

Age-Appropriate Play Equipment

One of the biggest challenges in designing a playground is creating safe, developmentally appropriate play experiences for children of different ages.

In its *Handbook for Public Playground Safety*, the Consumer Product Safety Commission has this to say about the topic of age-appropriate play:

Preschool and school-age children differ dramatically not only in physical size and ability, but also in their cognitive and social skills. Therefore, age-appropriate playground designs should accommodate these differences with regard to the type, scale, and the layout of equipment.

The CPSC *Handbook* divides playground users into two groups:

- *Preschool children*, 2 to 5 years old.
- *School-age children*, 5 to 12 years old.

A third group, *infants and toddlers*, includes children under 2 years of age. The CPSC doesn't address the needs of this group in its *Handbook* guidelines. However, the growing importance of non-parental childcare makes it obvious that the safety needs of infants and toddlers can be an important consideration in playground design.

The emotional and developmental differences between these age groups can be dramatic. For example:

Infants and toddlers

Infants are sensory creatures who explore relentlessly with their eyes, hands, feet, torsos, noses, and mouths. They creep, crawl, sit up, pull up, and otherwise exert themselves at ground or floor level until they learn to walk, when they launch themselves on the journey to being “toddlers” — a term that is defined more by state licensing requirements than by any universally recognized developmental standard. Toddlers need space to exercise their new physical



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freedom while avoiding territorial conflict with their peers.

Preschoolers

Two-year-olds (in some states, 2-1/2- or 3-year olds) represent the lower age limit of the preschool group. These young children enjoy dramatic play and imitating others. They like a place of their own, and they have limited attention span.

For this audience, the best playground challenges involve climbing over, under and around things, plus activities that foster fine motor skills. Social skills are not well developed, and a desire to “be like the big kids” may result in conflicts and exposure to physical risks.

School-age children

At the older end of this age range, we have children who are about to make the transition from the elementary grades to junior high. These 12-year-olds can be nearly twice the height of 2-year-olds and can have more than eight times the grip strength.

Twelve-year-olds are enthusiastic, subject to peer pressure, and fond of “messing around” on the playground—traits that can lead to vandalism and aggression if sufficient play challenges aren't available.

Physical challenges for developing gross motor skills are especially important for this age group. Older children forget that preschoolers are smaller and weaker, and accidents may result when they engage in high-spirited play around younger children.

Clearly, there is no justification for mixing children from these three developmental groups. Trying to rationalize a common play area for eco-



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conomic reasons is irresponsible and self-defeating, since unnecessary risk is the quickest path to injuries and lawsuits.

Match abilities with appropriate activities.

To minimize your risk and provide children of all ages with a safer, more satisfying play experience, you should consider separating age groups.

1. An *infants and toddlers* area for babies and children under the age of 2. This might include:

- Tunnel mazes and activity panels with “pull-up” handles for infants.
- Small multi-level playstructures for toddlers, with crawl tunnels and slides of modest height.

2. A *preschool area* for children between ages 2 and 5. This play area should include one or more of the following items:

- A *linked-playstructure* that is scaled to young children’s dimensions, with age-appropriate play activities such as crawl tunnels, small slides, enclosed play spaces, activity panels that develop fine motor skills, and decks of modest height.
- *Independent play events* such as spring riders, talk tubes, and “theme” climbers that promote active and fantasy play.
- A *sandbox with play tables* for manipulative play.
- *Learning wall clusters* at ground level for young children of all abilities.

3. A *school-age area* for 5- to 12-year-olds featuring:

- A *linked-playstructure* with decks and play activities geared to the body dimensions and play needs of older children.
- *Swings, fitness clusters* and other independent play

events designed to provide physical challenges.

- *Sports equipment* such as basketball outfits or tetherball.

Provide a buffer zone.

A buffer zone will provide clear separation between the age-specific play areas. This can be an area with benches and picnic tables, a pedestrian path, a decorative fence, or landscaping such as a hedge or a row of closely spaced evergreens.

For security, each play area should be visible from the other as well as from nearby benches. Having rest rooms and drinking fountains nearby (and within view) is also desirable.

Allocate your budget.

In building a playground, a good rule of thumb is to spend 60% of your budget on equipment for older children and 40% for toddlers and preschoolers. This ratio should be varied if infants are present or to suit other specific needs on your playground.

Obtain expert advice.

Your play equipment manufacturer should be able to help you design a total play area that serves all the ages of your users. Increasingly, outdoor playground equipment has been designed with specific age groups in mind. Landscape Structures offers specific play systems for children 2-5, 5-12 and for the pre-teen/teen years, as well as independent play items based on each age group’s interests and abilities.

Appropriate Landscape Structures systems and play events by age group

Infants*	Toddlers*	Ages 2-5*	Ages 5-12*
Infant Maze	Toddler Town	PlayShaper structures	PlayVenture, PlayBooster structures
Learning Walls	Clubhouses	Decks 48" and under	Decks up to 72"
	Train Engine and Cars	Low swings	Higher swings
	Independent Tunnels	Crawl tunnels	Corkscrew/Loop poles
	Talk Tubes	Cozy Climber	Climbers
		Bridges and ramps	All slides
		Balance beam	Upper-body equipment
		Single/double poly slides	Track rides
		Tunnel slide	Spring platform
		Activity panels	Fitness equipment
		Spring riders	Sports equipment

* Many of the examples listed can be used for other age groups. However, such events should be located in separate areas rather than being shared. Care must be taken to avoid crowding and traffic conflicts. Infants, in particular, should always be under close supervision.



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