

# 14 OUTDOOR PLAY ENVIRONMENT AND EQUIPMENT

## 14.1 STANDARD

Outdoor play environments and equipment shall be organised and maintained to maximise challenge and variety for children, within safe parameters.

### Rationale

Outdoor play and physical exercise are important for the health, development and general wellbeing of children. The outdoor play environment should present challenge, variety and excitement, while being suitable to the child's age and ability.

Care needs to be taken to ensure that equipment is developmentally appropriate and of a safe construction. Supervision of the highest standard is necessary to ensure that children remain safe in playgrounds that present challenge and excitement for their age and ability.

### 14.1.1 The outdoor play environment

- a) The outdoor play environment shall:
  - i) be easily supervised;
  - ii) be directly accessible from the licensed indoor play area;
  - iii) provide a variety of areas, such as open spaces / quiet areas / active areas; and
  - iv) comprise a range of surface types.
- b) The service provider shall, each day, complete a hazard identification and management checklist, before children access the outdoor play area.
- c) The service provider shall maintain all equipment, surfaces and vegetation in the outdoor play area in good repair to prevent any hazards for children due to lack of appropriate softfall, trip hazards, protrusions, entrapment hazards etc.

### 14.1.2 Outdoor play equipment

- a) Outdoor play equipment (both fixed and non-fixed equipment), and the surfaces under and around the equipment, shall comply with, and be maintained so that they continue to meet relevant Australian Standards.
- b) The outdoor play equipment shall be:
  - i) appropriate to the age and ability level of the children;
  - ii) maintained in a good state of repair;
  - iii) positioned safely; and
  - iv) stored safely, as appropriate.
- c) Sandpits are to be securely covered when not in use, and maintained in a clean condition.
- d) Bikes and other mobile play equipment shall be:
  - i) appropriate to the age and ability level of the children; and
  - ii) used in areas away from potential hazards such as swings and slides.
- e) Staff shall directly supervise children at all times outdoor equipment is in use.
- f) Children shall be made aware of guidelines for use of equipment, such as only one child at a time to use the equipment.
- g) Equipment (eg trampettes etc) is to be fitted with relevant safety items when in use, for example, safety pads to cover all springs (trampette).

**Note:** Trampolines shall not be used.

Outdoor play is an essential element of the children's program, vital to their growth and development.

Playgrounds are for the purpose of fun; however, young children constantly challenge their own abilities without being able to recognise potential hazards. Injuries associated with playground equipment are significant, the most serious being linked to falls from equipment onto a hard surface such as concrete or bitumen, or falls from a height of one metre or higher.

There must always be a high standard of supervision, given the level of potential hazards.

## **What steps can we take to reduce the chance of injuries?**

**1**

### **Playground Surfacing:**

Given the pattern of playground accidents, the benchmark set out in the relevant playground standard includes:

- play equipment with a fall height of less than 500mm must be placed over a well-maintained, soft surface such as grass, mulch or sand – a hard surface is inappropriate;
- equipment with a fall height of more than 500mm requires an approved (ie certificated) softfall surface underneath it;
- the minimum depth for softfall is 250mm, compressed, ie 250mm after it has been installed and trodden down. In high use zones, eg underneath a swing, it is recommended that the softfall be to a depth of 250mm plus 20%;
- in an early childhood setting (ie where there is supervised outdoor play, and the children are under six years of age), there must be a minimum fall zone of 1.9m beyond the sides of the equipment and from its extremities, eg a swing arc. In school-aged facilities / public playgrounds the minimum fall zone is required to be 2.5m.

**Note:** A fall zone is the surface that may be hit by a child / person falling from a piece of equipment. A person falling does not necessarily land directly underneath the equipment – they are more likely to fall slightly away from it, particularly if it is moving equipment, such as a swing.

A specified fall zone of 1.9m, then, would require softfall to the correct depth to a distance of 1.9m around all sides of the equipment.

## **What should we consider when selecting a softfall surface?**

When selecting softfall, the centre should also consider relevant safety factors such as the age of the children, eg some organic materials may present a choking hazard to toddlers; or an inhalation hazard. Some children may be allergic to products such as pine bark.

Whether the selected softfall surface is an organic product, or an artificial product (such as rubberised tiles, foam surfaces, artificial grass), the centre should obtain written certification from the supplier to confirm that the product conforms to testing as set down in the standard.

Where an **approved** softfall surface is required, ie for equipment with a fall height of 500 mm or more, the softfall product, whether organic or artificial, should preferably be laid by the supplier, with written certification given that both the product and the installation comply with the standard.

## Maintenance of softfall surfaces

Regular maintenance of a softfall surface is crucial to ensure that the depth continues to meet the standard. This is particularly important in high-use areas such as the areas underneath swings.

**NB:** The licensee, to meet their duty of care, should become familiar with the content of the softfall standard.

## 2 Playground Design:

Playgrounds can be designed for adventure *and* safety.

Essentially, playgrounds can be designed to incorporate four main 'play' elements: active, passive, creative and social, eg cubbies, shops, etc. Quiet places where a child can be alone, still allowing for supervision, can be incorporated.

The relationship of these areas to each other, ie the flow / pattern of children's play, should be considered, as it is important for children's safety to avoid conflict of activities. For example, areas for passive play should be placed well away from 'dynamic' playground equipment such as swings; or access to an 'active' area should not be right through a 'passive' area. Another consideration is placement of storage facilities.

To make supervision easier, a play area should be designed to provide shade, seating and a clear view of the play area.

**NB:** The licensee, to meet their duty of care, should become familiar with the content of the playground standard.

## 3 Playground Equipment:

Playgrounds can be made safer by the selection of well-designed, age-appropriate equipment which meets Australian Standards.

Each piece of equipment should have at least 1.9m of unobstructed space and softfall surface around it. (2.5m in school-aged facilities / public playground.)

Children under five years should not have access to a fall height over 1.5m.

Children under three years should not have access to a fall height over 1m.

The maximum accessible fall height for all children is 2.5m. There should be safety rails on platforms and ramps over 500mm above ground. The protection such a barrier provides should be assessed – for example, an 'infill' barrier affords more protection than a barrier with horizontal bars.

## Maintenance of equipment

Ongoing maintenance to ensure the good repair of equipment is important. This includes maintaining the appropriate depth of softfall surfacing to the recommended fall zone limits; ensuring no sharp or rough edges etc, no damage due to rust and wear, no protruding bolts or other components; no entrapment hazards.

## 4 Non-fixed or mobile equipment:

The licensee should be aware that non-fixed / mobile items are covered by the Australian Standards which relate to fixed equipment, ie non-fixed equipment should:

- be set up on a level surface;
- have 1.9m of unobstructed space around each piece of equipment (if the children are under six years of age, otherwise, the unobstructed space must be 2.5m);
- be set up on certified softfall if the climbing height is greater than 500mm;
- have a softfall area of 1.9m (if the children are under six years of age, otherwise, the softfall area must be 2.5m);

- have a maximum climbing height of 1m for children under three years, and 1.5m for three – five year olds.

**Note:** Foam mats can move when children 'land' or run on them, etc, and the area of sofffall may therefore be compromised.

## **What are the relevant standards?**

The Australian playground standards are viewed as the minimum benchmark, so carrying out the requirements demonstrates that a child care provider is taking responsible steps towards injury prevention.

The child care centre should become familiar with all the relevant Australian standards, which are reviewed regularly.

## **Where can we get more information?**

- Standards Australia (<http://www.standards.com.au>)
- The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne (<http://www.childsafety.com.au>)
- The Children's Hospital, Westmead (<http://www.chw.edu.au>)
- Kidsafe Playground Advisory Unit, C/- Kidsafe, Locked Bag 4001, Westmead, NSW 2145  
Telephone: (02) 9845 0890  
Fax: (02) 9845 0895

## **What other issues in relation to playgrounds should we be aware of?**

### **Daily playground checks:**

Each day, before the children access the outdoor play areas, a check should be made to ensure that the playground is safe, eg no loose rubbish, sandpit raked, sofffall area raked, and so on.

### **Maintenance Checks:**

'Kidsafe' has produced some valuable checklists for centres to use on a weekly, quarterly, annual basis, and so on.

These checklists can be tailored to suit the needs of the centre.

Checklists should be kept for a year as demonstration that the safety checks are carried out daily.

### **Safety Equipment:**

It is recommended that children wear safety helmets when riding bikes; and appropriate safety equipment such as knee and elbow protection when using other mobile play equipment.

### **Exercise Equipment:**

Where a centre chooses to provide items such as trampettes, in addition to meeting standards relating to non-fixed equipment, the centre must also consider the safety assessment procedures, eg before use, the trampette should be carefully checked to ensure springs, stitching etc are in good condition, and safety pads cover all springs.

## **Trampolines:**

Given the evidence about potential serious injury to a child's spine, internal injuries or complicated fractures, it is recommended that the centre not install a trampoline. Guidelines on the use of trampolines recommend that a trampoline not be accessible to children who have not been instructed in the proper use of a trampoline. An Australian Standard is being developed about trampolines.

## **Sandpits:**

Sandpits provide for creative, imaginative and constructive play.

Sandpits need to be well constructed, and have good drainage. A sandpit should be securely covered when not in use; and the sand regularly cleaned as it can be a source of infection.

## **Tip!**

The good news is that there is a wealth of information about every aspect of playground design/ siting, equipment, safety, using play spaces to enhance children's development and imagination.

In addition, there are now training programs which will enable staff to assess whether their playgrounds comply with Australian Standards.

## **For licensing, the applicant shall have available:**

- Certification for softfall (if equipment has a fall height of 500mm or more)
- Certification for equipment covered by Australian Standards
- Hazard identification and management checklist for previous 12 months

**Note:** Documentation will be assessed under Standard 15: Administration and Records



