

Information Sheet Number 22

Design of Play Areas

Introduction

Children's play areas are far from being the simple provision most people believe. A swing, a slide and a climbing frame are not, on their own, of great benefit to the growing child. To provide fully for children requires a sophisticated approach to siting, design and selection of equipment and surfacing.

Play

The opportunity to play creatively in high-quality environments is essential to the development of children. Through their play they acquire skills and abilities which can be learnt in no other way. Children cannot provide these opportunities for themselves - adults must do it for them. The quality of what we provide affects the quality of what children learn. The greater the complexity of that environment the greater the quality of learning.

Consultation

The provision of playgrounds should always be undertaken in consultation with children and parents. The process of understanding their environment and how they can affect it is a crucial element in the child's development.

Siting

The playground has to be in the right place - so that children can reach it safely and easily without crossing hazards such as major roads. There should be no environmental hazards (such as fast-flowing rivers) affecting the site and it must be easily visible to ensure children's social safety and reduce vandalism.

Design

This covers such items as the landscaping, planting, pathways, fences and gates, seats - everything which goes to make up an environment. The playground equipment is like the three-piece suite in a room - you must consider the walls, floor, ceilings, tables etc., all of which go to make up an environment. You should be clear about the age group for which you are designing; whether there are any special requirements in the area; what the long-term management will provide.

Playgrounds should be usable by all children regardless of ability.

Equipment Selection

Equipment should be appropriate for the age group and match their developmental needs - as well as being fun to play on. Younger children like sand-play, swinging, climbing and sliding - but they are small and items should be scaled accordingly. Older children like more exciting equipment - large group swings, cable runways, roundabouts etc. They want places where they can sit and talk - that is one of the most popular playground activities. They like planting and trees; places for skateboards and bicycles; flat areas for ball games.

Surfacing

Hard surfaces are not recommended on playgrounds other than for the areas between equipment. The type of surface to be selected depends on the site, the equipment and the amount of maintenance it will receive. If only minimal maintenance is available a loose-fill material such as bark or sand may not be suitable. In general firm surfaces are required with moving items.

Management

Once it has been provided the playground requires regular inspection and maintenance and eventual replacement. Unless this can be provided it is better not to start the project.

Safety

A key element of playground provision is safety and this can be achieved in a number of ways:

- ensuring the playground is sited correctly

- ensuring the design and equipment meets the needs of the children
- ensuring the design meets basic safety requirements
- ensuring the equipment meets relevant standards : BS EN 1176
- ensuring the surfacing meets BS EN 1176 and BS EN 1177
- ensuring the surfacing has been correctly supplied and installed
- ensuring a proper post-installation inspection is carried out
- ensuring the playground is properly inspected and maintained

Advice

Advice on different aspects of playgrounds is available from RoSPA's Play Safety Manager at the address below.

