

Plan for Playground Safety before Kids Play in the Backyard

Spring is just around the corner and backyard playgrounds are beckoning children everywhere. But are those playgrounds safe?

“Whether your kids are clamoring to play on the existing swing set in your backyard or begging for new playground equipment from the local home improvement center or department store, make sure the equipment is safe before you let them play on it,” says Cheryl Clark, an Iowa State University Extension family life field specialist.

Clark offers the following suggestions to improve the safety of your backyard play area.

1. **Choose the right equipment.** The American Society for Testing and Materials has published a voluntary standard for home playground equipment, ASTM F-1148. Check if the equipment you purchase meets this standard. Make sure the height of the equipment and the type of equipment you select matches the age of the children who will be using it. Two-year-olds and 8-year-olds have different skills and abilities.
2. **Install equipment properly.** Follow the manufacturer’s instructions for proper installation. Do not install equipment over hard surfaces such as concrete, asphalt, soils or hard-packed earth. Provide enough clearance around pieces of equipment and fences, buildings, flower beds and other backyard features.
3. **Provide a shock-absorbing surface under and around equipment where a child might fall.** Acceptable protective surfacing materials include sand, gravel, wood chips and double shredded bark mulch. The depth of material needed is related to the height of the equipment and the specific type of surfacing material.
4. **Maintain equipment to keep it safe.** Inspect equipment regularly for hardware that is loose or worn; protrusions or projections that can catch clothing or can cut or scratch a child, such as nails, bolts, open “S” hooks, etc.; missing protective caps; splinters, large cracks or decayed wood parts; missing or broken pieces such as handholds, guardrails or swing seats; tripping hazards; broken glass and other debris. Remove, correct or repair any of these conditions immediately.
5. **Help children play safely.** Supervise children when they play. Do not let children play on unsafe equipment or equipment that doesn’t match their ages and development. Children will often use equipment in unintended ways, so it’s important to teach them how to use equipment correctly. Dress children for safety by avoiding loose fitting clothes, clothing with strings, sandals and other items that can be hazardous while playing on equipment.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) “Outdoor Home Playground Safety Handbook” (CPSC publication number 325) highlights the most important safety information parents need to know about planning, constructing and maintaining an outdoor home playground, Clark said. This publication is available on the CPSC website, www.cpsc.gov.