

Playing Smart -

School playgrounds are growth areas

How to design a play area and prepare for Broad Spectrum Special Schools

Going fast are barren schoolyards and green deserts due to the pressure on outside space for new facilities and buildings. In their place outside classrooms, play, sport and quiet areas are appearing. Without careful planning they could become a hotch potch. Indeed it is rare to find school staff who, with the opportunity of a new play area, have any experience of a similar project. It is because it is not what they do every day whereas it is exactly what API members do day in and day out.

Moreover, change is a constant in play equipment and play area design. New equipment is always being developed by the manufacturers - of whom some eighty percent are members of the API. It is these manufacturers who now design most of the UK's play areas in local parks, schools - mainstream and special needs, theme and adventure parks, holiday camps, hospitals and travel termini. As a result, API members have a wealth of day-to-day experience in bespoke play area design from which schools can benefit. All API members are listed at www.api-play.org

Budgets and Buried Treasure

Half the cost of play areas is buried in below-ground works. As a rule of thumb whatever the delivered price of a multi-play unit, the total budget will need to be about twice as much. This is not easy for people raising funds to accept but the reasons are sound enough. The calculation involves the cost of all ground works including drainage, play equipment foundations, paths plus fencing, gates and making good. These tasks are perfectly normal in turnkey projects for play areas which must all pass a post-installation safety inspections before use.

Soft Landing

Installation costs that much because in addition to the ground working and material costs, safety surfacing must be included. Its very important job is to limit head injury and other injuries from a fall. The specifications are fully defined in EN 1177 and vary with potential fall height up to a three metre maximum. Play areas surfaces must also be free from trip hazards and loose gravel.

Today one of the extensively used types of safety surfacing is 'wet pour'. It is that 'rubbery tarmac' found around and under play equipment. In addition to limiting injuries, wet pour is designed to provide an all-weather surface and is also kinder to knees and elbows in a tumble. Designs can incorporate colourful graphics, shapes and animals giving additional play value. The design and installation of safety surfaces is now an integral part of overall playground design. Generally, the more elaborate the graphics and design, the more the cost. However many excellent designs are affordable and provide good value for money. However, low level equipment may not need safety surfacing.

Material advantage

Modern play equipment is designed to provide many years of service with minimum maintenance. Modern materials have also contributed to its long life, durability and vandal resistance. As play equipment designs have become more complex and interesting, manufacturers are using more sophisticated production methods and technically advanced materials. Tubular steel and modern plastics are being combined to provide yet more interesting shapes and colour. Timber play equipment has also advanced with the use of sustainable-timber materials. Laminated wood adds strength and metal in ground fixings have greatly improved the durability and life of timber equipment.

Safety inspection and maintaining safety

All new play areas and play equipment needs to pass a post-installation safety inspection report mainly to the European standard EN 1176 Parts 1-7. It must be done by someone who is independent of the manufacturer, contractor, installer and the play provider. The play inspector must be suitably qualified and experienced and would, most likely, be registered with the Register of Play Inspectors (RPII). The RPII examines and certifies inspectors' competence to the European EN standards which apply throughout the EEC. RPII certificated professional competence (CPC) also includes British standards and guidelines relevant nationwide.

Understanding what inspectors will pass or condemn is a sensible step for all play area designers, equipment manufacturers and installation contractors. It should lead to a positive inspection report and immediate use of the play area. It should help avoid costly delays, stop payment being withheld, stop frustration for schools, PTA's and LEA's and lead to everyone's aim; safe play. The API is instrumental in ensuring the interpretation of the EU standard and all guidelines is widely understood by all its members.

DIY Inspections

The RPII can also certificate school or LEA staff to do routine daily inspections and to carry out the more demanding quarterly operational inspections. It is something school staff and their helpers can do. Frequent inspection done well should lead to routine maintenance and any necessary repair. This means when annual safety inspection reports are due, play areas should sail through without unexpected or large repair costs.

More good advice for buyers....

Don't rush! It really is best not to rush things. Research is essential and learning from other schools is very worthwhile. There is a section on schools and play in the new free API 2007-08 Directory. The API offers other relevant published articles including, 'Avoiding playground nightmares'. It has been well received by many schools. Five case studies will start the research stage. An early finding at a school may be that budgets do not meet aspirations. Here is where experience counts. The API members, play manufacturers, are designing and installing every day to tight budgets and can help a school get the most out of its funds. Even before being awarded a project most API members will help up to a point and may even outline design ideas.

....and an API Safety Net

Customers of API members also enjoy peace of mind as they benefit from the API's free but rarely used Independent Mediation Panel Service if a dispute occurs. It is just the sort of stop-loss backstop which is ideal for the less experienced buyer albeit more of a safeguard than actually used.

The future

The newest introductions, based on new research and development, look even more exciting. With the clear aims of benefiting the bodies and minds of play area users of all ages, social interaction across generations is next up. Plans are for children, parents and grandparents all to be fitter, healthier and happier as a result of interacting with each other, technology, activity and, of course, enjoy learning with the latest in school playgrounds and play equipment.

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