



KIDSTALE
imagination at play

Playground Safety Guide

Top 12 Safety Tips to Follow

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Introduction

It's one thing to create a magical world of playground adventures. To challenge your children so they leave their comfort zones and dabble with a dose of healthy risk. But there is a great difference between guided risk and danger. If you're serious about creating your community's dream playground, safety should be up there with creativity and fundraising. Combined, these should be the guiding forces pushing your playground project into motion. Your little ones are the heart, soul, and future of your community. So, make sure you keep them safe while they're busy exploring the many benefits of play.

In this essential safety guide, you'll find all you need to keep that playground dream alive!



Chapter One: **The Vision**

The most innovative playground designs don't just look amazing. They are also wellthought out and planned with care. Here are a few important safety aspects to consider before moving your project forward, from ideation onto execution.

Make it Age Appropriate

Know your audience. If your playground is intended for toddlers, for example, equipment such as merry-go-rounds, or overhead ladders are not appropriate. The CPSC recommends that play areas for children between 2–5 years old “should be separated [from play areas for older children], at least by a buffer zone.” So if you’re planning to cater to the whole community, consider adding a picnic area that breaks up the activities for younger and older children. This will dramatically reduce the risk of injury from faster-paced activities that often disrupt and harm your youngest community members. You should also include signage that indicates what age your play space is most appropriate for.

Not sure which play systems would fit your children best? Consult a playground specialist while in the planning stages of your project. With the right guidance, you’ll include the perfect equipment to match your youngsters’ ability levels.

Think About Spacing

Judge the distance. There are few things worse than a beautifully designed playground that looks fantastic but is impractical and dangerous to play in. Make sure your decisions are in line with North American safety standards. Spacing is particularly important for structures that play with momentum, such as slides, swings, and spinners. So evaluate the space you have to work with before getting started. Find out the minimum recommended distances between different pieces of play. Then try to find a balance between innovative design and safety. Let’s take the eminent slide as an example.

The exit zone should be between 6–8 feet long, depending on the height of the slide. This space must be kept clear of any other play structures. So check up on the rules for each play system, and make sure your outdoor area complies. The moral of the equipment spacing tale is either do your homework or seek advice from playground experts! Whichever option you go for though, just remember one thing. When you're in the designing stages, place the pieces of your play puzzle together with just as much practicality as creativity.

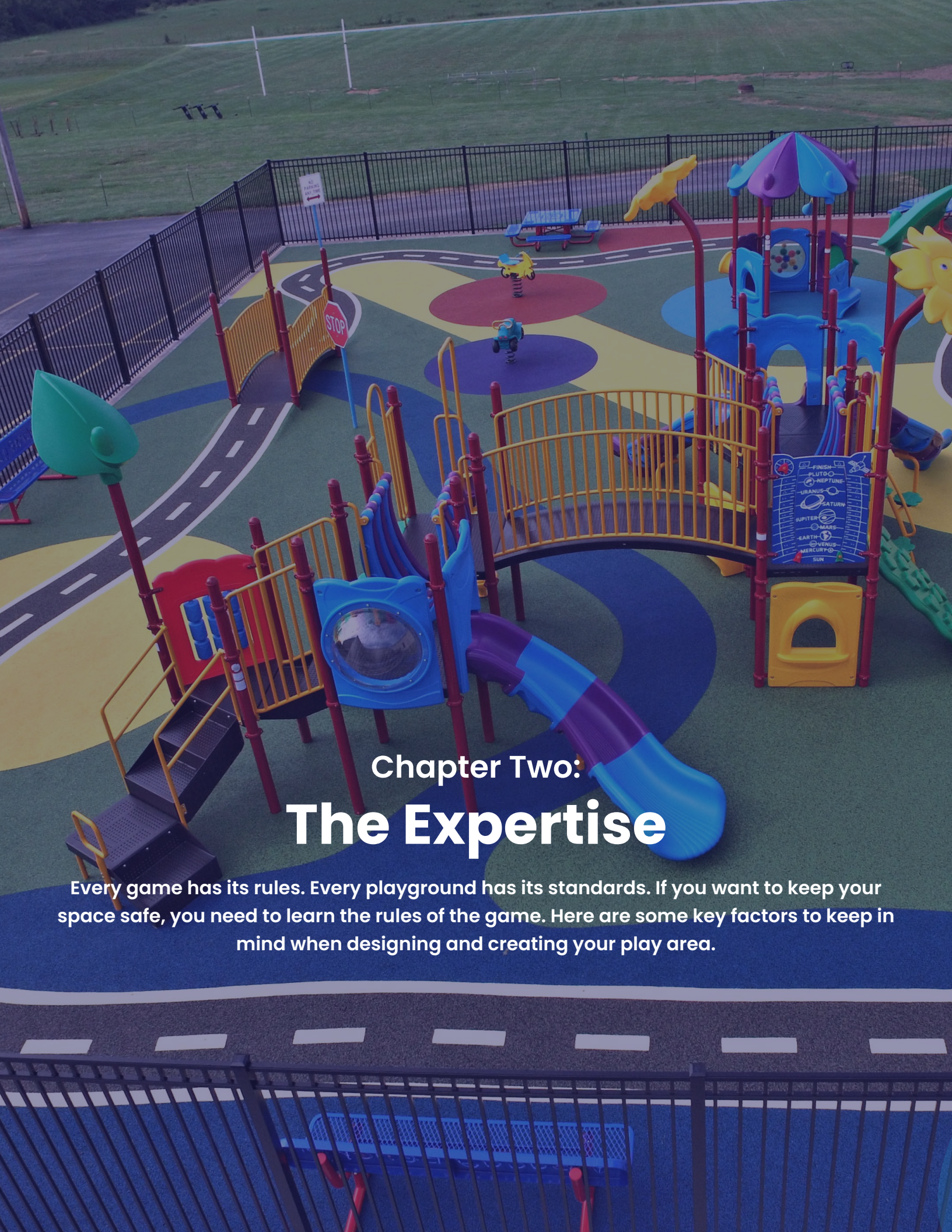
Choose it Wisely

Recognize a hazard when you see one. Ever since Roosevelt introduced the idea of accessible community playgrounds in 1907, play has been blessing our streets with joy. But many things have changed since 1907. Not all the structures we used to cherish would cut the safety requirements today.

Here's a list of some of the most troublesome systems to avoid like the plague when designing your dream space:

- Animal figure or heavy swings that can cause injury on impact
- Free swinging ropes that may fray or form a loop
- Exercise rings and trapeze bars
- Multiple occupancy or glider swings
- Swinging gates
- Trampolines

Not sure how to make the best decision? Seek inspiration from some of these playground projects. If you choose wisely, you won't have to compromise on adventure, and your space will still be safe and secure for all.



Chapter Two: **The Expertise**

Every game has its rules. Every playground has its standards. If you want to keep your space safe, you need to learn the rules of the game. Here are some key factors to keep in mind when designing and creating your play area.

Lay the Right Foundations

Make the right choices. The surfacing you pick is one of the most important decisions you can make for your children's safety. Every year, over 200,000 children end up in the emergency room because of playground accidents. 79% of these accidents are a result of a playground fall. If your outdoor area is not surfaced properly, a fall onto grass, dirt, or concrete can be life-threatening. Luckily, there are plenty of safer choices for you to pick from. If you're trying to create a woodland adventure space, you could use engineered wood fiber or wood chips. If you're looking to create a sunny, beach-like vibe, you could opt for sand or pea gravel. And if you're hoping to splash color and character into your surface you could choose customized poured-in-place rubber.

Whatever you decide upon though, make sure it meets safety standards. And if you're not sure, ask someone who is.

Prevent that Fall

Predict and prevent. If you're looking to raise the bar and bring boundless fun to your young community, you need to anticipate and prevent accidents before they occur. The more elevated your platforms and structures are, the more serious the potential injury will be if a child were to fall. Adding guardrails and barriers will provide your youngsters with the protection they need to explore the unknown without risk of danger.



Depending on the age of your children and the height of each platform, ramp, staircase, or bridge, there are different guidelines to follow. If your outdoor space is built for 2-5-year-olds, you should include guardrails on any structure higher than 20', and full protective barriers for any platforms higher than 30". If your playground is built for 5-12-year-olds, you should include a guardrail for any surface higher than 30", and full protective barriers for any structures higher than 48".

There are many ways to be creative with your protective barriers. You can consider adding activity panels, transparent bubbles, or small peepholes that your children can peek out from while they play. With the right vision, you can integrate guardrails and barriers into your play theme without disturbing the overall appearance of your play area.



Watch Out for Those Edges

Be a stickler for detail. Our youngest ones are curious creatures. Exploration is in their bones. So double-check that your play systems have no sharp, jagged, or pointy items, edges, or shapes. You'd be surprised at how creative your little explorers can be when it comes to causing unusual accidents! So here are a few pieces of equipment to watch out for:

- Tires: The steel belt can start to work its way out of the rubber casing. So if you have any equipment with tires in your play space, make sure you run regular maintenance checks.
- Wooden barriers: When your little ones grab hold of the barriers as they run excitedly from one activity to the next, they can easily get wood splinters. So consider alternative materials that are less prone to causing mayhem!
- Pointed Corners on Platforms, Posts, and Panels: Make sure every edge of play has rounded corners or capping, and check for wear and tear often.
- Seesaws and other moving pieces: Work with a playground specialist to ensure that there are no crush points that could squash little limbs.



Chapter Three: **The Little Details**

Every game has its rules. Every playground has its standards. If you want to keep your space safe, you need to learn the rules of the game. Here are some key factors to keep in mind when designing and creating your play area.

Untangle the Mystery

Keep your eyes open for potential danger. If you spot any components sticking out, make sure they won't catch on any clothing or be big enough to impale. Nuts, bolt ends, protrusions, and hooks are particularly important elements to watch out for. To make sure your playground equipment is compliant with playground safety standards, you need to ask the right questions from the get-go. Are your bolt ends less than two threads further than the nut? Are all your hooks closed, with gaps smaller than 0.04 inches? Do the diameters of projections decrease in size as they move away from the surface they protrude from? Many of the most common playground accidents such as impalement, lacerations, and even strangulations, are caused by non-compliant protrusions and entanglements.

So review your play area thoroughly before the grand opening. Often these hazards can be prevented easily, provided you know what to look out for.

Empower Free-Spirited Play

Don't take anything as given. A child's cognitive development is encouraged and heightened through play. But while your kids are young, they may not react to troublesome situations linearly or predictably. If they get stuck in small spaces they may well panic and make the incident even worse. So do everything you can to avoid such situations from occurring in the first place.

The CPSC suggests that any interior opposing surfaces with more than 3.5 inches and less than 9 inches in distance have the potential to cause entrapment. Once you've picked your pieces of play, run the measurements and distances past a play specialist. They should be able to tell you right away if any potential entrapment hazards need to be resolved. And if you're not sure, remember that any opening that allows a child's torso but not their head to pass can be deadly.



Take a Trip Down Safety Lane

Tread carefully while you plan. Think about your outdoor environment before deciding upon an appropriate design. If, for example, your community space is near or in a woodland area, watch out for exposed tree roots or rocks that could cause your children to fall. And consider making the natural world around you an inspiration for your play area to increase awareness of potential hazards. Include boulders and tree trunk components, so that your kids start to assimilate the features of their natural environment too. That way, they will be more likely to recognize and keep an eye out for others.

You should also make sure you don't have any exposed concrete footings, as this could most certainly cause accidents. And try to avoid color schemes that blend in with your safety surfacing. Take all the little details into consideration, and don't take anything for granted. In the excitement of the adventure, your children will rarely look down at the ground while they hop, skip, and jump from one play system to the next.

A young child with light hair, wearing a denim jacket, is holding a red skateboard. In the background, a woman is visible, looking towards the child. The entire image has a blue tint.

Chapter Four: **The Icing on the Cake**

If you've gotten this far, it's because you understand the importance of play, but you don't want to cut corners on safety precautions. So once your playground structures are up and young dreams are roaming free around your community, don't let all those efforts go to waste. Here are three final safety measures that are important to remember.

Keep it Clean

Sanitize the bejeebers out of your play space! Now more than ever, cleaning should be a number one priority. In light of recent events, the CDC has created guidance and instructions for cleaning outdoor parks and play spaces. There are several methods you can take to ensure your kids stay healthy and virus free while they enjoy the great outdoors. Here are a few ideas:

- Set up a regular cleaning rota for staff so that your equipment is disinfected daily.
- Add motivational messaging strategically around your area. This will educate users and encourage supervisors to wipe surfaces before they leave the play zone.
- Provide hand sanitizer, paper towels, extra soap, and more trash cans. With the right tools, you can persuade users to practice COVID-friendly hygiene practices.
- Encourage social distancing and only allow users to enter the play area if they have a face mask on.
- Stagger the number of children who can use the playground at any given time. If your community is large, allocate time slots or monitor how long each child can spend in your play zone to ensure everyone gets a turn.
- Regularly check up on the latest recommendations from the National Program for Playground Safety and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Staying up-to-date with best practices will help you follow all the right protocols to keep your children safe.

Show It Some Love

Don't stop till you drop! Your playground may look like the bee's knees on the day of opening. But like all good things in life, if you want it to last, you have to take good care of it.

If you're not sure where to begin, work with your playground partners to come up with a periodic maintenance and inspection plan. You can read the NPPS maintenance guidelines for further inspiration. But to get you off on the right track, here are some of the aspects you should include in this plan:

- First and foremost, surfacing is key. Make sure you keep a close eye on the condition of your flooring. Level and replace loose-fill surfacing and inspect rubber tiles or pour-in-place rubber for missing sections. Repair as needed.
- Once you've finished building your playground, don't forget to ask your manufacturer for maintenance recommendations per play structure. Play equipment that has moving pieces like swings, track rides, and merry-go-rounds should be inspected often and a strict maintenance plan should be followed.
- Inspect for worn-out, broken, loose, or missing pieces. Repair, tighten, or replace components as soon as you identify a potential issue.

Find Your Guardian Angels!

And last but not least, empower the adults within your community to take supervision seriously. Over 40% of playground injuries take place when proper supervision is lacking. So take the necessary precautions to educate your staff, volunteers, and parents. Assign supervisors to observe and monitor activities. Post supervision tips at the entrance of your play area. Design your outdoor space with supervision in mind. Adults should be able to easily keep an eye on each child as they play.

You could even consider launching a playground supervision and safety campaign via social media. This may help you raise awareness about the importance of supervising your youngsters during their playground adventures.



So there you have it. The top 12 safety tips to keep in mind when starting your playground project. If you're looking to take one step further, we strongly recommend that a member of your organization attends and participates in a Certified Playground Safety Inspectors course facilitated by the National Recreation and Parks Association, NRPA.

Have more playground related questions? We've been working with passionate communities to facilitate innovative play experiences for over 25 years. Send us a message and we'd be happy to go over any of your doubts.



Telling Safe Tales of Play

Your trusty safety guide to keep your youngsters out of harm's way while they play.

In this playground safety guide, we look at the top safety tips that will keep your little explorers safe while

they play. Ready to bring joy to your community?





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