

PlaySafe, LLC

Recreational Consulting & Services

Playground Supervision Part 2

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Providing a safe and fun playground for children involves more than correct installation, inspection and maintenance of appropriate equipment, surfacing, shade structures, signs and fencing. To create a playground environment that protects the physical and emotional safety of children, agencies should consider placement of well-trained supervisors to monitor behavior, prevent accidents or injuries when possible, and respond to emergencies. For some public playground operators, it is not feasible to supervise all users. However, for organized recreation or education programs providing playground supervision, having a clear understanding of the type of training needed, how to locate training opportunities and requirements for playground supervisors is important.

Training Components

Whether playground supervisors are paid staff members or volunteers, training should be provided prior to the start of their duties and on an ongoing basis. Breaking up training into short modules, including some that can be completed independently, is a good idea to improve retention of the information and assure completion. Online training, webinars and written safety plans are among the various approaches that should be part of a comprehensive training program.

Learning about requirements of the position, scheduling, uniforms, and communication procedures is necessary prior to beginning work as a playground supervisor. General information about risk management and the Americans with Disabilities Act should be provided as part of the playground supervisor training along with agency procedures, playground rules, and age guidelines for each playground. Supervisors need to learn effective approaches to supervision, such as being assertive, calm and polite. Knowing about child developmental stages is very helpful, as well as strategies for modifying behavior. A good grasp of approved methods for dealing with behavior problems on the playground is needed for supervisors. They need to know the approved consequences for users who break rules, such as a short time-out, talking to the child, referral to a playground mediator, or loss of privileges for a specified time period.

Supervisors should be trained to conduct an inspection of the playground area prior to use. A quick walk through of the playground to identify and remove hazards is one sure way to get off to a good safe start as conditions on a playground can change quickly. Use of a safety checklist is a great way to keep a supervisor on track and document that a thorough check of the playground is completed prior to use. Knowing how to identify hazards and safe methods for removing or addressing those hazards is important for supervisors. Information about how to contact maintenance personnel in case of broken equipment, graffiti, misplaced surfacing, or other hazards needs to be provided to

supervisors so problems on the playground can be corrected in a timely manner. Protocol for closing off unsafe areas in the playground if necessary should be discussed in advance.

Many injuries happen at the start of a play period. Children rush into the playground with great anticipation and little regard for their safety. Supervisors who are well placed throughout the playground can prevent problems by paying close attention as children enter and encouraging them to slow down. This is also a great time to check for and address potential hazards the children are wearing or carrying into the playground. Children need to remove strings on hoods or clothing, long necklaces or scarves, toys like binoculars that hang around their neck, or other items that could get caught on playground equipment and result in strangulation.

One of the most basic considerations for effective supervision is having enough supervisors and placing them effectively. Clear sight lines must be established by supervisors. They need to be well-placed so all areas of the playground are covered. Constant movement in different patterns throughout a specified zone is a good supervision strategy on a playground. If a supervisor stands in one place, or moves in a regular pattern, the opportunity for misbehavior increases. Supervisors should not hold long conversations with others or become distracted from their duties. They need to remain alert and attentive while on duty.

Supervisors need to watch for children using playground components in improper ways and stop the behavior. Quick action on the part of a playground supervisor is needed to address unsafe behaviors like a child walking on top of an enclosed slide or on top of a railing, trying to get their bodies through an opening between steps or bars, or bringing a skateboard or bike to the top of a play structure. Bullying or other inappropriate behaviors in the playground area need to be identified and dealt with immediately by supervisors. Emotional health of playground users is as important as their physical safety. Educating people about acceptable interaction on the playground is part of a playground supervisor's responsibilities.

Keeping an eye out not only on users, but also on other people or animals in the area is another important consideration for playground supervisors. Children need to be protected from misbehaviors of others. A readily available communication device (cell phone, bull horn, whistle, two-way radio) is needed along with an understanding of protocols for dealing with external threats.

Procedures for dealing with environmental factors need to be explained to playground supervisors. Extreme heat or cold, rain, snow, lightning and other weather factors can impact user safety. Supervisors need to know how to respond safely to protect playground users in case of inclement or extreme weather. Frozen surfacing materials may not have the required impact attenuation to cushion users in case of a fall, so the agency protocol may be to close the playground in extremely cold weather. Supervisors need to be aware of the policies and alternatives for those play periods.

Training Opportunities

The good news for playground operators and supervisors is that a large number of training opportunities are available free or at a low cost. Playground supervisors in different settings (public, private, school, day-care facilities, churches, and non-profits) can all benefit from information provided by the following organizations.

The California Parks and Recreation Society (CPRS) has many online resources of benefit to playground supervisors, including a pre-inspection questionnaire, information about playground regulations, and publications with a focus on playground safety (cprs.org). The organization offers online courses in playground hazard identification and safety management.

The National Program for Playground Safety (NPPS) provides safety checklists, current research about playground safety, and training. The NPPS provides classes and certifications in playground supervision at a low cost. Courses are offered often and many are available online. Obtain more information at playgroundsafety.org.

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) offers fact sheets, research, and other valuable information useful for playground supervisor training (nrpa.org). One valuable resource provided free online is *The Dirty Dozen: 12 Playground Hazards* ([http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Professional_Development/Certification/CP SI/Dirty-Dozen-Playground-Hazards.pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Professional_Development/Certification/CP%20SI/Dirty-Dozen-Playground-Hazards.pdf)). They also offer a number of online classes in playground safety and supervision.

Peaceful Playgrounds is another good resource for supervisor training (peacefulplaygrounds.com), with free webinars, low-cost online classes and valuable information about playground safety. The Playground Supervisor online course is designed to highlight the responsibilities of supervisors, legal issues, and discussion about how to keep kids safe.

Private companies like PlaySafe, LLC (play-safe.com) provides workshops in playground supervision, playground maintenance, and risk management. Agencies can schedule in-house training for playground supervisors in a group to minimize training costs. One advantage to conducting the training on site is that the discussion can incorporate unique aspects of your playground and agency.

Requirements

Developing a written description of the requirements for playground supervisors is suggested, even if the position is filled by volunteers. Clear delineation of the responsibilities of supervisors helps clarify the expectations and is an important part of preparing individuals to be effective in the position. A background check is highly advisable for individuals who will be supervising playgrounds. It is well worth the cost and time involved in background checks to assure the safety of playground users.

Some method for identifying the playground supervisor on duty should be provided. This could be a vest in a bright color or another piece of clothing that makes the individual

clearly identifiable on the playground. A method of quickly gaining the attention of users to enforce rules and to communicate with others in case of a problem or emergency should be readily available to supervisors. This could include a whistle, cell phone, two-way radio, and other methods of communication.

Written procedures, protocols and rules should be used in the training of playground supervisors. These documents need to be revised regularly and contain information needed by supervisors. Limited rules that are clearly worded, posted and written with input by playground users are most effective. Consequences for breaking rules also need to be discussed with playground supervisors, along with explanations about acceptable strategies for rule enforcement.

Checklists for inspecting the playground and incident/accident reports should be developed, reviewed with supervisors, and made available. Use of these documents needs to be a regular and expected part of the playground supervisor's duties. Playground supervisors are responsible for referring information about problems needing follow-up and corrective action to designated individuals. The documents need to be filed in an orderly way and stored in a safe location for an appropriate period of time.

There is more to a safe playground than the physical aspects of the play area. Having well-trained supervisors that are proactive and attentive can go a long way in reducing injuries, accidents, and lawsuits. Playground operators can take advantage of many no or low cost training opportunities for their supervisors.