

Schools need more time for play, not less

PLAY HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND THUS THE PROVISION OF QUALITY PLAY OPPORTUNITIES IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF A GOOD LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, WRITES **BARBARA CHAMPION**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PLAY AUSTRALIA.

Historically schools in Australia have understood the importance of outdoor play for children throughout the years, but unfortunately this is no longer the case.

In Australia, as in many other parts of the world, the majority of children live over-protected lives. Their opportunities for free, unsupervised play are minimal and risk taking during play is largely “squashed” by adults. The reasons for this situation are the same here as in many other places, a fear that children will be injured, a fear that they are vulnerable and an adult population who doesn’t remember that risk taking was an important element of their own childhood play.

Today many adults have forgotten that children are capable problem solvers who need chances to try.

There are also numerous reports available concerning the poor health of so many of our young people in Australia.

“Children are becoming less active and more sedentary and this has to change.” (Vic Health report, Active for Life, 2014)

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN SCHOOLS

Play has an important role in human development and thus the provision of quality play opportunities is an integral part of a good learning environment.

Through play, students:

- Interact socially;
- Engage in dramatic play, role play and fantasy;
- Extend their creativity and imagination;
- Test themselves physically, developing skills and mastery over physical challenges;
- Develop ball handling and other skills;
- Observe the natural environment; and,
- Engage in a range of self-directed activities which aid each individual to develop towards independent adulthood.

Consequently, play is an important complement to the ‘formal’ curriculum of schools.

School grounds that provide a satisfying range of settings for play for students of different ages and interests are likely to reduce the number of conflicts.

Students are likely to be easier to manage, vandalism is likely to be reduced and the positive spin-offs include benefits to the student’s self-image and to the image of the school in general. A quality range of outdoor settings often also provides opportunities for staff to transfer some activities out of doors.

Students have a variety of interests and will want to play in different ways at different times. Consequently schools should provide a range of types of play spaces.

Students tend to utilise all of the grounds for their play (excluding the areas, which are out of bounds). Schools therefore need to consider the ‘package’ offered by all of the outdoor spaces



Perth College, Mount Lawley, WA. Image courtesy of Nature Play Solutions.



St Joseph's Primary School, Busselton, WA. Image courtesy of Nature Play Solutions.

when planning play areas.

PLAY NEEDS IN SCHOOLS

Play spaces will typically involve combinations of:

- Large areas of hard surfaces (for a range of ball games, rebound walls, etc.);
- Smaller hard surfaced areas for hop-scotch, elastics and other small group games;
- Large grassed area for running, ball games, athletics and other activities;
- Play equipment for different aged students, catering for potentially large groups of students at any one time and providing a range of types of activities;
- Small spaces with seating for individuals and small groups;
- Smaller grassed areas for a variety of activities requiring intimate spaces;
- Sand play areas, dirt, water and planting for creative activities;
- Areas suitable for marbles, small cars and toys, digging, and play with loose materials and surfaces;
- Areas for dramatic /role play which might include decks, cubbies and planting;
- Shade and shelter, drinking water and other utilities;
- Shrubs and trees for hiding, shelter, imaginative games;
- Tables and seats for a range of group activities;
- Gathering spaces for assemblies, performances and community activities; and,
- Quiet spaces as well as busy spaces.

Areas around buildings such as steps and stairs, doorways, and garden beds are valued play areas and will be appropriated by students for a range of activities. They should be considered when assessing the range of activities available.

Because schools may have limited space, most

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areas need to be as multi-functional as possible to enable the best value to be obtained out of each part of the grounds. Schools need to consider all spaces within the grounds which are utilised by students, taking into account both safety and the play activities which they provide.

ANXIETY ABOUT SAFETY IN 2015

Community awareness of safety has increased dramatically over the past few years, and playgrounds and playground equipment are now under greater scrutiny. Therefore playgrounds and play equipment in schools are key priorities in the risk management responsibility of schools.

Because the victims of playground accidents in schools are young children who are often unable to detect potential hazards for themselves, and because of the varied and often unpredictable nature of play activities, playground safety demands particular attention to detail.

We are sometimes accused of taking the fun out of playgrounds by making them “too safe”. In many cases, dangers which lead to injury have little or, no bearing upon the fun or the challenge and “fun” or “challenge” cannot be used as an excuse for negligence.

Even if “we used to play on them, and never

got hurt” (except the odd broken leg), values and awareness have changed and schools must accept the responsibility of providing quality play spaces and experiences for students, and therefore knowledge and implementation of relevant Australian Standards for playgrounds is a requirement of schools today. Whilst it is not possible to eradicate playground accidents, our main concern is the reduction of injuries in playgrounds which can be avoided.

RISK BENEFIT APPROACH TO MANAGING RISK

Play Australia supports the risk benefit approach to the management of risk in schools.

Risk/Benefit Assessment simply put, is the practice of ‘weighing up’ the benefits and hazards associated with risky play in a playground. For example, the benefits to children in using monkey bars far outweighs the risks of injury.

The fact that there are many children today who are not able physically to use a monkey bar is a much greater health concern than the possible injury caused by falling.

There is ample evidence from around the world which shows us that if children are allowed responsibility for their own play, then injury is reduced, and general performance in school life improves.

Swanson Primary School in New Zealand, which

removed all rules in the playground, showed us that fewer children were getting hurt, children focused better in class and there was less bullying and incidents of vandalism had dropped off.

SUGGESTED WAYS TO SUPPORT BETTER PLAY OPPORTUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

This section will focus on play equipment given its significance in schools.

Good siting and layout

Play equipment in schools needs to be located in areas of the school ground that enable informal supervision, and provide students with a feeling of being “where the action is”.

Internal layout of play equipment areas should aim for prevention of conflicts between:

- Moving equipment (e.g. track glides) and running children;
- Play traffic (e.g. from a slide, out of a tunnel) into the path of other activities;
- Quiet play (e.g. sand pits) and boisterous games (football match); and,
- Active, boisterous groups (late primary ages and older) and “littlies” and pre-schoolers.

Well-designed equipment

Equipment should be designed to avoid shear, pinch or crush points; protrusions – splinters, jagged edges and protruding bolts, which can tear skin or snag clothes.

Equipment should be built and installed in a way so that a child’s head, neck, torso, limbs or fingers cannot become trapped. Australian Standards AS4685 - 2014 provides details to assist in the provision of quality play equipment in schools.

Soft impact absorbing surface materials

Falls onto hard surfaces constitute the largest single cause of injury in playgrounds.

Concrete, brick, stone, exposed concrete footings, timber, bare earth and grass are not suitable surfaces within the fall zones of equipment.

Impact absorbing surfaces such as well-maintained pine mulch, or pine bark appear to be the most effective. Loose materials such as these can be retained by a border. Schools are also using a variety of synthetic materials, particularly in high use areas which need to be carefully monitored for the impact absorbing qualities.



St Joan of Arc Primary School, Brighton, VIC. Image courtesy of A-Play.



St Anne's School, Kew East, VIC. Image courtesy of Jeavons Landscape Architects.

A fall zone is required for every piece of equipment with a free height of fall above 600mm to ensure that it is not possible for the head of a child to touch any part of another piece of equipment or hard object on falling.

Pinch points and sharp edges

Equipment should be checked regularly to make sure that there are no sharp edges.

Moving components such as suspension bridges and track glides, should be regularly checked to make sure that there are no moving parts or mechanisms

that might crush or pinch a small finger.

Things that protrude or tangle

Protruding bolts and other pieces of hardware or components of equipment can cause bruises and cuts if a child bumps into them. These protrusions can also act as hooks, which can catch a child’s clothing and potentially cause strangulation if a child is caught by a hooded top. Ropes should be anchored securely at both ends so that they cannot form a loop or noose.

Regular inspections

Equipment varies in its maintenance



St Joseph's School, Black Rock, VIC. Image courtesy of A-Play.

requirements. Some items could need daily inspection in areas of heavy use. At least every six months all equipment should be inspected by a suitably qualified person and general checks should be regularly carried out as well.

Loose impact absorbing soft surface materials will of course need more regular attention.

Repairs should occur as soon as possible after reporting. If a hazard cannot be repaired quickly it should be secured against use until repair.

Prompt repairs not only improve safety and restore play value and amenity but they may prevent further vandalism, which often occurs after initial damage “downgrades” equipment. Quick minor repairs can often prevent more costly major repairs later and therefore minimise any potential litigating circumstances.

Adequate supervision

The degree of supervision required depends upon the age and ability of the children (and in a practical sense, the size of the school teaching staff). Young children constantly challenge their own abilities, but are often unable to recognise potential hazards. In supervising play teachers should make sure that the child uses equipment which is appropriate for his or her age/size.

Schools have school-based policies and practices on supervision of the outdoor play area, but it must be



Presbyterian Ladies College, Peppermint Grove, WA. Image courtesy of Nature Play Solutions.

recognised that no amount of playground supervision will prevent some children from taking risks which are unforeseen by staff and therefore cannot be prevented.

One way of encouraging supervision from adults in addition to teaching staff on duty is to design play environments that appeal to people of all ages, where watching adults may sit comfortably, in shade or shelter if required.

HOW TO BETTER MANAGE POTENTIAL INJURY IN SCHOOLS

Injuries in school grounds are by no means restricted to playground equipment.

Tripping and falling, collisions with hard objects and with other students are common causes of injury to both students and staff. Buildings, verandah poles, changes in levels, paths, drainage pits, vents and other surfaces need to be designed and located with extreme care, avoiding blind corners and taking into account that large numbers of students (often running) use the space.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A MAINTENANCE SCHEDULE

School grounds should be inspected for potential hazards such as:

- Verandah poles outside doorways, in thoroughfares or in situations where students are unlikely to see them, especially while running;
- Steps and changes in level which are poorly proportioned, difficult to see or lack handrails;
- Fencing, gates and railings which students climb and which have structural problems, sharp protrusions, splinters or other hazards;
- Trip hazards at ground level – protruding drainage pit covers, irregular paving, cracks or tree roots in thoroughfares, broken off post or other remnants of old structures;
- Loose gravelly surfaces on slopes and where students run;
- Slippery patches which may stay damp in winter;
- Rocks which students can fall onto or throw around;
- Embankments which students can slip down or which have protruding sharp objects;
- Blind corners in busy areas; taps and hoses which are positioned where students play or walk; window glass at low levels through which students could fall;
- Holes, cracks or exposed irrigation fixtures in ovals;
- Trees or shrubs with poisonous parts, sharp spikes or thorns or branches at eye level;
- Splinters and deteriorating timbers in seats, retaining edges and other wooden constructions;
- Sheds or other areas with hazardous chemicals or machinery to which students have access; rubbish skips which students can climb into or around, or which place students at risk when trucks enter the school;
- Areas within the site used for car parking when students are present; and,

- Sporting equipment such as goal posts or basketball rings which have structural or other design or maintenance problems.
- Schools often struggle to find the resources needed for effective maintenance of school grounds, but it is by far the most important risk management strategy when considering potential injury to children.
- Injury prevention is an important goal for everyone working in schools. The provision of challenging and play opportunities, which are fun for students, is of equal and growing importance. The challenge for all of us is to achieve a reasonable balance of these two objectives.

Barbara Champion is the Executive Director of Play Australia and prior to this position she worked in the Education and Local Government sectors in Victoria. Her experience includes leadership and /or involvement in a number of community based education, arts and health organisations.

PLAY AUSTRALIA

Play Australia is the national peak play organisation whose membership comprises professionals, groups and individuals committed to promoting the value of play. We collect, disseminate and exchange information about play and play environments; encourage consultation with organisations and individuals on issues relating to play; facilitate research into the use of playgrounds and their value; promote better design of playgrounds; and encourage the better planning, design, safety, development and maintenance of play spaces. Play Australia (formerly PRAV, the Playgrounds & Recreation Association of Victoria) has been in operation for 100 years.