

# Backyard & playground safety



The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008

Play is an important part of a child's development; and playing outside in the fresh air can be fun and adventurous, particularly when there are playmates. The backyard or local playground provides lots of scope to run, climb, swing, explore and play imaginary games. With careful planning, such environments can provide the desirable challenges for children and still be safe, thereby sparing children any unnecessary injuries.

Ideally any play area needs to cater for children of various ages, and interests, who have differing physical, social and mental abilities. If buying play equipment for home use, there are many aspects to consider, for example the ages and abilities of children, quality and cost of equipment and possible on-going maintenance costs. Unfortunately on occasions some parents give in to pressure to buy equipment because it has become popular when it is not really suitable, or should only be used under the strictest supervision. Play should be enjoyable and safe.

## Rates of injury

Two thirds of children hospitalised with playground equipment injuries are aged 5–9 years of age.

Most of the injuries are arm fractures due to falls (80%). Other common injuries include head and facial injuries, cuts, bruises and dislocations.

A third of home injuries to children under 5 years occur in the backyard, garden or garage.

## Main causes of injury

Some play and recreational equipment commonly associated with injuries include:

- monkey bars, trampolines, swings, climbing equipment (including tree houses)
- skateboards, in-line skates (roller blades) and micro scooters.

Some typical backyard injuries include falling onto concrete; running into gates; falling off fences; fence posts and balconies.

## Suggested ways to reduce the risk of injury

Be aware of the safety features to look for when buying play equipment. Do not assume that products, sometimes heavily advertised to entice children, are safe.

### Playground equipment

There are Australian safety standards that apply to playground equipment; however it is up to you to check and make sure the equipment is suitable for your needs and situation.

Consider the following safety strategies:

- The design of equipment should take into account a child's behaviour and potential misuse of equipment (e.g. climbing on to the top of the roof).
- Gaps between sections that a head, arm, leg or finger could get trapped or wedged between.
- Nails, screws or bolts that jut out and are likely to rust. Regularly inspect and maintain existing equipment Remove hazardous equipment.
- Good handgrips are needed on climbing equipment. Consider the size of your children's hands in relation to the size of the handgrips.
- The maximum height of equipment should be 2.5 metres, however equipment that is over 1.5 metres is not suitable for children under 5 years of age.

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## Playground equipment – cont.

- Swings, slides and climbing equipment should have soft fall material underneath to provide impact-absorbing surfaces in fall zones. If woodchips are used, a depth of at least 300mm must be maintained.
- Equipment should be spaced so that two children playing on two pieces of equipment at the same time do not crash into each other. Place swings in a separate area with barriers to prevent traffic flow across their path.
- Playground equipment needs to be firmly set into the ground to ensure stability.
- If using community play equipment make an assessment as to the safety and age appropriateness. Report any problems to your local council. Visually scan areas to make sure that no broken glass or used syringes are lying about.
- Rubber soled, closed-in footwear will protect children's feet and give them a better grip when climbing. Loose sandals and thongs should be avoided.
- Choose safe times for children to play on equipment. For example, avoid busy times and wet weather when equipment can be slippery to climb or grasp.



## Trampolines

Trampolines are not suitable for children under 6 years of age. They should be considered sports equipment, not a toy.

Older children need to be closely supervised by an adult when using a trampoline.

Spring and frame pads should be used.

If the trampoline is outside and exposed to sun and rain, check regularly for signs of rusting and other damage.

Guidelines for safe trampoline use:

- To reduce the risk of injury only one child at a time should be on the trampoline.
- At no time should children be permitted to get underneath the trampoline.
- Drinking or eating whilst bouncing should not be allowed because of the possibility of inhaling food and choking.
- Short periods of bouncing are best to avoid tiredness, tension or dizziness, which may cause a loss of balance.
- Careful mounting and dismounting must be taught. At no time should children jump from the trampoline to the ground.
- Clear the area around the trampoline of any obstacles, toys and debris.

## Skating and scooters

Children who skateboard, roller-skate or use a micro scooter should wear protective gear, including a bicycle helmet, in addition to wrist, elbow and kneepads.

The younger the child the greater the risk of injury. It is wise to discourage young children under 6 years of age, from using skates or scooters because of the level of skill, co-ordination and balance required.

Professional instruction is encouraged. Novice skaters should learn the basics of controlled skating and stopping.

Rollerblading and roller-skating should not take place on roads or amongst pedestrians. Smooth areas should be set aside by local government for rollerbladers and roller skaters. These areas may need to be shared with cyclists or skateboarders e.g. bike paths.

Parks with wide footpaths are the best places for children to skate – avoid times that are busy or when there are a lot of pedestrians. Supervise children, particularly when they are learning new skills.

Skating should not occur at night as skaters can't be seen, and they can't see obstacles or other skaters.

*Statistics are based on those provided by the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit, Monash University. Figures have been rounded off for ease of reading.*

### For further information:

- The Playground & Recreation Association of Victoria (03) 8846 4111 or [www.prav.asn.au](http://www.prav.asn.au)
- Monash University Accident Research Centre (03) 9905 4371 or [www.monash.edu.au/mucarc](http://www.monash.edu.au/mucarc)

For further information  
about the Safety Centre  
Telephone 9345 5085

[www.rch.org.au/safetycentre](http://www.rch.org.au/safetycentre)

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