Spring ahead for playground maintenance to keep kids safe

By Cheryl Corson*

With spring recess and milder weather approaching, it's time to evaluate the condition of playgrounds in your district.

Four basic factors are involved in playground safety: age-appropriate design, adequate playground supervision, proper shock absorbent surfacing materials, and regular equipment maintenance. Since approximately 70 percent of playground injuries involve falls, it's clear that what's underneath your playground equipment is just as important as the condition of the equipment itself.

Assuming your playground is age appropriate and well-designed, now's the time to check the depth and condition of your playground surfacing and carefully go over every piece of equipment. If you haven't already done so, map existing playground sites and take inventory of the equipment. This is the first step of your spring maintenance routine. The next step is to know what to check.

❑ **Documents you need.** These two publications provide objective maintenance criteria:

The most important document for your playground maintenance library is the 1997 *Handbook for Public Playground Safety (Pub. No. 325)*, published by the **U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission**. This free, 62-page booklet specifies playground layout and design guidelines, surfacing recommendations, and installation and maintenance protocol.

In fact, six states have passed laws pertaining to public playground safety, all of which adopt the CPSC standards. If your school is in California, Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina or Texas, be especially sure to have this handbook and be familiar with its contents.

Another useful publication is the third edition of *Playground Safety is No Accident, Developing a Public Playground Safety and Maintenance Program*, published by the **National Recreation and Park Association**. Detailed maintenance protocols and model inspection forms are provided, including a guide that helps determine how often to inspect your playground for various conditions. You can copy the forms to use, saving time and guesswork, and providing clear evidence to insurers and the public that your district is acting responsibly.

❑ **How high? How deep? How far?** Loose fill playground surfacing can include wood chips, shredded bark mulch, sand, gravel and (now readily commercially available) shredded tires. The recommended depth depends on the material used and the fall height "below which a life-threatening head injury would not be expected to occur."

The CPSC *Handbook* shows recommended depths of materials calibrated to various fall heights. For example, 9 inches of uncompressed wood chips or shredded bark mulch protects children falling from 10 feet, while the same depth of fine sand only protects children from a fall height of 5 feet, half the distance. Though more costly, 6 inches of shredded tires protects children from fall heights of 10-12 feet and because it does not decompose, it does not require such frequent replacement.

Loose fill material needs regular replenishing and loosening as it scatters, decomposes and becomes compacted. It also needs cleaning and raking to remove foreign objects and debris. For all newer playground equipment, manufacturers will recommend the ideal depth of loose fill material. It is a good idea to mark this level on the equipment support posts of the actual equipment. This makes inspection by eye easier for staff.

The other important factor is the distance beyond the equipment footprint to apply protective surfacing. This distance will vary between types of playground equipment, and the term to describe it is "use zone," the "surface under and around a piece of equipment onto which a child falling from or exiting from the equipment would be expected to land." (CPSC *Handbook*, p.3) Documentation from newer playground equipment will indicate the use zone.

❑ **Other routine maintenance.** Besides surfacing, check every piece of equipment for loose S-hooks, bolts and moving parts. Make sure there are no sharp points, missing protective caps, or hazardous protrusions. Check for tripping hazards such as exposed footings or anchoring devices on equipment and exposed moving parts. Check for adequate drainage, especially beneath highly compacted areas such as below swings or slides, and remove any splinters, rust or paint chips.

❑ **Certified playground safety inspectors.** Consider having some of your facilities staff become certified playground safety inspectors. This NPRA program offers rigorous review of standards, and three-year certification. Your district can also hire a CPSI from your area to inspect your facilities for you. There are about 6,000 CPSIs all around the US.

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Find out more

✔ The *Handbook for Public Playground Safety*, free online at: *http://cpsc.gov/cpsepub/pubs/325.pdf.*

✔ *Playground Safety is No Accident: Developing a Public Playground Safety and Maintenance Program*, $50, from the **National Recreation and Park Association**, *www.nrpa.org.*

✔ To locate a Certified Playground Safety Inspector, contact **Roy Geiger**, manager of the NRPA's National Playground Safety Program: (703) 858-2148; *rgeiger@nrpa.org.* ■

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