

# Playground Maintenance: Keeping it Safe for Kids

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**W**hether your playground is new or on the mature side, a maintenance plan is a must. Inspections and maintenance keep a playground safe, minimizing the risk of injury.

Inspections, conducted on a regular basis, check for things such as excessive wear, deterioration and potential hazards on the play equipment and the playground itself.

Maintenance plans should be customized to each individual playground, based on the specific equipment and surfacing in place, and will help you address these five P's ("Proper planning prevents

poor performance").

You should base your plan on:

- Age group the playground is designed for and used by. Younger children aren't typically as tough on play equipment as older, bigger children, so playgrounds for these children may not need as frequent inspections.
- Size of the playground.
- How often the playground is used. Daily use by several hundred children means more maintenance than a playground that is occasionally used or used by 10 to 20 children.
- Type of play equipment. Any equip-

ment with moving parts (e.g., swings and bouncers) will require more frequent inspections and maintenance.

- Type of surfacing. Loose fill surfacing gets dispersed during play, which means it will need to be maintained on a more frequent basis. Unitary surfacing requires less day-to-day maintenance but does require maintenance to ensure it is long lasting.
- Use of the playground. Playgrounds open to the public may have additional maintenance considerations, such as graffiti and unintended uses of the equipment.



*Engineered wood fiber provides excellent fall protection but requires more frequent maintenance.*



*The ropes on rope play equipment will last longer if tensioning is maintained.*

Regular cleaning and inexpensive repairs will prevent larger, more time-consuming, and certainly more expensive repairs and replacements.

You also want to be sure you have all the information about the components and surfacing on the playground. If you are missing any information, your playground consultant should be able to supply it along with maintenance suggestions, installation instructions and manufacturer information.

### **Inspection/Maintenance Issues**

Maintaining playground equipment and the surrounding area is essential to minimizing the risk of injury to users. While this isn't a comprehensive list, it will give you a start on what to look for.

#### **Maintenance of the Playground Equipment**

- Worn, loose, damaged or missing parts, such as loose bolts, missing end caps and cracks.
- Metal parts show no visible cracks, bending, warping or breakage.
- Broken or missing components on equipment, such as handrails, guardrails, protective barriers, steps or rungs.
- Sharp points, edges or unsafe protrusions.
- Frayed cables, worn ropes, open hooks or chains.
- Deteriorated wood, splitting or splintering.
- Rusted or corroded metals
- Equipment not securely anchored.

### Maintenance of the Playground Surface

The type of surfacing you have will determine how frequently you need to inspect and/or maintain it. Loose-fill surfacing does require more frequent maintenance than unitary surfacing.

- Loosen and level with a rake and replenish on a regularly established basis. Remove any foreign objects or debris to prevent compaction.
- Check under any platforms for loose-fill surface to either remove or spread to main areas of impact.
- Check to ensure the surface is not compacted and does not have reduced depth in heavy use areas (such as under swings or at slide exits) to ensure it still meets recommended compacted depth.
- Ensure there are no trip hazards or foreign objects, such as rocks or debris.

Unitary surfaces are much lower maintenance, but they aren't completely maintenance-free. Basic maintenance (keeping the surface clean of debris) is important for a long-lasting surface. You also want to check for holes, flakes and/or buckling of a unitary surface.

### Maintenance of the Playground Area

Often, in community or destination playgrounds, even school playgrounds, there are other maintenance issues that crop up. If a playground is used regularly as a "destination," it will probably require daily inspections and more frequent maintenance.

Teens might use these areas as hang-out spots. Parents and caregivers may stay at a destination park for longer periods, bringing toys and other objects that can be lost. Visitors may bring food and refreshments, introducing the need for regular trash cleanup.

Regular inspections can help you find:

- Vandalism and graffiti
- Unintended use of play equipment

- User modifications, such as ropes tied to parts or equipment rearranged
- Hazardous or dangerous debris, such as broken glass

In addition, you'll want to check to make sure there are no trip hazards (e.g., rocks and stumps), collections of water, and holes or other damage to fences.

### When Play Equipment Breaks

A successful playground design is one

that is used and enjoyed on a regular basis. Unfortunately, regular use also means moving parts wear out and sometimes playground equipment breaks.

When equipment breaks or you have a surfacing issue, follow these simple steps as quickly as possible:

- A) Take a photo of the entire play area to help communicate and identify the location.
- B) Take a photo of the general area of the

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*Playground Grass Funserts provide additional fun!*

issue (i.e., the break or damage). Make sure you capture its location on the playground and other items that might be connected to the problem piece.

For example, if a slide section breaks, you want to take photos that will show the entire slide. By doing this, the manufacturer might identify other

issues that can be prevented with proactive measures.

C) Take close-up photos to identify and communicate the specific issue.

Once you do this, compile everything and send to the play equipment consultant who initially helped you with the playground. Any item/part numbers, structure information and installation dates are all important information to supply for a speedy repair and resolution.

Be sure to decide if the repair issue causes a potential hazard that requires temporarily closing the playground or part of the structure until the issue can be resolved.

If your play equipment is 10 to 15 years old or older and you are seeing the effects of wear and tear, consider putting a “replacement” plan in place so you’re prepared when the day comes to replace the playground.

When it comes time to replace equipment, your plan should include:

- The type of play equipment kids enjoy playing on the most
- Drainage issues that need to be resolved
- Layout issues that need to be addressed (i.e., does the layout accommodate for a particular item)

Having some of these things figured out and a foundation of money saved back will help to make any new additions or new playground projects a better success.

When developing your maintenance plan and schedule, you should always be able to count on the playground consultant you worked with. He or she can help you determine what maintenance is needed for your playground and may offer a plan where experienced, certified installers will come inspect, clean and do the maintenance for you.

***Tim McNamara is a Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI) and a sales consultant for ABCreative. Visit [ABCreative.net](http://ABCreative.net) for more playground safety solutions.***



*On traditional post and platform play equipment, check to be sure the equipment isn't broken or worn.*



*Check individual components for excessive wear, deterioration and potential hazards.*