



PLAYGROUND MAINTENANCE

PLAN IT INTO YOUR CONSTRUCTION BUDGET

This paper introduces the issue of playground maintenance, especially to groups who may be contemplating building or buying their own equipment and who may have limited resources.

AUSTRALIAN STANDARDS

There are two Australian Standards for Playgrounds that should be consulted by anyone planning, designing, building or maintaining a playground.

In considering playground surfaces reference should be made to:

- AS4685 2014 Part 0
- AS/ NZS 4422 - Playground Surfacing Specifications, requirements and test method 2016

Injuries in playgrounds are less likely to occur if the guidelines in these Standards are observed.

PLANNING FOR MAINTENANCE

When a playground is being planned, it is usually hard enough to get together enough money and other resources to complete the first stages, as well as plan for future maintenance and repairs. Unfortunately, maintenance needs to be planned from the very start or else the newly completed playground will deteriorate into an unattractive site with potential hazards in a short time.

Older playgrounds have often been in the ground without much attention for 15-20 years. No one purchases a vehicle or machine and expects it to last so long without a service. It is unreasonable to expect continued performance from playground equipment. Money spent on "servicing" equipment should be budgeted accordingly.

WHY IS MAINTENANCE NECESSARY?

Maintenance is a sensible way of protecting your investment and playgrounds should not differ in this way from any other capital investment.

Lack of maintenance has been the direct cause of both injuries and deaths in playgrounds. Preventable accidents can be caused by such things as:

- Excessive wear of materials, causing them to eventually break or come loose under stress.
- "Booby-trap" vandalism.
- Splinters, jagged and rusty edges, and exposed bolts.
- Lack of lubrication of moving parts causing uneven wear and eventual failure.

The fact that many of the victims are children who cannot detect risk of injury places maintenance as a high priority in playground safety.

WHAT IS MAINTENANCE?

Maintenance includes a range of tasks, which will vary from playground to playground, depending upon materials used, type of equipment, type of planting, climate, vandalism, etc.

All playgrounds need regular, low key maintenance such as mowing, cleaning up litter and broken glass, raking back loose undersurfacing, raking sand pits, and checking that nothing is broke, missing or loose on equipment.

In addition, equipment needs special attention from time to time. At least every six months a suitably qualified person should carry out a thorough inspection of every item of equipment, and direct any repairs which are needed. A similar, but briefer, check should be ideally carried out every few months in addition to this six monthly thorough inspection.

SPECIAL ATTENTION

Where special items of equipment present a particular maintenance problem, or need lubrication (especially moving parts of equipment), they will require inspection, lubrication or repairs on a much more regular basis than static items. Some intensively used playgrounds require daily attention. Some areas are more prone to vandalism than others and will require extra inspections. The location and intensity of use need to be assessed before a maintenance budget can be drawn up.

URGENT REPAIRS

When a playground is damaged, vandalized, or materials fail, it is important that repairs can be carried out as soon as the damage has been reported. This restores the play value of the item quickly, but it also serves to deter further damage. Experience has shown that once an item is damaged, it is “devalued” in the eyes of the user. Continuing the original pattern of destruction is easy and becomes more likely.

When you build a playground you need to anticipate such problems and prepare a strategy to deal with urgent problems. The strategy may not require your groups to actually do any repairs themselves but will ensure that the right person is notified who can help in a hurry.

ISOLATING EQUIPMENT FROM FURTHER USE

Sometimes it is impossible to arrange repairs at short notice. If you have a hazardous situation occur in your playground, it is nonetheless your responsibility to ensure that no one can hurt themselves on it while you arrange for repairs.

In such a situation, some form of effective warning device should be employed (and remember that many children are unable to read signs).

Children should be prevented from using damaged equipment – if necessary, remove the access ladders, lock the swing seat to the top beam, or fence the item off from further use.

Make sure your warning device is not itself hazardous.

LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Lack of funds, or ignorance about your responsibilities does not protect you from liability if someone is injured in your poorly maintained playground. It is vital that these responsibilities are worked through before you start to build the playground.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS

When a voluntary organisation builds a playground, e.g. a service club, it has some times been expected that the local council will take over responsibility for mowing and maintenance once it is complete. Such arrangements are usually at best vague, and are rarely discussed and formalized. When it comes to the crunch it may be discovered that the council accepts no responsibility at all. It is recommended that a formal agreement be drawn up between such parties before the playground is built.

OLD PLAYGROUNDS

Many old playgrounds exist which have two kinds of problems requiring inspection

- **Inherent design problems** which were built into equipment before safety standards were commonly accepted. No amount of regular maintenance will ever rid your playground of these. Equipment may require re-building, upgrading or removal.
- **Problems caused by wear and tear.** These can usually be prevented by regular inspections and repairs and preventative maintenance but if your playground has been neglected for years, rebuilding, replacement or upgrading may also be necessary.

NEW PLAYGROUNDS

As with most new structures, playground equipment will require a short time to settle into its new location. Soil settles and timber dries out (and shrinks) and sometimes fittings become loose. About six weeks after construction, go over all items and tighten all bolts, check that footings are still firm and that mounds have not subsided.

FINDING OUT WHAT TASKS ARE REQUIRED

When you purchase equipment, find out from the manufacturer what maintenance is necessary and follow their instructions. For playgrounds you have built yourself, you should seek detailed advice from the Playgrounds and Recreation Association of Victoria.

RESOURCES FOR MAINTENANCE

If you do not have the funds to pay someone to inspect or repair equipment you have limited options. You may:

- Prepare a roster of volunteers in the local community,
- or**
- Persuade another Authority to take over the responsibility for inspection and repairs.

Do not just leave the situation to chance.

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