

Playground **SAFETY** Handbook



**A pictorial guide to the basics of
international safety standards**



Managing

Managing Great Playgrounds

02



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Playground Ideas Safety Manual

A summary of the most common playground hazards.

The safety of children is everybody's responsibility and is something that needs to be considered carefully. From birth, a child's ability to move, play and learn is a miracle to watch and we all want to see our children have the best, most enriching experiences to help them grow and develop into healthy, happy adults.

Along this learning journey, a child's ability to perceive hazards takes time to mature and it is our job to fill this perception gap. Doing this well involves a tricky balance of helping children to avoid the 'big mistakes' that could have long-term negative effects for that child and; having the patience and confidence to stand back and let them learn for themselves with the many 'small mistakes' that come and go.

Finding this balance between intervening and letting go is a real challenge and is essentially what this manual is all about.

Acknowledgments:

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Thank you.

"Unfortunately, the term 'risk-taking' is usually interpreted with negative connotations, with 'risk' and 'hazard' often being seen as synonymous (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). Greenfield (2003), however, believes a distinction should be drawn between these two terms; hazard is something the child does not see, whereas risk relates to the child's uncertainty about being able to achieve the desired outcome, requiring a choice whether to take the risk or not. Adults can mostly see the hazards and endeavour to eliminate them. The way is then clear for children to face the challenge and accept the risk should they choose to do so. This also involves providing adequate supervision and support and being aware of those aspects of the child's behaviour that might contribute to serious injury, especially as a result of inappropriate use of playground equipment."

Helen Little and Shirley Wyver

Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/australian_journal_of_early_childhood/ajec_index_abstracts/outdoor_play_does_avoiding_the_risks_reduce_the_benefits.html



Managing

Your number one priority

There is no use creating a safe playground if it means the playground is so dull that children lose interest in it. That defeats the entire purpose! This manual offers a simple process to help guide you in your number one priority: to create a great playground. A great playground is much more than just safe. It is a stimulating, adventurous and challenging space that will fully support children's growing bodies and minds as well as being safe. Reserving your judgment on safety and focusing on a great design first is the best way to start. Often simple modifications can be made to elements to make them safe if we clearly think through how children might use them.

In our Playground Builders Handbook there is a lot of great information about completing a community consultation (Chapter 1: Listen) and designing playgrounds (Chapter 3: Design). This section of the safety handbook will help in you in guiding the design decisions you make after reading these sections.

Creating a great playground

Starting from a place of wanting to create a great playground, we need to first have a clear understanding of what that means to us - so that we can communicate this to everyone. In our Playground Builders Handbook again there is lots of information and ideas about all types of play.

We have created a poster for you at the end of this section to print out and stick somewhere visible - so everyone will know why your playground is a great playground design for so much more than running and jumping. This poster represents the agreed principles of why your playground has been designed the way it has and what the children get out of using it.

Great playgrounds:

- get children outdoors
- allow children to test the boundaries of their abilities
- help children learn to make friends and collaborate
- encourage creativity and problem solving
- encourage imagination and pretend play
- give children healthy exercise
- are exciting and fun!

Assessing how great your playground is

So how do you know whether your playground is great or not? Well it may sound a little funny, but one of the best ways to do this is to try and ask each of your individual playground elements some questions and from the answer, give them a score. 1 point for yes and 0 points for no. There will be certain elements that you will always include regardless of the score, but a playground that has elements that score a lot of points and a whole site design that includes points from every different question is a really good start.

Use the Play Value Interview Questionnaire at the end of this section to ask your playground questions and score them. There is a practice example of how to do this included.



Managing great playgrounds

Modifying your elements to make your playground even greater

So now that you have an idea of the value of each of your elements and the playground as a whole, what can you do to increase their value for play? Go back over your questionnaire again and look at the elements that had a low score. Ask the following 3 questions to see if you can improve the score.

1. Are there any design elements you haven't included that you should?
2. Are there other elements that provide the same activity (but score much higher) that you could add or substitute? *For example: a seesaw is a fun element, but the standard sit down seesaw gets boring fairly quickly for most children. On the other hand, our Balance Seesaw Hybrid (<http://www.playgroundideas.org/designs/balance-seesaw-hybrid/>) has the same kind of activity and costs a similar amount as a few standard seesaws but scores much higher on the playground element assessment.*
3. Can you change the location of the element so that it combines with other elements to improve the play value overall? *For example: Adding a play shopfront next to a sandpit where children can "sell" the cakes they "bake" in the sandpit increases the play value of both elements significantly.*

When you've worked over your questionnaire a few times and reached the end of this process you should have a clear idea of how to maximise the play value of your specific space. It is now time to begin considering safety for your particular playground.

The context for safety in playgrounds

We all agree that we want our children to be safe and free from serious injury and so removing the obvious hazards mentioned in the latter part of this manual will make a big impact on safety. The issue is however, that in the process of removing these hazards, playground designers/ managers often also remove the most positive, stimulating and challenging aspects of the playground as well. Creating a great playground requires judgement, it requires you to weigh up the benefits of certain activities with the potential risks that that activity holds in your specific context. These decisions should be made based on your particular situation and will change throughout the world but below we have some helpful ideas to start you on the road.

Risk and play

'Children are more likely to develop responsible attitudes toward risk if they have experience dealing with risky situations. If adults deny children the opportunities for worthwhile, positive risks, they also prevent children from developing the decision-making skills necessary to make accurate risk judgement. Children need to learn to take calculated risks' - Barker 2004

It is important to note that all of us are exposed to risks that we gladly choose to take, like riding a bike, because those risks have important benefits to our lives. Life is full of risky situations we cannot avoid and the consequences of poor judgement gets more serious as we reach adulthood. The last thing we want are teenagers who have not learned to manage small risks to be experimenting with big risks like learning to drive a car or dealing with drugs and alcohol... From learning to take small risks with small consequences as children we learn the skills to calculate bigger risks with bigger consequences later in life. The good news is that children are in-built with the perfect tool to develop these skills and this tool is called 'play'.



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What is risk competence?

Minute by minute, day by day, children forge forward in their development by practising skills and trying new experiences. Before each of these moments where they step into the unknown children are making judgements on whether they are ready or not for that next challenge. We call this process of children evaluating how confident and ready they feel in themselves to take on new experiences and challenges in their environment 'risk competence'. A great playground will provide opportunities for children to practise risk competence in their own time.

Why providing risk in play is important

Risk in play is valuable because it allows children the freedom to develop the following human capacities:

- Curiosity
- Physical skill
- Leadership
- Self-confidence
- Resilience
- Creativity
- Innovation

Children who develop these human capacities tend to become more happy, well-rounded, successful adults.

Dealing with our own fear

Everyone agrees that great play is an essential tool for children's development. We know that the only way anyone learns a new skill is to try it for the first time and then over and over. Childhood therefore involves millions of small attempts beyond a child's current competence. This pathway to mastery comes with all of the expected falls and clumsy mistakes you would expect from a developing human.

Even with this knowledge, the process of watching a child constantly teetering on the edge of their competence can make us nervous (which is a normal and natural reaction from our empathy towards a child's pain.) A conflict arises however, when our desire to remove the chance of any injury overrides the child's needs to take these important risks and this is why some balance and flexibility is required in our judgement in order for the child to grow.

To make the issue more complex, children grow, develop and change in their competence quickly (often quicker than we notice) which means that we may be holding them back without even realising it.

A risk benefit approach (discussed below) can be helpful to make more balanced decisions between our 'duty of care' to minimise the chance of children having a serious injury with our 'duty of care' to cater for children's need for the freedom to experience, explore and test their boundaries.

What is a risk benefit approach?

First, let's clarify 2 key points:

1) We all take risks and use our judgement daily to decide which risks are ok and which to avoid. (taking a bus is a risk most people are more than willing to take).

2) No playground will ever be injury free, ever. In fact, it is guaranteed that children will be injured during childhood. Bumps and scratches are a natural part of the learning process as children grow up and most people would agree that if we created a world where a child could



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never fall over that this would create other, worse consequences for the child. Children need challenges to grow and develop and they will experience some consequences along the way. So, it is really important to differentiate between 'bad hazards' and 'good risks'.

'Bad hazards' are those risks that offer no value to children and could cause serious harm. All the most common hazards are covered in this manual and they can and should be eliminated without loss of play value to children. Please also refer to your local Safety Standards which are listed on the Global Safety Standards page on the Playground Ideas website (<http://www.playgroundideas.org/global-safety-standards/>). Use common sense and seek expert advice (if it is available) to assess and remove these hazards in your playspace.
For example: A bad hazard would be an old piece of equipment with protruding nails, a rusted ladder with rungs missing and a rotten deck platform

'Good risks' on the other hand are challenging activities that provide value to children's learning and development and are unlikely to cause serious harm. These risks should be included. These activities often involve tricky movement, agility and balance. Eliminating them can be counterproductive and therefore common sense must be introduced when evaluating these activities to manage and support them effectively.
For example: A good risk might be including a series of rocks at different levels in an embankment for scrambling up and down.

Removing obvious hazards

Removing hazards (please read carefully through the latter chapters of this handbook at this stage) like sharp edges, shearing or entrapments is unlikely to lower the play value of your playground, but will significantly reduce the chance of a serious injury.

Note: Injuries in the developing world are not the same as they are in wealthy countries. Healthcare can be a long distance away and may be of low quality. This increases the need to carefully remove any bad hazards.

It is important to also be aware that a perfectly safe playground elements can become hazardous when placed in certain settings or next to other elements. *For example: Swings too close to the main pathway in and out of the classroom.*

When evaluating if your great playground has the right balance of risk and safety it is important to remember that every community has its own particular set of broader circumstances that are worth considering as well. Know the following about your particular playground's community:

- The ages and skills of the children using the playground
- The volumes of children using the playground regularly
- The amount of adult supervision in the playground
- The capacity for trained adults to work with children to teach them 'risk competence'
- How often the playground is maintained (this includes clean-up as well as part replacement or repair)
- Where elements sit in relation to paving, buildings, doorways, roads, trees and plants, water bodies (i.e. rivers) and other structures (i.e. poles)
- The type of ground surface and slope
- Where elements sit in relation to other elements. This might be related to Free Height of Fall (refer to the Hazards section of this manual) or just conflicts in activities as mentioned above (*For example: Swings too close to pathways or running children*).



Managing great playgrounds

Undertaking a risk benefit assessment

What we suggest you do after you have completed your Play Value Interview Questionnaire is undertake a risk / benefit assessment on your playground **using the checklist at the end of this section.**

To finalise your design you will need to rank each of your playground elements again according to play value and how severe the risk is. When evaluating it will be useful for you to have the latter sections of this handbook available to refer to.

A playground element that is LOW in play value but HIGH in risk will more than likely be worth removing.

A playground element that is HIGH in play value and LOW or MEDIUM in risk will more than likely be a valuable play activity and worth including.

A playground element may sometimes be both HIGH in value and risk. In this situation you will need to exercise some common sense judgment and refer back to the questions in the section above to take decisions on what to do.

A playground element may also sometimes be both LOW in value and risk. Retaining it will not be an issue of safety, but it might be worth looking at how the element may be further improved.

Refer to the example checklist provided and use the checklist template to complete your own assessment of your playground.

What to do when things go wrong

Of course, when accidents do occur it is MOST important you are prepared. **At the end of this section is a poster titled 'When something goes wrong in our playground this is what we do' that you should print off, fill out the details required, and put it up somewhere close to a telephone or in a prominent location.** This will help with responding quickly and effectively to any situation that arises.

And finally...

You now have the framework to address the safety aspects of your great playground design. Remember maximising children's opportunities to grow and develop should always be the end goal.

Taking a balanced approach to 'risk' ensures that whilst we are being mindful of children's wellbeing, we're also not compromising our great playspace on valuable opportunities for play.

'As safe as necessary, not as safe as possible' – Ball, Gill & Spiegel 2007

If you have any further questions about managing risk please get in touch at info@playgroundideas.org

PLAY VALUE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE:

1. Write the particular element or activity along the top of the table and ask your playground the questions down the left-hand side by putting a score in the middle column. At the end total the score for both element / activity and play ground overall at the bottom. The higher your possible score the BETTER!
2. Review again, this time looking at all the elements / activities that received low scores and see how those scores can be further improved.

[illegible]

RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST:

1. Put the elements from your playground down the left-hand side of the checklist.
2. Rate the element in terms of good risk as H = High, M = Medium and L = Low
3. Rate the likelihood of bad hazards occurring as H = High, M = Medium and L = Low
4. Review and write your assessment in the far right-hand column

[illegible]

THE PLAYGROUND AT

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**IS A "GREAT"
PLAYGROUND BECAUSE**

It takes us outdoors

It can change

It challenges us to grow

It helps us learn to make friends

It gives us healthy exercise

It takes us outdoors

It's exciting and fun!

.....

(add your own description here)

WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG IN OUR PLAYGROUND THIS IS WHAT WE DO:

1. Make sure that we remove the children, staff and ourselves from danger first
2. If safe to do so, remove any hazards
3. Assess how serious the injury is and what treatment might be needed
4. If the injury requires minor first aid send a responsible adult or older child to bring the first aid kit and treat injured child
5. If the injury is more serious contact the following numbers:

AMBULANCE:

**MEDICAL
CENTRE:**

DOCTOR:

6. Rope or tape off the playground area until it has been assessed
7. Contact the child's parents or carer
8. Write down all details of the incident, what treatment or actions were followed and what the outcome was
9. Assess the playground and make changes if necessary