

## SOFT PLAY CENTRES FUN AND SAFE is the aim



Play has an important role in children's lives, it is where they learn & test their abilities and it is also critical for overall growth of any child. A Soft play facility is a part of many Family Entertainment Centres, Theme Parks and Restaurants and generally includes slides, padded floors, suspended elements, plastic tubes for crawling through, climbing nets & ball pools. The size, levels & number of play elements will vary in each soft play area dependant on the space available.

In this article we will be covering the safe practices you should be developing in order to manage an indoor soft play area so that children can enjoy the experience without risk of injury.

### **INJURIES IN SOFT PLAY:**

Most common type of injuries occur in soft play are Ankle sprain, shoulder injuries, struck by other object, children throwing objects on each other & collision with other children.

It is not necessary to keep your soft play centre at risk when potential hazards can be identified and controlled by carrying out a detailed risk assessment. Whilst every Soft Play area will be different in size, shape, and activities there are a number of "Best Practice" steps you can adopt to ensure your operations is aiming for a low risk experience.

### **Your Soft Play Entrance & Exit Areas**

**Entry restrictions:** Play areas can be designed for children of a specific age group, height or sometimes weight as well. **Manufacturer's recommendations** must be considered carefully in this regard, it is always best to have an adult accompany smaller children for regular monitoring.

Chances of injuries will be less if you set restrictions for children of the same height or age group to play at the same time, as smaller children are at a disadvantage in a collision with a larger child. Hence age & height must be considered areas part of your entry restrictions and signage.



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- **Standard Operating Procedures & Training:** You should always have your Standard Operating Procedures documented and ready to train your staff on. It is imperative that the team managing your Soft Play area understand the risks, the rules of entry, the maximum capacity and also how to handle and remove unruly children. All your rules should also clearly be written on your signage at the entrance to ensure visitors are able to read and understand these in advance.
- **Physical Barriers:** Fixed fencing around the play area and controlled entry and exit points are important to ensure you have a clear barrier for where the children can play and only the children that have gained entry from the allocated entry point are able to be within the Soft Play Area. This is both to ensure you control overcrowding and also to prevent any children wondering off and away from the safe environment they have been left in.
- **Rules of Entry:** It is important that your staff know and continually tell the children that they must leave their shoes, and any loose/sharp objects outside the play area. This is to make certain that these items do not result in an accident within the Soft Play area. This should also be one of the rules clearly highlighted on your signage.
- **Maximum Occupancy Limit:** Overcrowding will result in a higher number of incidents and accidents; you need to know the **Manufacturer's recommendations** and ensure that your maximum occupancy at any one time does not exceed this. To know and plan your maximum occupancy will also help when you are planning your staff numbers and scheduling.
- **Time Limits:** It is advisable to set time limits and have control measures in place to ensure children are safely removed from the play area when their authorized parent/guardian comes to collect them. This will also allow you to control your maximum occupancy at any one time and will in addition ensure the parent/guardian know at what time they must be near the exit to collect their child/children.
- **Exit Procedure:** You should have a clear exit area that is separate to your entrance area. This is to avoid overcrowding during busy periods and will also help to ensure you have a clear and safe area for children to leave the Soft Play area and for their authorized parent/guardian to collect them from.



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### Your Soft Play Internal Area (where the play happens)

- **Soft and Safe with Foam Padding:** Every metal or sharp part of your Soft Play area must be well covered with foam padding. Once a child has entered your play area, they should be in a very safe, soft environment with lots of soft matting in the landing areas to ensure all impact and hazards are removed. It is also critical that your safety officers are checking all the internal areas, foam padding and floor mats daily to replace them as necessary due to wear and tear.
- **Inaccessible Areas:** Any gaps, unnecessary openings must be covered/protected to avoid fall & entrapment incidents. Also consider use of double netting in areas that create fall hazards to avoid unwanted climbs.
- **Shoes Free Zone:** Entry with shoes must not be allowed in any Soft Play area. It will be helpful to maintain hygiene and removes the risk of accidents between the children, in addition you should consider giving each child grip socks to help further reduce the risk of slips and falls.
- **Lighting:** Your Soft Play Area must be well lit and allow for clear visibility and supervision by your team and the responsible adults.
- **Emergency Response Plan:** Have a clear Emergency Response Plan documented and your staff trained on how to manage this. You should consider the possible emergencies of Soft Play areas, commonly these are risk of fire, children fighting, a missing child, or an accident between two children bumping into one another. All of these are instances when a complete evacuation or partial evacuation of play area may be required and your teams in charge must be trained on how to correctly handle this type of situation.
- **Play area Elements:** Additional fun and safe elements such as soft barriers, humps & suspended cylinders can also work as speed breakers in a Soft Play area and will help prevent children from running at high speed or creating collision risk. These soft elements can be placed within your play area corridors, corners, junctions or wherever a child is required to slow down.





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- **Ball Pool:** A Ball Pool with a low number of balls is unsafe, these balls are required to provide soft landing for the children. Also bear in mind when training your staff that little children may hide under the balls so they should always keep a close eye on this part of play area and continually let the children know that this is not allowed. If they see this happen, they should be able to remedy and remove the child from under the balls to avoid any accidents when other children are play and jumping in this area.
- **Slides:** Slides are safe if kids are careful when using them. Adult supervision is critical to ensure the proper use of slides. Every child must be briefed on safe sliding technique:
  - Always slide down with feet first and sitting up
  - Cross the legs while sliding down
  - Sliding down headfirst, or on the back or stomach should never be allowed.
  - Only one child should be on the slide platform at a time, and kids should not slide down in groups.
  - Kids should always check that the bottom of the slide is clear before sliding down. When they reach the bottom, they should get off and move away from the end of the slide, so it is clear for other kids to slide down.
  - Children should take one step at a time and should not run with high speed when climbing the steps/ladder to the top of the slide.
  - They should not climb up the sliding board itself to get to the top.
- **Signage:** Your signage should be noticeably clear on height and age restrictions and it is always best when communicating with children to use pictures with clear depiction of all of your DO's or Don'ts. The above list should always be part of your signage to for a Soft Play area.

### General Best Practice Recommendations

- **Supervision:** A high level of supervision is key factor in play areas. Most incidents can be prevented or at a minimum better controlled if children are continuously supervised.
- **Routine Checks:** Routine checks and daily maintenance will identify early defects that must be fixed immediately. In case of major defects, the Soft Play Area should be closed and barricaded until the issues have been fixed to prevent children access.





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- **Cleaning & Hygiene:** Cleaning to remove dirt and disinfection for virus/bacteria are the key to maintain hygiene of any play area. You should always source and only use child friendly cleaning materials. Regular disinfection throughout the day is in today's world not just a good idea but a necessity, make sure you have regularly scheduled these throughout the day. To clear the entire area properly there should be staggered times throughout each day when the play area is closed, cleaned and then re-opened.
- **Child Safeguarding Policy:** To ensure children's wellbeing management can consider a policy on child safeguarding. Child safeguarding includes proactive measures to keep all children under supervision and actions to prevent physical, sexual, emotional abuse and maltreatment perpetrated by anyone. The impacts of abuse on a child's physical, mental and emotional health can be severe and long lasting which is why this policy could be useful in addressing & controlling many risks which are do need to be addressed.

The advice we have shared here is based on a high-level view of best practice when operating a Soft Play Area. It is however particularly important that you speak with and follow the recommendations of the Manufacturer who has supplied your Soft Play Equipment. They should also share an operations manual with you that you can use to create your own Operating Procedures, Staff Training Plan and all associated documents to ensure your safety measures meet the requirements of your individual country, the regulations of your local authorities and the recommendations of your manufacturer.

Soft Play areas can be a very appealing attraction for many children and their families. They are spaces that when managed properly give children a place they will want to spend plenty of time in. Of course in any space where a number of children play at the same time, it is common to see a lot of excitement and energy, we hope this articles helps you with some hints & tips to make sure your Soft Play Area is a safe and fun place for all your customers.