

Play Time

What you need to know about using engineered wood fiber on your playground

By Jeff Mrakovich

Engineered wood fiber (EWF) is still a commonly used playground and trail surface because of its low initial cost, its good impact-attenuating characteristics, and its ability to be knit together for accessibility purposes. Those terms are commonly used along with this popular surface, but another term that comes to mind is maintenance. Ask most playground owners and operators and it's commonly thought that more maintenance is just a trade-off for the low initial cost of EWF.

But for Zeager Bros., a national manufacturer of EWF located in Middletown, Pennsylvania, it's more so a matter of educating playground owners and operators about products that can lower the care and maintenance time commonly tied to loose-fill surfaces, including EWF, and how to best use these products to get the most for their dollars spent.

Take, for instance, wear mats, which are often used in high-traffic areas, such as swing and slide exits, to help reduce holes and limit maintenance. But does installing some wear mats in a few areas on the playground satisfy a playground owner's responsibility of keeping the playground safe and accessible? Not exactly. Here are a few questions to ask the manufacturer before you purchase wear mats.

How do I install wear mats so they will meet accessibility guidelines?

A common mistake is that most manufacturers say to place their mats on the surface or, even worse, instruct users to bury them beneath the wood fiber. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines call for entrance and exits of accessible equipment to be virtually level (less than 2 percent). Zeager offers wear mats that have flaps that are anchored into the surrounding surface and help to keep an even transition between the surrounding surface and the



mat. The flaps also help to keep the surfacing below the mat in place, which gives optimum impact safety. The anchor system holds the mat in place, keeping the area accessible and vandal proof.

Do I affect the impact value of my surface by placing a mat over top the surface?

Ask your vendor if it has impact testing showing its wear mat passes the ASTM F1292 test standard for impact-attenuating surfaces in and around playground equipment. This standard tests for impact values of the mat over certain thicknesses of EWF at three temperatures: 25 degrees Fahrenheit, 70 degrees Fahrenheit, and 120 degrees Fahrenheit. This assures that no

Photos: Zeager Bros.



Various Zeager Bros playground surface coverings.



matter what time of year, children are less likely to suffer a life-threatening head injury should they fall. The International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association provides a third-party certification program that shows your wear mat meets safety standards performed by an independent lab. Go to www.ipema.org for information.

Wear mats seem to be available for common pieces of equipment like swing bays and slide exits, but what about other types of equipment like large spinners, overhead ladders, track rides, and others?

The best thing to do is just ask your vendor. Common sizes available are 3'x3' for slide exits, 3'x6' for individual swings, 6'x8' for a typical swing bay, and, in some cases, a 6' square or round mat for tire swings or spinner toys. But if you have an area, such as under a track ride or overhead rings, a long narrow mat, for example, would work best. Placing a few 3'x6' swing mats head to head may help, but they probably will get moved and not protect the area very well. Zeager has created a customized wear mat that can cover these odd-shaped, highly used areas and keep them safe, seamless, and accessible. The system uses a unique anchoring system that is safe and won't allow the mat to be moved, but also allows for maintenance down the road to be performed without a lot of hassle.

So if you're worried about stretching your budget, you don't have to trade low cost for functionality. There are accessory products out there that allow you to keep your EWF playground surfacing while maintaining safety and accessibility. ■

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