

# PLAYGROUND SUPERVISION GUIDE



**Preserving the Play Environment  
Promoting the Value of Play  
Protecting Children**

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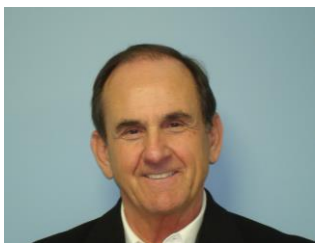
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This Guide is a part of the Safety Resource Series and is provided as a public service by BigToys. The Safety Resource Series is made up of the Playground Maintenance Guide and the Playground Supervision Guide. For more information about the Series or to request digital copies of the Guides, visit [www.bigtoys.com](http://www.bigtoys.com) or call (800) 727-1907.

### **Disclaimer**

The purpose of this overview is to raise awareness about some considerations for a routine playground supervision program; it is not to be considered as an all-inclusive list. Do not rely upon this overview in lieu of the normal safety inspections that might otherwise be conducted. Please refer to the manufacturer specifications and warnings, which were supplied with the equipment, and continue with normal inspections. Please do not construe our failure to either itemize any particular supervisory activity or list any particular condition as a statement that these activities are unneeded or that these conditions do not require attention. PlayCore and its divisions volunteer these comments in the interest of safety while advising of the restricted context in which they are given.

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# Introduction

The importance of a qualified and caring playground supervisor frequently goes unnoticed by everyone except children. You need to be a compassionate adult, often lending a friendly ear, as well as an administrator, enforcing the rules. The primary job of a playground supervisor is to be concerned about the safety and welfare of the children that are in your care. How you choose to do your job may impact not only their safety but the value of their play. Through play, children grow and develop valuable skills that will carry them into the adult world. The work of a playground supervisor is to enhance play opportunities and restrict behaviors that prevent children from productive, safer play experiences. Along with participating in this seminar, supervisors should familiarize themselves with their school or agency's playground related policies, be trained in first aid, and participate in ongoing learning about best practices for playground supervision.

## Learning Objectives

- Identify the importance of the value of play and playground supervision
- Gain an understanding of the play environment
- Identify potential environmental and playground equipment hazards
- Develop active supervision practices to reduce injuries
- Develop an understanding of potential behavior-related hazards
- Define the elements of a pre-play site inspection
- Develop effective supervision and emergency response plans for continuous quality improvement



*Playground supervisors have an important role in helping to protect children's safety and enhance play opportunities.*

## The Value of Play

In order to enhance the value of play, you must know how to positively support play in safer and more meaningful ways. Play has innate value for all children. As a playground supervisor, how you approach the supervision of the playground may impact children's physical safety and the opportunities they may have to develop physically, cognitively, communicatively, emotionally, and socially. With diabetes, obesity, and social adjustment issues reaching epidemic proportions, playground supervisors can have a significant role in facilitating healthy, active outdoor play and learning.

Through play, children

- Learn about the world around them
- Develop physical skills
- Strengthen their bodies
- Mature socially and emotionally
- Learn cooperation and teamwork



*Children have a sense of pride and accomplishment when they are successful at developmentally appropriate risk taking.*

• Preserving the Play Environment • Promoting the Value of Play • Protecting Children



- Expend energy and improve focus (*Studies have shown that free play helps children to increase brain activity and be better prepared to learn inside the classroom.*)
- Enjoy multisensory experiences
- Demonstrate creativity and imagination
- Develop cognitive skills such as cause and effect and problem solving
- Learn leadership skills

All of the small play events that take place during “play time” are the stepping stones that enrich a child’s life and pave the pathway to a purposeful adulthood.

Determining the roles and responsibilities of staff while children are on the playground is essential to ensuring that opportunities are provided for play along a developmentally appropriate continuum of learning in a safer environment. While some staff may serve as supervisors, others may serve as play facilitators to engage more directly with children through guided discovery or perhaps by organizing group games or learning activities. It is important to provide opportunities for children to experience various types of play through child-initiated exploration during free play and more guided learning and directed play in which children develop important social rules while interacting with others on the playground. Facilitators may provide redirection, encourage social engagement, or provide materials or equipment for children to interact with. Providing opportunities for various types of play can offer a well-rounded environment that promotes hands-on learning and encourages the construction of ideas and knowledge, while still providing opportunities for choice, social and pretend play, and problem solving.

## **Why is Playground Supervision Preparation Important?**

Studies have shown that working as a group to learn about playground supervision creates strong, active supervision, which in turn can reduce the number of playground injuries (National Program for Playground Safety). However, we cannot assume that everyone knows how to properly supervise children on a playground. Improper or lack of supervision knowledge can negatively impact not only children’s safety but also their play experiences. A well prepared play supervisor should know how to promote healthy, active, challenging play without compromising safety.

Most playground injuries are minor bumps, bruises, cuts, and scratches; unfortunately, sometimes playground injuries can be more serious. However, by providing information and education about proper playground supervision, we may reduce the severity and number of injuries that occur on the playground while also increasing play value.

The play environment and the needs of the children can change quickly; in order to remain up-to-date, communicate continuously with your school or agency’s administration. Playground supervisors can play a vital role in ensuring that

### **Did You Know?**

- **200,000** children visit the emergency room each year due to injuries sustained on the playground (*Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2006*)
- **80%** of elementary school injuries every school year happen on the playground (*Thompson & Bruya, 1995*)
- **84%** of all playground accidents could be avoided through two activities: adult supervision and proper playground maintenance (*National Recreation and Park Association’s CPSI Course*)



playground needs are addressed proactively. A means of communicating changes to procedures should be established to make certain that all involved in playground supervision receive the same information.

It is a good idea to include groups of staff in the playground supervision discussion even if they are not directly responsible for playground duties. They may be needed to step into the playground supervision role during a supervisor's absence or in an emergency, or they may wish to volunteer for this position in the future. Also, providing playground supervision information to a broad group can help promote the value of play throughout the school or agency.



***Playground supervisors work together to map out their playground space and their site-specific supervision plan.***

The ratio of supervisors-to-children on the playground should ideally be the same as the classroom ratio, but it can be adjusted depending on the needs of a particular group of children and/or specific licensing or accreditation requirements. *Tip: If the population being served includes children with disabilities, it would be appropriate to work with administration to set up a supervision program that would enable the playground supervisors to best support each child's experience.*



Communicating playground supervisors about play, playground policies, environmental and behavioral considerations and/or standards, and the playground supervisor's role are critical for promoting safer and more meaningful play. Schools and agencies are encouraged to embrace the playground as an

important asset and to strive to minimize risk by focusing efforts on preparing playground supervisors, maintaining safer play environments, and adopting playground policies and procedures that continuously improve the overall quality of the children's experiences.

## How and Why Children are Injured on Playgrounds

A playground supervisor can make the playground safer simply by having an understanding of how and why children are injured on playgrounds. Children are injured on playgrounds for various reasons. In no way does this program guide include a comprehensive listing of possible hazards or injuries, but it does outline some of the potential hazards. Through observation, experience, and discussion with other playground supervisors, you will begin to recognize play patterns that could lead to injury.

**On the playground, pay close attention to the following:**

- **Children getting on and off of play equipment**
    - *Tip: Children are more likely to experience challenge as they begin and end an activity.*
  - **Young children, who may not have fully developed motor skills**
    - Children should not be allowed to lift another child onto overhead climbers.
    - Young children may be more susceptible to falls because they are still developing spatial awareness skills.
    - *Tip: Supervise younger children closely when they attempt to use upper body equipment.*
  - **Children displaying lack of caution**
    - Accidents happen...nearly 1/3 of playground injuries are self inflicted.
    - Teach children to be cautious as they move through the play environment.
    - *Tip: Discourage running on and around the playground equipment.*
  - **Overcrowding on play activities, such as slide entrances**
    - Be aware of overcrowding especially in the first few minutes of recess as children often rush to their favorite activities!
    - *Tip: If a component is frequently overcrowded due to its popularity, consider developing guidelines that ensure that all children have a chance to use the equipment.*
- 
- **Items brought into the play environment that could become strangulation hazards**
    - Openings in playground equipment are not designed to accommodate children wearing sports helmets and could entrap a child's head.
    - Items worn around the neck, such as jump ropes, mittens, scarves, dog leashes, long necklaces, and canteens, should not be worn.
    - Strings attached to children's clothing pose hazards.
    - *Tip: Require children to remove helmets (unless worn for medical reasons in a supervised environment) and other strangulation hazards before using equipment.*
- 



Source: CPSC
- **Children interacting with playmates**
    - Over half of playground injuries are caused by children's interaction with others.
    - *Tip: By knowing the temperaments of the children in your care, learn to be proactive and intervene if necessary. It is important to provide children with opportunities to develop valuable interpersonal and conflict resolution skills on their own.*
    - *Tip: Ask the children to help you develop rules that will promote safety and fun on the playground.*
  - **Falls**
    - Falls are the number one cause of playground injury.
    - *Tip: Approved safety surfacing should be maintained under and around the playground equipment.*



## Falls and Safety Surfacing

Children often learn through their experiences, even when the experience means they fall down. The leading cause of playground injuries is falls, including falls from the equipment onto the ground and falls from one piece of equipment onto another piece of equipment. Work with other supervisors and your agency to develop policies that limit risky behaviors and promote safer play. With good supervision, developmentally appropriate equipment, and proper safety surfacing, children can develop new skills and engage in developmentally appropriate risk taking in safer ways.

The surface under and around the playground equipment should be a material that is capable of absorbing some of the impact from a child's falling body. Hard surfaces such as grass, packed earth, concrete, and asphalt are **not** considered to be protective surfaces. Playground supervisors should know enough about protective surfacing to know when to alert someone that the surfaces need attention. *Tip: If you suspect the surfacing is unsafe, **do not** allow children to use the playground equipment.*

Unacceptable Playground Surfacing	Acceptable Playground Surfacing Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grass</li> <li>Packed earth</li> <li>Concrete, asphalt</li> <li>Other hard surfaces</li> </ul>  <p>Grass and packed earth are unacceptable playground surfaces.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sand, gravel, shredded rubber</li> <li>Wood chips, shredded bark mulch, engineered wood fiber</li> <li>Unitary materials certified for playground use</li> <li>Poured-in-place rubber, rubber tiles, bonded rubber</li> </ul>  <p>SurfaceSure Engineered Wood Fiber is a good choice for loose-fill playground surfacing.</p>

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) classifies surfacing materials into two categories: loose-fill and unitary. Loose-fill surfaces include sand, gravel, wood chips, shredded bark mulch, shredded recycled tires, and engineered wood fiber. Engineered wood fiber is a wood product that is made exclusively for use under playground equipment.

Table 2. Minimum compressed loose-fill surfacing depths				
Inches	Of	(Loose-Fill Material)	Protects to	Fall Height (feet)
9		Shredded/recycled rubber		10
9		Sand		4
9		Pea Gravel		5
9		Wood mulch (non-CCA)		7
9		Wood chips		10

Source CPSC

*Loose-fill materials should be maintained at a depth that will help protect from a fall. Table 2 indicates minimum compressed loose-fill surfacing depths as recommended by the CPSC.*

The CPSC's Handbook for Public Playground Safety recommends that there be 12 inches of appropriate loose-fill material under playground equipment. Under no circumstances should loose-fill material be less than nine inches. For more information, please refer to Table 2 entitled, "Minimum compressed loose-fill surfacing depths." Loose-fill materials tend to compact and get kicked out in high traffic areas, such as under swings and at the base of slides. To

maintain loose-fill material at an acceptable depth, it should be raked and leveled periodically. As a playground supervisor, it is important to notify the owner or their representative when loose-fill surfacing material needs to be raked back into place and/or replenished.



***Loose-fill materials get kicked away and must be raked level.***



***BigToys Wear Mats under swings can help keep loose-fill materials in place and protect unitary surfaces from wear.***



***Unitary surfacing materials like SurfaceSure Poured Rubber are a good option for playground surfacing.***

Unitary surfacing materials include rubber tiles, solid rubber surfaces like poured-in-place rubber and bonded rubber, and synthetic turf. A playground supervisor should check that the unitary materials are in good condition with no holes, tears, or damage. If the surfacing is damaged in an area, that area should be taken out of service until it is repaired.

CPSC Documentation of Surfacing: *Materials used as protective surfacing under playground equipment must meet impact attenuation criteria. The CPSC has outlined the performance criteria that various types of surfaces must meet. Manufacturers of unitary materials, shredded rubber, recycled tires and engineered wood fiber are expected to supply all*

*compliance and test reports for their surfaces. In the event that local landscape materials are used you may consult with the Consumer Product Safety Commission's Handbook for Public Playground Safety for information regarding the type and depth of common surfaces. For more information, visit [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov), publication #325.*



## Active Supervision Can Reduce Injuries

An active playground supervisor constantly moves throughout the play environment. There are two types of movement that playground supervisors should use. The first involves **physically moving** through the play environment. The second type of movement is **visual scanning**. Visual scanning is moving with your eyes, always looking from one side to another, not spending much time focusing on one area of the playground. Remember this mantra: **“Move with the body. Scan with the eyes.”**

A playground supervisor must observe not just see. By carefully observing children’s behavior, you will begin to anticipate what they are about to do. Often a supervisor can stop a situation from getting out of hand by simply moving physically closer to the children involved or by looking directly at them. Asking a child to walk with you for a few minutes removes him or her from the immediate situation and can give him or her an opportunity to redirect their behavior.

Active supervision does not mean playing games with the children. If a supervisor is acting as referee or shooting hoops with the kids he or she is not actively watching the rest of the children. When making supervision choices, consider the needs of each child and the needs of the group. *Tip: In environments with a large number of staff, some should serve as supervisors while others serve as facilitators, engaging children in guided or more directive play to promote creativity, socialization, and learning.*

Active playground supervision also means having an understanding of children’s physical skills. Position supervisors near challenging play components to provide encouragement and additional supervision. For example, young children may need additional supervision when using upper body equipment such as horizontal ladders. Close proximity to the equipment also enables the supervisor to discourage its improper use.

(Ex: children grabbing the legs of a child above them, children trying to hurry a child that is having difficulty, etc.)

### ***Simple ways to make your supervision efforts more effective:***

- Move with the body. Scan with the eyes.
- Observe children’s behavior to anticipate dangerous situations.
- Avoid distractions.
- Position supervisors near challenging components.



***When engaging individuals or small groups of children, ensure that sufficient supervision is provided to the rest of the playground.***

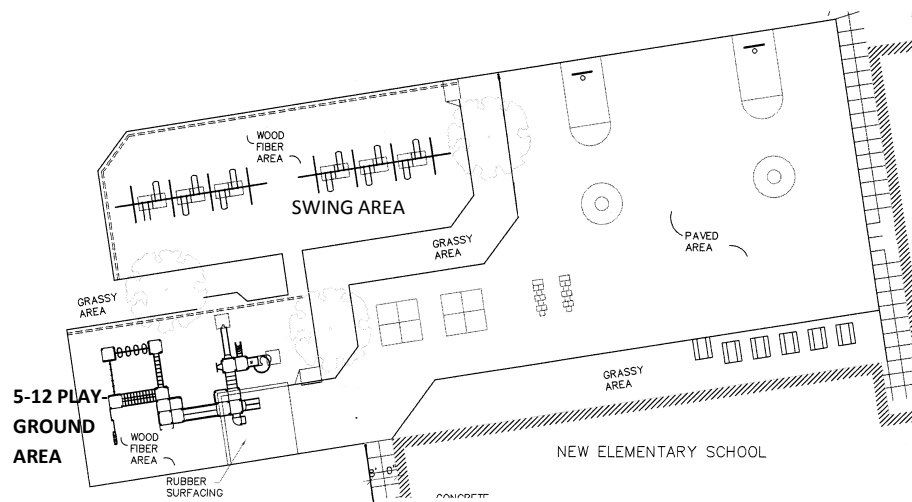
# Understand the Play Environment



A playground supervisor must be familiar with the play environment as well as the playground equipment. The play environment includes play equipment, natural landscaping, ball fields, and any other areas that children may use for play while under your supervision. As part of developing a supervision program, go out on the playground and closely examine all of the equipment and relevant play areas. Considering the environment and the types of activities that will occur there will help you become familiar with areas that require greater supervision or help you anticipate potential challenges.

## Map Out the Playground

When evaluating the play environment, draw the playground on paper.



*The purpose of mapping out the play area is to establish a collective understanding of the following things:*

- Activities that are allowed in each area
- How children will move from the building into the play area
- What areas are off limits to all children or to a particular age group
- What sight line concerns may exist
- How the staff can most effectively supervise the play environment
- Other factors

### Include the following areas in your drawing:

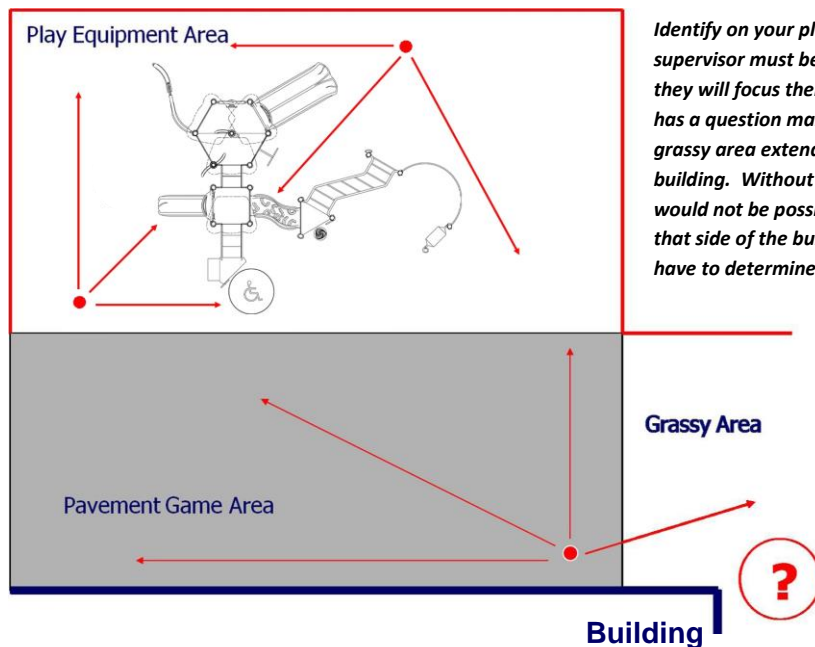
- Activity areas: grassy areas, paved game areas, athletic fields, and playground equipment areas
  - When mapping activity areas, you might anticipate overcrowding. On a paved game area, for example, children playing hop scotch or jumping rope might interfere with a basketball game.
  - *Tip: By designing areas for each activity, overcrowding and conflicts can be avoided.*
  - *Tip: Ball play and chase games should be kept away from the playground equipment area.*
- Main points of access into and out of the building and grounds
- Streets, fences, and any hazards that may be attractive to the children, such as retention ponds, streams, dumpsters, culvert pipes, or drainage ditches
- Areas appropriate for use only by certain age groups
  - Playgrounds are typically intended for use by ages 2-5, 5-12, or 2-12.
  - *Tip: Look for labels and signs on and around the play equipment specifying the appropriate age group.*
- Equipment that might require a greater level of supervision



## Establish Sight Lines

A play environment map is an essential tool for designing a supervision plan. In this section, you will learn how to use the playground map to recognize sight lines and determine the number and placement of supervisors. Sight lines are imaginary lines that describe the areas a supervisor can clearly see when positioned on the playground.

When defining sight lines, discuss any areas of the play environment that are difficult to see into, through, and/or around. Look at the playground equipment configurations and note any areas where the view is obscured. Also, identify components such as crawl tubes or tube slides that are not as visually open. Many horizontal crawl tubes longer than four feet have openings in them to allow for supervision. Buildings and landscaping can also create visual inaccessibility. *Tip: Any areas that cannot be supervised due to their lack of visual access should be off limits to children.*



Identify on your playground map where each supervisor must be stationed and what direction they will focus their attention. The illustration has a question mark in the lower right where the grassy area extends around the side of the building. Without adding a fourth supervisor it would not be possible to supervise children on that side of the building so the supervisors will have to determine how to address this issue.

Determine how supervisors can move through the play environment to provide a greater level of supervision in all areas. Remember that the playground supervisor is constantly moving, not standing in just one spot. By organizing the play areas with a diagram and detailing visual sight lines, you will be able to determine the number of supervisors necessary to provide supervision for each area. Ideally, the ratio of playground supervisors is the same as the classroom teacher-to-student ratio.

### Group Activity #1

1. Playground supervisors should go outside to become familiar with the playground equipment and draw a map of the play environment. Note the following areas on your map.
  - All activity areas
  - Main points of interest
2. Evaluate the playground environment, establishing the following guidelines:
  - Where your sight lines should be
  - The number of supervisors
  - Where each supervisor should move and focus his or her attention

## Know the Children's Abilities

It is imperative that a playground supervisor understand the abilities of the children that he or she will be responsible for supervising. Infants, toddlers, and pre-school children as well as children with disabilities may require a greater level of support than school-age children. The physical, cognitive, communicative, sensory, and social/emotional abilities of children on the playground may vary, and playground supervisors should be familiar with the skills and needs of the children in order to best support their development. (Playgrounds are typically intended for ages 2-5, 5-12, or 2-12.)

Very young children can often climb up before they have developed the ability to back down a climber. They are still developing their understanding of cause and effect, depth perception, and their sense of balance, and they may be unsteady on their feet when attempting new challenges. When supervising young children, be aware of the challenges they may face, and be available to facilitate their development in appropriate ways while allowing for them to develop independence.



*Young children may need additional support and developmentally appropriate equipment, such as this smaller slide, on the playground.*



*Children with disabilities may need additional support and/or specialized equipment on the playground.*

Children with disabilities may have needs that impact their ability to fully independently access equipment on the playground. Assistance should be provided as needed while still encouraging the child to be as independent as possible. Some children may need additional support to help them actively participate and engage in play. Playground supervisors should be aware of any medical needs that might impact a child's safety on the playground and guide them in choosing activities that would be most appropriate. (Ex: sensitivity to sun exposure or temperature, heart conditions triggered by exertion, etc.) Supervisors should be informed about the needs of the children they are supervising so they can encourage and promote inclusive play and fun for everyone. Confidential information should be shared only with members of the child's support team.

When supporting older children, ensure that they are playing on age-appropriate equipment and are using the equipment correctly. Older children that become bored with equipment that does not provide developmentally appropriate risk and challenge may attempt inappropriate uses of the equipment.

### Group Activity #2

As a group, discuss the abilities of children using your playground.

- Explore abilities that might influence how and/or whether particular age groups should use varying play components. Note components or areas that are "off limits" to certain age groups.
- Discuss ways to promote inclusion and promote active engagement among children with and without disabilities. Often, children can participate in the same activities even if they participate in a different way.
- Identify equitable play activities for children of all abilities.



## Identify Facility-Related Hazards

Children can be injured on playgrounds as a result of interaction with the facility or with each other. Facility related hazards are hazards within the play environment. During active playground supervision, it is important for the supervisor to identify such hazards and takes steps to remedy them.

In addition to the regular maintenance staff inspections of the playground, pre-play site inspections should take place before each use of the playground. Changes are constantly occurring to the playground as a result of climate, use, and/or vandalism. The pre-play inspection only takes a few minutes of time but is vital to improving the safety of the play environment.

During a pre-play inspection the supervisor is looking for anything that seems out of order or abnormal. If a condition is found that may present a hazard and it cannot be corrected immediately, the playground or a portion of it may need to be closed. Clearly communicate any playground closures to all staff and children. Playground supervisors should work with the owner or their representative to determine the best method of closing the playground. The organization may benefit from developing a formal work order process or a simple maintenance request form to remedy any facility-related hazards. *Tip: Digital photographs can be useful in describing the precise maintenance need.*



*Hazards in the play environment can be related to the facility. In this case, damaged playground equipment poses a hazard.*

### Conditions to Look for During a Pre-play Site Inspection

Due to the variation of sites and equipment, this list should not be considered to be all inclusive. Each facility should evaluate its unique needs when creating the pre-play site inspection criteria.

#### 1. Environmental Hazards

- Weather
  - Is there any impact from rain, snow, wind or excessive heat?
  - Does the surfacing and equipment show good drainage (no puddles)?
  - Are the surfacing and equipment free from ice?
  - Is all equipment, including slides, a reasonable temperature?



*In addition to having unacceptable surfacing under it, this metal slide may become superheated on excessively hot days.*

## Foreign Materials



*Toys and loose parts are encouraged in the play environment but not on the playground equipment.*

- Playground is free from animals, nests, and animal droppings.
- All toys and found objects, like rocks and branches, are away from the equipment.
- All bodily fluids and accidents are properly and safely cleaned up.
- Playground is free from trash and broken glass.
- *Tip: Wear gloves that protect against blood-borne pathogens when cleaning up drug paraphernalia, bodily fluids, or other dangerous materials.*
- *Tip: Look inside tunnels and tube slides before and after recess to make certain that there are no hidden hazards and that children are not hiding to avoid going back to class.*

## Surfaces

- Sidewalks and pavement game areas are free from loose particles such as sand, gravel, mulch, and shredded rubber. Loose particles scattered onto a hard pavement may cause a child to slip and fall.
- Grassy play areas are free from wildlife habitats like molehills and other trip hazards.
- Safety surfacing is intact with no ruts or deep depressions.
- All loose-fill materials are at appropriate depth. *Tip: Daily raking and levelling by custodial staff helps keep loose-fill surfacing material in good shape for play.*
- *Tip: Do not allow children to play on equipment if there are exposed concrete footings or unacceptable surfacing.*



*In addition to having unacceptable surfacing around it, this seesaw's exposed concrete footing poses a hazard to children.*

## 2. Playground Equipment Hazards

- Broken, missing, or damaged parts
  - Playground equipment is free from conditions that may pose danger to a child.
  - *Tip: In many cases, you may need to make a decision about whether a hazard is present.* For example, if a knob on a play panel no longer turns, it is broken but is not presenting a hazard to a child. If that same knob is missing and a bolt end is exposed, a hazard may be present. Alert the owner or their representative and close the area from play.



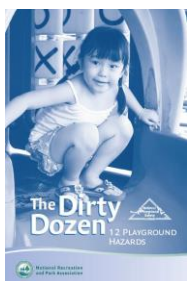
*This spring rider is missing a handhold. This missing part is a danger to users.*



- Missing or loose hardware
  - No components have missing or loose hardware. If the hardware is missing, the integrity of the piece it was attached to may be compromised.
  - *Tip: Closely observe any hardware that is loose or missing to determine if a hazard is present. Report such conditions to the owner or their representative.*
- Movement
  - Some play components have flex built into their design. (Ex: net climbers, including mast; swing structures; slide bedways, etc.)
  - If you notice increased movement in these components, check for secure hardware and intact parts to determine if the flex is normal or abnormal (hazardous).
  - *Tip: If the movement is new or appears to increase, investigate the source of the movement.*
  - *Tip: Always keep the children off of the equipment if there is any doubt or concern about its integrity, and report the concern to the owner and/or the person responsible for inspecting and maintaining the playground.*
- Swings
  - Because of the frequency of use and the movement of swings, they wear out more frequently than other types of equipment.
  - Swings are free from any broken or damaged swing seats.
  - Swing chains are not severely worn, broken, kinked, or twisted.
  - Chains hang freely and are not wrapped around the top rail of the swing structure.



***This collar has become loose and the deck is slipping. Report such loose hardware and prevent children from playing on the deck.***



## The National Recreation and Park Association Dirty Dozen Checklist

The National Recreation and Park Association has identified twelve of the leading causes of injury to children on the playground. These hazards are referred to as the “Dirty Dozen”. For more information about playground safety and to purchase a copy of the Dirty Dozen Checklist, go to [www.nrpa.org/cpsi](http://www.nrpa.org/cpsi).

### Group Activity #3

As a group, go outside to the play area and perform a pre-play site inspection. Be sure to check all areas mentioned in this section: weather; foreign materials; surfaces; broken, missing, or damaged parts; missing or loose hardware; movement; and swings.

# Promote Positive Playground Behavior



## **Identify Behavior-Related Hazards**

In addition to facility-related hazards, supervisors should be aware of children's behavior that may be potentially dangerous to themselves or others so that they can respond proactively. Due to the variation of sites and equipment, this list of behavior related hazards should not be considered to be complete.

**On the playground, pay close attention to the following behaviors:**

- **Risk taking behaviors**
  - While often positive, risk taking behaviors may occur both on and off of the equipment that may endanger a child. Supervisors should determine acceptable use of the playground equipment.
  - Peer-pressure can often increase dangerous risk taking behavior.
  - *Tip: Support and give assistance to children when they are exploring with appropriate risk taking behaviors, keeping the risk taking activity within the boundaries of their developmental capabilities.*
- **Aggressive behaviors**
  - Children's emotions are sometimes acted out in non-preferred ways.
  - *Tip: Watch for aggressive behavior towards both other children and inanimate objects like playground equipment.*
  - Intervening to help the child work through anger or frustration may keep the situation from escalating and prevent the transfer of verbal or physical aggression to other children. The supervisor's role is to channel non-preferred behavior into acceptable and meaningful forms of expression.
- **Use of the equipment**
  - Children should use the equipment within its intended parameters while still participating in imaginative and free play.
  - *Tip: Discourage pushing, shoving, overcrowding on or around the equipment.*
  - *Tip: Discourage running and playing tag on the equipment, as these activities can distract children from spatial judgement which could lead to missteps, slips, or falls.*
- **Bullying and conflict resolution**
  - All children should be visible to the playground supervisors at all times, as well as when walking to and from the playground area.
  - Provide plenty of choices, activities, and developmentally appropriate playground equipment and activities so that children do not wait to play and there is something for everyone to enjoy.
  - Since peer pressure is the most influential factor in putting a stop to bullying, schools should provide opportunities to raise awareness through discussion, curriculum, media, and role playing. Bullying often takes place in the presence of other student bystanders, so increasing their empathy and giving them the confidence to intervene can work effectively.
  - *Tip: Develop a school policy on bullying that defines what is considered a bullying incident, how to proactively prevent bullying from occurring, and the procedure for intervening and taking disciplinary action if necessary. Students should also know the procedure and steps to take if they witness bullying and should learn about conflict resolution skills.*



## Develop Playground Rules

Playground supervisors should collaborate with school or agency staff and children to develop rules and guidelines that promote safety, encourage positive behavior, and allow children to be active, experience new challenges, and mature developmentally. There is no hard-and-fast set of playground rules. Rules will vary based on the ages of the children, the site-specific play environment and playground equipment, the number of playground supervisors, what is socially acceptable in that particular setting or community, and other factors. Ultimately, your school or agency can develop playground safety rules in two ways: First, supervisors can collaborate to establish school or agency wide rules, providing guidance and understanding as to what type of activities and behavior will be encouraged/discouraged on the playground; Second, rules can be developed with children that relate specifically to the desired behaviors your school or agency wants to encourage on the playground. Including children in this process can help them take ownership of the rules.

### Supervisors' Playground Rules

Supervisors' playground rules should be developed in a group discussion with supervisors and members of your school or agency staff and administration. These rules will be based on behaviors that the playground supervisors determine would be unsafe for children, but they should also address the desired behaviors that would encourage fun, engagement, and safer play.

As a group, the supervisors should decide what is considered acceptable/unacceptable play behavior. What skills and behaviors do you wish to encourage while children are playing? (Ex: running, jumping, climbing, pushing, ball play, piling on, curiosity, hiding, social daring, bullying, etc.)

During this process, work with your school or agency to decide what behaviors will be allowed in each area of the play environment and on and around the playground equipment. The acceptable behavior may vary for different age groups and for different types of equipment. *Tip: You may wish to develop playground policies for activities such as lining up and checking out balls, toys, and other loose parts.*

### Examples of Supervisors' Playground Rules:

- Tag games should be played in the grassy area away from the equipment.
- Children can use slides by going down feet first.
- Shovels, buckets, and other sand toys should remain in the sand and water play area.
- Children must wear helmets when riding bikes and other riding toys, and helmets should be returned to the designated area before getting on playground equipment.
- Fences, trees, lampposts, and other site amenities should not be used as climbing equipment.

When developing rules about the playground equipment, consider among other factors these things:

- Age and ability of each user group
  - *Tip: Look for signs and labels on and around the equipment that indicate appropriate user groups.*
  - Consider height and complexity of activity
- Overcrowding and the number of children on equipment
- Foreign objects brought onto the play equipment (Ex: helmets, clothing with strings, sharp objects, etc.)
  - Work with and educate parents, so they can help discourage the wearing/carrying of these items
  - Scan the play environment frequently, looking for dangerous objects and other hazards
  - Consider creating a "playground dress code" that restricts the wearing of drawstrings, other strangulation hazards, and inappropriate footwear
- Usage during inclement weather or other weather-related hazards
  - Encourage the wearing of sun protective clothing and/or sunscreen



### Develop Rules with Children

When children have a say in developing the rules, they assume ownership and are more likely to embrace them. When developing playground rules, allow children at your school or agency the opportunity to talk about how they like to be treated and what might upset or hurt them when they are playing outside on the playground. Keep the focus on how the children like to be treated by others (ex. included, treated fairly, encouraged, etc.), and create a list of "good safety choices" to make on the playground. *Tip: It may be helpful to use happy and sad faces/thumbs up and thumbs down to provide a visual during discussion about good and less preferred choices.* Use this list to create rules that are simple and positive; develop a few broad rules (5 works well) instead of many specific ones.

When establishing the rules, discuss with the children what the rules mean and give examples to which they can relate or role play the rules together. Following are some examples that might be useful in discussing rules with children:

- How can children 'Be Respectful'?
  - Talk about teasing, bullying, following requests from supervisors, and using equipment appropriately.
- What does it mean to 'Be Careful'?
  - Ask them questions like "Why do we wear helmets when we ride our trikes? What could happen if we didn't?" or "Is it safe to run behind the swings? What could happen?"
  - This discussion will help children develop an understanding of the rules, provide opportunities to develop better choices, and essentially guide them through the problem solving process.
- How can children 'Use Kind Words' to settle a dispute?
  - Help children understand words are a better choice than pushing or yelling to resolve a conflict.
  - Conflict resolution strategies can be helpful for children as they learn to interact with their peers.
  - Ask children to give some examples of how to use kind words on the playground. (Ex. "That doesn't feel good." vs. "Leave me alone!"; "Thanks for asking." vs. "I don't want to play!"; "Please let me pass." vs. "Get out of my way!")

### Examples of Early Childhood Rules:

- Play Safe
- Use Kind Words
- Make Friends
- Take Turns
- Have Fun

### Examples of Elementary Aged Rules:

- Everyone can play – include and encourage others
- Follow directions
- Always return equipment
- Use playground equipment appropriately
- Keep hands to yourself
- Stay inside designated play area
- Wear playground-friendly clothing
- All games are open
- Take turns & be cautious of others
- Stop, look, & listen when you hear the whistle/bell

Discuss how good behavior will be rewarded and what consequences will occur for not following the rules. Once finalized, these rules should become part of your published playground rules. These rules should be distributed to everyone involved with the agency or school, and it is suggested that a copy be sent home to the parents and guardians of the children for further reinforcement in other settings. Posting them in the classroom and/or on the playground provides a consistent reminder and an easy way for supervisors to review and discuss the rules. *Tip: Depending on the age and development of the children, you may consider adding a simple picture to each rule to provide a visual reminder.*





## Develop Positive Behavior Supports

It is important to consider positive behavior supports and how the supervisors can be *proactive* to ensure that the rules are followed rather than *reactive* when they are broken. Keep in mind that supervisors are not the “Playground Police.” It is the supervisor’s job to provide a safer environment for active free play, encourage children, and help children follow and understand the playground rules in order to promote safety and fun for everyone. In order to be proactive, be consistent with rules, procedures, and routines. Any disciplinary procedure taken should be previously approved by school or agency administration and should be fair and consistent.

Some methods for promoting positive playground behavior:

- Positive behavior supports
  - Choices and self-monitoring opportunities
  - Positive reinforcement and praise.  
*Tip: Consider developing a public method of rewarding children for positive behavior, such as a “Playground Friend of the Week” award.*
  - Natural consequences
  - Visual supports
  - Reminders of rules. *Tip: Try to state reminders in a positive way to reinforce the desired behavior. For example, you might say “Keep hands to yourself” instead of “No pushing” or “Use the equipment in a safer way” instead of “No jumping off the wall.”*
- Passive methods of enforcement
  - Making eye contact
  - Physically moving closer in proximity to a child
- Some behavior may require other disciplinary actions that have been approved by your school or agency
  - Time outs, verbal warnings, or taking privileges away



*By promoting positive playground behavior, you can help kids play more safely and have more fun!*

Supervisors should remain consistent in how they react to less preferred behaviors from children. Threats and warnings without the intention of taking action are confusing to children. All playground supervisors must be consistent regarding what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior, the number and type of reminders given, and consequences that will follow.

## Provide Choices & Establish Consequences

Providing children with choice gives them an element of control and ownership in the decision making process. Poor choices may result in natural consequences (such as not getting to participate in an activity) or an established disciplinary action. Keep consequences **simple**; make them **relevant** and **timely**. If at all possible, the consequences should occur on the same day or immediately after the behavior occurred. *Tip: Deal with issues on the spot by removing equipment and materials or children from the undesired or dangerous situation.*

### Examples of Providing Choices:

- If a child wants to climb up a slide, you might say, "You can go down the slide feet first or climb on the climbing wall."
- "You can listen and follow directions or you can sit and watch your friends play."

Any disciplinary procedures must be consistent with existing school or agency policy. Procedures should be finalized and approved by the administration. Copies of policy and procedures for positive behavior supports and other disciplinary procedures should be included as part of the playground supervision program and reviewed and revised as necessary.

### When developing consequences, consider questions like these:

- Is the consequence the same for running on the play equipment as for shoving a classmate to the ground?
- How will you manage verbal versus physical bullying?
- Does the level of consequence increase with the number of incidents?
- How many reminders will be given before there is a consequence?
- What if other factors like attention seeking or defending oneself influenced the behavior?
- *Tip: Be careful with setting up too many specifics. There are always unique circumstances to every situation.*

### The following examples are forms of discipline that are not recommended:

- Requiring physical exercise such as doing pushups or running laps. Children should relate exercise with positive feelings and memories, not negative ones.
- Taking away recess time in school settings. Children need to exert energy in order to focus and do their best in the classroom. Studies show that children that engage in daily high-energy activity increase test scores and on task behavior (Davis, C., et al., *Effects of aerobic exercise on overweight children's cognitive functioning: a randomized controlled trial, Research Quarterly for Exercise Sport*, 2007).
  - Intentionally embarrassing or humiliating children, which can harm them socially and emotionally.



*Positive behavior supports can help children relate exercise with positive feelings and memories.*



## Group Activity #4

Work with the school or agency administration and staff to develop and finalize rules that can be used by the supervisors to promote positive playground behavior.

### Part I: Develop Supervisors' Playground Rules

1. Using the playground map (created in Group Activity #1) as a reference, list the types of activities that are intended to occur in each area of the play environment.
2. Create a list of playground equipment components and the potential unacceptable behaviors that could occur on or around them. (Ex. walking on top of horizontal ladders, jumping off elevated platforms, swinging upside down, etc.)  
*Tip: Consider users' ages and abilities when determining rules.*
3. Consider other factors such as items brought into the play environment that may require additional rules and/or monitoring to ensure safer play.
4. Make a list of acceptable and unacceptable play behaviors for each play area and each component of playground equipment. Discuss questions of play equity, fairness, and inclusion to be sure that they are addressed in playground rules.
5. Discuss how these rules will be followed through. (Ex: communication of rules to the children, ways to offer safer choices, the monitoring system that will be in place, etc.)

### Part II: Develop Positive Behavior Supports on the Playground

1. Discuss ways to be proactive to ensure that the rules are followed rather than reactive when they are broken.
2. When possible, encourage the children to follow the playground rules by using positive behavior supports. (Ex. choices and self-monitoring opportunities, positive reinforcement and praise, natural consequences, visual supports, reminders of rules, etc.)
3. Pass out scenarios of children engaging in less preferred play behaviors. Discuss or role play in small groups how to use positive behavior management strategies.

### Part III: Provide Choices & Establish Consequences

1. Define potential playground scenarios and create alternative choices that give the children control and ownership in the decision making process.
2. List disciplinary procedures that are consistent with school or agency policy.
3. Determine how consequences will be communicated to the children and who will respond.
4. Discuss how supervisors will determine consequences based on specifics of each incident.

### Part IV: Finalize Playground Rules

At the completion of Parts I-III of this Group Activity, your group's list should be finalized and presented to school or agency administration for approval. The completed list will become part of a permanent record that can be used on an on-going basis, and it should be reviewed and/or revised as necessary.

## Group Activity #5

Work with the children to develop rules that will help them understand and demonstrate positive playground behavior.

1. Discuss with the children why playground safety is important, and explain that they are going to help create their own playground safety rules.
2. Allow children the opportunity to talk about how they like to be treated and what might upset or hurt them when they are playing on the playground.
3. Use open-ended questions, examples to which the children can relate, and other means to talk about behavioral choices that can help them have positive play experiences.
4. From this discussion, create a list of positive play behaviors. You may wish to use a visual indicator such as happy/sad faces or thumbs up/thumbs down depending on the developmental ages of the children.
5. Use this list to come up with positive, simple, child-friendly rules.
6. Finalize the rules with the school or agency administration, including them in the playground policy. Consider posting the playground rules in the classroom and/or on the playground to provide a consistent reminder.



## **Define the Playground Supervisor's Behavior**

Children are born to play. As discussed earlier, kids require time for healthy active play opportunities in order to fully develop socially, emotionally, communicatively, physically, and cognitively. When children are deprived of play opportunities the consequences can result in serious developmental and physical health conditions such as obesity. Your behavior can directly impact the quantity and quality of children's play experiences.

### **Identify the Supervisor**

For safety reasons, children need a means of easily locating and communicating with a playground supervisor, but on a busy playground, it can be difficult for children to spot them and for supervisors to hear children calling their names. Consider a brightly colored uniform or vest that can be worn by the supervisors to enable easy recognition. A visual indicator can expedite contact and improve safety.

### **Have a Positive Attitude**

Attitude is everything! What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about play—a sense of freedom, laughter, running, jumping, swinging, and generally having fun outside? The playground supervisor's attitude has a direct impact on the value of children's play experiences. A great playground supervisor promotes healthy active play and is familiar with the needs of children. First and foremost, take the job seriously, be prepared, patient, and have a positive attitude.

### **Define Your Location**

It is important to define the location of each playground supervisor and where they will move while watching the children. In Group Activity #1 you explored sight lines and the number of supervisors on the playground. Each supervisor should know what area of the playground he or she is responsible for supervising before the children come out to play. The supervisor should be familiar with the area and equipment, understanding where he or she needs to physically roam while scanning the play environment with his or her eyes, closely monitoring challenging equipment and areas out of immediate sight like inside crawl tubes.

### **Communicate**

Playground supervisors should establish a means of communicating with one another and the main office from the playground. Many schools and agencies use radios or other mobile communication devices for this purpose. If one supervisor is assisting an injured child, he or she needs to alert the other supervisors and facilitators of the situation for them to communicate with the main office regarding the emergency situation. You will also need a means of communicating with the other supervisors if you need to leave your post for any reason.

### **Know Your Emergency Response**

As part of playground supervisor preparation, discuss existing school or agency policies relating to injury prevention, emergency response, and incident reporting procedures.

All playground supervisors should be trained in first aid and equipped with proper first aid materials. Small first aid kits in backpacks or fanny packs could include protective gloves, protective mouth guards, gauze, bandages, etc. If any children have severe allergies to bee stings or other medical needs, subject to school or agency policy, it may be necessary for the supervisor to have the appropriate medicine as part of the kit.

*• Preserving the Play Environment • Promoting the Value of Play • Protecting Children*



Emergency response plans should be explored for scenarios like fire, severe weather, bomb threats, rabid or sick animals, strangers on the playground, and weapons on the playground. Emergency response plans may already be developed for inside the building, but handling emergencies outside the building is equally important.

When developing emergency plans for different playground emergency scenarios, consider these things:

- Watch the children not directly involved in the emergency and protect them from harm.
- Children are very familiar with fire drills and severe weather drills and learn at an early age the seriousness of the situation. By developing similar playground protocols, you can build on these familiar experiences.
- Involve management in the process of developing playground emergency response plans.
- Know how to respond to help keep everyone calm.
- Evacuation plans should include a method of gathering the children together, directing them to a given location, and accounting for all of the children.
- Practice drills on the playground to help ensure quick response in a real emergency.

### **Report Incidents**

Every school and agency should have an incident report form that has been prepared with the advice of the school or agency's legal or risk management department. Playground supervisors should know how to properly complete the form in a timely manner so that proper notifications and documentation can be ensured. If a child is injured severely enough to require treatment at a hospital, there is a good chance that further information will be needed about the incident. Additionally, incident reports should be processed and retained in a systematic manner so that trends can be identified and adjustments to the supervision program can be made. An incident report form is the best, most complete way of documenting the circumstances surrounding the incident; therefore it needs to be completed and submitted immediately following the incident as directed by the school or agency policy. Other incidents such as bullying, fighting, or medical emergencies, etc. may also need to be documented.

# Develop a Playground Supervision Plan



## Group Activity #6

Using your notes from Group Activities #1-5 and the information provided in this Guide as a starting point, complete the Playground Supervision Plan on the following pages with the group of playground supervisors from your school or agency. Use this resource as a tool to engage your various stakeholders in the planning, documentation, communication/preparation, and execution of a comprehensive playground supervision plan. Remember it should be a living document and needs to be continually updated and refined for continuous quality improvement.

# Playground Supervision Plan

Name of School/Agency/Group: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Playground (if multiple): \_\_\_\_\_

Staff & Administration Involved in Development of Plan:

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## **Define the Ratios on the Playground**

*(Number of children/number of staff)*

## **Define the Roles of Staff**

*(Determine personnel that will function as playground supervisors and those that will function as play facilitators.)*

## **Define the Supervisors, Their Roles, and Locations/Designated Supervision Areas**

*(Consider how they will be positioned and move to supervise areas that are less visually accessible.)*

## **Define the Play Facilitators & Their Roles, If Applicable**

*(Who will facilitate play with the children? What type of activities and engagement will they provide?)*

## **Define the Developmental Ages of the Children**

## **Define Age Appropriate Equipment**

*(Labels and signs indicate age appropriateness of equipment. How will you keep children from using inappropriate pieces of equipment?)*

## **Define Activity Areas**

*(What activities will be encouraged/discouraged in each area of the play environment? Where will loose parts such as balls and manipulatives be allowed?)*

## **Define the Accessibility Needs to Ensure Access and Inclusion of Children of All Abilities**

*(Ex. Equipment, surfacing, visual supports, modifications, adult assistance, etc.)*

*Note: This form is designed as a sample playground supervision plan. Due to the variation of sites and equipment, this plan should not be considered to be all inclusive. Each facility should evaluate its unique needs when creating a playground supervision plan.*

**Define Developmental Outcomes**

*(What developmental skills are important for children to experience on the playground?)*

**Define System for Identifying & Correcting Potential Facility-Related Hazards**

*(Who will complete pre-play site inspection? To whom should hazards be reported? What is the process for closing the playground due to facility-related hazards?)*

**Define the Playground Dress Code, If Applicable**

*(Ex: clothing that could become a strangulation hazard, helmets, footwear, sun protective clothing, sunscreen, etc.)*

**Define the Playground Rules: Supervisors' Rules**

*(Develop guidelines for safety, appropriate playground behavior, positive behavior supports, consequences, etc. How will these rules be reviewed and approved by school or agency administration?)*

**Define the Playground Rules: Rules Developed with Children**

*(Rules for children's behavior should be simple, positive, and child-friendly. How will the rules be posted and reviewed with the children for further reinforcement?)*

**Define Means of Identifying the Supervisor**

*(Will the supervisors wear brightly colored clothing or vests?)*

**Define the Communication System**

*(Who will communicate with the main office in the event of an incident? How will information be conveyed to other supervisors/facilitators? Ex: Radios, whistles, hand signals, etc. How and when will it be communicated to the children that it is time to line up and go back inside?)*

**Define Emergency Plan & Incident Reporting Process**

*(Assign roles that each adult will take on in case of emergency. Who will stay with an injured child? Who will watch the other children? Who will communicate with the main office? Who will fill out incident reports? How will they be reviewed and retained?)*

**Define Maintenance of Playground Supervision Plan**

*(How frequently will the Playground Supervision Plan be updated and communicated? How will the school or agency prepare new supervisors? How will the Playground Supervision Plan be incorporated into the school or agency's policies and procedures?)*

**Additional Site-specific Considerations**



# Conclusion

## Promote Play

Now that you have learned about playground supervision and started your planning process, we encourage you to become an advocate for play for all children at your school or agency. Help give children the opportunities they need to play freely, explore new learning opportunities, exercise their bodies, and grow into healthy, productive adults.

Share the fun! As a play supervisor you are in the perfect position to share your knowledge with others.

Here are some ideas of ways that you can promote fun, safer play in your community:

- Establish a playground safety week, sending information home regarding the importance of play and playground safety.
- Become a resource for parents and teachers about safer play.
- Offer information and tips to parents, teachers, and care givers about safer play on the playground.
- Establish a continuous quality improvement process, tracking incidents and positively promoting safer play.

By becoming an advocate for healthy play opportunities within your community, you have an opportunity to positively impact the health and well-being of our most precious resource, our children.





## Resources

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### **PlayCore**

[www.playcore.com](http://www.playcore.com)

(877) 762-7563

For a variety of resources and programs for play, visit [www.playcore.com](http://www.playcore.com).

### **NRPA-National Recreation and Park Association**

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

(800) 626-6772

NRPA is dedicated to educating professionals and the public on the essential nature of parks and recreation.

### **IPEMA-International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association**

[www.ipema.com](http://www.ipema.com)

(888) 944-7362

IPEMA is a non-profit, membership, trade association that represents and promotes an open market for manufacturers of playground equipment and surfacing.

### **NPPS- National Program for Playground Safety**

[www.uni.edu/playground](http://www.uni.edu/playground)

(800) 554-7529

NPPS is the premier non-profit organization in the United States delivering training and services about outdoor play and safety.

### **ASTM- ASTM International**

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

(610) 832-9500

Formerly known as the American Society for Testing and Materials, ASTM is an independent and world renowned developer of technical standards utilized in testing a multitude of products, including playground equipment and related products.

### **CPSC- Consumer Product Safety Commission**

[www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov)

(800) 638-2772

The Consumer Product Safety Commission regulates many products, including playground equipment and related products, to help ensure consumers/users safety.

### **Access Board- U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board**

[www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov)

800-872-2253

The Access Board has completed Accessibility Guidelines for Play Facilities as set forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

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