



Get out and Play. Every day.

Families can make playground visits safer during the pandemic

JULY 1, 2020 — After months of closing or being too snow-covered to use, playgrounds at schools and public parks reopened in most communities for the summer. Families are definitely returning to play.

“During this pandemic, our outdoor spaces have become more valuable than ever,” said Josh Durand, director of Anchorage Parks and Recreation. “These are opportunities to have some reprieve. Outdoor experiences can wash away some of the stress in life. This is good for children and parents alike.”

Even though the yellow caution tape came down from playgrounds in Anchorage and elsewhere, it’s still important for families to be careful when bringing their children to swing, slide or climb. Gathering close to others can increase the chances of spreading COVID-19 from person to person. That includes kids playing and yelling near each other, as well as parents from different households hanging out together as they watch.

“Parents standing next to each other chitchatting are also at risk,” said Dr. Anne Zink, Alaska’s Chief Medical Officer.

Parks departments across Alaska are putting in extra time to clean playgrounds. Even so, you can help set expectations for your family to prevent the spread of illness. Show up with your own hand sanitizer and tell your kids that they’ll be using it before and after playing. Bring face coverings for everyone, and put them on before coming within 6 feet of others. That includes you, too, Mom and Dad. Let your children know that they can have fun playing with people in their household or [small social bubble](#), but they’ll need to keep away from other children. And yes, that will feel strange to children who just want to play together.

“It’s challenging because kids don’t really participate in social distancing,” Zink said. “They need to interact. That’s who they are.”

You can’t remove all of the risk of spreading illness at playgrounds, but you can definitely minimize it, Zink said. When planning a playground visit, put together a small play group that is your [new social bubble](#). Then, always go with them to the playground and only play with that group, she said. Choose to visit playgrounds when they’re least crowded. Zink also suggested

trying something new. One family had playground equipment in their backyard and decided to invite a few other families who could use it, one at a time. That way, the kids in each family could enjoy time at the playground without risking interaction with other kids.



Zink acknowledged it's hard to clean everything you might touch at a playground. That's why some parents, like Paula Wright of Anchorage, have decided not to return to them right now.

"I just think it's impossible with so many kids to keep the surfaces clean," said Wright, a mother of two young boys. It's also hard to keep your distance from others while there.

"To me, it's a big challenge that we can easily avoid by going other places."

Zink also encouraged considering options other than playgrounds: Explore the woods. Go for a hike in our wide open spaces. Wright's family built a swing in the backyard. They've been hiking and biking on trails, gone camping more than usual, and looked for big fields where the boys could run.

"We live in the coolest playground in the entire world," Zink said.

Below are related Questions and Answers about using playgrounds during the pandemic.

What are the important reminders for preventing the spread of COVID-19 at parks and playgrounds?

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) recommends hanging posters and signs in parks and playgrounds](#) to share these reminders:

- **Wear face coverings when possible.** They're most important when you or your children might get within 6 feet of others. Face coverings shouldn't be worn by children younger than 2 and anyone who has trouble breathing.
- **Stay home if you are sick or do not feel well.**
- **Stay at least 6 feet away from others.**
- **Cover coughs and sneezes** with a tissue or the inside of your elbow. Throw out tissues in the trash.
- **Wash hands often** with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing.
 - If soap and water are not available, **use hand sanitizer** that contains at least 60% alcohol and rub hands together until dry. Young children should be supervised to ensure they are using sanitizer safely.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth** with unwashed hands.

How are Alaska parks departments cleaning playgrounds during the pandemic?

Parks departments across the state are busy cleaning and hanging COVID-19 signs in playgrounds this summer. [The Fairbanks North Star Borough Parks and Recreation Department](#) is following the [CDC guidelines for parks](#), which call for routine cleaning in outdoor areas instead of disinfecting all surfaces, said David Jones, the parks maintenance manager.

“Spraying disinfectant on sidewalks and in parks is not an efficient use of disinfectant supplies and has not been proven to reduce the risk of COVID-19 to the public,” the CDC stated. “You should continue existing cleaning and hygiene practices for outdoor areas.”

For the Fairbanks staff, that means starting their work days early each morning, seven days a week, by visiting playgrounds before the kids arrive. The parks department maintains about 30 properties in Fairbanks, and 19 of them have playground equipment, Jones said. The staff visits as many as possible daily, cleaning with soap and water and with diluted bleach on some surfaces, he said. Some parks have restrooms, and the Fairbanks parks department cleans those twice a day. Keeping up with that schedule has been challenging because the department is understaffed right now, Jones said. That's because the department couldn't recruit seasonal staff when the pandemic began this spring. They've tried to maximize what they can routinely clean by temporarily removing some items and storing them for later.

“I pulled a lot of benches and picnic tables to reduce the amount of surfaces you clean,” Jones said.

Durand in Anchorage oversees a large group of properties: [224 parks with 82 playgrounds](#). Before parks reopened in early May, his staff power washed each playground. He said it's not possible for his staff to clean each playground daily, so they are cleaning them as needed. They plan to power wash several times this year with a disinfecting solution. The Anchorage staff also added hand sanitizer this summer to each porta potty in parks and playgrounds, Durand said.

What kind of cleaning supplies should families use before, during and after visiting playgrounds?

Parks department staff are routinely cleaning playgrounds, but as Jones pointed out, they can't control how clean playgrounds remain throughout the day. Families should bring hand wipes and sanitizer, and make sure everyone uses it before and after playing. They could use soap or water instead, but often those are found in public restrooms and Zink recommends not using those restrooms if possible given all of the high-touch surfaces that need regular cleaning. Consider bringing disinfecting wipes to clean surfaces you'd touch, sit on, or eat on — like swings, picnic tables and benches.

Should children and parents wear face coverings while at playgrounds?

You often don't see children and parents wearing face coverings at playgrounds right now, but Zink recommends that they do so when it's not just their family playing there. At playgrounds, children tend to get close together on equipment. Parents tend to gather and talk. Playing closely and gathering decreases the distance between people, which can increase the chances of spreading illness. Keeping that distance is important, but so is wearing face coverings when you are talking or playing closer than 6 feet away from others.

Visit the [COVID-19 in Alaska](#) website for updated information for the state.

Read the entire [Play Every Day blog online](#).

Play Every Day is a campaign with the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services to help Alaska children grow up at a healthy weight and encourage families to be physically active and choose healthy drinks. For more information, visit www.playeveryday.alaska.gov.