

Health & Safety for Caregivers

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Home Playground Safety for Child Care Providers

When it comes to safety, you can't be too cautious. The same attention you pay to safety inside your home should also be devoted to ensuring a safe outdoor environment. Each year, over 200,000 preschool and elementary-aged children are injured while playing on playground equipment and require emergency room treatment. Fractures, internal injuries, strains/sprains, severe bruising, and deep cuts are the most common injuries. Most injuries happen on public playgrounds, but those that occur on home playgrounds are the most likely to result in death.

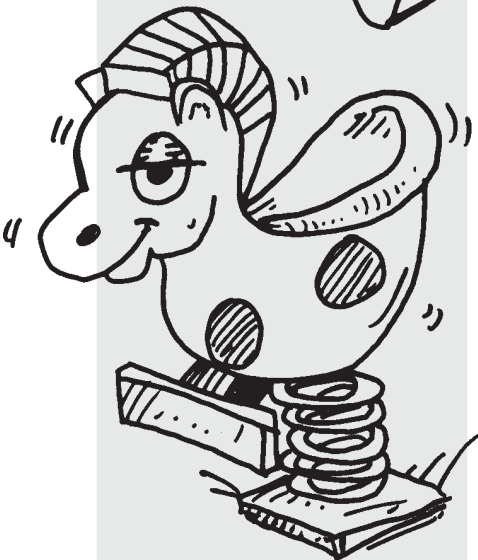
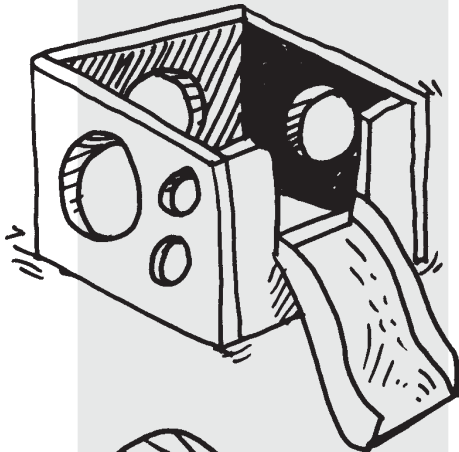
Is Your Home Playground Safe?

You are already familiar with the basics—your home playground is fenced in; there aren't any poisonous plants; tools and dangerous yard chemicals are kept in locked storage sheds; and you monitor the children closely. But there are other important safety measures you can take as well. Minimize the risk of injury to the children in your care while they are playing on your home playground by following these five recommendations, based on research data collected by the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the National Program for Playground Safety.

First, talk with the children in your care about the rules for playground play. Stick to a few simple, short rules. Focus on those that can help prevent the most common playground injuries. For example, you will probably want to include a rule about staying a safe distance from a moving swing and a rule about safe and unsafe play with ropes. Many children enjoy jumping from play equipment, so a rule that describes a safe height for jumping is a must. Once you have talked with the children about what your rules are, write them on a poster board and display them prominently on your playground. Share them with the children's parents, also. As you remind the children of the rules as they play, remember to add short explanations. Children follow rules much better when they understand the reasons behind them.

Second, since almost 60 percent of all injuries are caused by falls to the ground, be sure you have guardrails and protective surfacing installed. A concussion can result from a fall of just 12 inches if the child falls onto concrete or asphalt. Never place playground equipment over these surfaces. Guardrails on platforms over 30 inches high can prevent many falls. When falls occur, the surface of the playground can mean the difference between an easily forgotten accident and a life-threatening injury. Although dirt and grass may seem like safe surfaces, they don't have a good ability to absorb shock—a fall from a height of 8 feet has the same impact as hitting a brick wall while traveling 30 mph!

Shock-absorbing materials, such as pea gravel, wood chips, or triple-shredded wood mulch, will help cushion falls when installed sufficiently deep. An inch of mulch on hard packed dirt will not provide any protection; 12 inches of mulch under and around playground equipment will. Playground equipment should have 12 inches of loose-fill directly under and extending 3 to 4 feet in all directions around them. Swings are a special case and should have 12 inches of loose-fill extending a minimum of 6 feet from the outer edge of the support structure both in front and back.



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Although you might be tempted to think that bicycle or other helmets would be an additional safety precaution against head injuries from falls, they pose dangers of their own when children wear them while climbing on play structures. A helmet can get caught in an opening that a child's body fits through—a dangerous strangulation hazard!

Third, look for potential entrapment and strangulation hazards. In general, spaces that could trap children, such as openings between ladder rungs or between guardrails should be less than 3½ inches or greater than 9 inches wide. Cargo net openings should have a perimeter opening of less than 17 inches or more than 28 inches (add up the length of both sides of one of the net's squares). Openings that measure within the "danger range" are those that are large enough to permit a child's body to go through, but are too small to permit their heads to go through. When children enter such openings feet first, their heads may become trapped, quickly causing strangulation.

You also need to be on the lookout for "S" hooks, especially on swings, and any other bolts or equipment components/hardware that could catch children's clothing and cause them to strangle. Close "S" hooks as tightly as possible and put caps on bolts and eliminate other catch-points on all of your playground equipment.

Ropes are dangerous on the playground, too. Many children have died after becoming entangled on a rope they were wearing or playing with. Another common culprit in strangulation deaths is the strings from children's hooded jackets or coats. The bead or knot at the end of the string can easily become caught in any of the many small spaces on playground equipment. Remove strings, tuck them inside the jacket, or remove the knots or beads.

Fourth, inspect your playground on a regular basis. Keep your playground equipment rust and splinter free. Broken or missing equipment pieces are accidents waiting to happen. Keep children off broken equipment and repair it as soon as possible. Over time, protective surfacing get scattered, decomposes, and needs to be replenished. Keep it at least 12 inches deep.

Finally, be aware of the sun. Check for hot surfaces, especially on metal, before allowing the children to play on

playground equipment. Sunlight has the potential to make playground equipment hot enough to cause severe burns. Metal slides are particularly troublesome. Very young children are most likely at risk because they do not have the coordination to quickly pull their hands away or get off of a hot surface.

You should also limit the amount of time the children spend in the sun. As the sun moves higher in the sky, the sun's rays become more intense and can do more damage to the skin and eyes. When possible, plan outdoor activities for early morning or late afternoon; the sun's rays are less intense before 10:00 a.m. and after 4:00 p.m. Playing in shaded areas also helps reduce the amount of sun exposure. Encourage parents to send along sun-protective items, such as brimmed hats, sunglasses, and sunscreen lotion. Remember to reapply sunscreen after children have been playing in water.

For More Information

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) has a free, downloadable read-together book that can help you and the children in your care discuss and learn about safe play. You can access it on the World Wide Web at <http://www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/kids.pdf>.

If you are interested in knowing more about the specific details of playground safety, refer to the CPSC's Handbook for Public Playground Safety at <http://www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/325.pdf>.

References

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