

What is slackline?

Slackline is a balance sport that's been around for a few decades now. Practitioners walk or otherwise balance on 1" wide tubular climbing webbing (if you're not a rock climber, you may have seen similar but much less strong material used in backpack straps). The line is pulled taut between two anchors, and depending on the tension and weight of the slackliner, it will sag 'slack' somewhat.

Where is slackline generally performed?

Slacklining takes place in many parks across the world. In the Seattle-area, Greenlake and Golden Gardens (in the Locust tree grove by the bathhouse) are two of the most popular spots. Slacklining in Washington state and King County is legal provided that no public paths are blocked (KCC: 7.12.645) and that trees are not damaged (KCC: 7.12.550).

Who slacklines?

Kids and adults of all ages. It takes about 10 minutes to learn to balance, and 30-60 minutes to begin to walk consistently. Due to the quick learning curve slacklining tends to attract people of many backgrounds.

NWslackline.org is a non-profit site run by Adam Burtle. It contains a variety of information on where to buy slackline materials, what to buy, how to rig slacklines safely, how to protect trees from damage, how to perform various tricks, et cetera. Mr. Burtle runs a Facebook group dedicated to slackline and routinely organizes meetups at local parks. Mr. Burtle appeared on Q13 Fox's morning show in October 2009, and King5 NBC's Evening Magazine show in March 2010, both times appearing at Golden Gardens to introduce slacklining to the general public. Adam Burtle and one of his Seattle slackline meetups will appear in a Seattle Times article due to be published in April 2010.

Why install a permanent "kid-friendly" slackline at Golden Gardens?

Most slackliners learn the basics of the sport by asking someone else if they can "try their line." In keeping with this mentality, most slackliners are happy to share their lines with anyone who asks, and provide a few tips. Children of almost any age seem to love slacklining, and most slackliners find it enjoyable to teach kids the basics. That being said, kids can tend to monopolize a slackline (In fact, at Golden Gardens, we often bring an extra line to set up just for kids with this in mind). Slacklines being used by adults also tend to be about three feet high, and twenty to thirty feet long. Neither of these criteria make it easy for a child to learn without assistance, so usually an adult has to help them balance and the slackliner has to sit on the line to lower it to a kid-friendly height. A ten to fifteen foot long and one-to-two-foot-high line would be much more appropriate for kids ages 5-12. A dedicated kid-friendly line would also give kids more time to practice, introduce more kids to the sport (currently they only get to try if there is an adult there with his or her own slackline), and allow adult slackliners more time to their own practicing.

Is slacklining safe?

Slacklining equipment is very sturdy. The sport is done using tubular rock climbing webbing, which is rated for 4,000 pounds or more "ultimate break strength." Type 18 webbing is sometimes used, which breaks at (or above) 7,000 pounds. Webbing is intended to absorb the weight of a human falling from a great height (and rock climbers routinely trust their lives to this webbing). The hardware used to secure the slackline is either aluminum or steel, but is also used in rock climbing and thus rated to absorb stresses far beyond what slacklining will induce. Aluminum carabiners are generally rated 4,000 - 6,000 pounds along major axis, and steel carabiners can rate as high as 10,000 or more. Aluminum or steel rappel rings are often used, and those also rate between 4,000 and 10,000 pounds.

Listed below are the primary playground hazards according to the Handbook for Public Playground Safety published by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). The hazards are grouped by their applicability to slacklining, with appropriate recommendations and considerations where necessary:

Not applicable to slackline:

- Crush and shearing points
- Entanglement and impalement
- Entrapment (e.g. of head)
- Sharp points, corners, and edges

Possibly applicable to slackline:

- Suspended hazards: Children using a playground may be injured if they run into suspended components (such as cables, wires, ropes, or other flexible parts) hanging from one piece of the playground equipment to another or to the ground. Cables, wires, ropes, or similar flexible parts suspended between play units or from the ground to a play unit that are within 45 degrees of horizontal are considered suspended hazards.

Recommendations for avoiding these hazards:

- The slackline should not be located in high traffic areas.
- The slackline should be brightly colored for added visibility. Brightly colored flags hanging from the line can also be installed.

Most applicable to slackline:

- Tripping hazards: Play areas should be free of tripping hazards (i.e., sudden change in elevations) to children who are using a playground. The two most common trip hazards are anchoring devices for playground equipment and containment walls for loose-fill surfacing materials.

As noted above, the slackline should be brightly colored for added visibility. It may also be possible to include brightly colored flags hanging from the line.

Age Appropriateness

Again, as noted in the CPSC's Handbook for Public Playground Safety, "chain or cable walks" are listed as appropriate equipment for ages 5-12. We have helped many children younger than 5 walk on a slackline, with their parent or guardian's assistance. We envision a line no higher than approximately 12-18 inches from the ground.

What materials would the Parks Department need to procure to install a slackline?

The Parks Department would need to procure 20-30 feet of webbing for the line and two anchor slings (sold at any outdoor store for \$.36/foot). At least four forged rappel rings (\$1.95-2.95 each) are also needed. Total cost for the line and basic rigging would be around \$20. The line (but not metal hardware) would likely need replacing once per year, depending on use. Adam Burtle would be willing to install the line itself, and train or assist Parks employees in its installation.

NWslackline would be willing to donate these materials if necessary.

What design considerations would exist if the Parks Department wanted to include a slackline?

The slackline would need two sturdy metal posts at least three feet high. The type of poles currently used in playground equipment would work fine, so at least one end of the line could potentially be attached directly to an existing play structure. The biggest consideration is that the line not be installed in a high traffic area. As mentioned above, the largest hazard is that a child might not be aware of the line, run through the area, and run into or trip over the line. Some "flagging" can easily be employed, along with a brightly colored line, to increase visibility. We would recommend attaching one end of the line to a corner of a play structure, and the other end to a dedicated pole sunk into the ground. This pole should be situated 12-15 feet away and in the LEAST trafficked portion of the play area. Other natural obstacles that might prevent children running through this area (trees, beams, etc) could also improve the safety of the location. The surface below the line should be appropriately soft (e.g. sand, pea gravel, wood chips, rubber), and should provide a clear "landing zone" of approximately 5 feet on either side of the line.