

# Playing Smart – School Playgrounds are Growth Areas



*How to design a play area and prepare for broad spectrum special schools.*

**Editor's note:** Following on from the RoSPA (David Yearly) Article, 'Playing Safe', here is the first of two articles from the Association of Play Industries (API) to help those planning projects for outside play in schools to take the key steps for a successful outcome. This first article, 'Playing Smart' outlines the best way to run design and installation. As a frequent visitor to one of the schools featured in this edition (Case Study 5), I have seen first hand what a difference such projects can make, especially on sites with limited outdoor space.

The second API article follows this autumn. Editor.

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](http://www.api-play.org)

## Budgets & 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. More information is available at [www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org)

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. See case studies.

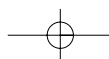
## Material Advantage

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) [www.playinspectors.com](http://www.playinspectors.com) The RPII examines and certificates inspectors' competence to the European EN standards which apply throughout the E.E.C. 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, PTAs and LEAs 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 2006-7 Directory. At [www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org) The API offers other relevant published articles including, 'Avoiding playground nightmares'. It has been well received by many schools. Five case studies shown below 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.

### Case Study 1: Two heads are better than one,



In a Salford school there is playground proof the total can be greater than the sum of the parts. St Andrew's headteacher, Anne Smith knew she wanted to provide more stimulating play facilities. Through working with one of the API's playground manufacturer's, Pendlewood, her view is that jointly they have been hugely successful. "They tapped into my wavelength and the result is way beyond what we imagined possible," said Anne Smith.

The school raised £18,000 from Lottery Grants, SureStart and local organisations with a small balance coming from limited school funds. The results are excellent value for money.

St Andrews, a mainstream school, often has children with severe special needs and for two, a boy and a girl, the new playground has arrived while they are there. These are children whose gross motor skills are underdeveloped. One has Downs Syndrome. Both have made really noticeable progress with the Downs Syndrome child showing great improvement in growing motor skills, in speech, in language and self-confidence. "With the designers we ensured access for our 3-5 years olds and special needs children and the manufacture tailor made

some modifications. The outcome is excellent. The children all play so well together that no one child stands out because of their particular need and all are completely integrated. Now that's what I call inclusive," Anne Smith, confirmed.

More: Pendlewood Ltd:  
[www.pendlewood.com](http://www.pendlewood.com)

### Case Study 2: Consultation is king

The TreeHouse Trust (TreeHouse), a UK charity based in north London, was founded in 1997 by a group of parents whose children had recently been diagnosed with severe autism. In recent years TreeHouse decided to invest in an exciting and challenging play scheme. Their play equipment supplier, API member Eibe, worked with the TreeHouse team to design and build a unique playground for the school. The designs took the needs of autistic children into consideration by working with TreeHouse to develop the types of play equipment that would progressively develop the children's skills. Treehouse have been ordering equipment in phases which allows them to have a play area that grows each year when funding is available.

The teaching specialists at Treehouse wanted to provide the children with a stimulating and interactive environment to stimulate and exercise the children's fine motor, receptive and expressive skills. As is the case with most cities, Space is at a premium. Eibe play designed a layout of play equipment to maximise core development skills and best use of space.

More: [www.eibe.co.uk](http://www.eibe.co.uk)



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## Playing Smart – School Playgrounds are Growth Areas *(continued)*

### Case Study 3:



*With a fall height of 600mm or less, this equipment does not need a expensive safety surfacing. To counter wear less expensive surfacing can be used if needed.*

Taunton's Archbishop Cranmer Community Primary School in Somerset is pleased with its new Trailblazer NRG from RSS Playmakers. This is the first installation of this system at a school. It joins many public playgrounds with this new system.

The school chose the equipment as a modern alternative to timber play equipment, as it is manufactured from dramatic structural steel and features distinctive arches and support posts. The system has a streamlined and contemporary appearance and has been specifically developed to address the motivational needs of children and to encourage maximum activity and energy expenditure. It is ideal for developing co-operation and teamwork. Recently the school had an SASP coach on site for some 'Outdoor Education' work with the children which links teamwork, cooperation and trust. They used the new play equipment in some of these lessons.

The system demands greater concentration and stamina due to the need for movement across and between the challenges. Completing the trail gives children a great sense of achievement. Tracy Crossman, Key Stage Two Coordinator, said, "The Trailblazer NRG system has been extremely well received by pupils - we have had one Year 4 boy declare: 'I wish I had this at home!'. We are considering how it might form part of the National Curriculum during next term." More: [www.rss.co.uk](http://www.rss.co.uk)

### Case Study 4:

#### Play – An International School Language in Aberdeen

In the languages of thirty-seven countries they shouted, "Fantastic!" That is how the 380 school children aged three to eighteen describe their new play area designed and installed for The Aberdeen International School. With 1000 sq metres of wall-to-wall wet pour safety surface it is also an all-weather facility. Design and equipment selection had to be suitable for boys and girls in the 3- to 18-years age range and for children with special needs. The site is also unusual as it incorporates a large change of levels.

Before the play area opened the school's business manager, Cyria Scott appointed a play area inspector to report on the finished area. It passed with flying colours. That is to be expected from Russell Leisure, a member of the API. However, as Mrs Scott commented, "Until you have experienced the school's annual oil-industry health and safety inspection, you have no idea just how rigorous safety checks can be." So that's another first for this play area, meeting the rightly demanding safety standards of the world's oil industry.

Play area details: Russell Leisure equipment includes a Spiderkid Pholcus, a Berliner Cable Ride and Sindelfingen, a Metro Access Swing and two play huts. More: [www.RussellLeisure.co.uk](http://www.RussellLeisure.co.uk)



### Case Study 5:

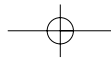
#### Modern Play

An innovative playground has provided Colston's Primary School, Bristol with an exciting resource that is engaging pupils at break times and during lessons. As well as being extremely popular for recreation and physical education sessions, the school uses the scheme's distinctive sculptural appearance as the basis for art, design, technology and humanities lessons.

Colston's Primary School, Bristol, is a large inner-urban primary school close to Bristol city centre with over 420 pupils from four to eleven years of age. The site is in a conservation area with very limited playground space that is all hard-surfaced. This dearth of outdoor provision led school staff and governors to consider installing play equipment. Their main aims were to improve the resources for physical activity at play times, thereby reducing playground accidents, and to provide facilities to enhance the physical education curriculum.

Headteacher, John Gavaghan said, "The children are still exploring different possibilities and new ways of using the equipment. And as well as all sorts of active play, they are also using the area for quieter reflective play and just sitting together." Commenting on the play equipment he said, "As well as being extremely effective as play equipment, it is a distinctive piece of architectural design that really enhances the grounds." Pupils use the equipment each break time on a timetabled basis – usually twice a week – so that each year group has a regular opportunity to enjoy it. We are amazed at how many children can be playing on the equipment at the same time. "It keeps whole groups occupied and engaged at once. Children don't have to wait to get on or stand around because there is nothing to do. And they are constantly finding new things that keep them interested."

More: [www.kompan.co.uk](http://www.kompan.co.uk)



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