



# PlayAction Guide

## CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUND SAFETY

### CREATING A SAFER PLAY ENVIRONMENT

When the community creates play environments and facilities for its children, it is axiomatic that these should be appropriate in terms of age, ability range, social factors and play value - and should be as safe as possible. The surrounding environment also must be gauged from the same perspective. For example, it is not safe just because there is a 'mint catalogue' array of play equipment but safety barriers are omitted allowing unchecked access onto a busy road. This Factsheet is a simple introduction to playground safety - what we should look for in a safe playground, what causes accidents, existing and likely future standards, monitoring their implementation, and working for improvements. Playgrounds which meet the child's developmental needs are safer than those which do not. A free booklet on playgrounds and their play value is available from RoSPA - send an A5 SAE to address at end of this Guide.



### WHAT VALUE ARE PLAYGROUNDS?

Fixed-equipment unsupervised playgrounds are the commonest form of environmental play provision in Britain, mainly local authority provided, some commercial. Organised summer playschemes and pre-school playgroups come a long way behind in second place. Children spend less than ten per cent of their free time on such playgrounds, and increasingly parents accompany children to and from them. The attraction to local authorities in the past on such an emphasis was that it offered an inexpensive means of widespread, localised provision - maintenance was not cost burdensome, nor demanding in terms of staff. No one asked, however, if they worked!

Today the situation is changing in terms of awareness of the potential for accident and injury to children on the playground. If this provision is to remain the main play demand on local authority budgets, it must satisfy increasing demands from parents and the law, both UK and European. Above all, it must be judged from the point of view of what it offers the child. The playground should offer the following:

- a stimulating environment which helps the child to develop;**
- a place which encourages their involvement through providing opportunities, and which does so because the equipment and layout are interesting and can be used safely, and are not boring (which encourages inappropriate use);**
- a place which attracts children to play, which can be reached safely, and is in a safe environmental context; safety of equipment, surfaces and ancillaries (e.g. fencing, gates, shrubbery etc.).**
- a place which is Fun!**

**The following must be borne in mind: even if a playground is unsafe, children will still use it, and do so nation-wide every day. As a general principle good quality playgrounds which meet the needs of children are safer than those which do not.**

### ACCIDENTS IN PLAYGROUNDS

Despite recognition of playground accidents for many years, there are no firm figures of annual incidents in the UK. There is no single national body responsible for playground safety. Small-scale studies here and abroad suggest 150,000 accidents requiring medical treatment at a hospital or by a doctor in this country annually. Recent figures from the Department of Trade and Industry suggest 40,000 accidents result in a hospital visit annually. A recent analysis of a representative 400 accidents collected by the Department suggested that the great majority of these were injuries as a result of falls from equipment and are minor in their result. Despite some well-publicised accidents, playgrounds are much safer places than other places where children play.

Until recently it was most commonly held that the most serious playground injuries are caused when the head impacts with the ground after a fall from equipment. This remains true but it is very rare as after four years the child is no longer top heavy and has sufficient co-ordination to put their hands down. However, it is generally agreed that there are too many preventable or avoidable accidents in playgrounds and that there are a range of measures that can deter or prevent them. These accidents include falls from items which are too high and/or lack any/adequate safety surfaces, cuts and other injuries caused by poorly maintained items, and poorly-sited equipment (e.g. which encourages a child to run in front of other, moving items).

The many potential hazards mean playground owners/managers must be aware at all times of the need for playground safety consciousness - this encompasses every stage from selecting and buying through installation to use, inspection, maintenance and repair. For, at the least, playground injury is an unpleasant and painful digression from the purpose of a playground. At worst, it encompasses serious injury, long-term medical treatment, permanent disability or death. It is important to remember that children need challenge and adventure in their playgrounds. It is essential to distinguish between risk and hazard: a risk being something the child can assess, a hazard being something hidden or outside the experience.



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## THE MAIN CAUSES OF PLAYGROUND ACCIDENTS

Generally, accidents on playgrounds are the result of errors:

**The design of the equipment**  
**Design and layout of site**  
**Child behaviour**

**Incorrect installation**  
**Inspection/maintenance procedures**  
**Failure to inform of the intended use and age range, or level of ability required**

**Selection of inappropriate equipment**  
**Insufficient play value and interest**

The design of the equipment is the responsibility of the manufacturers. These are standards of design, manufacture and installation (see below) - these even cover the items designed and built on a customised, individual basis (e.g. the community artist). There is also a corpus of experience of manufacturers, local authorities, and playground managers which is being added to constantly. The role and value of the 'monitor' (parents, local groups, ward councillors and other "busybodies") however unwelcome to the owner in terms of extra work and cost cannot be under-estimated. Public concern leading to repairs/replacement improves safety thus preventing injury or worse and saves money and loss of valuable resources - e.g. a child saves from disability saves parents and the community from a lifetime of special care obligations.

## LAWS WHICH APPLY TO PLAYGROUNDS

At the time of writing there are no specific laws applying to playgrounds in British law. Attempts to create enforceable standards through Private Members' measures in Parliament have failed to get second readings including one to ensure compliance with British Standards (see below). There are a number of general laws whose provisions affect e.g. liability for accidents on playgrounds, safety standards, etc. Negligence or nuisance may come under the Occupiers Liability Act 1957 (revised 1984), and other relevant legislation includes The Unfair Contract Terms Act 1977, The Consumer Safety Act 1978, the Consumer Protection Act 1987, and The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulation 1992. A duty of 'reasonable care' may be said to exist so far as playground managers and operators are concerned. The courts appear to expect: greater care to be taken where children are involved:

*an active duty to safety*

*compliance with relevant standards*

*regular inspection and maintenance training*

Britain's playgrounds now come under European Standard BS EN 1176 and 1177. There are a number of differences between BS 5696 [the old UK standard] and the new. They are not retrospective but managers should undertake a comparison combined with a risk assessment where there are differences. [HSE provides Entertainment Sheet 11 giving advice on EN 1176 and 1177.]

## SAFETY STANDARDS

Safety standards do not prevent all accidents but may reduce litigation. It is also fair to say that the blind imposition of standards has done much to reduce the play quality of playgrounds. The standard is a tool for safety, but does not, by itself, give safety.

Various sectors of British Industry set standards for their ranges of products through 'British Standards' (BS). BS EN 1176 is the standard for 'Children's Playground Equipment'. BS are not enforceable. When buying or inspecting equipment, there is a need to ensure that the equipment truly is up to BS even where claimed by the manufacturers - this will often be an 'expert' matter. The Government, HSE and main safety organisations such as CAPT, FPC, NPFA and RoSPA recommends that all new equipment should meet the testable parts of EN 1176. Surfacing materials are now much more rigorously treated in BS EN 1177 which covers impact absorbing requirements of surfacing. Other tests are in BS 7188 for use in the UK. The impact-absorbing performance of the chosen surface should also demonstrate a 'critical height' in excess of the potential fall height. Critical height represents the greatest height of head-first fall from which a child, landing on the surface, could be expected to avoid a critical head injury. Paint used should confirm to BS5665 (relating to paint used for toys). BS EN 1176 comes in seven parts, six of which relate to the equipment. Part 7 is a management guide. A free booklet is available from RoSPA - send A5 SAE - see address below.



## PREVENTION BETTER THAN ....

We can all contribute towards prevention of playground accidents. Those who design and install equipment standards to follow as have playground owners, managers and maintainers. The owner has a responsibility to design the playground properly, and to install and maintain it correctly - many independent organisations, manufacturers and insurers help with inspection services, design etc. The equipment should be suitable for age ranges likely to use it - there is a need to consider, for example, the needs/access of older children/young people and there is now specific equipment for this purpose.

Equipment should provide a wide range of play opportunities, and should encourage children to play safely - this does not imply lack of adventure or challenge though there are limits as to what can be left unsupervised. Fair Play also recommends that careful attention should be paid to the degree of challenge of any item or configuration of equipment related to age and that notices describing correct usage should be displayed on equipment together with minimum and maximum recommended age.

Impact-absorbing surfacing, which should be fitted around all equipment, is of two main kinds: loose fill (e.g. bark, sand etc.) and



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synthetic (e.g. rubber tiles, sheet etc.). Each type is the subject of claims and each has its appropriate usages. Parents, teachers, play activists, councillors and other adults have an important role - vigilance that playgrounds are kept in good condition, and that defects are quickly reported and remedied.

Children are rarely consulted about the safety of their own play areas - yet they could be the most useful 'reporters' especially if there is a programme of education and regular contact to enable the owner to keep abreast of their views, reports etc. Playgrounds may be owned by e.g. local authorities, local education authorities, schools, parish councils, county councils, playing field committees, trusts, amenity societies, community bodies, housing authorities and associations, public houses and other commercial enterprises such as supermarket chains, public houses, and voluntary play bodies. They all have the same duty of care. While most local authority and education playgrounds are subject to regular inspection, the level of competence in that sector is not always reached in the private sector. Whatever the type of provision - tenant facilities, charge payers services, customer benefit etc. - standards should be uniformly high, and improving. A free booklet 'The Children's Playground' (send an A5 SAE) is available from RoSPA and would be helpful to anyone thinking of a playground.

## ACTION FOR SAFER PLAYGROUNDS



Children can be helped to appreciate the need for sensible playground behaviour. Rightly, we teach much emphasis on road, 'stranger' and water safety - likewise, the classroom and other means and venues can be utilised for playground safety. The Royal Society for the Prevent of Accidents, RoSPA, The Child Accident Prevention Trust and others below can be asked for curriculum advice, materials etc. Local Play Associations/Councils/Forums (local bodies concerned about play) can set up playground safety committees/groups with responsibility for monitoring, (or indeed a wider remit of Safety at Play which takes in road traffic, animals, volunteers/staff working with children, environmental hazards etc.). Groups can also be formed by parents concerned with a very specific local problem - this can be an effective way to liaise with/put pressure to act on local authorities.

The individual person is most likely to be the initial source of effective, quick action - a person may spot a deficiency or hazard, it may be their child or a friend's or neighbour's who's been hurt, or an injury or worse may be anticipated if nothing is done. It is important to let that concern be known to the owner or local authority or Health & Safety Executive at the earliest opportunity and that person can continue pressuring and getting people like Councillors and MP aware of the problem, perhaps leading to an action group's formation. If a commercial or private concern, the local authority's Environmental Health Officers can assist.

The first contact is with the owner or their managers. In the case of a pub or supermarket site this should be easy enough, but public playgrounds don't always have a clearly identifiable owner, with notices failing also to give a contact point or telephone number. Fair Play recommends that all playgrounds display this information, requesting notification of any accidents, faults or problems. Having identified the owner, the first step may be a call for visit e.g. to find out to who to speak about the actual problem. With a local authority, the switchboard operator may not know and there may be more than one Department managing play areas or it may be located in one of several departments varying from one authority to another - Leisure, Recreation, Housing, Parks, Amenities, Environment etc. Always ask the name, position and telephone extension of the person confirming their department's/firm's role, and include date and summary of conversation and of promised action/deadline. If nothing happens by then, repeat. If that fails after another week, write to the owners - head of Department, Brewery main office or supermarket manager etc. - and "confirm the concern of such-and-such a date about ...." setting out what is wrong, where and any incidents or accidents to date. Seek immediate remedy if serious, and if you feel it threatens serious injury or life, call for immediate closure until safe.

If there is no or inadequate action within two weeks or no reply, write a second time - if to a council, to its chief executive, adding a copy of your first letter. Also send copies to your Ward Councillor of your District Council - their office will give you name(s) and address(es) and telephone number(s) and tell you if/where/when they hold surgeries.

The Council may replay that it would like to act but is too poor but this is no justification for allowing a danger to persist/remain. Fair Play rejects delay, indifference, excuses, failure to act, inadequate action etc. Persistence is the key. Also, remember that group action is often the next effective step. The campaigner for a local playground's safety may need such support, "two heads ...." being a good philosophy, so that like-minded folk work together. An individual or safety action group can petition parents, neighbours and residents, even children (best to help the latter do their own). Hold a meeting at your local school, church or parish/neighbourhood hall, raise it at the annual Town/Parish Meeting or at a Parish/Town Council question time if they have one, or convene a Parish/Town Elector's Meeting if really serious, or get a Parish/Town, District/Borough and/or County Councillor to raise it at the appropriate Council office or Council Committee or Council Meeting. Contact Fair Play for advice on tactics.

The press also welcomes good stories so at some stage they may be contacted to carry a story or letter, or they may send a report and/or photographer to the site or a meeting etc. We advise that copies of letters/press cuttings etc. also be sent to your Member of Parliament at The House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA or his/her own constituency office, making sure the owner is aware of this.

The campaigner may find opinions challenged. There are ways of enhancing a case. An inspection can be made using e.g. Fair



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Play's Playground Safety Checklist (1.50) or other such checks. We can also recommend expert advice the cost often being free or very low. Pass on such an independent report to the owner and let Councillors, Press and MP have a summary. If there is a case that a valuable public resource is being neglected pass your concern/report/evidence to the District or County Auditor if owned by the District Council or County Council: the relevant Council must give the Auditor's name and address. If you feel your case has been unjustly treated by the Council owning the play area, the Local Government Ombudsman may take it up - address also via the Council. The Health and Safety Executive, address/telephone no. In the phone book, is also able to act where it considers there is a breach of the laws it is there to enforce, and can order closure until remedied.

## FURTHER THOUGHTS

Much is made of campaigns to help children journey safely to and from school. Little has been heard of safety to and from play, yet children spend three times as much time at play than in formal education. Playground siting, access and design must be thought of in the context of road safety. As devastating as a fall injury can be, a child contracting a disease like toxocara canis carried in cat and dog faeces - this can lead to loss of sight or other very unpleasant problems - so fencing, self-closing gates and cleansing are valid concerns together with appropriate notices, plus Council/owner legal action for persistent offenders. Fair Play recommends public notices about worming of dogs and cats, and also more frequent soil testing near formal and informal public play areas for pathogens if dogs and cats gain access. They should not be allowed on playgrounds other than Guide Dogs.

There is concern that more legislation and directives may lead to reduced play provision and opportunities rather than improved safety standards. Provision and safety measures have become much more expensive, but good quality play provision is still cost-effective if e.g. it helps reduce road accidents, helps tackle neighbourhood problems, crime etc. If a playground's equipment is to be removed and not replaced, fight hard and do not be afraid to challenge adult leisure expenditure if it is children who are being targeted for the most cuts. The key to provision is to undertake a risk assessment which can create good environments by understanding the risks involved.

Rather than lose a play area site completely, activists may be able to, for example, offer to raise money for improvements (though do not let this be used by a penny-pinching council which rarely spends on children's needs) or the site might become a more informal, landscaped area for children - many are beginning to question if a manufacturer-equipment-based approach is the only means of provision and there are self-build projects, with expert direction, and ideas of more emphasis on natural mounds and contours to increase interest.

Supervision is an important issue. So often, play areas are not overseen and yet regular rotas of visits can deter inappropriate behaviour on equipment, and there was much to be said for the old 'Play Hut' with perhaps a retired person or parent on site sometimes, with first aid box, an eye for trouble, a kindly ear - and a story even! **Almost never consulted are children themselves.** Examples of getting children to assess the play interest of sites show they can be very responsible and add a vital dimension to playground management and planning.

## HELP FROM

**Fair Play for Children** - 35 Lyon Street, Bognor Regis PO21 1BW, Tel: 01243-869922 (+answerphone), Fax:: 01243-862072, e-mail: fairplay@arunet.co.uk [nation-wide association for the Child's Right to Play]

**National Playing Fields Association** - St Chad's Place, London WC1X 9HH, Tel 0171-584-6445 [includes NPFA Playground Services Ltd]

**Children's Play Information Centre** - 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE, Tel: 020-7843 6303

**Association of Play Industries** - Federation House, National Agricultural Centre, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire CV8 2RF, Tel 01203 414999 [the organisation of equipment manufacturers, installers, etc. - publishes member list]

**Child Accident Prevention Trust** - 4th Floor, Clerk's Court, 18-20 Farringdon Lane, London EC1R 3AY, Tel: 0171-608 2838/Fax 0171-608 3674

**Play Scotland** - Moray House College of Education, Cremond Campus, Cremond Road North, Edinburgh EH4 6JD, Tel: 0131-312 6001 ext. 294

**Play Wales/ EHWARAE CYMRU** - Baltic House, Mount Street Square, Cardiff CF10 5SH Tel: 0282 048 6050, e-mail: playwa@globalnet.co.uk

**Play Board Northern Ireland** - 253 Lisburn Road, Belfast N1 BT9 7EW, Tel: 01232 382633, e-mail: kidsplay@playbrd.dnet.co.uk web-site: <http://www.playboard.org/>

**RoSPA: Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents** - Edgbaston Park, 353 Bristol Road, Birmingham B5 7ST, Tel: 0121-248 2000 **Playground office** at 3 Earning Street, Godmanchester, Huntingdon, Cambs. PE29 2JD, Tel: 01480 411384 [independent expert advice, quote Fair Play when contacting]

**Institute of Leisure & Amenity Management - ILAM** - ILAM House, Lower Basildon, Reading, Berks RG8 9NE, Tel: 01491 874222 [Children's Panel]

**British Standards Institute - BSI** - 389 Chiswick High Road, London W4 6AL, Tel: 020-8996 9000.

\* has published standards, leaflets, reports etc. on playground safety, design etc.

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