

## Maintaining Outdoor Play Areas

### Introduction

“Play is great for children’s well-being and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.” – Health and Safety Executive

Play areas need not be completely free of risk, because navigating risk and understanding limitations is an important part of childhood development. They should however be carefully planned and managed to ensure unnecessary hazards which do not benefit development are not introduced, such as dangerous fall zoning, faulty equipment, lack of security or inappropriately designed equipment.

When the term “Play Area” is used in this document, it is referring to the fixed equipment, surfaces and fences/gates installed in play areas. It includes items provided for outdoor play such as swings, slides, roundabouts etc. even where such outdoor items are used indoors.

Both in and out of school, play is an important part of a child’s development. It helps children to understand risks, learn to engage with others, develop empathy, use critical thinking skills and improve dexterity.

Outdoor play equipment also helps to maintain physical health and encourages exploration, sharing and collaboration.

The use of play areas carries with it obvious risks, such as falls and collisions, but it is important that children’s ability to enjoy and develop through play is not hampered by over protection from risks.

Cuts, scrapes and even the occasional broken bone are almost inevitable in regularly used play areas, but this doesn’t mean we should do away with them or stop children using them as intended.

The risk management strategy for play areas should be proportionate to the risk and in balance with the benefit these areas provide. It should focus on three main factors;

1. Supervision of play areas
2. Maintenance and inspection
3. Educating pupils and adults about the risks

## **Where to locate your play area**

When choosing where to site a new piece of equipment or a play area, you have to consider a number of criteria.

### **Access**

For children and adults, including those with disabilities, adults with pushchairs and emergency services etc.

### **Access routes**

Hard surfaces should be non-slip so they are not affected by weather conditions. Avoid the need to cross vehicle routes or car parks to reduce risk of injury by traffic. Consider relationship to other buildings or facilities such as toilets.

Where there is a grassed area and a known high volume of users you will need to monitor the surface area.

### **Supervision**

Children will require some level of supervision, and the level of supervision increases the younger the children are. Risk assessments should be conducted to determine the appropriate number of people required to supervise. This should take into account observation points, lines of sight etc.

Supervising staff should be familiar with the equipment, the rules for use and of the ability of the children.

### **Security**

Is the site protected from vandalism or improper use outside of opening hours? Consider any location of water, drains and water features. Where playgrounds or play areas are surrounded by fences or contain fenced off structure such as ponds or fencing around play equipment the fences must be designed without openings or gaps in which children can become entrapped. This is always possible with palisade style fencing. Fences should be built to the relevant standard set out in BS1722 and the relevant parts of BS EN1176.

### **Topology**

The site should be level and have adequate drainage so as to reduce the risk of corrosion to equipment and surfaces. If the area is in shade it can significantly shorten

the lifespan of wooden equipment whilst also increasing the growth of moss which increases slip hazards.

In addition, overhanging branches (as well as poisonous plants / nettles) may also cause a hazard.

### **How to select play equipment.**

The first step to making play areas are safe to use for pupils, is to buy equipment that conforms to recognised safety standards. Play equipment should be safe by design – that is, user safety should have been considered and addressed as part of the process of designing the equipment. Ensuring that your equipment meets the British Standards related to play equipment is the best and easiest way to ensure that the equipment you provide is safe by design.

It is strongly recommended that you:

- Carry out due diligence checks on the suitability and competency of companies used when procuring equipment - [The Association of Play Industries \(API\)](#) is a trade association that provides a list of accredited manufacturers, suppliers and installers of playground equipment.
- Confirm with the chosen supplier, prior to purchase, that the play equipment is appropriate for the anticipated age ranges of the children who will use it.
- Seek confirmation, prior to purchase, that the play equipment and surrounding surfacing conforms to BS EN 1176.

If you decide to purchase play equipment and / or surfacing that does not comply with BS EN 1176, or is not installed by an API accredited company, you must ensure that you have:

- Ensured that an inspection has been carried out by a competent person independent of the supplier or installer before the equipment is used. The person undertaking the post installation inspection will need to have current [Register of Play Inspectors International \(RPII\)](#) 'Outdoor Annual' inspection accreditation.
- Evidence that the inspector has provided a report verifying any actions required and confirmation that the equipment complies with current good practice guidance and is considered safe by design.

The surfaces surrounding play equipment will also need to be suitable for reducing the likelihood of injury in the event of a fall. If the potential fall height from a piece of play equipment is greater than 600mm, it is recommended that the surrounding surface be made of an impact attenuating material.

This could include any of the following:

- Grass: This can be used underneath play equipment with a fall height less than 1.5m. However, it has little wear resistance or impact absorbency in dry conditions or when the soil becomes compacted. There should be a risk assessment carried out to determine if a good sward can be maintained, that areas of wear are strengthened, that there are few stones or hard objects to a depth of 150mm and confirm that the condition of the surface can be monitored.
- Loose-fill materials such as sand, wood chips and pea shingle to a depth of 200mm-300mm: They have good impact absorbency but disperse and break-down. They are not suitable where there is moving equipment, such as swings.
- Synthetic surfaces, including:
  - Tiles: Generally efficient, long-lasting and if tested to BS EN 1177 will be suitable where there is a fall height up to 3.2m.
  - Wet-poured surfaces: Generally efficient and long-lasting but expensive and very difficult to lay.
  - Layered: Generally efficient but require some maintenance and can be subject to vandalism and wear problems. Requires expert laying.

Where a manufactured impact attenuating surface is provided, you must ensure that you have copies of the appropriate test certificates which confirm that the surface meets with BS 1177, has been laid in the areas recommended by BS EN 1176 and in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

The extent of the surfacing around fixed play equipment will depend on the fall height as shown by some examples in the table below.

Fall height	Min. surface distance from edge of equipment
600mm - 1.5m	1.5m
2.0m	1.83m
2.5m	2.23m
3.0m	2.5m

You will also need to ensure that the surface itself isn't an additional hazard. Surfaces should be inspected regularly for defects which might create a hazard (e.g. cracks resulting in a trip hazard or sharp edges, lifting resulting in a trip hazard, etc.), or which might reduce its impact attenuation (e.g. a grass surface which has become dried out and compacted).

Due to the complexity of designing and installing safe play areas, it is strongly recommended that you seek advice from an appropriately competent and qualified person when selecting the type and extent of impact attenuating surface required beneath and around play equipment.

- Vertical posts should have a space no greater than 3.5 inches to avoid headentrapment.
- Fences should be at least 1000mm high.
- A horizontal rail or board is required at the top to prevent entrapment.
- Avoid gaps or ledges which can be used as footholds.
- Bottom rails or boards should be flush with the ground.

### **Glass Reinforced Plastics (GRP)**

GRP stands for Glass Reinforced Plastic. It is also called fibreglass, composite plastic or FRP. It is strong, extremely light and highly versatile. GRP behaves differently to the conventional thermoplastics that are used in everyday items.

It is a common material used for playground equipment due to its strength, durability, and weather resistance.

Glass reinforced plastics (GRP) should be tested to ISO 5470 and, if there is a risk of brittleness from UV radiation (sunlight), the manufacturer will specify the date on which the equipment should be taken out of use or replaced. It may however be kept in use beyond that date provided it is regularly inspected and certified safe for use by a person with sufficient detailed knowledge and experience of GRP products to make that decision.

### **What supervision is required?**

The DfE provides specific guidance on the supervision ratios for EYFS providers in the [statutory framework for the early years foundation stage](#).

[However, schools are expected to carry out their own risk assessment at the beginning of each academic year to determine the appropriate supervision ratios for each class.](#) Supervision ratios should be will vary depending on the age, behaviour and abilities of children within your group.

They will also vary depending on:

- The nature of the activities you are undertaking
- The types of equipment children have access to
- The line of sight across the play area
- The experience of the staff members
- The size and layout of the play area
- Any specific pupil needs
- Any specialist equipment needed

Remember, don't base your ratios on the minimum number you will need to oversee the playground and play areas. You also need to consider your response in an emergency. If there is a serious accident, one staff member might need to attend to the injured party, one may need to run for assistance from a first aider, and one might need to contact the emergency services.

Does this leave you with enough staff to supervise the remaining pupils before they are taken back to their classrooms?

### **What type of maintenance is required?**

Maintenance of play equipment takes several forms. Some can be carried out by staff in the school, and some may require some investment in training. Other maintenance requires the use of a competent contractor.

**Routine visual checks:** These can be carried out by any staff member supervising play, and should be conducted daily. The checks don't require detailed inspection, and consist of a brief walk through the play area to check for obvious signs of damage, decay of vandalism, and any foreign objects in the area such as bottles and cans, sharps or animal waste. The checks don't need to be recorded, but you should be able to evidence that you've instructed staff to carry them out and what to look for.

**Operational inspections:** these can also be carried out by a member of staff in the school, but require a more detailed inspection of the play area. They look in more detail at equipment to check for loose timbers, damaged surfaces, missing bolts, smoothness of moving parts etc. Training to carry out these inspections can be provided by companies like RoSPA, who also provide [additional details on what needs to be inspected](#). These inspections need to be recorded, and should be conducted every 1-3 months.

The table at the end of this document gives more guidance on this.

**Annual inspections:** These inspections look at equipment in detail, and will be accompanied by an assessment of risk for each piece of equipment along with a list of remedial actions. They should be completed by a competent and qualified contractor who is independent from the school.

The inspection will be carried out in line with BSEN 1176, the British and European standards for play areas and play equipment, and BSEN 1177, which covers impact softening surfaces installed around play equipment.

The annual inspections will highlight risks such as finger/head/arm trapping risks, decay in timber, shock-absorption in surfaces, and proximity to other hazards.

### **Who can maintain a play area?**

Routine daily and operational inspections can be carried out by a suitably competent staff member. Training providers can be found on the [RPII website](#) if additional training is needed.

Annual inspections should only be completed by a competent and qualified independent inspector. You should use a contractor with an RPII Annual Contractor qualification. Inspectors with this qualification have to hold both Public Liability and Professional indemnity insurance, a current DBS, and sign and abide by the RPII code of conduct.

### **How do I know if someone is competent?**

Inspector competency can be checked on the [RPII website](#). You will need their RPII inspector number which can be found on their ID card.

When checking an inspector, you should ensure they are qualified to carry out the work you are asking them to do. RPII Inspectors will often have a range of qualifications that allow them to carry out specific types of inspections. It's important to check what work they are qualified to do before you use them.

You should check prior to arranging the inspection, and request to see their ID card when they arrive on site to ensure the registration number matches.

When checking an inspector online, you will also be able to see their DBS expiry date. Using inspectors who do not hold the relevant qualifications and registration could mean that they are not competent to carry out the works, meaning they may miss failures in equipment or carry out inadequate repairs, or do not carry the required insurance policies in the event of a civil claim.

### **New and old equipment**

The current British and European standards relating to play areas were released in 2020, and when purchasing new equipment for the school, you should always ensure it has been designed to conform to BS EN 1176. Manufacturers / retailers should be able to provide evidence, and the equipment should carry a BSI Kitemark.

The standards are not, however, retrospective or a legal requirement, and following your inspection it is likely that some or all equipment that predates the standards will have some non-compliances raised. You may also have some bespoke play equipment built by local makers which does not comply with British Standards.

In either case, this does not mean that you can no longer use the equipment, but you should take reasonably practicable steps to reduce the risk posed by these non-compliances. This might include replacing chains to avoid finger trapping, adding additional rungs to avoid leg/arm trapping, covering exposed fastenings or adding rubber edges for improved grip or cushioning. Experienced inspectors familiar with the standards will be able to give practical guidance on reducing risk without having to remove equipment in most cases.

### **Portable and permanent socketed goals**

Goal posts are often missed from annual inspections of sports equipment because they are located outside of the main PE areas. However, they can still pose a significant risk if not properly managed and must undergo regular maintenance and inspection the same as other play and sports equipment.

### **Routine inspections**

Routine visual checks should be carried out before each use. The routine visual inspection enables identification of obvious hazards resulting from vandalism, misuse or general degradation. During a visual inspection, you should check for:

- Damage to the goal frame
- Lack of sufficient anchorage / instability of equipment
- Damaged or missing fixtures
- Damaged nets or damaged/missing net fixings
- Correct attachments of net to goal frame

If any inspection raises concerns over stability / strength, the goal should be taken out of use tested by a competent contractor.

### **Operational inspections**

An operational inspection should be carried out at least every 6 months, or at a greater frequency if indicated by the manufacturer's instructions. Operational inspections should be recorded and carried out in line with the table below.

If any inspection raises concerns over stability / strength, the goal should be taken out of use tested by a competent contractor.



Control points (where applicable)	Inspection method		Criteria for assessing results	Socketed goal	Portable goal
	Visual	Manual			
Stability	X	X	When the structure is shaken in game play position, there is no tip-over	X	X
Marking	X	-	Present	X	X
Fixture onto the support (wall/floor)	X	X	No slack in the fixtures other than the slack naturally present due to design or assembly	X	X
Folding and hoisting system	-	X	No working failure when lifting, dropping or folding away the goal.	(X)	(X)
Netting and net fixings	X	X	No defective fixtures and / or no mesh holes liable to generate a risk.	(X)	(X)
Uprights and crossbar	X	X	No slack other than the functional slack other than the functional slack present due to design or assembly	X	X
Location changes and transport	X	X	No inadvertent release or unintended collapse in the carrier system.	-	X
Lockdown in position	X	X	No inadvertent release of the lockdown system.	-	(X)
Anchoring / ballast system	X	X	Sufficient and securely located.	-	(X)
Assembly / screw-set	X	X	None of the assembly screws show any sign of loosening.	X	X

Control points (where applicable)	Inspection method		Criteria for assessing results	Socketed goal	Portable goal
	Visual	Manual			
Corrosion	X	-	No corrosion capable of generating a risk for users.	X	X
Support framework (backing frame and foldaway structure)	X	X	No deformation or breakage during working use.	X	X
Netting support	X	X	No deformation or breakage.	(X)	(X)
Padding	X	X	No damage and securely located.	(X)	(X)
Entrapment	X	X	No risk of entrapment in the goal frame or support framework.	X	X
Key X – to be inspected (x) – to be inspected if fitted					

## Main inspection

Main inspections should be carried out at least annually unless a greater frequency is indicated by the manufacturer's instructions or national regulations / standards. The main inspection should be recorded, and carried out in line with the table below, by a competent contractor.

A report containing the following information should be prepared as part of the main inspection.

1. Identification of the issuing body
2. Place(s) and date(s) of the inspection
3. Identification of the item(s) inspected
4. Name, address and signature of the inspector
5. A record of all defects found

All inspections should be recorded and reported to the operator. The operator should establish a clear identification system for each goal or goal system.

If any inspection raises concerns over stability / strength, the goal should be taken out of use tested by a competent contractor.

Control points (where applicable)	Inspection method		Criteria for assessing results	Socketed goal	Portable goal
	Visual	Manual			
Stability	X	X	When the structure is shaken in game play position, there is no tip-over	X	X
Marking	X	-	Present	X	X
Fixture onto the support (wall/floor)	X	X	No slack in the fixtures other than the slack naturally present due to design or assembly	X	X
Folding and hoisting system	-	X	No working failure when lifting, dropping or folding away the goal.	(X)	(X)
Netting and net fixings	X	X	No defective fixtures and / or no mesh holes liable to generate a risk.	(X)	(X)
Uprights and crossbar	X	X	No slack other than the functional slack other than the functional slack present due to design or assembly	X	X
Location changes and transport	X	X	No inadvertent release or unintended collapse in the carrier system.	-	X
Lockdown in position	X	X	No inadvertent release of the lockdown system.	-	(X)
Anchoring / ballast system	X	X	Sufficient and securely located.	-	(X)
Assembly / screw-set	X	X	None of the assembly screws show any sign of loosening.	X	X

Control points (where applicable)	Inspection method		Criteria for assessing results	Socketed goal	Portable goal
	Visual	Manual			
Corrosion	X	-	No corrosion capable of generating a risk for users.	X	X
Support framework (backing frame and foldaway structure)	X	X	No deformation or breakage during working use.	X	X
Netting support	X	X	No deformation or breakage.	(X)	(X)
Padding	X	X	No damage and securely located.	(X)	(X)
Entrapment <sup>b</sup>	X	X	No risk of entrapment when handling the uprights or other goal components.	X	X
Checks record	X		Existence of the records file and its content (check record, frequency schedules etc.)	X	X
Stability <sup>a</sup>			The goal should not tip over during the test	X	X
Sth <sup>a</sup> rengt			During the test, the goal should not show any signs of breakage or deformation.	X	Sth <sup>a</sup> rengt
Surface finish	X	X	No components protruding ≥8mm without protective sheathing and no splinters.	X	Surface finish
Net and net fixings	X	X	No defective fixtures and / or no mesh holes liable to generate a risk.  No risk of entrapment and no metal cup hooks and metal spring cup hooks.	X	Net and net fixings

Control points (where applicable)	Inspection method		Criteria for assessing results	Socketed goal	Portable goal
	Visual	Manual			
Entrapment <sup>b</sup>	X	X	No risk of entrapment in the goal frame or support framework.	X	Entrapment <sup>b</sup>
<p>Key</p> <p>X – to be inspected</p> <p>(x) – to be inspected if fitted</p> <p><sup>a</sup> These tests should only be conducted if the stability of the goal cannot be determined visually</p> <p><sup>b</sup> If the structure have been changed for initial supply the entrapment will require alternative testing</p>					

## Operational inspection of play equipment guidance

Inspect (if present)	Instructions on what to check when inspecting the play equipment
Timber	Is there evidence of damaged timber surfaces, missing timber components, or air cracking exceeding 10mm?
	Are there any concerns about the structural integrity (push / pull supporting posts to judge structural integrity)?
Metal	Is there evidence of bending, corrosion, worn, damaged or sharp edges?
	Are there any concerns about the structural integrity (push / pull supporting posts to judge structural integrity)?
Concrete footings	Are they exposed?
Fixings	Are there any bolts and fixings that are missing, unsecured or in poor condition?
	Are there any exposed ends of tubing that should be covered by plugs or caps?
Chains, ropes	Are they in poor condition (i.e. climbing ropes worn, frayed, kinked, twisted or broken, chain-links not intact)?
Swings	Are seats damaged or in poor condition?
Slides	Are there any cracks or sharp edges?
Tyres	Are there any splits or exposed wire, excessive wear or evidence of vandalism?
Barriers / guardrails	Are there any missing barriers or guardrails?
Surfacing	Is it in poor condition with areas of excessive wear or areas where seams / edges are creating a trip hazard?

Inspect (if present)	Instructions on what to check when inspecting the play equipment
Surfacing	Is it in poor condition with areas of excessive wear or areas where seams / edges are creating a trip hazard?
	Are there any sharp materials present?
	Grass: is there is a lack of grass and evidence of exposed, compacted soil?
	Rubber (grass) matting or tiles: are there any missing sections, separation between sections or edges presenting a trip hazard?
	Rubber (grass) matting or tiles: are there any ground anchoring pegs that are protruding above the matting?
	Natural loose fill (sand / wood chip / gravel): is this thinning beneath equipment (should be between 200mm–300mm)?
Signage	Is there any evidence that any original signage / instructions are missing?
	Is there a need for any additional safety / instructional signage?
	Are any signs / instructions illegible?

## Operational inspection of play equipment record

RAISE-AP Termly fixed play equipment inspection

List equipment (with photograph) and verify that it is either in good condition or highlight any remedial actions that need to be rectified.

Equipment name	Photo of equipment	Comments / action required
[Example] Basket swing	Add small photo to aid identification	No issues

Inspected by (name)		Signature		Date	
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Reviewed: September 2025

Approved by: **RAISE-AP** Educational Directors, September 2025

Next Review Date: September 2027