

THE STATE OF OUTDOOR PLAY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Outdoor Play Trends: API Annual Survey



Foreword

Outdoor play is not just a break from learning—it is learning. It shapes children’s physical development, emotional resilience, and social confidence.

This summary offers an honest look at how outdoor play is currently used and prioritised in primary schools across England. The findings present both challenges and opportunities. Most importantly, they elevate the professional voice of school leaders and teachers at a time when every square metre of space, and every penny of budget, must deliver impact.

This report has been made possible with the support of the **Association of Play Industries (API)**, the UK’s leading trade association for the play sector.

API members are trusted experts in the design and installation of outdoor playground equipment, indoor play spaces and safety surfacing. They work across a wide range of settings—including schools, local authorities, holiday parks and housing developments—bringing high-quality, safe and engaging play environments to life.

At a time when childhood inactivity and obesity are on the rise, the API champions the role of active outdoor play in improving children’s physical and mental health.

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1

Quality & use of outdoor play spaces

Provision is uneven and has declined over time.



Declining quality from EYFS to KS2

8% of teachers in Primary schools rate their outdoor play spaces as excellent. This compares to 33% of people working in EYFS. 1 in 5 schools rate KS2 provision as *poor* or *very poor*.



High usage during the school day

Nearly all schools report using outdoor areas during breaks and lunch, but fewer than 50% use them after school.



EYFS leads in daily outdoor use

78% of EYFS settings use outdoor areas throughout the day. This drops to just 16% by KS2.

2

Equipment: current outdoor play provision

Risk and safety influence choices.

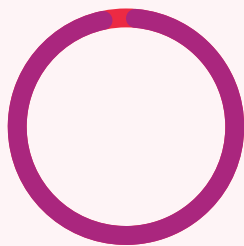
- **Playground markings and mud kitchens are the most common features found in school play areas**, with 77% of schools reporting they have markings and 61% including mud kitchens or messy play zones.
- **Higher-risk items like swings and trampolines are rare**—found in fewer than 1 in 10 schools.
- Equipment supporting physical development and creative play is inconsistent across settings.



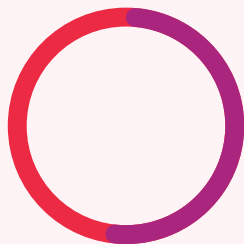
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The role of outdoor play in learning

Curriculum integration declines as children grow.



Play-based learning is nearly universal in EYFS (98%), but drops dramatically to just 27% in KS1 and 10% in KS2.



Outdoor teaching time shrinks: Half of respondents spend over 50% of their EYFS lesson time outside; in KS2, it's only 1.5%.

Outdoor learning can enrich the curriculum and boost pupil engagement. With a little creativity, everyday equipment and school grounds can become the setting for meaningful, hands-on learning experiences—across subjects from literacy and numeracy to science and the arts.



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Inclusion and accessibility

Provision is lacking for pupils with SEND.

- **70% of schools lack specialist equipment** for children with disabilities or additional needs.
- **Adapting existing facilities is a more common approach than investing in new ones:** *“We adapt what we have to make it wheelchair friendly.”*
- **Inequity persists:** Schools rated Outstanding and those in rural areas are more likely to have inclusive, functional outdoor spaces.

Create inclusive outdoor spaces where every child can thrive

Inclusive outdoor environments benefit all children—especially those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). By considering accessibility, sensory needs, and opportunities for different types of play, schools can ensure that outdoor spaces support engagement, wellbeing and learning for every pupil.

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Investment & decision-making

Cost takes priority—but inclusion must catch up.

Most schools spent under £10,000 in the last three years on outdoor play (65%).

Key barriers beyond budget include space constraints, competing priorities, and limited staff time.

Cost and safety dominate purchasing priorities, but only 36% of schools consider inclusivity when choosing equipment.



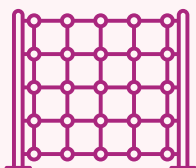
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Looking ahead

Budgets are tight, but priorities are clear.

48% of schools say they're unlikely to invest more than £10,000 in the next 2–3 years.

Top priorities for development include:



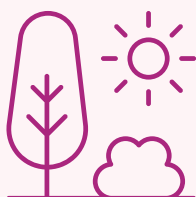
Maintaining
existing equipment



Adding inclusive,
multifunctional resources



Weatherproofing spaces
for all-year use



Expanding outdoor
learning opportunities



Direct quotes from educators

“We know how powerful outdoor play is. But without funding and planning, it’s always the first thing cut.”

“We’ve made creative use of what we have, but the space just isn’t there to do more.”

“We want to make play inclusive—but the cost of specialist equipment makes it almost impossible.”

Transforming outdoor spaces can be costly—but with the right support, it’s entirely possible.

National grants, community partnerships, creative fundraising ideas and themed events could all help bring your project to life.

8

Conclusions and recommendations

Outdoor play is a cornerstone of learning, health and wellbeing. It deserves a strategic approach that centres equity, accessibility, and creativity—not just in the early years, but throughout a child’s journey through school.

1

Conduct an annual review of outdoor play – Regularly assess how your outdoor spaces are used, identify what's working well, and spot opportunities for improvement or investment.

2

Champion inclusive equipment in funding bids and PTA projects.

3

Prioritise flexible, multifunctional spaces over single-use installations.

About the Association of Play Industries (API)

Setting the standard for high-quality, safe and inclusive play in the UK

The Association of Play Industries (API) is the lead trade body for the UK play sector. Established over 35 years ago, the API represents manufacturers, installers and designers of outdoor and indoor play equipment, as well as sports and surfacing solutions for schools, parks, public spaces and community environments.

All API members must meet rigorous standards around quality, safety, sustainability and ethics—making them some of the most trusted suppliers of play equipment in the country.

What do the API do?

- **Promote best practice** in the design, installation and maintenance of play equipment and spaces.
- **Support schools and local authorities** to make informed decisions about investing in outdoor play.
- **Ensure safety compliance** with British and European safety standards (BS EN 1176 and 1177).
- **Advocate for inclusive, high-quality provision** through research, policy work and national campaigns.
- **Drive industry standards** through an independent, audited Code of Conduct that governs all members.



Why API-approved suppliers matter in education

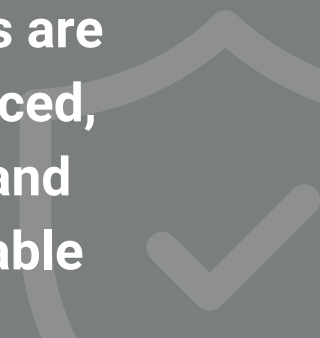
Choosing an API member for your playground project guarantees:



Equipment meets or exceeds national safety standards



Design considers inclusivity, accessibility and age-appropriate challenge



Installers are experienced, insured and accountable



Long-term value, maintenance and safety are built into the planning process

For schools, this means **peace of mind, value for money, and play spaces that work—for every child.**



The research

This report was underpinned by a national survey and focus group commissioned by the API and conducted by The Education Company in November 2024.

The findings are based on real insights from schools across the UK, with the aim of supporting better decision-making, policy development, and ultimately, better play for all children.

To explore more about the API or to find a trusted supplier near you, visit: www.api-play.org



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