Kidsafe
Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Australia
Northern Territory

NT Education and Care Guide to Safe Play

In partnership with
NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

Published by Kidsafe NT
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Purpose of this Guide

Keeping children safe during play is a shared responsibility. Approved providers, nominated supervisors, coordinators and educators should take reasonable steps to identify potential risks and provide safe play environments that promote children's health, safety and wellbeing.

The purpose of this Guide is to establish a minimum standard of safety within play areas at education and care services. It provides a practical tool to support educators in creating safer play environments where children can explore, learn and develop.

It provides guidance for early childhood education and care services regulated under the National Quality Framework that provides education and care to children aged 0-6 years.

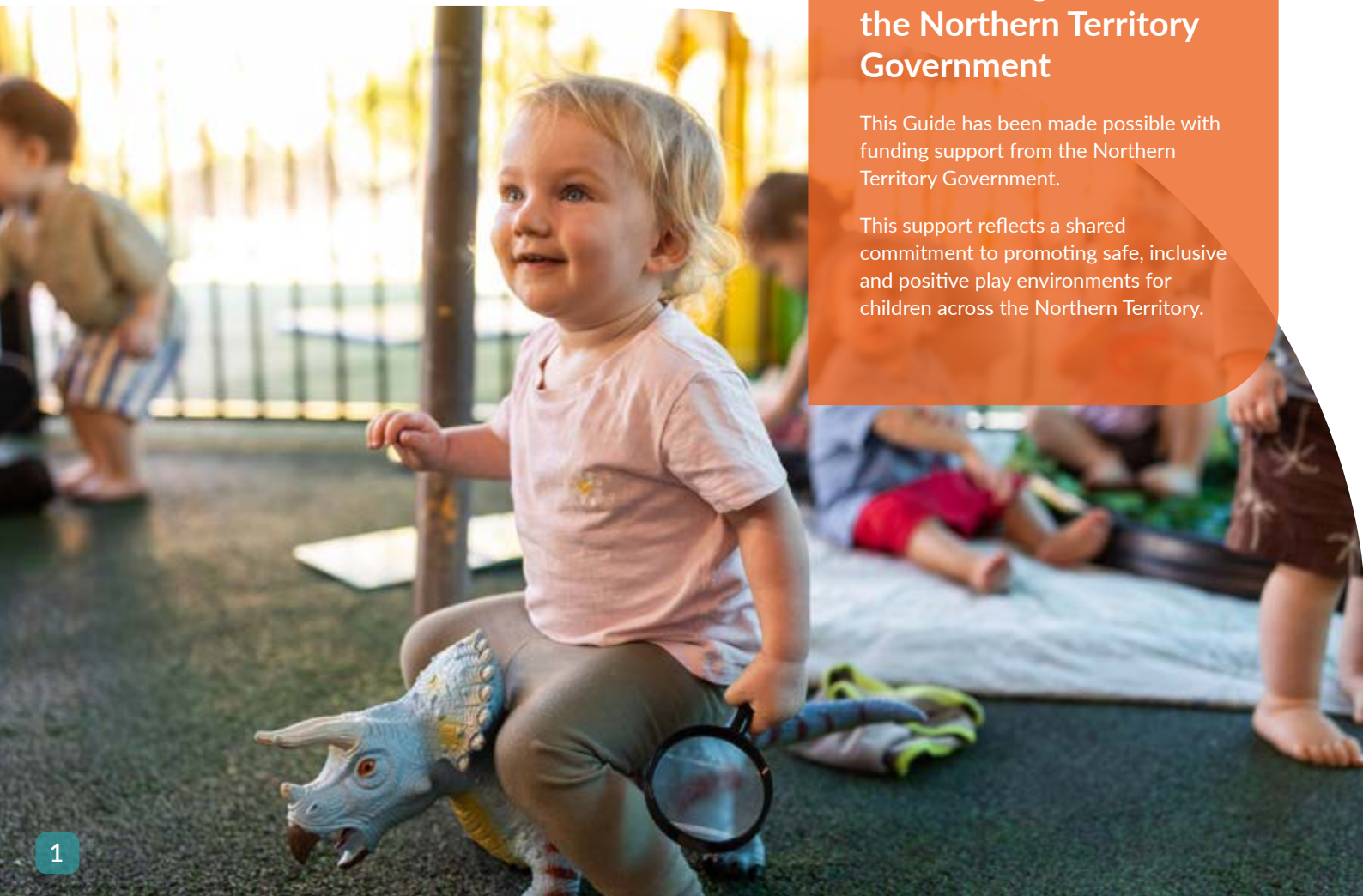
This Guide will assist educators to:

- establish a minimum standard of safety for play areas within the centre
- identify potential hazards and implement controls to reduce the risk of injury
- conduct risk assessments and risk–benefit assessments
- develop a foundational understanding of the Australian Standards for Playgrounds
- recognise the benefits of nature play and how to incorporate it into play areas.

Acknowledgement of the Northern Territory Government

This Guide has been made possible with funding support from the Northern Territory Government.

This support reflects a shared commitment to promoting safe, inclusive and positive play environments for children across the Northern Territory.



Introduction

Kidsafe NT is the leading non-government, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the prevention of unintentional childhood accidents, injuries and deaths in the Northern Territory (NT).

We have been creating a safer environment for NT kids since 2003.

Our organisation focuses on preventing unintentional injuries and deaths to children through education, research, advocacy and the promotion of environmental, legislative and behavioural changes.

Contact Kidsafe NT

nt@kidsafent.com.au
(08) 8941 8234

Kidsafe NT Services

Consultation Services

Kidsafe NT can provide information and guidance by phone or email to discuss safety concerns, playground design considerations and ideas for enhancing children's safety.

Playground Inspections

Our accredited Playground Inspectors can inspect playgrounds against relevant Australian Standards and provide a written report outlining findings and prioritised recommendations.

Playground Information Sessions

We offer an approximately one-hour information session supported by PowerPoint visuals. Designed for organisations, schools and early childhood education and care services, the session provides essential information about creating safer playground environments.

The session also introduces key principles relating to the Australian Standards for playground equipment and surfacing, including AS 4685.

National Quality Framework

The National Quality Framework (NQF) is Australia's nationally consistent system for regulating and improving the quality of early childhood education and care services. It includes the Education and Care Services National Law (National Law), Education and Care Services National Regulations (National Regulations), National Quality Standard, assessment and quality rating processes and approved learning frameworks.

Quality Education and Care NT (QECNT)[1] is the NT regulatory authority responsible for administering the NQF, including monitoring and enforcing compliance with the National Law and National Regulations and conducting assessment and rating of services.

QECNT supports services to create safe, inclusive and engaging play environments where children can explore, learn and experience appropriate challenge. Through guidance, monitoring and a focus on continuous quality improvement, QECNT supports services to strengthen practices that promote children's safety, health, wellbeing and developmental outcomes.

Contact QECNT

qualityecnt.det@education.nt.gov.au
(08) 8999 3561

[1] https://education.nt.gov.au/committees-regulators-and-advisory-groups/quality-education-and-care-nt

Importance of outdoor play

Outdoor play is more than just a way for children to be physically active. It plays an essential role in children's learning, health and development, helping build physical strength, coordination and balance, while providing valuable opportunities to explore, experiment, learn and connect with the natural world.

Outdoor play aligns strongly with the Early Years Learning Framework[2] (EYLF) V2.0's emphasis on learning through experience, building knowledge from real-world interactions, and supporting children's connection to Country, community, and environment.

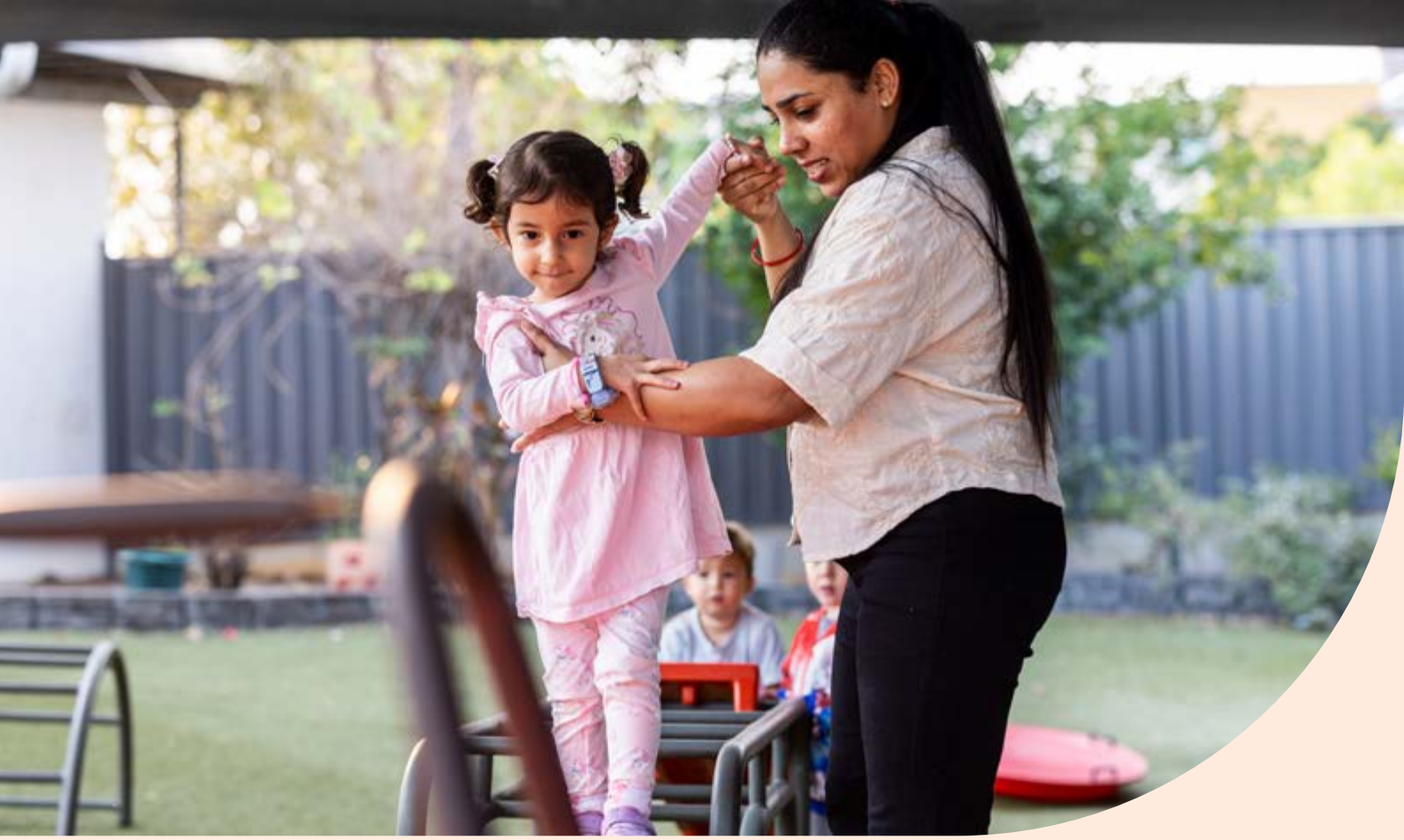
Outdoor play can support children's development in many ways, including:

- Social skills – playing with others provides opportunities for children to communicate, share, cooperate, negotiate and develop empathy.
- Imagination and creativity – outdoor play is often open-ended, encouraging children to use their imagination and creativity to develop ideas, invent games and explore different ways to play.
- Thinking and problem-solving skills - assessing risks, making decisions and attempting new challenges can help children develop problem-solving skills, persistence and perseverance and experience the satisfaction of overcoming challenges.
- Sense of self - mastering new skills and interacting with others can strengthen children's confidence and sense of competence in their physical and social abilities.
- Sense of connection – outdoor play can help children develop connections with their peers, their community, and the places and natural environments around them.
- Self-care skills – encountering and managing appropriate physical and social challenges can help children develop an awareness of risk and learn ways to keep themselves safe.

To support these broad learning and developmental outcomes, play environments should provide opportunities for active, free, quiet, social, imaginative, creative, exploratory and nature-based play.

Environments that encourage children to use their own initiative, explore possibilities, make decisions and engage with appropriate challenges provide valuable opportunities for learning and development.

[2] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf



Balancing safety, risk and play

While play is an important part of children's learning and development, it can also involve the risk of injury. In education and care services, injury incidents are more likely to occur in outdoor play areas, with falls and trips among the common causes of injury[3].

Unintentional injury[4] is an important health and safety issue for children, particularly during the early years when increasing mobility, curiosity and independence can expose children to new hazards.

Many childhood injuries can be prevented through the provision of safe environments, appropriate supervision and effective injury prevention measures.

EYLF V2.0 recognises that children need opportunities to experience challenge and managed risk. Rather than eliminating all risk, educators create environments where children can safely test their abilities, make decisions, solve problems, build confidence, resilience and independence while foreseeable hazards and unacceptable risks are identified and managed. Playgrounds should be designed, installed, supervised, inspected and maintained with children's safety and developmental needs in mind.

Understanding how, where and why injuries occur can help services identify hazards and take practical steps to reduce risk. Safe play environments allow children to experience challenge, develop skills and explore while reducing the likelihood and potential severity of preventable injuries.

[3] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/qa2-managing-and-responding-injury-trauma-and-illness-incidents

[4] https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/injury/injuries-in-children-and-adolescents-2021-22/contents/injuries-by-developmental-stage/early-childhood-1-4

Factors contributing to playground injuries

Playground injuries may result from a combination of behavioural and environmental factors, including:

- lack of appropriate adult supervision
- use of equipment not suitable for a child's age, abilities or stage of development
- inappropriate or unintended use of equipment
- over-crowding
- poor design or layout of equipment and play spaces
- inadequate inspection and maintenance.

Managing and responding to injuries

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority's (ACECQA) guidance[5] on managing and responding to injury, trauma and illness highlights the importance of protecting children's health, safety and wellbeing through proactive risk management and effective responses to incidents. Services should identify and address potential hazards, regularly assess risks, support staff knowledge and training, and promote safe practices with children and families.

Approved providers must also respond appropriately when incidents occur, maintain required records, notify families and, where applicable, notify the regulatory authority[6] of serious incidents within the prescribed timeframes and in accordance with the National Law and National Regulations.

[5] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard/quality-area-2-childrens-health-and-safety

[6] https://education.nt.gov.au/committees-regulators-and-advisory-groups/quality-education-and-care-nt/decision-making-tool/dmt/an-incident

Australian Standards for Playgrounds

The Australian Standards for Playgrounds have been developed to provide guidelines for the design, installation, maintenance and operation of playgrounds. They are not intended to provide totally risk-free environments.

Australian Standards (AS) are a minimum benchmark. They are not mandatory unless referenced in legislation or regulation. The Australian Standards for Playgrounds should be consulted by anyone planning, designing, building or maintaining a playground.

Definitions of common playground terminology, including terms used in the Australian Standards for Playgrounds, can be found in the **Glossary** of this Guide.

AS 4685

AS 4685 sets out the general and specific requirements for playground equipment.

AS 4685.0: Development, installation, inspection, maintenance and operation

AS 4685.1: General safety requirements and test methods

AS 4685.2: Additional safety requirements and test methods for swings

AS 4685.3: Additional safety requirements and test methods for slides

AS 4685.4: Additional safety requirements and test methods for cableways

AS 4685.5: Additional specific safety requirements and test methods for carousels

AS 4685.6: Additional safety requirements and test methods for rocking equipment

AS 4685.11: Additional specific safety requirements and test methods for spatial networks

AS 4422

Playground Surfacing - Specifications, Requirements & Test Methods

AS 1428.3

Design for Access and Mobility - Requirements for Children and Adolescents with Physical Disabilities

AS/NZS ISO 31000

Risk Management - Principles & Guidelines

AS 4989

Trampolines - Safety Aspects

AS3533.4.2: Amusement Rides and Devices

Part 4.2 Specific Requirements - Contained Play Facilities

For more information:

To purchase a copy of the *Australian Standards for Playgrounds* visit:

https://www.standards.org.au/search-results?query=as4685

Playground hazards

Most playground injuries can be prevented or their severity reduced through good planning, design and maintenance and risk management planning to avoid playground hazards. It is important to note that the Australian Standards for Playgrounds recognise children need opportunities to experience risk and challenge in playgrounds and focus on the elimination of hazards likely to cause serious injuries. The standards do not advocate risk-free playgrounds.

Similarly, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) recognises that protecting children from harm does not mean removing challenge, adventure or uncertainty from play. Rather, the EYLF V2.0 actively recognises the value of children engaging with risk, with references to calculated risks, risky play and risk-taking appearing throughout the framework and its guidance.

Age-appropriate activities

Children of different ages (or the same age) can have very different physical skills. It is important to ensure your playground includes graduated levels of risk[7] and challenge or that you provide different playground activities for younger and older children.

A benefit-risk approach considers both the developmental and learning benefits alongside potential risks. When the benefits outweigh the risk, the activity could proceed, or if necessary be re-evaluated after risk reduction.

Entrapment and pinch points

There must be no gaps in which a child could become trapped, especially by the head, neck or chest. Gaps that might trap limbs, hands, fingers, hair and clothing should also be avoided. Ensure there are no moving parts that might create crush or pinch points and that any timber is well maintained to avoid splits and splinters.

Equipment not recommended

Boat swings, maypoles and plank swings are extremely hazardous because of their design, and all have the potential to cause death or serious injury. Kidsafe NT recommends that if any of these items are present in your playground they should be immediately removed.

[7] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/latest-news/blog/taking-risk-play-safely

Playground hazards

Guardrails and barriers

Guardrails with vertical rails or solid barriers must be installed on platforms more than 600mm above the ground to prevent children from falling.

Maintenance

It is important that a regime of regular maintenance checks and annual comprehensive audit inspections is maintained. Similarly, it is important to keep accurate records of these checks and inspections and any repairs or modifications undertaken.

Protrusions and catch points

Playground equipment should not contain any bolts, nails, screws or other elements that might cut, pierce or bruise, or act as a hook to entangle children's clothing or hair. Similarly, ensure any ropes are secured at the top and bottom so they cannot form a loop or noose.

Space and the flow of play

Playgrounds typically involve lots of movement. Allow sufficient space for children to move freely about the playground and use the equipment safely. Another important point to consider is any potential clash between active and passive play pursuits. A good design and layout will ensure the flow of children moving through the space matches the different activities children might be participating in.

Trip hazards

Keep paths and walkways even and clear of tree roots, stumps or rocks unless these are used to provide a balance activity and embedded within an appropriate space. Avoid any edging or curbing that might create a trip hazard and ensure all concrete footings are well below the ground and any surfacing material. Ensure concrete surfaces are free from sand, gravel and other loose debris to minimise slips, trips, falls and other injury risks.

Boat swing

May pole

Plank swing

Fencing

Fencing in early childhood education and care settings

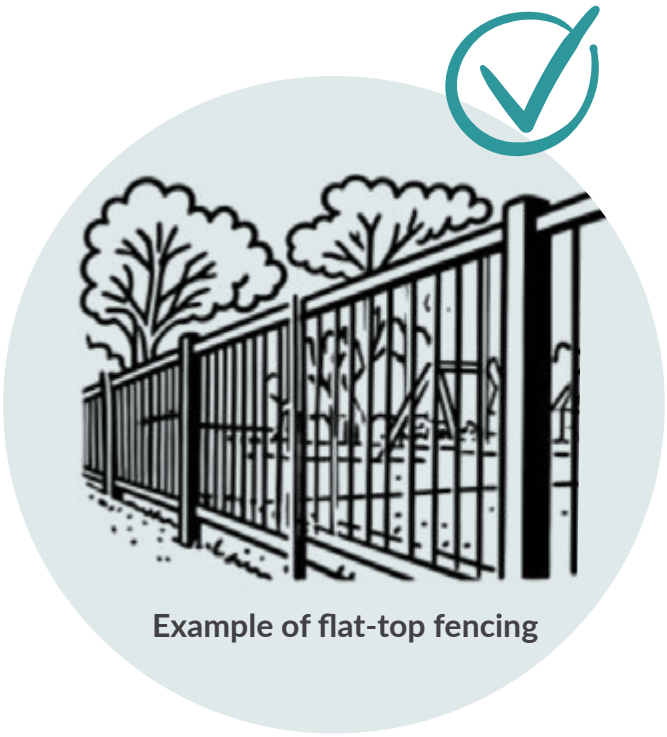
Under Regulation 104 of the Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011), services providing education and care to children under school age must ensure that any outdoor space is enclosed by a fence or barrier that is of a height and design that children preschool age or under cannot go through, over or under.

A fence around an outdoor play space helps keep children safe. It is important to choose a fence or barrier that does not create any new safety risks. At a minimum, the fence should comply with Australian Standard AS 1926.1, which sets safety requirements for swimming pool barriers.

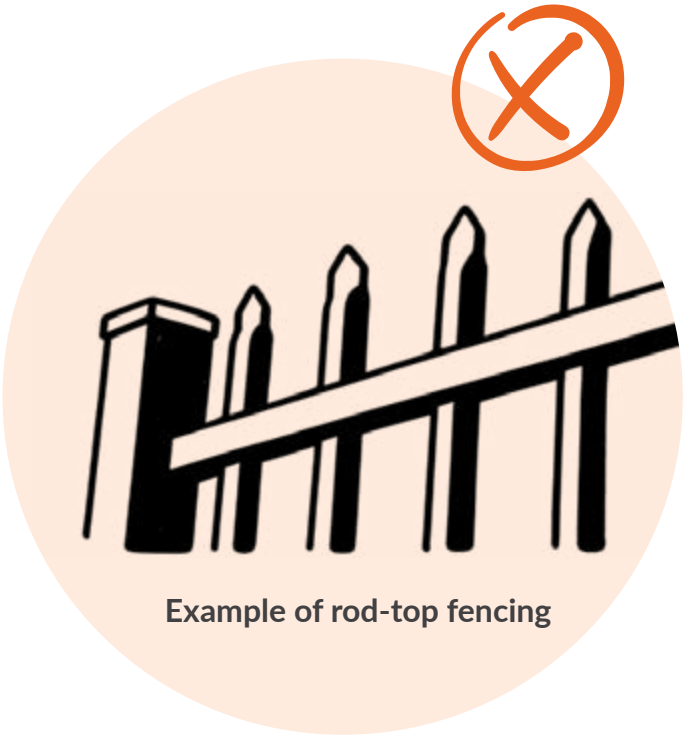
If an Early Childhood Education and Care Service is located within a leased property, the landlord should assess the most appropriate fencing requirement and consider the recommendations in this fact sheet.

Fencing recommendations:

- a minimum height of 1800mm for boundary fencing
- a minimum height of 1200mm where fencing is dividing play areas or surrounding enclosed verandahs
- a maximum of 100mm wide openings between vertical bars or under the fence
- climbable objects must be at least 900mm from the fence line
- avoid horizontal rails that are climbable other than the top and bottom rails
- flat-top fencing is to be used
- rail-loop-top or rod-top fencing is not to be used as it may present an entrapment or strangulation risk
- self-closing gates that open inwards, towards the play area.



Example of flat-top fencing



Example of rod-top fencing

What can be done if your existing fence does not meet these requirements?

ISSUE	ACTION
If the fence does not meet any of the Kidsafe recommendations	Replace the existing fence with a fence that meets the recommended safety requirements.
If there is a loop-top or rod-top fencing profile	Remove the loop-top or rod-top section of the fence by cutting off the ends and sealing any holes left behind. This will help prevent children's fingers from getting trapped. Make sure the fence is structurally sound and remains at the recommended height after the changes.
If the fence is not high enough	Install fence extension panels along the top of the existing fence to increase its height, such as the example shown below.

Other safety recommendations

- Ensure children can be seen and heard at all times through active supervision. Regularly check and monitor blind spots or areas that are hard to see, if they are unable to be eliminated. This could be supported through the development of a visual supervision plan.
- Before going inside, do a thorough check of the outdoor area. Check places where children may be hidden, such as tunnels, slides, cubby houses, and any other hiding spots.
- Gates should close by themselves, be child-resistant, and open inwards towards the play area. They should also have finger guards to help prevent children from trapping or injuring their fingers. The latch should not be accessible and be 1500mm above ground or on the outside of the gate.
- Ensure moveable equipment, such as chairs, tables and seating is placed away from fences so children cannot use it to climb over the fence.

Example of fence extension panels (if fence is not high enough)

Example of climbable object too close to the fence line. Climbable objects must be at least 900mm from the fence line

Adequate supervision for children's safety

Under the National Law and Regulations, approved providers must ensure all children are adequately supervised and protected from harm and hazards. Adequate supervision[8] is fundamental to children's safety, wellbeing and learning and requires active, intentional, responsive and engaged practice.

Both the ACECQA and the EYLF V2.0 recognise active supervision as a critical responsibility of educators. Active supervision protects children from harm while also supporting learning, wellbeing, relationships and engagement, and requires planning, vigilance, communication and ongoing assessment of the environment.

Effective supervision plays an important role in enabling children to experience challenge and take appropriate risks while remaining safe. ACECQA emphasises that supervision is not simply watching children from a distance. It involves educators being present, engaged, vigilant and responsive, knowing where children are, anticipating risks, positioning themselves effectively and communicating with colleagues. Importantly, educators also interact with children in ways that support learning, wellbeing and meaningful engagement.

Supervision is everyone's responsibility and is a critical preventative measure in reducing the likelihood of incidents occurring. Section 165 of the National Law requires children being educated and cared for by the service to be adequately supervised.

[8] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-07/Adequate%20supervision%20%282%29.pdf

Services can ensure adequate supervision through the following practices:

- **Sufficient staffing:** Educator-to-child ratios will be maintained at all times. Staffing and deployment will also consider the ages, abilities and individual needs of children, the activities being undertaken, the environment, identified hazards and higher-risk periods. Meeting minimum ratios alone will not be relied upon as evidence that supervision is adequate.
- **Strategic educator positioning:** Educators will position themselves throughout indoor and outdoor environments to maximise visibility and maintain effective lines of sight. Educators will regularly scan and move through the environment rather than remaining in one location.
- **Managing blind spots:** Proactively identify, assess and minimise areas where an educator's line of sight or ability to hear and respond to children may be restricted. Staff should be able to see all areas of a play space including behind structures such as trees, sheds, equipment and any hidden spaces in the space. Doing a complete outdoor environment check before going back inside, including checking inside tunnels, slides, cubby houses or anywhere a child may hide. Supervision arrangements should consider both permanent and temporary blind spots across indoor and outdoor environments.
- **Accounting for all children:** Maintain accurate roll marking and regular head counts, including comprehensive checks during transitions between environments, to ensure every child is accounted for, and that no child is left behind.

ACECQA's Active supervision in 6 steps[9] provides a practical framework for applying these principles in everyday practice. For more information, please visit the Australian Children Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) website at www.acecqa.gov.au.

[9] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-09/Active-Supervision-6-steps.pdf

Identifying hazards and determining risks

What is a hazard?

A hazard is anything with the potential to cause harm. It may include a substance, piece of equipment, work practice or within the education and care sector, a child's specific condition. Examples of hazards include:

- chemical hazards, such as cleaning products and disinfectants.
- damaged or broken toys and play equipment.
- risks associated with handling and moving equipment or children.
- inadequate supervision of children.
- unsuitable fencing or fencing non-compliant with Regulation 104 of the Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011).

What is risk?

Risk refers to the chance or likelihood harm may result from a hazard. It describes the probability of harm occurring, which can range from 'never' to 'certain' depending on various factors.

Most playground injuries can be prevented, or their severity reduced, through effective planning, thoughtful design and regular risk assessment. Preventing serious injury is a key priority in playground environments however, safety must be balanced with children's need for play, learning and enjoyment.

Increasingly, research highlights the benefits of play environments that include elements of risk and challenge. Conversely, evidence shows that limiting these opportunities can lead to negative outcomes, and that attempting to create completely risk-free playgrounds may reduce opportunities for learning and development.

Playgrounds also support children in developing self-awareness including understanding their strengths, abilities, achievements and limitations. They provide opportunities to learn how to assess risk, solve problems, communicate, collaborate and interact positively with others.

It is important to recognise Australian playground standards acknowledge the need for children to experience risk and challenge. These standards focus on eliminating hazards that could cause serious or life-threatening injuries, rather than promoting entirely risk-free environments.

Risk assessments

Developing risk assessment and management plans is an ongoing part of daily practice. One way to support this is by using a system of daily hazard identification and risk management. This can help you to identify, assess and manage the risk of harm before an incident occurs.

In line with the NQF, it is the responsibility of the approved provider and service leaders to manage them quickly and effectively via a thorough risk assessment of indoor and outdoor learning environments[10].

The latest addition to the AS 4685 Playground Standard also places a strong emphasis on risk assessment. Part 0 focuses on the development, installation, inspection, maintenance and operation of playgrounds. During safety and compliance checks there are often elements that do not clearly fall under a specific standard. In these cases, conducting a risk assessment is a practical way to determine the likelihood of a serious injury occurring.

AS 4685.0 defines a risk assessment as the process of identifying, evaluating and estimating levels of risk in a given situation, considering the likelihood of occurrence, comparing findings against relevant benchmarks or standards and determining what level of risk is acceptable. A range of risk matrices are available to support the assessment of activities or playground equipment.

A health and safety risk assessment aims to identify and manage hazards that may pose a risk to the health, safety and wellbeing of children, as well as the safe delivery of education and care. This process involves:

- identifying hazards
- assessing the likelihood of the hazard posing a risk and to whom
- estimating the severity of the consequences
- developing an action plan to eliminate the hazard or minimise its effect through control measures.

Conducting risk assessments enable educators to identify potential hazards, consider who may be at risk and evaluate the possible consequences of harm. This process assists in implementing appropriate control measures before accidents, injuries or illness occur.

When undertaking a risk assessment, key questions to consider include:

- Who may be at risk and how could they be harmed?
- What is the likelihood of injury or harm occurring?
- What are the potential consequences if an incident occurs?

Consequences may range from minor or trivial injuries through to serious injury or fatality.

Hazards that present the greatest level of risk should be addressed as a priority. It is important to determine whether existing control measures are adequate or if additional precautions are required to further reduce the risk of harm. Findings from risk assessments should be documented, regularly reviewed and revised where necessary.

Risk assessments must be reviewed whenever changes occur within the environment, such as the introduction of new equipment, changes to the use of a space, or the enrolment of a child with additional needs. Control measures should also be audited on a regular basis to ensure they remain effective and are functioning as intended.

A risk severity matrix can be used to provide a consistent and measurable understanding of risk exposure across the centre. The classification of risk levels, along with the decision-making processes associated with them, should align with the organisation's risk management procedures.

[10] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/applications/sample-forms-and-templates

The following is an example of a risk assessment method that may be used by a centre responsible for the operation and maintenance of a playground. For each identified hazard or risk, both the likelihood of occurrence and the potential consequences are assessed and rated using a set of defined indicators.

Risk matrix

Consequences \ Likelihood	Rare	Unlikely	Possible	Likely	Almost Certain
Major	Moderate	High	High	Critical	Critical
Significant	Moderate	Moderate	High	High	Critical
Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
Minor	Very Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Insignificant	Very Low	Very Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate

Risk Benefit Assessment

Risk assessment is not only about identifying and eliminating risks. A risk-benefit analysis considers both the potential risks of an activity and the benefits it may provide for children's learning, development and wellbeing. It is developed alongside the risk assessment and supports a balanced approach to managing risk, enabling approved providers, nominated supervisors, educators and staff to meet their legislative obligations while recognising the value of appropriate challenge, exploration and play.

The ACECQA Risk Assessment and Management Tool[11] aims to help children's education and care service approved providers, leaders, educators, teachers and staff to understand the importance of assessing and managing risk as an embedded part of quality practice and improvement.

[11] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/latest-news/blog/risk-assessment-practice

Moveable equipment

The Australian Standard (AS) 4685 that applies to fixed playground equipment also applies to non-fixed or mobile equipment. Non-fixed or mobile equipment includes trestles and attachments, portable forts, climbing apparatus and many more.

All movable play equipment must be placed on flat, level ground to ensure it is stable. A clear fall area must be maintained around equipment. As a general safety measure, Kidsafe NT recommends services allow at least 1500 mm of clear space around and between equipment that is not connected.

For any equipment with a climbing height 600mm or greater above ground level, the equipment must be set up on a certified surfacing with impact absorbing material. Certified surfacing is required to fill the fall zone under and around the equipment.

When setting up non-fixed or mobile equipment, ensure there are no enclosed openings within the range of 89mm – 230mm at heights of 600mm or more above ground level or a supporting surface to avoid the possibility of strangulation by head and neck entrapment.

Kidsafe NT recommends equipment be limited to a maximum climbing height of 1500mm.

Playground surfacing

Playground surfacing can consist of different items such as:

- Non-compacting sand – either whitewashed sand or river sand
- Wood chip mulch
- Solid materials/Unitary surfacing – impact absorbing materials e.g. wet pour rubber or artificial turf

Falls are the leading cause of injury hospitalisation for children, with falls involving playground equipment the most common type of fall. Therefore, appropriately impact-absorbing playground surfaces[12] are a key safety strategy and injury prevention intervention.

Loose-fill should be installed at a depth of 300mm for a new playground and maintained at between 200mm and 300mm for an existing playground. It is the air between each loose particle that provides the cushioning effect. Regularly rake and dig over the loose-fill to prevent it from becoming hard or compacted.

The impact absorbing capabilities of any type of loose-fill will depend on the material type and depth. Loose-fill is extremely susceptible to displacement, which may result in the material becoming too shallow to provide the required impact attenuation. Loose-fill shall therefore be regularly inspected, and topped up as necessary, to ensure that the correct material depth is maintained.

[12] https://www.standards-global.com/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/preview/2053152

Examples of playground surfacing

Non-compacting whitewashed sand

Non-compacting river sand

Wood chip mulch

Wet pour rubber/unitary surfacing

Nature play

Australian Standard (AS) 4685.0 defines a natural play space as "the elements of a playground consisting of natural, non-manufactured items that are incorporated into the playground, such as logs, boulders, plant materials and surfaces, changes in level and other landscape elements."

Nature play extends beyond the physical design of an outdoor environment. Within the context of ACECQA and the EYLF, natural environments provide rich pedagogical opportunities for children to exercise agency, investigate, take appropriate risks, solve problems and develop connections with the natural world. In this way, nature play aligns with Quality Area 3 of the NQS and Learning Outcomes 2, 3 and 4 of the EYLF, supporting children's learning, holistic development, wellbeing and environmental responsibility.

Natural play spaces combine natural environments, landscape features and vegetation to encourage children to explore and learn about the natural world. While manufactured play equipment may still be included, natural play spaces provide opportunities for spontaneous play, creativity and learning experiences.

Benefits of nature play[13]

Children who play in natural settings:

- are more resistant to stress, have lower incidence of behavioural disorders, anxiety and depression and have a higher measure of self-worth;
- are sick less often;
- tend to be more physically active and are less likely to be overweight;
- may experience reduced symptoms associated with Attention Deficit Disorder[14] (ADD/ADHD) following contact with natural environments
- engage in more diverse, imaginative and creative play, supporting the development of language, communication and collaboration skills;
- may experience less bullying, particularly where play environments provide diverse and engaging nature-based opportunities.

[13] https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/nature-play-and-child-wellbeing

[14] https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21060736

Safety principles in nature play

The application of safety principles to nature play is similar to those applied to manufactured playground equipment. The requirements of AS 4685 apply equally to natural play elements incorporated within a playground environment.

However, the standard recognises certain safety measures may not always be practical or appropriate in natural play settings. For example, it may not be feasible or desirable to install barriers or handrails on natural elements such as logs or boulders.

- Adequate impact-attenuating surfacing should be provided in the impact area corresponding to the free height of fall (FHoF).
- The impact area should be free of obstacles that could cause injury.
- Hazardous situations that may cause entrapment should be avoided.
- Consideration should be given to preventing easy access to hazardous situations.
- Where the contents of this Standard do not apply directly to natural elements, a risk benefit assessment may be required to determine the suitability of such elements.

Importantly, risk management in nature play does not necessarily mean eliminating challenge or applying manufactured-playground solutions to every natural feature. Where a design-based control, such as a barrier or handrail, is inappropriate or would substantially diminish the intended play value of a natural element, the risk-benefit assessment should consider whether the risk can be adequately managed through alternative controls. These may include the design and positioning of the element, controlling access, environmental or maintenance controls, and risk-responsive supervision.

This aligns with ACECQA's approach to adequate supervision. There is no single formula for adequate supervision; rather, it should be active, dynamic and effective and responsive to the particular children, activities, environment and potential hazards involved.

In a nature-play environment, this may require more deliberate educator positioning, active monitoring and ongoing assessment of changing conditions, particularly where natural challenges cannot be managed in the same way as conventional manufactured equipment. Where necessary, supervision arrangements and staffing should be adjusted to ensure adequate supervision can be maintained.

Shade in play spaces

In the Northern Territory, UV radiation levels are high for most of the year. Providing adequate shade in outdoor play areas helps minimise children's unnecessary exposure to UV radiation and may reduce the risk of developing skin cancer later in life. Well-designed, shaded play areas also encourage physical activity and can support long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.

Educators and children should wear appropriate sun-safe hats when outdoors and apply sunscreen in line with the service's sun protection policy. Educators should also make use of shaded areas and consider the weather, UV levels and how long children are playing outdoors.

Shade is an essential component of all play spaces. Areas that are excessively hot or exposed to glare are less likely to be used. Effective shade should be provided for both children using the play equipment and educators supervising the play space.

Shade and sun protection can be provided through a variety of methods, including:

- Playgrounds located near established tree canopies. Trees offer natural shade and help reduce the overall temperature of the area.
- Installing purpose-built shade structures or shade sails over play equipment or providing shelters adjacent to the play space for children, educators and carers to use as a refuge from the sun.
- Considering the movement of the sun throughout the day when designing the play space. Play equipment and shade structures should be positioned to maximise shade coverage during the hottest parts of the day.

Built shade

Constructed shade structures may be used where natural shade is unavailable or still being established. Approval from the local council may be required prior to the installation of shade structures.

Built shade options include:

- Permanent shade structures constructed from a range of materials. These structures should be durable, safe and regularly maintained.
- Adjustable shade systems such as louvred, cantilevered or retractable umbrellas and canvas awnings which provide flexibility by allowing shade coverage to be modified throughout the day or across different seasons.

Shade structures should be designed to minimise safety risks and prevent children from climbing onto the shade structure. To reduce access by climbing, the lowest accessible edge of the shade cover should maintain a minimum clearance of 1.5 metres from any part of the play structure or adjacent items within the education and care setting.

Consideration should also be given to the placement of shade support poles to ensure they are located outside the impact area of playground equipment.

Natural shade

Natural shade can be one of the most effective and visually appealing methods of providing sun protection within a play space. The use of vegetation for shade also offers a range of environmental benefits, including:

- reduced reliance on non-renewable resources commonly used in manufactured building materials.
- lower energy consumption when compared to constructed shade systems which often require high embodied energy to produce and install.
- minimising waste and disposal concerns as plant materials naturally decompose and return nutrients to the environment.

Additional environmental benefits may also be achieved through the use of native plants when establishing natural shade areas.

Departmental guidance

The Department of Education and Training provides policies and procedures[15] to help services understand and meet their responsibilities under the National Regulations, including Regulation 168.

Cancer Council shade audit tool

For advice about the Cancer Council shade audit tool, sun safety policies, school programs or local shade requirements in the NT, contact the Cancer Council NT program team on (08) 8944 1807 or email healthpromotion@cancernt.org.au.

Cancer Council NT offer free support and guidance to childcare centres and Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services to assist in developing and implementing a comprehensive, evidenced-based and up-to-date sun protection policy. Services can access the latest SunSmart news and resources to assist in their implementation. More information on how to perform a shade audit for your centre can be found at sunsmart.com.au/shade-audit.

[15] https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/early-childhood-education-and-care/preschool-specific-policy

Playground maintenance

Maintaining a playground is essential to ensuring it remains safe, functional and fit for use. Playground equipment and surrounding areas are a valuable asset and should be inspected and maintained regularly. Maintenance schedules may vary from daily to monthly inspections. Consistent maintenance demonstrates a commitment to duty of care for all users.

When planning a play space, consideration should also be given to access requirements for ongoing maintenance activities such as topping up sandpits, replenishing loose fill surfacing, landscaping and lawn mowing. A maintenance schedule should outline the components requiring inspection and maintenance as well as procedures for responding to damage or breakdowns.

A maintenance checklist may include:

- removal of broken glass, needles, animal waste and other debris.
- raking, loosening and topping up loose fill impact attenuating surfacing where material levels are low or compacted.
- maintenance and repair of unitary impact attenuating surfacing.
- repair or replacement of damaged, worn or missing equipment.
- removal of graffiti.
- emptying bins and removing rubbish.
- maintenance of ancillary items such as tables, seating and rubbish bins.
- removal of dead, damaged or overhanging tree branches.
- lubrication of bearings, bushes and moving components where required.
- checking the structural integrity and adequacy of all equipment.

Playground inspections

Daily playground and outdoor environment inspections are conducted to comply with National Law Section 167 and Regulations 103, 114 and 115. These inspections assist the service to identify and manage hazards, ensure equipment is safe and well maintained, support effective supervision and provide a safe environment for children.

The current Australian Standards identify three types of playground inspections: routine visual inspections, operational inspections and comprehensive inspections.

Routine visual inspection (daily):

High-use playgrounds require daily visual inspections, as these checks help to identify obvious hazards resulting from vandalism, wear and tear, or weather conditions that may have resulted in damaged equipment, broken glass, sharp objects or loss of under surfacing. Routine visual inspections should be conducted before children access outdoor play and nature play environments.

The frequency of inspections should reflect the level of use, the nature of the environment and any changing conditions. Educators should identify obvious hazards arising from general wear and tear, vandalism, weather, maintenance or changes to the natural environment. Identified hazards should be removed, isolated or appropriately controlled before children access the affected area.

Operational (1 to 3 months):

A more detailed inspection to check the operation and stability of equipment, wear of components such as ball bearings and moving joints.

Comprehensive (Post construction / ongoing annual):

A comprehensive inspection is often done on a yearly basis. A post construction inspection is done when a new playground is installed.

These inspections check for compliance with current Australian Standards. The overall stability of the equipment, footings, surfacing, structural integrity, corrosion/rotting is checked. Safety of any changes made due to repairs or replaced components are also checked.

Competence of person performing inspections

AS 4685.0 states individuals performing tasks such as assessment, inspection, repair and maintenance of a playground shall be competent to do so.

The post installation and comprehensive inspections shall be performed by a person who has training and experience that enables them to perform a full compliance check to AS 4685.

For more information regarding playground inspections, contact Kidsafe NT on (08) 8941 8234 or email nt@kidsafent.com.au.

Equipment not meeting current standards

Equipment that was perfectly safe prior to the introduction of AS4685 did not suddenly become dangerous the day after publication.

All new playground equipment should meet the latest version of the standards.

Older equipment that was installed prior to current standards shall be risk-assessed by a competent person and unacceptable risks addressed.

Be careful with overseas certification, particularly labelling, fall heights and impact area distances. Overseas certification does not necessarily mean compliance to Australian Standards.

Equipment alterations

Alterations to parts of a structure that could affect the essential safety of the equipment should only be carried out after consultation with the manufacturer. If the manufacturer cannot be contacted within a reasonable time, a competent person should be used.

In some circumstances, the person altering existing equipment takes over or shares the legal responsibilities of a manufacturer for the purposes of this Standard. It is therefore recommended that advice be sought.

For more information regarding equipment alterations, contact Kidsafe NT on (08) 8941 8234 or email nt@kidsafent.com.au.

Routine visual inspection checklist – outdoors

This example checklist may assist with conducting and recording daily inspections of all areas of a program to identify foreseeable hazards, changes in conditions or emerging risks that may have arisen since the previous check, and to ensure appropriate action is taken to protect children's health, safety and wellbeing. The checklist will need to be contextualised to the service's environment.

✓ = Safe ✗ = Needing Attention Education and Care Provider: _____

WEEK BEGINNING:	M	T	W	T	F
Outdoor area is free of hazards e.g. broken equipment, trash, water collections, garden tools, trip hazards etc.					
Has there been any vandalism?					
Gates are locked/closed as applicable and latches are in working order.					
There is nothing near any fence/gate that would assist children to climb over.					
The effective height of all fences/gates is maintained.					
The sandpit is clear of rubbish, raked as appropriate and c overed when not in use.					
Soft playground materials are clear of rubbish e.g. broken glass, rocks and other objects that may be a hazard if children fell.					
Loose-fill playground surfacing materials under/around equipment is the required depth and raked as appropriate.					
Rubbish bins for children's use are clean and empty.					
Rubbish awaiting collection is inaccessible to children and is stored appropriately until collection.					

Glossary

The following terminology is commonly used within the current Australian Standards for Playgrounds.

Cluster

Two or more separate pieces of equipment designed to be installed in close proximity to each other to provide continuity in a sequence that is needed for the play activity e.g. trail of stepping stones.

Competent person

A person who has acquired through training qualifications or experience or a combination of these, the knowledge and skills enabling that person to perform a specified task.

Equipment easily accessible

Requiring only basic skills to access the equipment, allowing users to move freely and quickly onto/within the equipment.

Equipment not easily accessible

This type of equipment provides a greater deal of challenge to access the equipment. Often used to 'design out' smaller children from accessing the equipment.

Free height of fall (FHoF)

The greatest vertical distance from the intended body support to the impact area below. For example, the intended body support of a platform is a user's feet. The Free height of fall is then measured from the platform to the surface below. Risk of serious injury is minimised where fall heights are reduced.

Impact area

The impact area is the surface that can be hit by a user falling from the equipment. The extent of the impact area shall be measured from a point directly below the elevated part of the equipment. A graded system of impact areas for specific FHoF, equipment and surfacing types has been introduced. For example, equipment that involves movement requires a larger impact area.

Impact-attenuating surfacing (IAS)

A surface, whereby the kinetic energy of an impact is dissipated by localised hysteresis, deformation or displacement such that the maximum acceleration and head injury criteria is reduced and the head injury criteria duration is increased. Often called soft fall or under surfacing.

Loose-fill material

Surfacing material supplied for the purpose of impact attenuation in playgrounds, consisting of unbound, granular, chipped or fibrous elements such as sand, wood fibre, bark mulch, wood chips or other materials. These may be organic or inorganic.

Moveable play equipment

A range of purpose-made manufactured equipment used in education and care services that is not permanently fixed in place and can be adjusted and moved by educators on a regular basis to vary play opportunities.

Nature play

The elements of a playground consisting of natural, non-manufactured items that are incorporated into the playground, including items such as logs, boulders, plant materials and surfaces, changes of level and other landscape elements.

Other settings

This describes the age group after Supervised Early Childhood. Often throughout the standards fall heights are categorised into sections such as Supervised Early Childhood (SEC) and Other Settings.

Playground

An area designed for children's play, including the site, natural features, built landscape, and any manufactured equipment and surfacing.

NOTE: This does not include domestic playgrounds, nor sites and equipment intended for use in formal sport. It does not include fitness equipment unless these items are integrated into the playground along with other play equipment.

Playground equipment

Equipment and structures, including components and constructional elements with, or on which, children can play outdoors or indoors. This can be individual play or in groups, according to their own rules or own reasons for playing which can change at any time.

Risk assessment

The identification, evaluation, and estimation of the levels of risks involved in a situation and the likelihood of its occurrence, its comparison against benchmarks or standards, and the determination of an acceptable level of risk.

Risk benefit assessment

A tool to aid risk management that explicitly brings together consideration of the benefits as well as the risks of play in a single judgement.

Shall

Indicates that a requirement is mandatory.

Should

Indicates a recommendation.

Supervised early childhood services (SECS)

A defined play space used by an education and care service or children's services, for children under school age, which is supervised by educators.

Under surfacing

For any equipment that has a free height of 600mm or more, Australian Standards recommend that the fall zone under-surfacing must meet certain minimum impact attenuating requirements. The two main types of materials that comply are loose-fill and synthetic/rubber materials. Loose-fill materials include suitable sand or mulch that is well drained, regularly checked, and raked / aerated to avoid compaction and replenished as required to maintain minimum depth. Kidsafe NT recommends a minimum depth of 300mm to allow for displacement during typical use.

Synthetic/rubber materials include wet pour rubber or synthetic grass. Surfaces should be free of trip hazards and checked periodically to ensure there is no deterioration (eg. sub surface bumps or dips). You should also ask the provider for a certificate of compliance with Australian Standards.

Unitary surfacing

An impact-attenuating surface consisting of one or more material components (such as shredded rubber bound together with urethane) formed into a sheet, tile or other continuous surface where the underlying protective properties of the impact surfacing change little with consecutive and/or repeated use. Commonly called rubber soft fall/under surfacing.

Upper body equipment

Playground equipment, or part of the equipment, from which suspension is intended using the hand/s without foot support, monkey bars, parallel bars, turning or somersault bars, horizontal ladders, jungle gyms, track rides and other suspended style equipment (excluding fireman's poles, cable ways (flying foxes), rope or chain structures and spatial networks).

Disclaimer

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