

Playground Safety



Each year about 250,000 children ages 15 and younger get hurt on playground equipment and are treated for their injuries in emergency rooms. Between 10 and 20 children die each year from playground injuries. About one-fourth of all playground injuries happen on home equipment, but most occur at school and public playgrounds.

This brochure can help you determine whether playground equipment—at your home, your child's school, or in your neighborhood—is as safe as possible.

How are children injured?

Falls cause about 75% of playground injuries. Children:

- Fall off equipment
- Fall from heights, especially from climbing structures (such as monkey bars)
- Trip over equipment

Other playground injuries are caused by:

- Blows from equipment, especially swings
- Cuts from sharp edges, hardware, or loose or exposed nails and screws

Types of Injuries

Many injuries, such as cuts, scrapes, and bruises, are not serious. However, some head injuries can be serious or even fatal. Other common playground injuries—many of which can be prevented—are broken bones, sprains, and injuries to the teeth and mouth.

Preventing Playground Injuries

Most important:

- The best way to prevent serious head injuries is to have a surface that will absorb impact when children land on it. This is especially needed under and around swings, slides, and other equipment. (See "What are safer surfaces?").
- To prevent injuries from falls, platforms should not be higher than 8 feet above the ground and should have guard rails (38 inches high).
- Vertical and horizontal spaces should be less than 3 1/2 inches wide or more than 9 inches wide. This is to keep a small child's head from getting trapped.
- Objects that stick out (bolts, nails, etc.), hooks that are not closed all the way ("S" hooks), sharp edges, and pinch points also cause many playground injuries. Equipment must be free of these hazards.
- Even with these measures children still need to be watched closely while they are playing.

Also important:

- Carefully maintain all equipment. Be sure that it has been installed exactly according to the manufacturer's directions.
- Swings should be clear of other equipment by a distance equal to twice the height of the swing, measured from the center of the swing while it is at rest. Swing seats should be made of soft materials such as rubber, plastic, or canvas. Children under 5 years of age should use chair swings. Make sure open hooks, or "S" hooks, on swing chains are closed to form a figure "8."
- Make sure equipment is the right size for the children playing on it. For example, smaller swings are meant for smaller children and can break if larger children use them.
- Make sure children cannot reach any moving parts that might pinch or trap any body part.
- Play equipment should be installed at least 6 feet from any barrier, such as a wall or fence, and should be securely anchored to prevent tipping. The concrete anchors should be buried below the surface of the dirt and beneath the full depth of the ground cover of absorbent material. Some equipment, such as swings and slides, requires a larger "fall zone" around it.
- Wood fences and equipment should be free of splinters; all fences and equipment should be free of nails that stick out.
- Metal slides exposed to direct sunlight can burn children's hands and legs. Plastic slides are less likely to cause burn injuries. Position slides in the shade or face them away from the afternoon sun.
- Slides should have a platform with rails at the top for children to hold. The sides of the slide should be 4 inches high.
- Make sure there are no rocks, pieces of glass, sticks, toys, debris, or other children at the base of a slide. These could get in the way of a child landing safely. The cleared and safer-surfaced area should extend from the exit of the slide a distance equal to the height of the slide plus 4 feet.

The Danger of Drawstrings

Drawstrings can strangle a child if they get caught on playground equipment. One way to prevent this is to take the drawstrings off the hoods and collars of your child's jackets, shirts, and hats and shorten the drawstrings around the bottom of coats and jackets.

If you want to leave the drawstrings, you can either:

- Cut all the ends just short enough so that they tie
- Sew a seam at the middle of the hood, collar, or waistband to prevent either side from pulling out if caught on an object

The best way to prevent drawstrings from getting caught on anything is to choose clothing that does not have them.

What are safer surfaces?

Did you know that even a 1-foot fall onto asphalt or concrete can cause a fatal head injury? Or that a 4-foot fall onto packed earth or grass can also cause serious injury or death?

Safer surfaces make a serious or fatal head injury less likely to occur if a child falls. This is because such surfaces absorb the impact of a fall.

Some examples of "safer surfaces" include:

- Sand (10 inches deep)
- Wood chips (12 inches deep)
- Rubber outdoor mat (follow manufacturers' instructions)

Sand and wood chips, which absorb impact, should be raked at least weekly to keep them soft. They also need refilling often to keep the correct depth.

No surface is totally safe. Many injuries are preventable, but they will sometimes occur even at the safest playgrounds—and even with the best supervision. Be prepared to handle an injury if it does occur.

For more information... about playground safety, "safer surfaces," or to get a copy of the *Handbook for Public Playground Safety*, contact the US Consumer Product Safety Commission, Washington, DC. 20207.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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