



## TO LEARN 'SCHOOL PLAYGROUND DESIGN', ASK TEACHER

### THE ASSOCIATION OF PLAY INDUSTRIES (API) SHARES ITS SECRETS FOR SUCCESSFUL PLAYGROUND DESIGN

Building development in schools can put playground and green sports areas under pressure. Even without development pressure, nowadays schoolyard concrete jungles and Tarmac deserts are neither seen as desirable nor safe nor supporting of children's needs or development. By comparison, well-planned areas for trim trails, play equipment, outdoor classrooms and quiet areas, reading or story circles and sensory gardens are where schools can make more of their latent facilities. Everyone wins, especially school children.

#### The hidden advantage

Schools have a huge advantage in playground design. They have a headteacher and staff with detailed knowledge of what pupils need, of child development aims and of what the catchment area offers or lacks. This, together with the specialist knowledge of an API playground manufacturer and a school's architect, can produce excellent playgrounds – which help with a school's objectives in pupil and child development. The added knowledge and resources of parents and PTA can also be a big help especially with fund raising. Although budgets may be always limited, much can be done for play that will fit the most modest funding.

#### Forget catalogue shopping

Play equipment catalogues are attractive but be warned! They may seem like an obvious place

to start planning a school play area but there is a better way. Successful play area design depends on much more than picking equipment. That comes later. Defining and understanding desired outcomes is where to start.

#### The secret of success

A school should aim to ensure their selected playground architect/ designer and manufacturer develop a complete understanding of the outcomes the school wants. The playground manufacturer can show the school and architect what is possible, feasible, manageable and affordable to buy and to maintain. (See Safety Inspection, later) Together, with the PTA, parents, governors and especially through consulting the children, they jointly take an important step towards a design that is a success for the children and the school. That includes meeting; pupil/ child development objectives, budgets, time plans, complying with safety standards and planning maintenance. Indeed with a successful play area, 'the whole is usually greater than the sum of the parts'. The secret of success is that there is no secret. Success lies mostly in a well informed and well-developed, jointly created brief, the result of partnership, cooperation, brainstorming and teamwork. When given the opportunity, play manufactures can create wonderful places to play for children to enjoy and learn from. If there is a secret to success it is to invite the API manufacturer to be creative. [▶ 38](#)

#### CASE STUDY > MANOR SCHOOL TEAMWORK SUCCESS

The headteacher at Manor Infants in Farnborough had an ambitious plan to transform some under-utilised school grounds into a multi-sensory area. With assistance from the School Landscapes Project and Hampshire County Council planning department the school wanted to create a multi-sensory area which would provide a myriad of colours, textures, sights and opportunity not just for play, but quite areas for peer interaction. The selected playground manufacturer came up with and tweaked designs until everybody in the team agreed the mixture of materials and equipment was an inspirational proposal on paper. Their challenge was to ensure it meet expectations. The finished garden area has been brought alive by the combination of innovative materials, colours and an intelligent use of space to maximise the play opportunities and create the ultimate break time experience for the children. The headteacher is thrilled with the final results and said, "The garden is so fantastic, the children adore playing with the equipment and sitting in the quiet areas."



[www.fawns.co.uk](http://www.fawns.co.uk)

## CASE STUDY > CHILDREN ENTHRALLED

Children are enjoying the time of their lives tackling a range of top quality playground equipment at their West Yorkshire primary school. Paul Franklin, headteacher at Upton School for the last five years said "I have seen a discernible change in the children's confidence and co-ordination, which is a very important part of play." For him the quality and benefits of playtime have risen perceptibly since the robust, colourful and challenging equipment was installed. "This equipment has added a new dimension to outside play. We used to have hoops and skipping ropes, but this is a real improvement, and it's inspired a lot of enthusiasm. It's also a very powerful way of promoting a healthy lifestyle and physical fitness and letting the children express themselves. It has also been a behaviour management tool, because while the children are engaged in playing they're not falling out with each other! At the same time it's encouraged the children to explore their sense of balance, their social behaviour, and to take on new challenges," he added.

The sensory garden also enables the 200 children, aged four to seven, to experience walking on different types of materials - such as gravel, and wood - and to experience different types of textures. The plastic, steel and rubber components of the play equipment have as significant role to play in the sensory garden as the herb garden, willow arch, and our log pile for mini-beasts! They also have an amphitheatre for children to listen to stories in summer, and the framework for a really good sensory area.

[www.sutcliffeplay.co.uk](http://www.sutcliffeplay.co.uk)



### Finding a playground maker

When looking for manufacturers a good place to start is the members' list at the Association of Play Industries (API) [www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org) From here there are links to members' websites to help in the search for examples of school playground projects. When requesting examples, schools should make clear the number of children, their age ranges and available or estimated budgets. Fortunately, the API only accepts members if everything they make and install meets play safety standards. As members of the API, play manufacturers and installers must meet many of the standards demanded in pre-qualification by local authorities' tendering processes. These include financial soundness and compliance with play safety standards. During

installation CDM Regulations apply. Another benefit for API members and their customers is the API's free dispute mediation and resolution service. It is rarely used.

### Post-installation play area

#### Safety Inspections – are not the law

Inspection is a choice. Best practice is a choice. Schools as play providers have a choice. Safety inspections are not a legal requirement. That is where choices stop. Just ask one question, 'Is it safe?' For an answer a consistent method to measure and assess what we check for safety is needed. That method needs to be to agreed standards or it would be meaningless. The standards exist. The European and British standard for outdoor play areas and equipment is EN 1176 while EN 1177 is for safer surfacing. There are others for indoor play and other types of play equipment. The standards are recommendations not legal requirements.

#### Why inspect?

Play providers in schools or anywhere want successful safety inspections because they want children to be safe – so do their insurers. They also know post-installation inspection and annually inspection is recommended in the Standards and is seen as Best Practice by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Post-installation inspections by a competent independent annual inspector are necessary parts of mandatory risk assessments to be done by all play providers including schools. Risk Assessment is a legal requirement as specified in the Health & Safety at Work Act 1994 & Regulations 1999. Annual inspectors, who are certificated competent to do annual play safety inspections, are qualified to inspect and report on newly installed play areas. Many are listed at the Register of Play Inspectors International (RPII) [www.playinspectors.com](http://www.playinspectors.com)

### Sleep easy!

While having a post-installation and annual safety inspection and report is not compulsory, unlike risk assessment, schools as play providers have many reasons to ensure they comply with and beyond the standards and guidelines. These include ensuring children's play areas are safe and minimising the risk of serious injury. They help in maintaining play equipment for its serviceable life to get Best Value from costly investments. Play providers also want to avoid litigation and claims fuelled by no-win-no-fee lawyers. One of the best ways to avoid problems is to insist on using a competent manufacturer.



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## CASE STUDY > PIRATES OF THE POMPHETT SCHOOL

Pomphlett School, Plymouth wanted to use a sloped grass area by a playground that had been unusable. Together the designer and headteacher came up with the idea of using the slope as a 'sea wave' with a shipwreck in the wave (see above).

The shipwreck levels were adapted to fit the slope. This specially designed shipwreck sits at the top and blue wet pour rubber extended down the slope providing a good all weather, non-slip safer surface. Imagination, foresight and sharing ideas between the designer and headteacher created project success within the budget.

[www.playlinedesign.co.uk](http://www.playlinedesign.co.uk)

### As safe as necessary – not as safe as possible

With safety standards in use, play manufacturers seek to provide as much challenge and excitement as possible, this includes opportunities for children to assess risk and learn what they are able to do as they grow. Play has many roles including being vitally important in child development. Play areas also provide meeting areas for children and the adults they bring with them. This contributes an important social and community role for play areas in schools or anywhere.

Schools need to define total requirements not just short-term needs. Planning a whole area, perhaps to be built in stages, age >40

group by age group can allow designers to produce the best relationship between areas. It helps achieve economies in total ground works, safer surfacing, paths gates and fencing. Every play area must pass a post installation inspection and then an annual safety inspection and report. Happily, there are numerous examples of successful school playground projects with API members.

#### CASE STUDY > DRAMATICALLY IMPROVED PUPIL BEHAVIOUR

At England Lane Junior and Infant School in Knottingley (see below), playtime has become funtime for pupils and teachers. "It's fantastic. The children absolutely adore it – mainly, I think, because it provides an exciting challenge. It has certainly reduced the problem of friction we used to have in the playground. We are also working towards Healthy School status and the new



#### CASE STUDY > BESPOKE PLAY EQUIPMENT

The Orchard School in Sandwell is a new-build special needs school for pupils ranging from early years to Key Stage II, all with profound and complex learning difficulties. The play manufacturer worked closely with the school and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council's landscape architects.



Originally timber play equipment had not been specified. In discussion with a timber-play manufacturer's team, things changed. It became apparent they offered exactly the design potential needed. They were able to create bespoke equipment to enable pupils to play inclusively and gain from the educational benefits play equipment provides. Around the play structures are a range of activity panels including convex mirrors, musical chimes and shapeshifters.

[www.handmadeplaces.co.uk](http://www.handmadeplaces.co.uk)

equipment is all part and parcel of that too," said headteacher, Christine Muirhead. The playground includes rubber stepping posts and a balance weaver to promote balance and co-operation skills; a crossed rope walk for upper body strength and co-ordination skills; swinging logs for upper body strength; a wobble walkway for role-play, co-operation and hand-eye co-ordination; a climbing wall and a tyre-twister, which promotes the cross-lateral skills that are essential for developing handwriting and doing sport."

[www.playforce.co.uk](http://www.playforce.co.uk)

#### CASE STUDY > A NEW SCHOOL PLAYGROUND FOR THE PUPILS OF CARLTON PRIMARY SCHOOL, CARLTON, WAKEFIELD

The design and build included a trail which offers many features to provide a safe but adventurous challenge to all. Ideal for developing inclusive play, social skills, team building and leadership qualities, the vast array of activities provide mental and physical challenges to suit all abilities.

[www.parkdaleplay.co.uk](http://www.parkdaleplay.co.uk)

#### CASE STUDY > THE SOUND OF MUSIC IN ST.ALBANS

Aboyne Lodge County Primary School in St. Albans, with nineteen percent of children are classified as special needs pupils, wanted to extend its existing outdoor play facilities to provide more play options. These needed to cater for the needs of all its children whilst standing up to the attentions of the local skateboarding community during out-of-school hours. Sound and music are recognised for their ability to provide sensory stimulation. Children of all ages and abilities benefit on physical, cognitive and emotional levels from these responsive mediums. Yet these modes of play are rarely available for pupils to use on an on-demand basis, outside the confines of a structured session. The play manufacturer introduced the school to large-scale musical instruments specifically designed for outside use. Playscapes consisting of tuned percussion instruments ranging from drums to xylophones and glockenspiels, can be deployed individually, in an outdoor orchestra setting or as part of an activity playground. The equipment is imaginatively designed for interactive play, with animal drums available in the shape of a turtle or dragon, or elaborate pipe drums to create a symphony of sound, all of which have fixed beaters.

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Aboyne Lodge School chose equipment including an two different but enormous xylophones and a brightly painted drum. Linda Crawley, headteacher commented, "We've found the equipment is exciting and interesting for all the children allowing them to interact with each other very well and play on an equal footing".

[www.sunsafe.co.uk](http://www.sunsafe.co.uk)

#### CASE STUDY > TUNING TO THE BUDGET

With their initial ideas outside their budget the team at The Oaks Primary School, Crawley looked at where costs could be shaved with their API manufacturer. The children had the final decision.



"They were surprised that safety surfaces took a large proportion of the money," said headteacher Penny Forbes. "So they considered each product against its costs." With design tweaked to the budget while ensuring maximum play value and variety, the manufacturer installed the equipment. "The children worked together to agree the rules for using it," Penny Forbes explained. "They have pride in their achievement, their role and the voice of the school, as well as a much better understanding of how to budget."

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