

Playground Safety

In 2023, about 200,000 children 15 years of age or younger - more than 500 every day - were treated in emergency rooms for injuries suffered while using playground equipment. About 65,000 children were younger than 5 years. In 2024, about 6,800 children were hospitalized as a result of injuries on the playground equipment

Almost 25% of all the playground injuries occur on equipment at home. Between 10 and 20 youngsters die each year from injuries involving playground equipment.

How are children injured

About 75% of playground injuries are caused by falls.

- Falling off equipment
- Falling from heights, especially from climbing equipment (such as monkey bars.)
- Tripping over equipment

The remaining 25% of playground injuries are caused by:

- Hits by equipment, especially swings.
- Cuts from sharp edges, hardware or loose nails and screws.

Types of injuries

Many injuries, such as cuts, scrapes and bruises are not serious. However, some injuries can be serious or even fatal. Head injuries in particular are likely to be serious. Other typical playground injuries include broken bones, sprains and dental injuries—many of which can be prevented. Fractures and head injuries commonly involve climbing equipment.

Preventing playground injuries:

Most important:

- The best way to prevent serious head injuries is to have a “safe surface” to land on beneath swings, slides and other equipment. (See: what is a safe surface?)
- To prevent falls, platforms should have guard rails(38 inches high) and should be no more than 6 feet above the ground.
- Vertical and horizontal spaces should be less than 3 1/2 inches wide or more than 9 inches wide to prevent a small child’s head from becoming trapped.
- Even with these measures, children still need close supervision.

Also important:

- Carefully maintain all equipment. Parents should cap all screws and bolts and check for loose nuts and bolts periodically.
- Place swings away from other equipment to keep walk areas safe. Swings should be made of soft materials such as soft rubber, plastic or canvas.
- Make sure that children cannot reach any moving parts that might trap any body part.
- Parents should not buy equipment with “S” type hooks, with sharp edges or rings between 5” and 10” since they entrap the child’s head.
- Play equipment should be installed at least 6 feet from any barrier, such as wall or fence and should be securely anchored in order to prevent tripping. Cover or cushion concrete anchors to prevent injuries. Concrete anchors also can be “counter sunk” below the ground surface to prevent injury.
- Wood fences and equipment should be free of splinters; all fences and equipment should be free of protruding nails.
- Plastic slides do not get as hot as metal slides. Make sure metal slides are cool to prevent children’s legs from getting burned. (You can achieve this by positioning slides under trees or by positioning slides facing away from the afternoon sun. Make sure there are no rocks, pieces of glass, sticks, toys, debris or other children at the base of a slide that would interfere with the child’s safe landing.
- Make sure the equipment is the right size for your child. Smaller swings are meant for smaller children and may break if used by larger ones.
- Young children should be supervised when using playground equipment. There should be no shoving, pushing or fighting.
- Children should not twist swings or swing empty seats or walk in front of moving swings.

What is a safe surface?

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

A “safe surface” is any surface that makes a serious or fatal injury less likely to occur if a child falls. Such a surface absorbs the impact of the fall, so a child is less likely to get seriously hurt. Here are some examples of “safe surfaces”:

- Sand (10 inches deep)
- Wood chips (12 inches deep)
- Rubber outdoors mat (follow manufacturer’s recommendations)

Soft, impact-absorbing surface materials like sand and wood chips need constant upkeep; these materials need refilling on a regular basis to maintain the correct depth. This provides effective cushioning material for protection against falls from playground equipment.

No surface is absolutely safe. Many injuries are preventable, but injuries will sometimes occur even at the safest playground and even with the best supervision.