, their fall zones may overlap with a minimum distance between structures of 6 feet. If adjacent equipment is higher than 30 inches, the minimum distance between structures should be 9 feet.
- For climbing equipment, merry-go-rounds, seesaws, and spring rockers, the fall zone should extend a minimum of 6 feet in all directions from the perimeter of the equipment.
- For slides, the fall zone behind the access ladder and to the sides of a slide should extend a minimum of 6 feet from the perimeter of the equipment. The fall zone in front of the exit of a slide should extend a minimum distance of 6 feet from the end of the slide chute or for a distance of $H+4$ feet, whichever is greater. H is the height of the slide platform.
- For swings with conventional seats, the fall zone should extend a minimum of 6 feet from the perimeter of the support structure on each side as well as a minimum distance of twice the height of the pivot point in front of and behind the swing seats. The fall zone on the sides of a swing structure may overlap with that of an adjacent swing structure. But the fall zone in front of and behind the swings may not overlap with any other fall zone.

3. Is there any equipment too high above ground?

The highest climbing rung or platform on climbing equipment or the height of the top of a slide, for example, should not exceed:

- 4 feet above the protective surfacing when designed for preschool-age children.
- 6 feet above the protective surfacing when designed for school-age children.

4. Do elevated play surfaces -- such as platforms, bridges, walkways, and ramps -- lack adequate guardrails or protective barriers to prevent falls? Can children inadvertently fall off high elevated surfaces?

5. Are swings too heavy, too close together, or too close to support structures?

- Swing seats should not be made of wood, metal, or any other heavy, rigid materials. Heavy, hard hitting swings -- including animal swings, multiple occupancy swings such as gliders (but not tire swings), swinging exercise rings, and trapeze bars -- may cause life-threatening head impact injuries.
- No swing structures should be attached to other play equipment or composite structures.
- No more than two swing seats should be suspended in the same section of the support structure.
- Infant/tot seats should not be suspended in the same of a swing structure as regular swing seats.
- Swings with conventional seats or tot seats should have horizontal clearances of at least 24 inches between adjacent seats and 30 inches between the swing seat and an adjacent structural component.

6. Does the play equipment have any head entrapment hazards?

Any opening -- except those where the ground is the lower boundary -- with an interior dimension between 3.5 and 9 inches may cause head entrapment, and such incidents can result in strangulation. Entrapment may occur when a child enters an opening, either head first or feet first, but cannot withdraw his or her head because the opening is too small.

7. Does the play equipment have any entanglement hazards on which children may catch clothing or anything else around their neck?

Entanglement incidents can result in strangulation.

- Look for open "S" hooks, especially on swings.
- Look for gaps, openings, holes, protrusions, or equipment components which may act as hooks or catch points, especially at the top of slides.

8. Does the play equipment have any sharp points, corners, or edges?

9. Does the play equipment have any hardware or components which are dangerous protrusions or projections?

10. Does the play equipment have any exposed moving parts or other junctures which create dangerous pinch, crush, or shearing points?

11. Does the play equipment or area have any exposed concrete footings or environmental obstacles, such as rocks or roots, which create trip hazards and may cause impact injuries?

**12. Does the play equipment show any signs of deterioration or corrosion?
Does the play area lack maintenance or appear to have been vandalized?**

- Look for loose splinters, large splits, and decay on wood components, rust or paint that is peeling, chipping, or cracking on metal components, and splitting or cracking on plastic components.
- Look for missing or damaged equipment components, checking items such as handholds, guardrails, swing seats, and benches.
- Special attention is warranted for deterioration and corrosion on structural components where they contact the ground; look for any emerging anchoring problems that may cause instability.

If the answer to any of the questions above is yes, contact the owner or operator of the playground - such as the school principal, the local Parks and Recreation Department, or the child care provider. Let them know that you found hazards and that their play equipment and playground are not safe. Share the results of this survey and demand that corrective action be taken immediately so that children do not get hurt. Hazardous equipment should be upgraded or removed. Most importantly, ensure that adequate protective surfacing gets installed and maintained.

A more detailed evaluation of the playground's safety can be completed using Consumer Federation of America's 1998 *Report and Model Law on Public Play Areas and Equipment*. For a copy of this report, send a check or money order for \$40 to Consumer Federation of America, 1424 16th Street, NW, Suite 604, Washington, DC 20036.