

Playground Safety: The SAFE Checklist

Preschoolers and children are attracted to playgrounds and opportunities to play outdoors. Families with young children are attracted to churches that offer outdoor play as a part of their ministry to children. Outdoor play experiences give teachers and volunteers at church great opportunities to use Bible truths and talk with children about God and His world. For children to grow and develop physically, spiritually, emotionally, socially, and intellectually, the church is trusted to provide and maintain safe outdoor play areas and experiences.

More than 200,000 children are treated in U.S. hospital emergency rooms each year for injuries associated with playground equipment.¹ However, churches can reduce the risk of playground accidents by identifying potential playground hazards, taking steps to provide safe play areas, and promoting greater safety awareness among those that purchase, install, maintain, and use the playground. Use the SAFE checklist for installing and maintaining playgrounds for children.

SUPERVISION

- ❖ At least two teachers should be on the playground with the children at all times. A third teacher is designated to take children to the restroom, attend scrapes, and help children get drinks. Classroom pupil-teacher ratios are maintained.
- ❖ Teachers observe, guide and interact with the children rather than converse with other adults. They are aware of and responsible for ongoing activities of each child on the playground.
- ❖ Safety and behavior guidelines are established and consistently followed, with consequences enforced when unsafe play occurs.
- ❖ Teachers follow guidelines for using developmentally appropriate equipment and age group play areas.
- ❖ A first-aid kit is available and teachers are trained to use it.

AGE-APPROPRIATE

- ❖ Separate areas are designated for children ages birth through 2, 3 through 5, and 6-12. A fence separates play areas, with signs posted to designate age groupings for each area.
- ❖ All playgrounds are protected from streets and parking lots by a fence at least 6 feet high. Fences are in good repair and have safety locks.
- ❖ Equipment is sized appropriately for each age group served, with climbing heights limited to the reaching height of children standing erect. (Suggestions for age-appropriate equipment may be found in the *Handbook for Public Playground Safety*).

¹ *Handbook for Public Playground Safety*, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Washington, D.C.; 1-800-638-2772 or visit www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/328.html.

- ❖ Equipment is placed at least 6 feet from fences and buildings, and arranged to give play space between equipment pieces.
- ❖ Children are dressed appropriately for playground play. Avoid loose clothing and dangling strings that can catch on playground equipment and present a strangling hazard.

F ALL SURFACES

- ❖ Surfaces around and under play equipment have at least 12 inches of impact materials such as: hardwood mulch/fiber, pea gravel, sand, shredded rubber tires, or safety-tested synthetic surface (rubber tiles, mats, or poured surfaces).
- ❖ Protective surface materials extend at least 6 feet in all directions from play equipment (see additional guidelines specific to swing sets).
- ❖ All playgrounds surfaces are checked daily for hazards such as broken glass, metal or sharp objects, sticks, rodents, standing water, or other unsafe materials and objects.
- ❖ A list of poisonous plants is obtained and reviewed. Play areas are kept free of such plants.
- ❖ Surfaces are kept free of fertilizers, weed killers, and pesticides.
- ❖ Sand bed and sand/water tables are covered when not in use.
- ❖ Tripping hazards such as exposed concrete footings, tree stumps, and rocks are removed.
- ❖ Elevated surfaces such as platforms and ramps have guardrails to prevent falls. Guardrail heights are at least 29 inches for 2-5 year olds and 38 inches for 6-12 year olds.

E QUIPMENT/MAINTENANCE

- ❖ Equipment is examined for missing or loose parts, protruding bolts or screws, sharp edges and corners, splintering wood, and open “S” hooks. Repairs are made immediately.
- ❖ Equipment is placed away from electrical or outdoor power lines, fences, and buildings. Play structures more than 30 inches high are spaced 9 feet apart.
- ❖ Handrails and steps are in good condition.
- ❖ Spaces that could trap children, such as openings in guardrails or between ladder rungs, measure less than 3.5 inches or more than nine inches,
- ❖ Frames of all equipment are anchored well.
- ❖ Metal playground equipment with potential hot surfaces is placed in shaded areas to prevent burns.
- ❖ Balance beams are 9 inches or less in height.

Swings

- ❖ Survey types and quality of swings (CAUTION: Moving equipment causes most playground injury and thus should be supervised closely or avoided on playgrounds).
- ❖ Animal-shaped, metal, or wooden swings are replaced with soft seat swings.
- ❖ Swings are attached with closed O-rings rather than open S-hooks.
- ❖ Only two swings are placed on each framework.
- ❖ Swings are 24 inches apart at the base and 30 inches from any support.
- ❖ Fall zones for swings are two times the height of the swing hanger (EXAMPLE: 10 foot height = 20 feet fall zone in front and 20 ft. in the back with 6 ft. on each side of the swing).

Slides

- ❖ Slides are well anchored and have form handrails for gripping.
- ❖ Steps have good traction and holes to drain water.
- ❖ Platforms and slide beds do not have any space for cords or clothing to catch and cause strangulation, and are shaded or covered to prevent burns from hot sun.
- ❖ Any cargo net openings should either be too small to permit entry of child's body, or large enough to permit free passage of a child's head.

Seesaws

- ❖ Handles are secure and easy to grip.
- ❖ All pivot points are covered to prevent pinched fingers.

Merry-Go-Round

- ❖ Base is firmly anchored and positioned so a child can not slide or roll underneath.
- ❖ Handles are easy for children to grip.
- ❖ Gearbox is covered so fingers cannot get caught.
- ❖ There are no spaces where any part of the body may become entrapped.
- ❖ A regulator (governor) is attached to control speed.

Material adapted from *Oklahoma Baptists Protecting Children* by Sheri Babb and *Steps to Take to Protect Mississippi's Children* by Don Hicks, Robin Keels and Linda Reeves. Edited by: Cindy Campbell, Kathy Flynn, Sue Harmon and Cindy Morris