

GATES AND FENCES IN PLAYGROUNDS

Introduction

This fact sheet is written as the author has become aware that there is much misunderstanding about the need for gates and fences at unsupervised playgrounds.

It is written by Rob Wheway who has been inspecting playgrounds throughout the British Isles for over 20 years.

The belief is that it is always necessary to fence playgrounds. The reasons given are to keep dogs out or to keep children in and prevent them “escaping” or running out into a hazard such as a busy road. There is also a belief that playgrounds must have two gates so that a bullied child can escape.

A boundary can make a playground appear tidier and more defined, though this of course may not necessarily be a fence. It can also denote areas of responsibility.

Problems with Gates and Fences

Gates are not without risk themselves. They do cause injuries to children from children running into a swinging gate following another child (usually a head injury) or from pinching their fingers either at the open side or at the hinged side where the gate can in effect, be a large pair of shears. There can be additional risks of latches and similar, projecting often at a child's eye level.

It is also not unknown for people to use a fenced playground as a paddock in which to contain their dog or for dogs to become trapped inside playgrounds.

Fences and gates are also expensive both on installation and maintenance. On a small playground they can be the most expensive item and costs can be expected of a few thousand pounds. In addition the gate itself has often quite high maintenance costs as it is a moving item and children, as we did when we were their age, still swing on them. A gate also creates a very narrow point of entrance consequently grass very quickly becomes muddy and worn which means a path or at least a hard patch becomes desirable. If a hard patch is installed it is not unusual for it to quickly become a trip point.

A gate can also create difficulties for a wheelchair user (who may be an accompanying parent or grandparent as well as a child) or for a parent with children in a buggy particularly if it is a double buggy.

Guidance

It is suggested that the following are used for guidance:

1. *Is there a hazard such as a busy road or canal nearby and is it near enough for a child to reach it un-noticed?*

If the canal or busy road is within 5 or 10 metres, then a fence is probably desirable. If on the other hand the distance is 30 or 40 metres then it may well not be.

If the road is sufficiently safe that children would normally expect to cross without restriction to visit a friend, go to the shop, etc., then again a fence may not be necessary.

2. *Are dogs a problem?*

If dogs are an occasional nuisance rather than a regular problem, then a fence is probably not necessary. The risks from disease from the faeces will probably be no greater than on any other green space, football pitch, or similar which in themselves are not fenced.

Dog grids are not now generally thought desirable as if they are placed the correct way up, they are a hazard for push- and wheelchairs as the wheels can get jammed or they can force an unexpected change of direction. They can also be quite slippery for a pedestrian and quite a nasty surface to fall on. If the grids are placed the wrong way up, they are not such a problem for push- or wheelchair users but neither are they a deterrent for dogs.

3. *Is there a problem with people cycling straight into the playground and being a hazard to other users?*

In this case a barrier at the gate or dog-leg entrance may be more appropriate rather than a gate. As it has no moving parts it will cost less to maintain.

4. *Does the playground attract specific users?*

The playground may be situated close to a nursery school where it is used by a high proportion of parents with toddlers or the playground is regularly used by children with an impairment which means that they are not aware of the risks of running away. In these circumstances, it may push the balance in favour of installing fences and gates rather than leaving the play area open.

5. *Are two gates necessary?*

The majority of small playgrounds do not have two gates and the fear of bullying is greater than the reality. A second gate will cost extra both in capital and maintenance and, if there is an adjacent hazard, it doubles the chance of one gate being left open. Where there is knowledge that bullying is a problem at a playground, then two gates may be necessary, otherwise the cost probably exceeds the benefits.

Where the playground is large it may be desirable to have gates at different sides just to reduce the travel distance for the children. Research has shown that children's travel distances are relatively short and making them walk an extra 50 or 60 yards may make them feel vulnerable if they feel threatened and therefore discourage them from going to the playground.

6. *Is there a movement conflict?*

The playground may be adjacent to another facility or in a desire line between two other facilities, or what would otherwise be a natural route across a park. In these circumstances a fence or at least a line of barriers may be necessary to avoid people walking into a hazard such as the arc of a swing.

Conclusions

Fences and gates around playgrounds are not automatically necessary.

They should be installed only on the basis of a Risk Assessment. In making the Risk Assessment a balance has to be struck between the benefits and risks to the children of installing the fences and gates.

It is also legitimate to take into account the cost of installing fences and gates.

On the basis of 'Reasonable Practicability' (Health and Safety at Work 1974 etc. Act), even if there is a slight benefit in favour of installing fences and gates, if the cost is disproportionate to the increase in safety then the fences and gates need not be installed.

Rob Wheway MSc, MEd, MILAM, MCMI, FRSA
Director
Children's Play Advisory Service
10 September 2010