

# Play just gets better



New materials, new colours, technical innovation, natural play, loose parts play, more creative consultation and recognition at government level - all make a huge difference to play today. As an interesting comparison, there is no change in the way children play naturally nor in the things they have always liked in play. Well researched, and even more easily observed, children like swinging, sliding, climbing, running, jumping, balancing and bouncing, make believe and imaginative play, building dens and hiding in houses. The changes are in play provision with enlightened agendas and government thinking behind new funding. Encouragingly, recent research for the DCSF into 'Children and Parents' Experiences of Recently Improved Play Areas', finds people like new equipment and the balance of equipment. Extracts state:

*"Although these areas had been enhanced via funding from non-Pathfinder/Play Builder sources, the types of improvements made were similar to those which Play Pathfinder and Play Builder investments will fund.*

*Parents mentioned the improved appearance of play areas that had been regenerated. New equipment was seen as more aesthetically pleasing, more modern looking, and for some parents was associated with better safety than the equipment it had replaced.*

*Parents and children were positive about the recent improvements made to play areas: they felt they spent longer periods of time on the sites due to the increased variety and appeal. Local authorities reported higher numbers of users following improvements.*

*The variety of high-quality equipment on sites was central to parents' and children's positive impressions and were the main reason why children wanted to visit. Local authorities stressed that consulting children and parents was vital in delivering a play site that met local users' needs and expectations."*

## ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITY

The big shift is in the interest in natural play and is one of the ten principles of the Play England's Design for Play. New play area design thinking includes a sympathetic blending with and enhancing of the existing environment, be it an urban streetscape, a public park or woodland dell. Designs may include ground mounding to change levels, planting to create interest and a different visual and sensual experience with pathways of different gravels, earth, grit and other materials to create variation.

## PLAY AREAS - A MATERIAL WORLD

No longer just about steel and wood, today's play equipment materials include the new and some very old. In use are stainless steel, mild steel, aluminium, rubber and modern plastics. Strong, smooth, colourful plastics sometimes in colour-sandwich panels may have wonderful computer cut games and graphics. Their colours are resistant to fading in daylight and can be fire retardant. Rope that is really steel cable with a rope-like surface, and huge rocks hewn from stone millions of years old are all part of modern play areas. In addition to real wood there may be panels of synthetic wood. Some is harder wearing, better in the English weather, more vandal proof and can cost less. Use of recycled materials grows as does recyclability of old equipment. This wonderful materials range is mixed and matched and offers huge choice.

## EQUIPMENT DESIGN

It is now 'taken as read' that local authority play providers must have equipment guaranteed to last some twenty years with minimum or no maintenance. It must be inclusive for children of all abilities, comply with safety standards and pass annual safety inspections. Beyond that comes, agenda-focused thinking. This aims to provide not just what children enjoy but that which also contributes to their health, development and learning naturally through play. One example, to combat child obesity, is 'hidden exercise'. Where equipment causes stretching of muscles and calorie burning 'work'. Playground design has become much more about the needs of the child rather than just what they like. Done well, play spaces cause children, teens, youths, adults and seniors to enjoy play and playful activity which benefits them without them realising it.

## CONSULTATION

Developments in consultation that engage communities at all levels continue to develop and are beneficially fuelled by mandatory requirements of Play England funding. Where once rare, consultation is now commonplace. From these engagements with children, families, residents, schools and stakeholders of every kind, can come an exchange which is able to richly inform the play design process. Interestingly, there is often a lag in public knowledge, experience and understanding of just what modern play areas and equipment can offer. Inevitably adults may base perceptions on their experience as children. One of many useful outcomes of consultation is for the public and local authorities to engage with play designers who can explain the design ideas behind the play area and the natural and manufactured equipment.

## BUYING A PLAY AREA

Historically, local authorities used to have design departments and staff to build playgrounds. In the past they bought pieces of play equipment from API members' catalogues and installed it. Councils are now more likely to have almost everything done by external suppliers. API members have grown expertly into that role of providing a total 'turnkey' solution with the complete package extending and expanding with the continued growth in play design and planning. From site survey to public consultation, design development to landscaping and planting, from project management and installation to the final local press photo-call launch event, API members have developed their expertise in all areas or invite in and work with associates who specialise in parts of it.

### CLIMBING FRAMES

The latest equipment examples include the architectural, sculptural, skeletal, dynamic, inviting and challenging modern pieces. They look nothing like those of yesteryear. Made from steel and plastic they are, in effect, 'see-through'. Children use them as they choose. How to play is not prescribed. This type of equipment aims to meet current interest and demand, in part stimulated by Government initiatives for 8-13 year olds, with plenty of on play value and excitement, challenge and risk.

### FAST

The trend towards new exciting, dynamic, fast equipment suitable especially for older children that has been seen in the last four to five years covers every type of equipment. As well as moving parts on climbing frames, examples include new ideas for roundabouts and rotators and a new breed of swings, inspired by surfing, skating and snowboarding - for example, the 'wow-causing' stand-on swing called the Freeride with two twist handles. The Rodeo Board, based on windsurfing moves, challenges riders from 12 years to adult.

### TECHNO - HERE IS A CHIP THAT BURNS FAT; THE COMPUTER CHIP

Built into a variety of techno-play equipment types are programs, lights, buzzers and buttons which challenge users and players to do more than 'beat the clock'. Stretching for one button and dashing and jumping to another, the calorie burn is clear to see albeit apparently incidental. The challenge to the competitive streak instantly appeals to every age, boys and girls alike. This is at last using computer-age kit to help healthy play, rather than sedentary screen-based so-called social networking. Techno play can even cause teens to meet and speak!

### YOUTH-TEEN-ADULT-3G

Play or sport or exercise? Play equipment or fitness equipment? What age? Teens? Adults? Seniors? Public spaces, sports and play areas are now seeing the arrival of outdoor fitness equipment designed to be unsupervised which may well have its origins in a gym as part of a work out circuit. Whether this is play or sport or exercise may remain undecided. What is certain is that it is popular and set to become more common. It supports agenda objectives of more fitness through exercise, hidden or not, for every age. On-the-ball, with a MUGA (multi use games area) is a new ball-court with sound deadening rubber technology built into the mesh panels to keep the sound down for nearby residents. Another development is the MUSA (multi-use sports area) specifically for teenage provision and especially to include girls. Made from stainless steel but toned down, it looks modern, fresh and 'cool'.

### PLAY JUST GETS BETTER

At one level, children just do what children do, they play. In designing and creating places and equipment for play. API members are a key part of all new thinking and fully in support of agenda-focused approaches. It is what they do and deliver, every day.



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