

Playground safety manual for schools¹

Play forms an important part of the physical, social, intellectual and emotional development of a child. It is, therefore, important for learners to go out into the fresh air, to be physically active, to interact with others and to have an opportunity to release their pent-up energy in a less restrictive environment than the classroom.

The playground and playground equipment are one of the highest risk areas in a School or Early Childhood Development Centre. Special attention and the implementation of safety standards to these areas will reduce the risks of serious injury. All childcare facilities have a legal “duty of care” to ensure the safety of children in their care. Failure to fulfil this “duty of care” can result in fines, loss of care facility license and imprisonment for the owner and staff of the facility should it be found that non-compliance or negligence was the cause of incident, injury or death.

The governance structure of the school is obligated to administer and control the school’s buildings and grounds. This inter alia implies that the governance structure needs to see to the school’s safety measures, which includes the implementation of safety standards to playgrounds and playground equipment.

The South African Bureau of Standards (‘SABS’) published playground safety standards which are considered the minimum standard of care which governing bodies needs to comply with and prescribes the minimum requirements for safety in and around

¹ This document should be read together with the document: "An overview of the functioning of independent schools in South Africa".

playgrounds concerning the safety of individuals and or schools. The South African National Standards include: South African National Standard SANS 51176 parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10 and 11 and Surfacing requirements underneath playground equipment and South African National Standard SANS 54960.

The governance structure occupying a position of trust towards the school and in fulfilling their duty of care, must ensure compliance with the standards summarised below.

1. Proper Surfacing.

Any structure with highest standing or sitting point over 50 cm should be installed with impact absorbing surfacing (hardwood, fibre/mulch, sand, rubber chips or matting, not grass), surface must be drained and kept clear of debris etc. All installers of safety or impact surfaces must provide a certificate of compliance with SANS 51177. Playground equipment with an approved safety or impact surface should not be higher than 1,5 meters, in early childhood development environment.

Spacing: Fall zones

The fall zone is the area around and under playground equipment. The safety surfacing should always cover an area at least 2m away from the equipment's edge.

Spacing: Equipment

The fall zone for individual pieces of equipment cannot overlap, there must be a minimum of 2m between items. This also relates to boundary structures such as walls and fences.

Risk of protrusion or entanglement

A protrusion is anything, (bolt, open hook, rungs, handholds), that protrudes and may cause injury or entanglement on hair or clothing. These should be firmly fixed at both ends and no rope or chain should form a loop or noose.

Size of Openings

Any opening on a piece of playground equipment should not fall within the sizes of 8 and 23cm (must be smaller or bigger) as they can add to the risk of head entrapment and strangulation.

Possibility of Trip

Avoid raised structure components at ground level, for example tree stumps, tree roots, rocks, etc.

Crushing, Pinching and Sharp Edges

Playground equipment should be made of durable material that will not fall apart due to poor manufacturing or deterioration. Equipment should be free of sharp edges or points that could cut skin. There should be no moving parts that could pinch or crush fingers.

Handrails/Guardrails on Raised Platforms

Any raised platform should have a guard or handrail that would prevent accidental fall from the platform at any open side. For ECD Centres learners, any platform higher than 30cm is required to have a rail and for primary age and up, any platform higher than 76cm.

Lack of maintenance

For playgrounds to remain safe, they should be properly and preventively maintained. Regularly check for missing, broken or worn out components. There should be no signs of deteriorating.

Suitability

The average age span of children in our playgrounds is two to twelve years. Equipment should be appropriate for intended age group. ECD Centre learners' play areas should be sited separately from older age group play area.

Supervision

Playground area should be situated easy to be observed. Children should be supervised on playgrounds.

Shading

Any playground piece sited in an unshaded area must be installed with additional shading to prevent burns and sunburn.

Inflatable hazards

Any mobile amusement rides which includes giant slides, water parks, other large inflatable amusement play equipment, mechanical bull rides, zip lines, motorised go-carts, quad bikes etc., fall under safety standards SANS 54960 and have their own list of regulations. These inflatable hazards will usually be hired for events held at school fun days or school fund raisers. It is the obligation of the governance structure to ensure the safety of the public and learners on these inflatables and the supplier or operator must provide a compliance certificate for the equipment or piece of equipment before it can be utilized.

Practical Guidelines for schools to ensure the safety of learners in the playground

In addition to the SABS standards and regulations, a responsible school governance structure will implement the following practical guidelines, which will be enforce through their school safety committee:

- Ensure specified number of supervisors for the number of learners;
- Set the times during which there is playground supervision;
- Draw up a duty roster for playground supervision of learners and educators;
- Provide training for supervisors on safety rules and playground safety and provide guidance on the use of playground equipment;
- Provide guidance to learners on how to use playground equipment and facilities safely;
- Develop written playground safety rules for learners and constantly enforce them;
- Do a simple and basic environmental survey to ensure that the surface, the

perimeter demarcations, the equipment and plants in the area are suitable for a playground, taking cognizance of the age and maturity levels of the learners;

- Careful select and place the playground equipment;
- Declare demarked playground areas and, where necessary, restrict learner access to perimeter fences in particular areas;
- Ensure that the playground and equipment are regularly maintained and checked for potential hazards;
- Ensure that provision is made in the school budget for the purchase and maintenance of age-appropriate playground equipment;
- Ensure children's access to drinking water and shaded areas in the playground.
- Ensure that the building, erecting, reconstructing and maintaining of new and existing playgrounds, are planned according to the above standards;
- Ensure that a safety audit is done on the playground equipment by a

playground safety professional. (Ensure that the safety auditor being used, has in-date certification. Such certification is only valid for three years and should schools renew this certificate every three year.)

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