

# Poorer neighborhoods often have less safe playgrounds

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Chicago study found many needed simple fixes like adding more wood chips.

(HealthDay)—Most playgrounds are safe for children, but many of them—particularly those in poorer neighborhoods—need improvement, a Chicago-area survey found.

The good news is that many of the safety issues, such as increasing the depth of wood chips covering playground surfaces, are easily correctable. And a softer landing can mean the difference between a harmless fall and one that causes serious injury, an expert said.

When researchers later followed up on the less-than-safe playgrounds, many of the problems had been fixed.

"We gave our information to the park district, and they were able to improve the quality of playgrounds pretty dramatically," said senior study author Dr. Karen Sheehan, medical director of the [Injury Prevention](#) and Research Center at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

"We're also making this data available to the communities so they know what's going on. It's often about mobilizing political will. We need to recognize that access to safe playgrounds is part of the [obesity epidemic](#) solution. If we can get kids outside with a nice place to play, they'll be more active," Sheehan said.

The study appeared online Jan. 21 and will be published in the February print issue of *Pediatrics*, along with an editorial by Dr. Gary Smith, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

"Playgrounds are more than just some equipment and mulch. Playgrounds and green spaces can pull neighborhoods together," Smith said. "They can help keep kids active and prevent [childhood obesity](#). Play helps decrease unwanted behaviors and helps improve performance in the classroom. Play is a child's occupation. And, playgrounds are a place where they can challenge and push themselves to grow physically and socially."

There are about 500 playgrounds in the Chicago area, according to study background information. The researchers assessed 467 of those playgrounds in 2009 and 459 in 2010. In 2011, the researchers also went back and reevaluated the 154 playgrounds that had failed the 2010 survey.

Playground surfacing was the biggest problem. Almost one in four of these playgrounds didn't have proper surfacing, which should be either a uniform surface made from rubber or other energy-absorbing material or

loose-fill [wood chips](#).

"If a playground is done correctly with the appropriate surfacing, when a climbing child overreaches and falls, he or she can just get up and brush themselves off, rather than paying the price of a broken bone or a traumatic brain injury," Smith explained.

The study found that in playgrounds with a loose-fill surface, most didn't have the recommended 9 to 12 inches of fill in place. But nearly all of the playgrounds did have cover over the concrete footings used to secure playground equipment, and provided a 6-foot use zone of soft surfacing.

Rust or peeling paint was a significant problem at about two-thirds of the playgrounds.

The researchers also found that in areas where more children live, there were more failing playgrounds, yet fewer playgrounds overall.

Similarly, neighborhoods with a larger percentage of the population living below the poverty level had more failing playgrounds, and fewer playgrounds overall. Areas with more blacks had more failing playgrounds, and areas with more Hispanics had fewer playgrounds, according to the study.

Sheehan said that a lack of money might be an issue in some of these communities, although she said the parks district was working on parks in all areas. In some cases, she said, the lack of available playgrounds has to do with the areas. There may be a lot of industrial buildings and not a lot of free space. If industrial areas are abandoned, some may be contaminated, she noted.

Editorial author Smith said increasing accessibility to parks and playgrounds often involves unique partnerships. He said in Columbus,

which has many scrap tire dumps, they were able to combine an environmental program that encouraged scrap tire recycling with playground resurfacing. Not only did that make the playgrounds safer and more accessible to children with disabilities, it also reduced the mountains of scrap tires in the Columbus area, he said.

Both Sheehan and Smith said the most important safety aspect in a playground is its surface.

When the researchers went back in 2011 to reevaluate [playgrounds](#) that had failed, they found that 40 percent now received a passing grade. They also found overall improvement, with average scores going from 61 percent to 67 percent.

**More information:** Learn more about playground safety from the [Child Injury Prevention Alliance](#).

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