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info@playaustralia.org.au
www.playaustralia.org.au

promoting the value of play

SCHOOLS, PLANNING A BETTER PLAYGROUND

This paper has been prepared to assist schools in the development of quality playspaces for all children.

Some useful questions which will assist in the development of the process

What do you need to do?

What questions do you need to ask to gather the information required to develop a plan?

What are the planning issues particular to school playgrounds?

What type of skills can be useful in your planning team?

What kind of consultation process is needed which will involve your school community?

What are the timelines and resource implications required to match the priorities?

The need for an Open Space Plan

There is a great benefit in developing a plan for the entire school grounds before undertaking any play-structured projects. The projects will be more focused, less mistakes will be made, problems can be anticipated and strategies designed to deal with them and unforeseen problems can be dealt with more effectively when a plan is prepared. Most importantly, however, the development of a plan, particularly with the involvement of the school community, will increase the interest and enthusiasm for the project.

The purpose of planning is to bring about change that may not otherwise happen, or happen too slowly. When a plan is developed for your school grounds, the school community can see what you would like to create and why; there is opportunity for debate and improvement and sharing of ideas and concepts that may otherwise remain unknown. An effective planning process will enable ideas to be generated in a non-threatening way and there will be strong potential benefit for the school community in working together to achieve a common goal.

The need for a plan for upgrading of the school grounds is often sparked by one event. This could be the need for new equipment, increasing numbers of children at the school, concerns about certain safety aspects of the play equipment, the acquisition of more land, the need for more classrooms, or demand for a new facility such as a multi-purpose room.

Such events, if dealt with in an ad hoc manner, ultimately lead to unsatisfactory compromises - where children may lose space to play or have restrictions on their play. By spending the time to develop a plan for the entire grounds, the compromises are likely to be more satisfactory resolved to the satisfaction of the school community with benefits to the children in creating stimulating play spaces.

The Planning Process

1. Establish a planning team

The team should ideally include:

- ◆ a planning coordinator;
- ◆ a landscape architect (or at least someone with design or drafting skills);
- ◆ Principal;
- ◆ parent representatives of School Council, and
- ◆ teacher representatives.

The participation of children/young people in the planning process needs careful consideration. It may not be necessary to have student members of the team but it is important that the views of the playspace users be sought throughout the process.

It is important to record meetings and decisions made. These records will assist in demonstrating that all areas have been considered and how decisions are made.

2. Establish aims, objectives and principles for play and play spaces at your school.

This step is one where you can begin to discuss:

- ◆ the value and benefits of play to children;
- ◆ the range of opportunities for play you want to create;
- ◆ why it is important for the children to have creative and stimulating play spaces;
- ◆ and what you aim to achieve.

A target period for the plan should also be established at this point.

This is an important step as it assists with ensuring everyone is heading in the same direction. A common aim arising from such a process is ***'To create an environment to stimulate play'***.

3. Preparation of a Site Plan

The site plan details the existing conditions of your school grounds. It should include an assessment and evaluation of the site; the location of boundaries; the location of services; the hazards and potential hazards- erosion zones, vegetation, including significant trees, sun angles, prevailing winds, and a safety audit of the existing play equipment.

It is advisable to have an inspection of your existing equipment for compliance with Australian Safety Standards and its general condition. Play Australia can assist you to gain access to expertise to assist in this task if you are a member.

Knowledge of the existing conditions assists with design (by knowing what you have to work with) and allocating priorities (by knowing where urgent work may be required).

4. Assessment of Formal and Informal use of the site.

This assessment evaluates how the grounds are currently used. It should include:

- ◆ flows of pedestrian traffic - students, staff, parents (pick up and drop off sites) and after school care;
- ◆ programs using the school grounds - including PE, games and structured play;
- ◆ School and government guidelines and regulations - identifying the parameters that must be met;
- ◆ Other school policies which may affect the plan - safety policies, PE strategies, multi-arts policies;

- ◆ use of the school buildings and grounds after hours - after school care use; weekend use, access at night, sports played at the grounds; fire regulations and access to the buildings by emergency vehicles; where parents wait for children and the conditions (do they need improving?);
- ◆ teacher and visitor parking requirements - current and future, and any possible acquisitions of land.

Other information which must be collected in the preparation of the plan includes:

- ◆ an analysis of the demographic profile of the area
The analysis will give a guide to likely increases or decreases in student numbers, which will assist with assessing future requirements for buildings or classrooms. It can also be used in preparation of a comprehensive masterplan for the school and assist with applications for funding and grants.
- ◆ an inventory of portable play equipment
this is often forgotten, but portable play equipment can be the key to increasing the possibilities of a play area. Most school grounds have limited space, so the space must be used as efficiently and creatively as possible. Portable play equipment offers new programs, the chance to offer activities which extend children more (they can be 'higher risk' activities offered only under supervision) and the flexibility to offer a much larger number of opportunities for play.
- ◆ an evaluation of other play opportunities available locally
It is important to evaluate what other opportunities are available to children, to enable the plan to highlight 'gaps' in provision, that is the type of play spaces which children currently do not have access to. It is also important not to duplicate provision. When space is at a premium and funding limited, it is unnecessary to build a play structure which duplicates one available at the nearby park!

5. Community Consultation and Needs Assessment

5.1 Needs Assessment

The identification of need, that is, *what play opportunities are needed and should be provided*, is a critical part of the plan. But, this is not an 'exact science'. While we know much about play, how children engage in playful activity and the benefits of play, much of the wonder of play is that it is creative and not predetermined. *The purpose of the plan is to create an environment to stimulate play.*

The key to gathering information on need is to endeavour to collect information from a wide variety of sources. **The trends and important features will become evident.**

5.2 Community Consultation

Involving the school community in the needs assessment process will assist in identifying what is important, but it will also provide the avenue for encouraging and promoting play and its value to the school community. The consultation should ideally involve:

- ◆ the children;
- ◆ teachers, and
- ◆ parents.

Depending on the nature and location of the school, the local community could also be involved. If major works are planned, the adjoining land owners need to be consulted.

There are four questions which can form the basis of questions to ask. These will provide much of the information sought.

What is good and should be retained?

What exists but needs improving?

What is needed and currently not provided?

What is poor and should be removed?

5.3 Consultation with Principal and school leadership

A consultation with the key leadership people in the school is an excellent starting point. A large amount of information can be gathered from this session, which will form the basis for consultation with other groups.

In addition to the four key questions, the following questions can also be explored. This is intended as a guide. You may need to determine other questions relevant to your school.

- ◆ Supervision - are 'physical improvements' necessary to aid in supervision in the playground, what is necessary and what should be avoided;
- ◆ The use of the playground - different age groups, boys and girls, constraints or barriers to play, program needs (specific and general), and other desired improvements in the school;
- ◆ Observations of children's play;
- ◆ Strategies and policies which the open space plan needs to complement, experiences from other schools to draw on;
- ◆ What other programs would be suitable, for example, the development of culturally-based play opportunities;
- ◆ The desired atmosphere for the school and the entry to the school, and what other issues need to be considered, including access to toilets, storage and bin locations.

5.4 Consultation with the teaching staff

Consultation sessions should be based on the four key questions. However, each group can also have valuable information and insight into the children's play and the potential play opportunities which could be provided. More specific information about different age groups and their specific play needs can be focused on in consultation with the teaching staff.

5.5 Consultation with the children

It is critical to involve the children in the planning of play spaces at school. They are the primary users, know the current play space well and will have significant ideas.

Features to be identified during the consultation include:

- ◆ Children's favourite play spaces special trees, shrubs and natural play spaces (how many best play items have been lost in one foul swoop with a chain saw?)
- ◆ how children play in a particular place, and
- ◆ what children play.

The ideal consultation can occur by walking around the playground with children talking about what they play and the best part about each place. As well as highlighting the important items to retain, we can gain a valuable insight into the child's play.

Each child will have their favourite play space, so the consultation should be as broad as possible. However, many traps occur in collection and analysis of this data. The following suggestions should be considered during consultation with the children:

- ◆ Something which may seem insignificant to one child may have a great importance to another. It is interesting to note, however, that many children will know what is important to other children also.

Further to this, it is worth asking children what they see as the needs or interests of other children during the consultation. Many older children will often identify the needs of younger children.

- ◆ Beware of placing an adult's interpretation on a child's activity. A child may look like they are on a slide when in reality they are on a rocket!
- ◆ Different age groups can communicate effectively on different levels. A young child may not understand the concepts of planning, but can tell you what they have difficulty with.
- ◆ Many children, particularly older children, begin to lose the 'art of play'. Many feel that they should conform to something they think we may want to hear.
- ◆ It is useful to avoid using terms such as 'playground', or to use them carefully, as many children associate the terms with a constructed item of equipment.

These potential difficulties highlight the need for a *balance* between the *information collected* and *assessing the physical site* to ensure there is a **balance of play zones and opportunities**. Remember that the aim is to provide a diverse range of play experiences and take a positive role in creating these options for children.

Some ideas to use in consultation with children include:

- ◆ In co-operation with teaching staff, develop an appropriate level of questions for each year level.

Grade prep, one and two

Draw your favourite game at school, draw a favourite place or favourite piece of equipment, draw something new;
What we have that we like, and
What we would like to have.

Grades three & four

What I use now;
What should be provided, and
What should be upgraded, removed, or provided.
Where else do you like to play?
Have you a favourite playground you like to go to with your family?
What do you like the best about it?

Grades five & six

What is good and should be maintained;
What exists but should be improved;
What is needed and should be provided, and
What is poor and should be removed.

Consultation with older children can also focus on what planning is, how you plan for something, how people use surveys to collect information and discussion of what is important in a playground, such as shelter from the sun and wind, somewhere safe to play and so on.

Selection of the best methods for collecting information will depend on the support and time available in your plan preparation. However, it is important to respect the time and effort given in the consultation.

Some other suggestions which could be used with children include:

- ◆ Consultation by teaching staff or run by individuals from the 'planning team'
- ◆ Have the children discuss the playgrounds through their SRC.

Children at all levels can also participate actively in the implementation process, with planting and landscaping, introducing conservation and environmental studies (such as burying plastic, orange peel and apple cores and digging them up 6 months later to see what happens to them). There is also potential for 'cross age tutoring' with children of all ages working together and sharing ideas and skills. Weed eradication and conservation programs such as tree planting can all be introduced as programs in this project.

Visit the playground with children of different age levels and interests. Take the time to explore all the grounds. A range of insights can be gathered through this.

The teaching staff will also have ideas that may be used in consultation.

5.6 Consultation with parents

Consultation with parents will again depend on the resources available during the planning process. A survey could be included in the school newsletter for all parents to comment on focusing on the key issues.

If more time is available, a meeting for parents to attend can also be run, to discuss the project and gather information.

6. Analysis of the zones for play

The next phase of the planning process is to collate the information which has been gathered. The existing conditions and the information gathered during the consultation need to be assessed with inspection of the site.

To ensure a broad range of play spaces for different age and interest groups is provided, the information gathered should be assessed with investigation of potential zones for play. The site plan should be marked with *where children play, the type of play and the age groups*. Then assess this information to see what is missing.

Play spaces should be available to provide for each of the following types of play: creative play; physical play; dramatic play, and quiet spaces.

It is useful to try to identify the types of play which can occur in these play zones. This is a good exercise to see what is missing and needs to be provided.

7. Prepare draft open space plan

8. Consultation on the draft open space plan

The draft open space plan should be circulated to the school community for comment. A public meeting can be organised to present the draft and gather comment.

The children should also be shown the draft and invited to comment. The SRC can be a good avenue for this discussion.

9. Preparation of final open space plan

10. Allocation of priorities to funding and development

This process should be finalized with discussion and itemizing of works to be done. Priorities for works and resources need to be allocated.

This is often a difficult task. Often major works must be done at the start of the program, such as drainage works, which do not have a 'high profile'. It is important to consider implementing some specific play developments early in the development process so the school community can see what is happening and enthusiasm can be retained.

The final plan and recommendations for resource allocation and development can be presented to the School Council and the teaching staff. The final plan should also be presented to the children,

11. Evaluation

Evaluation of the process is always a useful exercise. There may be, for example, issues which have been missed and should be reconsidered at a later time.

The plan may need to be reviewed on an annual basis while it is being implemented. This will ensure an organised approach to reallocation of resources or priorities where necessary. Priorities and needs are likely to change over time.

12. Conclusion

This paper gives some ideas helpful in preparing a plan for upgrading a school play space. It details some of the information which needs to be considered and highlights different methods of consultation with the school community. The presentation of this information is not intended as a set of rules to be followed, but offers suggestions which have assisted school communities to date.

This paper has been refined from a paper prepared by Cathy Kiss, B.A. (Recreation), former President and Life Member