



Consumer Federation of America

HOME PLAY EQUIPMENT: Safety Tips for Buying and Using

Back yard play equipment can provide your children with hours of entertainment and exercise during their preschool and early elementary school years. Yet, each year approximately 50,000 children are injured seriously enough to require hospital emergency treatment and four children die on home playground equipment. To reduce injuries, follow the steps below when selecting and using backyard play equipment.

TIPS FOR BUYING HOME PLAY EQUIPMENT

◆ PROTECTIVE SURFACING

When purchasing backyard play equipment, be sure to also purchase adequate protective surfacing to go under and around the equipment. Nearly 70% of all injuries on home equipment are due to falls. Grass and dirt are NOT acceptable -- grass wears out and, like dirt, becomes hard packed. Similarly, concrete and asphalt are also unacceptable.

- * Purchase hardwood chips, shredded wood mulch, sand, pea gravel, shredded rubber tires or synthetic surfaces.
- * Install chips, mulch, or gravel at depths of at least 9 inches and sand at 12 inches under and around all equipment.
- * Check manufacturer's specifications for synthetic or rubber materials.

◆ SWINGS

Swing injuries occur when children are hit with hard and rigid swing seats or when swing sets tip over.

- * Purchase swing seats that are lightweight, such as those made of flexible rubber or soft plastic. Avoid hard seats of metal, wood or rigid plastic.
- * Look for swings with anchoring instructions and purchase additional materials that may be needed.
- * Multiple occupancy swings or gliders - avoid those with gaps around the handle that can pinch fingers or skin, and swings with exposed screws or sharp edges that could cut.
- * Look for swings with adequate space (at least 8-12 inches) between the swings and between swings and the support posts.
- * Avoid swings with horizontal climbing ladders overhead. Children who fall from this climbing structure may hit children swinging below.

◆ EQUIPMENT HEIGHT

Limiting the height of play equipment is an essential means of preventing severe fall-related injuries.

- * The highest climbing rung or platform on climbing equipment or top of a slide should not exceed 6 feet for school-aged children, and 4 feet for pre-school children.
- * Look for guard rails for all elevated play surfaces higher than 30 inches.

◆ OPENINGS THAT CAN ENTRAP

Any opening - except those where the ground is the lowest boundary - with an opening between 3.5 and 9 inches may cause head entrapment, which can result in strangulation. Entrapment occurs when a child enters an opening, either head or feet first, but cannot withdraw his or her head because the opening is too small.

- * Avoid equipment with openings between 3.5-9 inches. Entrapment hazards are most commonly found between ladder rungs.

◆ MATERIALS

Wood sets are generally sturdier, typically supporting 120 pounds or more per person, versus most metal sets, supporting a weight limit of 75 pounds per child.

- * Avoid equipment with climbing ropes and rope swings, and do not add your own ropes to playground equipment. There have been many strangulation deaths associated with climbing ropes and rope swings.
- * Avoid open "S" hooks, bolts or hardware that can catch children's clothing and cause strangulation incidents.

TIPS FOR INSTALLATION, MAINTENANCE AND SAFE USE OF EQUIPMENT

- ◆ Follow closely all manufacturer installation directions.
- * Swing and other equipment legs should be securely anchored in concrete. All footings should be buried and environmental hazards, such as roots or rocks, should be removed or buried.
- * Do not place equipment too close together. A fall zone is the area under and around a piece of play equipment where a child might fall. To reduce injuries the fall zone should have protective surfacing and be free of other equipment obstacles. Climbers and slides should have a fall zone of 6 feet in all directions. Swings should have a fall zone that extends 6 feet out from the sides of the support structure and is at least twice the height of the swing in the front and back.
- * Pressure Treated Wood - Many consumers have concerns about the chemicals used in pressure treated wood which limits rot and insect damage. For example, one chemical used, copper chromium arsenate, contains arsenic, a potential carcinogen if ingested in high amounts.
- * If assembling or building a playground with pressure treated wood, take safety precautions. Wear gloves, goggles and a dust mask and place a tarp on the ground to collect and remove the debris. Do not burn the wood; the smoke can be hazardous. Avoid breathing any of the saw dust.
- ◆ Be sure to maintain play equipment.
- * Check the equipment regularly for signs of deterioration or corrosion on structural components. Corrosion, rotten wood, or large cracks are signs that the structural integrity of the equipment may be compromised.
- * Eliminate all clothing entanglement hazards. Replace protruding bolts, close any gaps or open seams joining equipment and slides to the platforms. Close open "S" hooks on swings.
- * Smooth out any sharp edges or rough wood.
- * Retire equipment when it becomes unsafe. Most play equipment lasts an average of seven years.
- ◆ Inspect protective surfacing regularly.
- * Maintain loose fill materials (wood chips, mulch, etc.) at adequate depths. Rake areas where fill has been displaced to restore to even levels, particularly under swings and at the bottom of slides.
- ◆ Supervise children.
- * Even the safest equipment can be used unsafely by children. Always supervise play and teach children about safe use. Prohibit unsafe activities such as twisting swinging chains, jumping contests, head first slides, or other activities that are not intended for play equipment.
- * Check for hot surfaces on metal equipment, such as slides. Direct sunlight may cause metal to reach temperatures high enough to cause serious contact burn injuries.
- ◆ Report unsafe equipment.
- * Call the Consumer Product Safety Commission, 1-800-638-CPSC, to report injuries and unsafe backyard play equipment.

Additional Resources:

The PIRGs: www.pirg.org

Consumer Federation of America (CFA): www.consumerfed.org

Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC): www.cpsc.gov

Consumer Reports, May 1996, Playing it Safe, pp.42-47.

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