



Safe Playgrounds

The church children and neighborhood were fortunate to have a generous donor who donated funds for the church to build a new playground. Volunteers from the men's group had spent several weekends installing the equipment. It had only been in use for a month when one Sunday, during children's hour, the kids were released for part of the class time to go outside and enjoy the refreshing spring weather.

In less than two minutes after turning them loose, a loud cry rang out. One of the children had fallen from the top level of the equipment and lay motionless on the ground. The emergency squad was called. Luckily, before they arrived, the boy was conscious and alert. To be safe, they took him to the hospital for observation and he was later released.

When church leaders began to ask questions, they realized that no one had really taken steps to follow basic guidelines for installing and maintaining the play equipment. In this case, no protective surface was considered and, therefore, had not been installed.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, each year more than 200,000 children go to U.S. hospital emergency rooms with injuries associated with playground equipment. Most injuries occur when a child falls from the equipment onto the ground. Use this simple checklist to help make sure your local community or school playground is a safe place to play.

In several states and jurisdictions, there are very specific laws relating to installation and maintenance of playgrounds. In some cases plans must be approved and the playground and equipment must be inspected by authorities before they may be used.

However, in most places, very few regulations exist, especially when it comes to private playgrounds (e.g. churches, homes, etc). As a result, many times the installation is not well-planned and the playground and

equipment not adequately maintained. Therefore, churches should take extra steps to make sure that they are meeting acceptable standards when it comes to playgrounds and equipment.

While there are many areas to be considered, the following basic guidelines are recommended:

- Make sure **surfaces** around playground equipment have at least 12 inches of wood chips, mulch, sand, or pea gravel, or are mats made of safety-tested rubber or rubber-like materials.
- Check that protective **surfacing extends** at least 6 feet in all directions from play equipment. For swings, be sure surfacing extends, in back and front, twice the height of the suspending bar.
- Make sure play structures more than 30 inches high are **spaced** at least 9 feet apart.
- Check for **dangerous hardware**, like open "S" hooks or protruding bolt ends.
- Make sure **spaces** that could trap children, such as openings in guardrails or between ladder rungs, measure less than 3.5 inches or more than 9 inches.
- Check for **sharp points or edges** in equipment.
- Look out for **tripping hazards**, like exposed concrete footings, tree stumps, and rocks.
- Make sure elevated surfaces, like platforms and ramps, have **guardrails** to prevent falls.
- Check **playgrounds regularly** to see that equipment and surfacing are in good condition.
- **Carefully supervise children** on playgrounds to make sure they're safe.

INSPECTIONS

Churches, made up mostly of volunteers, find it more difficult to stay diligent with inspections. Therefore, it is critical that someone, as part of their job description, be charged with either doing the inspection or making sure it is completed. Document the inspection and place the form in a file.

ACCESS

Church leadership will need to discuss their views on when and to whom the playground is accessible to. Is it for church children only? If so, can they play on it when there are no adults around to supervise? If it is open to the public, are their liability issues that need to be discussed with the church's insurance agent? If it is to

be off-limits to the public, is signage or a fence going to be needed?

COMMUNICATION

Leadership, parents and even neighbors should understand the guidelines for the playground area. Get input and make a decision and stick to it. Address concerns and violations quickly and fairly.

While a playground may be viewed as a great way to reach out and be a part of the neighborhood and community, careful planning, assembly, inspection and use is vital to the ongoing success of such a project. For more extensive information or for a project of larger magnitude, a visit to the internet or the services of a contractor may be in order.

TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT PLAYGROUND SAFETY

Safe playground equipment and adult supervision are extremely important, but that is only half of a successful playground safety program. Children need to know how to be safe and act responsibly on a playground.

Here are some general rules to teach the children:

- Never push or roughhouse on jungle gyms, slides, seesaws, swings, and other equipment, play responsibly
- Do not wear bike helmets when playing on playground equipment, take off your helmet
- Use playground equipment that is age appropriate
- Use equipment properly. Slide feet first, don't climb outside guardrails, no standing on swings, one child to a swing/seat, sit facing one another on a seesaw, etc.
- If you jump off equipment, make sure that you check to be sure there are no other children in your way. When you jump, land on both feet with knees slightly bent
- Leave bikes, backpacks, and bags away from the equipment and the area where you are playing so that no one trips over them and falls
- Playground equipment should never be used if it is wet because moisture causes the surface to be slippery
- During the summertime, playground equipment can become uncomfortably or dangerously hot, especially metal slides. Use good judgment - if the equipment feels hot to the touch, it is probably not safe or fun to play on

- Don't wear clothes with drawstrings or other strings at the playground. Drawstrings, purses and necklaces could get caught on equipment and accidentally strangle a child
- Wear sunscreen when playing outside, even on cloudy days, so that you don't get sunburned

There should always be an adult supervisor present when you are playing. If you see an unsafe act or condition, report the unsafe act or condition to the supervisor!

For additional information

Please refer to Sample Policy 15 in the United Methodist Insurance Church Safety Manual, or log on to www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/327.html

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