

# Ensuring Playground Safety

by Betsy Caesar

The importance of motor development has been well understood by early childhood educators for many years. Unfortunately, they have received little

in the way of guidance from designers or manufacturers of play equipment as to how to provide for safe active play. Recent brain research has proven what Piaget and child care providers knew all along, that movement is essential to the formation of intellect. Between the ages of birth and five or six years, children's bodies as much as their minds are the organ of intelligence.

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and maintaining safe active play settings have been developed. But, as recently as 1991, play equipment was often designed with openings that could entrap the head of a child five years old or younger. These head entrapments resulted in some deaths by strangulation. As recently as 1991 most manufactured play equipment was designed for children aged 5 to 12. Children five years of age and younger were, therefore, often playing on equipment that was unsafe for them.

Things have gotten a lot better since 1991. Advocates for children's play have cooperated with manufacturers of children's play equipment and have written a safety standard which now ensures safely designed equipment for children aged 2 to 5 and children aged 5 to 12. The United States Consumer Products Safety Commission has revised an outdated guideline for public playground safety. A national training program has been implemented that has certified over 10,000 people in playground safety inspection. A few states and child care licensing organizations have adopted nationally published standards and guidelines as their requirement for playground safety. But compliance with playground safety guidelines and standards is still very low.

The growth of quality child care in this country along with an enhanced understanding by manufacturers and designers about the importance of children's motor development has resulted in new research into active play safety for young children. Strategies for creating

This article will describe to you how every child care center can do their best to ensure the safety of their children on the playground.

## Mission statement

Every child center should start by developing a mission statement about their playground. This statement should include the goals that they expect to achieve through the use of their active play space and the means that the child care center is going to use to support those goals. A sample mission statement might read:

*Our child care center believes that active play should be free play. We believe that we need to provide our children with the opportunity to interact with the natural world and to grow developmentally through the use of active and passive play equipment. We believe that the child care provider's role is to support but not interrupt children's free play. We believe that our playground should be free of all hazards.*

## Playground teacher

In order to implement this type of mission statement every child care center should have a playground committee which includes a staff member who is assigned the responsibility for the playground.

Whether your operation is small, or part of a chain of centers, and even if you have a janitorial staff member who will clean and maintain the playground, every child care center needs someone with knowledge about and a commitment to playground safety.

The title for this staff person could be the Playground Teacher. The staff person could be a teacher, an administrator, or another staff member. The Playground Teacher's responsibility is to inform himself or herself about playground safety, take on the responsibility for making and keeping the playground safe, and teaching other staff about and engaging them in a program of playground safety.

The responsibilities for the Playground Teacher would be as follows:

◆ The playground file

The Playground Teacher should establish and maintain an active file about the playground. This file should include:

- The most current copy of the "United States Consumer Products Safety Commission Handbook for Public Playground Safety"
- The name and contact information for:
  - the manufacturer(s) of all your playground equipment as well as all purchase orders related to each piece of play equipment
  - the manufacturer or provider of your safety surfacing as well as all purchase orders related to the purchase of your surfacing
  - the playground installer as well as all contracts and invoices related to the installation of your playground
  - the playground auditor (who has audited your playground for compliance with the guidelines and standards), as well as all reports, contracts, and invoices related to the auditing of your playground

This file should also include:

- Equipment manufacturer's Installation, and Inspection and Maintenance Instructions
- Inspection and maintenance information provided by the manufacturer of your safety surfacing
- Statements of compliance with playground safety standards provided by your equipment and surfacing manufacturers
- Records of all inspections and maintenance work done to your playground
- Playground injury report forms, both blank sheets and records of injuries that have occurred

Most child care centers will not have such a complete file. Below is the information your Playground Teacher will need to complete your playground file.

◆ Resource information

The Playground Teacher must have a current copy of and be familiar with the *United States Consumer Products Safety Commission Handbook for Public Playground Safety*. The most current version was published in 1997. It is available for free from the Consumer Products Safety Commission:

www.cpsc.gov  
 Enter Handbook for Public Playground Safety in the search box on the Home Page  
 or write to:  
 United States Consumer Products Safety Commission  
 Office of Information and Public Affairs  
 Washington, DC 20207  
 Call (800) 638-2772

The Playground Teacher does not need to have a copy of but should be aware that there is a standard for public playground equipment safety published by the American Society for Testing and Materials. This standard: *Standard Consumer Safety Performance Specification*

*for Playground Equipment for Public Use F14-87* was first published in 1993. The most current version was published in 2001. Complying with this standard ensures that the playground equipment on your playground, if maintained in a safe condition, meets the safety requirements of your children. The ASTM F1487-01 also requires that the manufacturers of all equipment that complies with the standard provide concise installation and maintenance instructions for their play equipment. The Playground Teacher should look for that information and request it from the manufacturer if it is not available.

The Playground Teacher does not have to have a copy of but should be aware that there is a standard for safety surfacing also published by the American Society of Testing and Materials: *Standard Consumer Specification for Impact Attenuation of Surface Systems Under and Around Play Equipment ASTM F1292*. Complying with this standard ensures that the safety surfacing on your playground, if maintained in a safe condition, meets the safety requirements for your children.

These three documents represent the standard of care for playground safety, and it is these documents that will be referred to in a court of law if a law suit is brought related to a playground injury.

◆ Equipment safety

The Playground Teacher should find out if the equipment on your playground meets the ASTM F1487-01 Standard. If the child care center records do not contain information stating that the equipment meets this standard for the age of the children using the equipment, the Playground Teacher should ask the manufacturer(s) of their playground equipment to give them a statement in writing indicating that their equipment meets the ASTM F1487-01 Standard. If the manufacturer is unable

to supply a statement of compliance or is unable to assist in making repairs to bring the equipment into compliance, then the Playground Teacher should report to the playground committee that this piece of equipment is not in compliance with the standards. Please note that it is not necessary to be in complete compliance with the standards in order for the play equipment to be safe. Ask the manufacturer of your equipment to note what is not in compliance and to send a letter to you explaining why this non-compliance is not hazardous. If you are unable to get assistance from the manufacturer of your equipment, then you should consider removing that piece of equipment.

### ◆ Equipment layout

Once the Playground Teacher has ensured that the play equipment meets the ASTM F1487-01 Standard he or she can turn to the *Handbook for Public Playground Safety* and find out if there is enough space around each piece of playground equipment to ensure safety. The *Handbook* also provides information on age appropriateness of different components of play equipment, supervision, fencing, and shade.

### ◆ Safety surfacing

The *Handbook for Public Playground Safety* defines safety surfacing. Table 1 in the *Handbook* provides information about how much safety surfacing is needed to ensure safety under varying heights of playground equipment. The Playground Teacher should use this information to see if the playground equipment has the right type and depth of safety surfacing. If the playground has unitary rubber surfacing there should be a written report in your file supplied by the manufacturer of the safety surfacing stating that the surfacing they supplied to your center meets the ASTM F1292 Safety Surfacing Test for the fall heights of your equipment.

### ◆ Injuries

Over 200,000 children are seriously injured on playgrounds every year. Approximately 18 deaths per year are the result of playground injuries. Providing safe and age appropriate equipment and appropriate safety surfacing are very important in protecting children on the playground but if you don't maintain them in a safe condition you may have serious injuries. Research has shown that a third of all playground injuries can be avoided if playgrounds are properly inspected and maintained. This is the Playground Teacher's most important job.

### ◆ Inspection and maintenance forms

The Playground Teacher should write up a set of inspection and maintenance forms based on the equipment, surfacing, and all other elements of your playground. The Playground Teacher should walk the staff through the playground introducing and discussing all issues related to inspections and maintenance. Various inspection and maintenance duties should be assigned to staff members. The Playground Teacher will be responsible for seeing that these procedures are completed. This is best done through the use of simple check sheets. Keep these check sheets in your playground file as a record of your intent and actions related to playground safety. The following are sample inspection and maintenance issues:

#### Daily

- Check and clean the entire playground for hazardous debris or objects such as rocks, sharp sticks, and litter.
- Check for and take action on broken equipment or damage caused by vandalism.

- Rake loose fill surfacing in areas where the material has been displaced.
- Sweep loose fill surfacing and other debris off of play equipment platforms and solid surfaces such as asphalt or unitary rubber.
- Make sure use zones are free of all obstacles.
- Empty and clean water tables.
- Empty trash cans.

#### Monthly

- Check for and sand splinters on any wooden features in the playground.
- Check for and tighten or replace loose or missing hardware, caps, or plugs.
- Check for and replace all moving parts that show wear.
- Rake loose fill surfacing to ensure that it is at its proper depth in all areas of the use zones.
- Check all vegetation, clear out hazardous or poisonous weeds, prune dead branches in bushes or trees.

#### Bi-annually

- Check depth of loose fill surfacing; replenish if necessary.
- Check for and remove tripping hazards on the playground surface.
- Check for and correct any drainage problems such as standing water or erosion.
- Check all equipment and other playground features for rust, rot, and cracks with special attention to possible corrosion where support legs of play structures come into contact with the

ground. If any of these conditions cannot be repaired by recommended maintenance, call the manufacturer(s) of your play equipment and get their direction as to what to do.

- Check all play equipment for hazards that may have emerged since your equipment was installed. Check for sharp points, corners, and edges. Check for protruding hardware that might impale a child or entangle a child's clothing. If any of these conditions cannot be repaired by recommended maintenance, contact the manufacturer(s) of your play equipment and get directions on what to do.

- Fertilize all plantings.

Your inspections and maintenance program should include all recommendations supplied by the manufacturer(s) of your play equipment. Add these recommendations to your daily, monthly, and bi-annual program.

## Supervision

The early childhood community is aware of the need for good supervision. A safe playground will free supervisors from safety worries and enable them to interact supportively with and observe the creative development of children during free play. All supervisors should be aware that children should not wear loose strings, jewelry, or other items that could become entangled in play equipment. All supervisors should be aware that children should not play on equipment while wearing bike helmets.

## Assistance

The National Playground Safety Institute has trained over 10,000 people in playground auditing and inspection. There are Certified Playground Safety Inspectors in every state. Contact the National Recreation and Parks

Association to access contact information for a Certified Playground Safety Inspector in your area:

[www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org)

Click on National Playground Safety Institute under "Hot Topics" on the Home Page or write to:

National Playground Safety Institute  
National Recreation and Park Association  
22377 Belmont Ridge Road  
Ashburn VA 20148  
Call (703) 858-0784

The National Program for Playground Safety is a playground safety advocacy organization that has literature and video information to assist you in the process of making your playground safe:

[www.playgroundsafety.org](http://www.playgroundsafety.org)

or write to:

National Program for Playground Safety  
School of Health, Physical Education & Leisure Services  
WRC 205, University of Northern Iowa  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0618  
Call (800) 554-PLAY

## Children's play

Growth is about risk taking. This risk is part of all aspects of child development. The playground is all about child development and therefore it involves risk taking. Children will get injured on the playground. They will get bumps, bruises, scrapes, cuts, and even broken arms. But, if you maintain a safe playground in a safe condition, you will be able to prevent permanently disabling injuries and death and your children will flourish.