



#PlayToday

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*promoting the value of play*

## FENCING AND PUBLIC PLAYSPACES

There is no Standard on playground fencing, and there is no likelihood of there being one in Australia.

Play Australia and local government authorities generally do not support the provision of fencing around playgrounds except where there are particular issues concerning access, but not as a safety barrier, firstly because fencing does not prevent most children from running away if they wish to, and secondly it is the responsibility of parents to supervise their children in public open space.

Play Australia advises councils regularly to inform the community that parents are responsible for the supervision of their children, and not the council.

Councils are responsible for the physical landscape and infrastructure, and spend considerable resources in managing public open space, but parents and/or carers are responsible for the supervision of children.

Play Australia recognizes that there are sometimes particular circumstances where fencing can add to the quality of the playspace for children.

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## FENCING (FROM THE GOOD PLAYSPACE GUIDE)

*The Good Playspace Guide was prepared for the Department of Sport & Recreation Victoria by PRAV (now Play Australia), and is available to download from the Play Australia website at [www.playaustralia.org.au](http://www.playaustralia.org.au)*

### **Why fence a playground?**

There are many families and groups who are unable to visit playgrounds unless they are fenced because their children run off, are unable to hear or understand their name, are easily distracted, or become absorbed in an activity and do not notice they have moved away from their carers. For these groups, a high fence with a gate is important.

When a site is close to a hazard such as a water body, busy road, or steep cliffs, a fence makes many adults more comfortable about their children's safety.

Fences help contain balls and separate play spaces from neighbouring park uses such as dog-off-leash areas. A fence can also prevent fouling of sand or mulch in a play space by animals.

### **Disadvantages of fencing**

A major disadvantage of fencing a play space from the rest of a park is that it limits where play activities can take place, or effectively 'cages' play into a contained space.

It is virtually impossible for people who use wheelchairs to reach child-proof locks on gates, making fenced spaces with these systems inaccessible to some users. In addition, gates and child-proof locks regularly fail in public parks and the cost of replacing locks can be expensive over time.

Fences can also be used as an excuse not to supervise children properly.

## **Design of fences or barriers**

When considering a fence for a play space, it is important to think clearly about its purpose and make sure its design is consistent with that purpose.

Every municipality should aim to provide a few fenced play spaces, so there is a variety of options for parents and carers whose children require additional security.

However, natural barriers such as hedges (or another type of planting or design feature) can provide the same sense of containment as a fence, especially for small children.

Things to consider when designing fences for play spaces are:

- double-width gates for maintenance access;
- an alternative to locks to overcome the problem of inaccessibility to wheelchair users;
- single rail fences for visual definition, but these do not effectively contain children;
- no horizontal components that can be climbed, nor entrapment spaces or sharp components;
- no cables or wire fencing that is not easily seen at night or by a person with a vision impairment;
- planting and earthworks to help disguise a fence and make it less unattractive. Planting should not totally block views into the space, or support an agile child to climb over a fence;
- planting and earthworks to help disguise a fence and make it less unattractive. Planting should not totally block views into the space, or support an agile child to climb over a fence;
- designs for fences that make it a playful feature of the space;
- partial fencing that deters children from a quick run out onto a hazard in one direction; and
- seats near the openings in partial fences to make 'control' easier for adults.

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## **USE OF LOCKABLE GATES AND FENCING**

***The need for this statement arose due to councils receiving pressure from parents who wanted play equipment to be located next to the tennis court and to be fenced so that their children could be locked in whilst their mothers played tennis!***

Play Australia supports experience which suggests that children who enjoy quality play environments in the company of their parents or adult carers will experience significantly less injury than those who play in isolation from supportive adults.

Consequently Play Australia believes that children need to be appropriately supervised in public playspaces, as stated in AS4685-2014, and that Councils should plan to enable adults comfortable access to playgrounds by way of provision of adequate seating near to the play equipment, provision of water and toilets nearby etc.

Councils are not encouraged to erect structures such as fences or gates intended to separate children from adults but to design stimulating playspaces in accord with Australian Standards for Playground Safety that will foster greater use by children and their families.

Play Australia supports the need for some fenced play areas across the municipality in order to enable some families to enjoy playing in public playspaces.

Eg. Children on the autism spectrum in particular. However, this does not mean that councils should fence every playground, but that there are a few fenced spaces strategically across the municipality to enable families this extra amount of protection. I once met a parent of twin 4 year old boys on the spectrum and she told me that she could not take her children outside to play alone.

Fencing does not prevent most children from 'escaping' if they chose to, and the age group for whom a fence may act as a deterrent is the same age group which require supervision at all times.

Current evidence indicates that unfortunately there are parents today who chose to engage with their mobile phones rather than supervise their young children, and sadly sometimes there are injuries caused by this lack of supervision, due to young children getting mixed up with activities suitable for older children. Play Australia is doing everything we can to explain to parents the importance of their active supervision, and no doubt this will be an ongoing campaign, given the prominence of social media today.

Whilst we recognize the busy lives of parents, the supervision of children is their responsibility, and not council's, and all evidence indicates that the best play happens when adults engage with their children's play as well as actively supervising their activity.



*A good use of natural materials to serve the purpose of a barrier in the Kenton Reserve Playspace, City of Marion SA which will provide a distraction to a very young child.*