

# Risk Control Best Practices: Playground Safety

Each year, nearly a quarter of a million children go to U.S. hospital emergency rooms with injuries associated with playground equipment. Most injuries occur when a child falls from the equipment onto the ground. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) have published guidelines and standards that serve as the internationally recognized standard of care for public playgrounds. It is essential that those who are responsible for managing the public playgrounds in your community become familiar with these documents and develop a program to ensure compliance which will result in safer playgrounds for our children.

## Understanding Your Exposures

**The key to preventing playground-related injuries and any associated claims is understanding your exposures and having a plan to manage them. The following is a list of the most common exposures from a risk management and loss prevention perspective.**

### Inadequate Supervision

Most states have a Recreational Use statute that limits liability for municipalities should an accident occur when the public is using their recreational facilities/parks when there is no fee for use. The use-at-your-own-risk scenario typically applies. The inadequate supervision issue is a concern primarily at school playgrounds but could also become a concern during any supervised recreation program. When children are being supervised in your care it is your responsibility to help ensure they are using the playground safely and that you are enforcing the rules. Teachers and other supervising staff should be trained on what is allowed and not allowed on the playgrounds, and what is expected of them. Allow for adequate coverage so that all areas of the playground can be monitored. If you do not have adequate coverage then consider keeping kids in one designated area.

### Donated Equipment

Sometimes in an effort to save money municipalities will take donated or used playground equipment. The savings are not worth the risk. The equipment is often not to current playground standards and can be difficult to maintain after it is re-installed. If an injury were to happen and the equipment was known not to be to the current code, it could present challenges for the new owner. It is best to avoid donated equipment.

### Accessibility

All playgrounds must have an accessible route to the playground per the Americans with Disabilities Act. Any certified vendor should be required to install all current codes including the ADA. Problems typically occur after the installation of existing playgrounds, when parks are modified, not maintained properly or the safety surfacing is not compliant. Before any changes are made to any of your playgrounds be sure to consult with your contractor or code enforcement team. [Click here for the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities-Play Areas.](#)

## Inadequate Maintenance & Inspections

Playgrounds are designed for the elements and for heavy use but they also require routine maintenance as a result. Often times when a playground committee raises funds, designs, and builds a playground, the ongoing preventative maintenance and replacement of equipment is not considered. The following are some maintenance considerations for new builds and existing playgrounds.

- Establish an annual playground maintenance and equipment replacement budget.
- Following the playground installation, the contractor should be required to train all maintenance personnel on what preventative maintenance should be conducted, weekly, monthly, and annually. For existing playgrounds, hire a Certified Playground Safety Inspector to train your staff.
- If possible, consider contracting with the playground installer to conduct regular maintenance and an annual inspection. If you do not have any staff in-house capable of the maintenance then this is a must.
- Keep parts stored such as bolts and swing set chains as well as plenty of safety surfacing (mulch, gravel, sand, etc.).
- Use the sample provided in this guide to create your own custom inspection form that is specific to the equipment and exposures on your playground. Document all inspections and corrective actions taken.
- Conduct routine inspections of your playgrounds. Daily inspections are preferred, especially at school playgrounds as new issues can pop up during heavy use and often at night that should be addressed immediately including vandalism, broken glass, etc.
- Unfortunately, playgrounds can sometimes be an attractive location for drug users so needles and other paraphernalia should be a part of your inspection.
- When issues are identified during an inspection it is important to remedy the problem as soon as possible. If the issue cannot be fixed immediately then consideration should be given to temporarily closing the piece of equipment for use.
- Those responsible for playground maintenance should strongly consider taking the Certified Playground Safety Inspector course. This course is offered in person and online. [To learn more click here.](#)
- The Consumer Product Safety Commission has established a [Public Playground Safety Handbook](#) which provides recommendations for each type of equipment, sample checklists, equipment design, and selection.
- The American Society for Testing and Materials Safety and Performance Standards for Public Playgrounds can be [found here.](#)



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# Operational Considerations

Playgrounds that are located at schools should be managed and monitored like any other park.

## Things to consider:

- Seasonal issues such as snow or ice build-up, heavy rains, and shade.
- Tree-Roots should be monitored for tripping hazards and overhanging limbs should be trimmed to prevent injury or damage from falling.
- Festivals or events that could increase usage
- Sanitation and cleaning-be sure to use chemicals approved by the manufacturer
- Hours of operation should be limited to daylight hours unless the park has adequate lighting.
- Hours, rules, and procedures regarding inclement weather should be posted on your website, social media, and at the park.
- Communicate issues of vandalism through social media channels as well to bring attention to the problem.
- If accidents occur, conduct an investigation to determine if any corrective action is needed to prevent them in the future.

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# Getting Started: Playground Maintenance Program

Depending on the age, condition, and maintenance of your playgrounds you may need varying levels of attention. Below are some general areas to focus on to make sure you are on the right track.

## Operations

- ✓ Consult with a Certified Playground Inspector to give you a baseline action plan to help get your playground in compliance.
- ✓ Conduct daily inspections of your playgrounds. High frequency inspections are a must for all playgrounds to identify issues that can pop up from day to day including vandalism, weather related issues and damaged equipment.
- ✓ Evaluate your staffing and playground coverage by conducting checks before/after school and during recess to ensure your supervisors are properly monitoring and enforcing the rules.
- ✓ Establish an accident investigation program to evaluate the cause of playground related injuries. Take action to remedy the issues promptly.
- ✓ If you do not have properly trained maintenance staff to perform regular preventative maintenance then consider contracting with a professional.
- ✓ Ensure new equipment is installed per the Manufacturers specifications and it is inspected prior to use.
- ✓ Do not permit homemade or donated equipment to be installed.
- ✓ If volunteers are used to install equipment then the manufacturers representative should supervise the installation.
- ✓ Establish a parts inventory. Ensure all replacement parts are from Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM).

# Maintenance

- ✓ Make sure surfaces around playground equipment have at least 12 inches of wood chips, mulch, sand, pea gravel, mats, or other unitary surfacing materials.
- ✓ Check that protective surfacing extends at least 6 feet in all directions from play equipment. For swings, be sure surfacing extends, in back and front, twice the height of the suspending bar.
- ✓ Make sure play structures more than 30 inches high are spaced at least 9 feet apart.
- ✓ Check for dangerous hardware, like open "S" hooks or protruding bolt ends that could create a choking or entanglement hazard.
- ✓ Make sure spaces that could trap children, such as openings in guardrails or between ladder rungs, measure less than 3.5 inches or more than 9 inches.
- ✓ Check for sharp points or edges in the equipment.
- ✓ Eliminate or locate exposed concrete footings below surfacing material.
- ✓ Look out for tripping hazards, like exposed concrete footings, tree stumps, and rocks.
- ✓ Make sure elevated surfaces, like platforms and ramps, have guardrails to prevent falls.
- ✓ Remove or repair known broken/non-operating equipment.
- ✓ Remove equipment that is not recommended by the CPSC such as:
  - Animal Figure Swings
  - Multiple Occupancy Swings
  - Rope Swings
  - Dual Exercise Rings and Trapeze Bars

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