

Climbing Equipment Alert!

Recent Markel claims indicate an alarming trend: children under age four are falling from monkey bars and other climbing equipment. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) "Handbook for Playground Safety," children under age four should not be allowed on climbing equipment that requires them to use only their upper body. Climbing equipment includes arch climbers, sliding poles, chain or net climbers, overhead horizontal ladders, overhead rings, dome climbers, parallel bars, balance beams, cable walks, suspension bridges, and spiral climbers.

Studies indicate that children younger than age four may not have the upper body strength to use such equipment, making them more susceptible to a fall. This age restriction should be part of your playground safety program. However, since all children develop differently, it is important to assess the appropriateness of an activity even if the child is older.

Close proximity supervision, where you stand close enough to a child to catch him or her if necessary, is essential when children play on climbing equipment. Instruct children to tell you if they feel they are about to fall, and be prepared to catch them.

For preschoolers age four and older, make sure climbing equipment is no more than 60 inches high. For school-age children, climbing equipment should be no more than 84 inches high. Ensure center-to-center spacing on horizontal ladder rungs is no more than 12 inches apart for preschoolers age four and older. For older children, spacing should be greater than 9 inches apart but no more than 15 inches apart.

All playground equipment, indoors and out, should have a minimum of 12 inches of protective ground cover or unitary material that meets ASTM F1292-04: "Standard Specification for Impact Attenuation of Surfacing Materials within the Use Zone of Playground Equipment." Ground cover should extend at least 6 feet in all directions.

Other key points to consider:

- Climbing equipment should allow children to descend as easily as they ascend.
- Rung ladder slopes should be no greater than 75 to 90 degrees. The CPSC recommends a rung diameter of 1.25 inches to benefit the weakest child. Stepladder slopes should be between 50 and 75 degrees and stairway slopes should be no greater than 50 degrees.
- Check handrails frequently, making sure they are secure.

Our claims history reflects a few incidents where children have fallen backward when climbing vertical ladders attached to indoor play equipment. When using a ladder that has a 90-degree slope, position an adult at the base of the ladder to help the child climb and catch the child if needed.