

Playground Safety for Your Child with Special Needs

You can help your child have fun and be safely included at the playground. Talk with your therapists, teachers, doctors and other care providers about your child's unique needs. Ask other parents for inclusive play ideas. Here are some helpful tips.

Supervise at all times:

Adult presence is needed to watch for hazards and help with play activities when needed.

- Actively supervise your child.
- Look for ways you can help your child enjoy the equipment.
- Remove strings on clothing that could be a choking hazard or do not let your child play on the equipment.
- Match your child with a playmate. Check with your Boys and Girls Club, ARC chapter, United Way, church, school, YMCA, Campfire or other community groups. Find out about buddy programs, Special Sitters, or find interested young adults.

Always have your child play on developmentally-appropriate equipment:

Playground equipment is designed for different abilities and developmental levels. Look for playgrounds with separate equipment for younger children (ages 2 -5) and school-age children (ages 5-12).

- Talk with your child's caregivers about how to safely challenge your child to play to their potential.
- Be careful when your child tries new things.
- Talk with your child about safety.
- Look for areas where your child can slide, scoot or crawl on his or her own.
- Bring sand toys, trucks and other playthings. Your child will have something to play with and other children can interact with your child as well.

Falls are cushioned by soft surfaces:

Over 70% of all playground injuries are related to falls. Avoid playgrounds with surfaces of concrete, asphalt, grass, blacktop, packed dirt or rocks. Good surfaces should have wood chips, mulch, sand, pea gravel or rubber mats.

- Be prepared for emergencies. Bring a first aid kit.
- Know where a phone is and have emergency phone numbers handy.

Equipment is safe:

Check to make sure the equipment is anchored safely in the ground and all equipment is in good working order.

- Be sure spaces in equipment are less than 3.5 inches or greater than 9 inches to prevent children from getting caught in holes. Be sure loose-fill surfacing is 12 inches deep.
- Teach your child how to safely use playground equipment.
- Encourage your child to use developmentally appropriate equipment.
- Look for broken or missing parts.

Is This Playground Ready and Safe for My Child with Special Needs?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that playgrounds be accessible. The guidelines below will help you figure out if a playground is accessible to your child and what to do if it isn't.

ADA guidelines require that:

- Children in wheelchairs can move around on the playground surface or path to the play area.
- There are transfer ramps with wheel stops and guardrails for children to get on to higher equipment.
- There is separate equipment for all developmental levels.
- The playground equipment and surface are maintained.
- There is space for adults to help children play on the equipment.
- All openings on elevated play platforms are limited in width.
- There are hands-on areas for children sitting in wheelchairs.

If a playground is not safe, go to another playground. To change the playground, you can:

- Contact the playground owner or operator.
- Create a group of interested volunteers.
- Collect information and find out what the problems are.
- Develop a plan to improve the safety of the playground.
- Find out about new equipment and surfacing.

For ADA Guidelines:

- US Access Board
"Play Area Guidelines" on the internet
<http://www.access-board.gov>
(800) 872-2253
(800) 993-2822 (TTY)
- National Center on Physical Activity and Disability
Fact sheet on "Designing Accessible Play Areas"
Information about specific sports
<http://ncpad.cc.uic.edu/>
(800) 900-8086 (voice and TTY)

For help with planning a safe and accessible playground:

- The National Program for Playground Safety
<http://www.uni.edu/playground>
(800) 554-PLAY
- Boundless Playgrounds
<http://www.boundlessplaygrounds.org/>
(860) 243-8315

Other Resources:

- Goldberg, B. (1995). Sports and Exercise for Children with Chronic Health Conditions. Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics. ISBN0-87322-873-1
- Grosse, S.J. & Thompson, D. (Eds.). (1993). Play and Recreation for Individuals with Disabilities: Practical Pointers. Reston, Virginia: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. ISBN: 0-88314-554-5.
- Randasso, D. & Corless, K. (1998). Activity for Everyone - Children of all abilities in a regular physical activity program: A Hands-On Lesson Plan Book. American Association for Active Lifestyles and Fitness. ISBN: 0-88314-650-9.
- Thompson, D. and Hudson, S. (Spring 2001). "Access for All: ADA and Playground Surfacing Requirements." The Play Book. Salt Lake City, UT: National Playground Contractors Association, 16-17.

Supported by a contract with the Washington State Department of Health, Children with Special Health Care Needs Program. This handout has been reviewed by community and Children's Hospital health care providers. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's health care provider.

For More Information Contact:

- Your health care provider
- Children's Resource Line 206-987-2500 or 1-866-987-2500 toll-free Washington, Alaska, Montana, Idaho

Center for Children with Special Needs
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