

Member Alert-Maintaining Safe Playgrounds

California's playground safety regulations were enacted January 1, 2000 which requires all public playgrounds to be inspected by a Certified Playground Safety Inspector. When we are notified a school site has a new playground, SISC strongly recommends an inspection before it is used and before the district makes final payment to the vendor. **SISC can conduct this inspection for our members, please contact the JPA for scheduling.**

The regulations were developed by the Department of Health Services (DHS) in consultation with the Office of the State Architect, the California Parks and Recreation Society, the League of California Cities, and the California Department of Education.

The regulations help school districts administrators determine their responsibilities in inspecting, modernizing, maintaining, and developing play areas on school property. In the time since the implementation of the regulations, many districts have taken aggressive actions to upgrade their playground equipment and facilities thereby achieving safer play environments for children.

The following outline is provided to illustrate some of the major components that should be contemplated and included in a playground safety program:

- Policy statement
- Site inspections
- Hazard correction
- Staff training – Playground signage
- Accident investigation

Playground documentation and records that should be maintained as part of the program include the following:

- Copies of current public playground safety guidelines or standards.
- Copies of all staff training records.
- Individual playground site history by location.
- Inspection forms.

Districts may wish to use two separate types of inspections—high frequency/routine and low frequency/periodic. High frequency/routine inspections can identify surfacing problems, vandalism, and debris (such as glass) that can lead to an accident. Personnel who already perform tasks such grounds maintenance or playground supervision can easily perform these inspections.

Low frequency/periodic inspections are made less often but are more comprehensive than high frequency/routine inspections. They require a greater amount of time to perform and require more experienced and knowledgeable personnel. Periodic inspections evaluate equipment structural integrity. These inspections can be done on a seasonal basis depending on individual playground factors affecting each location.

The National Playground Safety Institute (NPSI) has identified twelve of the leading causes of injury on playgrounds. Familiarizing yourself with the “Dirty Dozen Checklist” will help you and your design

professional avoid these pitfalls for new playground equipment. They can also be used as the basis for inspection protocols.

DIRTY DOZEN CHECKLIST

Improper Protective Surfacing: Improper surfacing material under playground equipment is the leading cause of playground related injuries. Over 70% of all accidents on playgrounds are from children falling. There are many surfaces that offer protection from falls. Acceptable surfaces are engineered wood fiber/mulch, sand, and pea gravel. These surfaces must be maintained at a depth of 12 inches, be free of standing water and debris, and not be allowed to become compacted. Some synthetic materials may also be appropriate in certain situations.

Inadequate Use Zone: Use zones are under and around the playground equipment where a child might fall. A use zone should be covered with protective surfacing material and extend a minimum of 6 feet in all directions from the edge of stationary play equipment such as climbers and chip-up bars.

Protrusion And Entanglement Hazards: Protrusion hazards are components or pieces of hardware that might be capable of impaling or cutting a child if a child should fall against the hazard. Some protrusions are also capable of catching strings or items of clothing that might be worn around the child's neck. This type of entanglement is especially hazardous because it might result in strangulation.

Entrapment In Openings: Openings on playground equipment should be checked for head entrapment hazards. Children often enter openings feet first and attempt to slide through the opening. If the opening is not large enough, it may allow the body to pass through the opening and entrap the head. There should be no openings on playground equipment that measures between 3½ inches and 9 inches.

Insufficient Equipment Spacing: Improper spacing between pieces of play equipment can cause overcrowding of a play area that may create several hazards. Use zones for equipment that is higher than 30 inches above the ground cannot overlap. Therefore, there should be a minimum of 12 feet in between two play structures. Swings and other pieces of moving equipment should be located in an area away from other structures.

Trip Hazards: Trip hazards are created by play structure components or items on the playground. Exposed concrete footings, abrupt changes in surface elevation, containment borders, tree roots, tree stumps, and rocks are all common trip hazards that are often found in play environments.

Lack of Supervision: The supervision of a playground directly relates to the overall safety of the playground. A play area should be designed so that it is easy to observe the children at play. Young children are constantly challenging their own abilities, very often not being able to recognize potential hazards. It is estimated that over 40% of all playground injuries are directly related to lack of appropriate supervision.

Age-Inappropriate Activities: In an effort to provide a challenging and safe play environment for all ages, it is important to make sure that the equipment in the playground setting is appropriate for the age of the intended user. Areas for preschool age children should be separate from areas intended for school age children.

Lack of Maintenance: In order for playgrounds to remain in “safe” condition, a program of systematic, preventive maintenance must be present. There should be no missing, broken, or worn-out components. All hardware should be secure. The wood, metal, or plastic should not show signs of fatigue or deterioration. All parts should be stable with no apparent signs of loosening.

Pinch, Crush, Shearing, and Sharp Edge Hazards: Components in the play environment should be inspected to make sure there are no sharp edges or points that could cut skin.

Platforms With No Guardrails: Elevated surfaces such as platforms, ramps, and bridgeways should have guardrails that would prevent accidental falls. Equipment intended for school-age children should have guardrails on elevated surfaces higher than 30 inches.

Equipment Not Recommended For Public Playgrounds: Accidents associated with the following types of equipment have resulted in the Consumer Product Safety Commission recommending that they not be used on public playgrounds:

- Heavy swings such as animal figure swings and multiple occupancy/glider type swings.
- Free swinging ropes that may fray or form a loop.
- Swinging exercise rings and trapeze bars.

Attached is a High Frequency Inspection Form to assist you with your playground inspections (daily or routine). Please contact your Safety and Loss Control representative at (661) 636-4604 for additional information, clarification, or assistance. Reference: Health and Safety Code, Sections 115725-115750.