

Playground Fall Zone Maintenance

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With the school year coming to an end and summer maintenance about to get underway, I wanted to remind you to be sure and provide adequate fill material on your playgrounds. Though often overlooked, this necessary precaution could represent the difference between an avoidable injury to a student and a serious injury resulting in a lawsuit.

More than 200,000 children are treated in U.S. hospital emergency rooms each year for injuries associated with playground equipment. The majority of these injuries occur when children fall from the equipment onto areas improperly covered with non-absorbent materials. Earth materials – such as soils and hard-pack dirt – and, of course, harder surfaces like asphalt and concrete, are unsuitable for use under and around playground equipment of any height.

To help decrease the frequency and severity of these injuries on playgrounds, schools should seek to follow guidelines provided by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. With a focus, in part, on regular routine playground maintenance, these recommendations emphasize the importance of providing sufficient protective surfacing around playground equipment. This shock-absorbing surface reduces the frequency and severity of injuries resulting from falls.

Adequate, proper fill materials include sand, gravel, shredded-wood products, and shredded tires. And while most of your playgrounds likely have some form of suitable fill material on the surface, an insufficient depth may represent a potential problem if not addressed. Below is a table developed by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission that outlines different types of fill materials available, with the depth of fill needed for each, based on the height of the playground equipment.

Handbook for Public Playground Safety				
Critical Heights of Tested Materials				
Material	Uncompressed Depth			Compressed Depth
	6 Inch	9 Inch	12 Inch	9 Inch
Wood Chips	7 ft	10 ft	11 ft	10 ft
Shredded Bark Mulch	6 ft	10 ft	11 ft	7 ft
Engineered Wood Fibers	6 ft	7 ft	12 ft	6 ft
Fine Sand	5 ft	5 ft	9 ft	5 ft
Coarse Sand	5 ft	5 ft	6 ft	4 ft
Fine Gravel	6 ft	7 ft	10 ft	6 ft
Medium Gravel	5 ft	5 ft	6 ft	5 ft
Shredded Tires	10-12 ft	N/A	N/A	N/A

While summer is a great time to check the material depth and add new product, this safety concern needs to be addressed multiple times throughout the year because the conditions of the fall zones can change. If you are looking for guidelines on your school's specific equipment, you can contact your playground equipment provider for more information; or, if you would like a complete copy of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission Handbook for Public Playground Safety that addresses this topic, please contact me directly.