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promoting the value of play

PLAY IN SCHOOLS TODAY

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Play has an important role in human development. 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.

Play is an important complement to the 'formal' curriculum of the school.

School grounds which 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.

Variety in the School Grounds

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 utilize 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 when planning play areas.

This advice focuses on play equipment and areas from a safety perspective, but schools need to consider all the other spaces within the grounds which are utilized by students, taking into account both safety and the play activities which they provide.

Play Spaces

Typically, combinations of the following types of spaces are available:

- ◆ 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 junior, senior and/or intermediate 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, tables, seats, drinking water and other utilities;
- ◆ shrubs and trees for hiding, shelter, cubbies, 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 and their safety.

Because schools have limited space, most areas need to be as multi-functional as possible to enable the best value to be obtained out of each part of the grounds.

Play in secondary school environments

It is often difficult for students leaving primary school if they find that their secondary schools only provides ball courts and no other play areas. A common complaint is that there is 'nothing to do' at lunch-time and recess.

As students do not need to stop playing when they leave primary school, secondary schools are encouraged to consider how a range of students' recreation needs can be catered for in an age-appropriate manner.

Play time is a very important part of the school day. There are many social and financial benefits to school communities which address the play needs of students, and improve the safety of their outdoors play areas. This advice forms part of a wider strategy towards achieving these benefits for students, as well as for teachers and parents. Schools are encouraged to assess not only the safety of their grounds but also the quality and diversity of the play environments available to their students.

PLAYGROUNDS - PURPOSE AND PLANNING

Because play is a critical part of human development and has an integral role in learning, education, social integration and all aspects of a student's development, the provision of a range of quality play opportunities in schools is therefore extremely important. It is recommended that schools consider how well their grounds provide for the wide range of activities required by students and ensure that a good range of play settings is available.

A SAFETY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR SCHOOL PLAYGROUNDS

Introduction

Although the risk of injuries cannot be totally eliminated from school playgrounds, much can be done to minimize their frequency and severity.

What we know about injury in playgrounds

- ◆ Playgrounds and play equipment are a significant location and cause of injury for children;
- ◆ Injuries are predictable and preventable;
- ◆ Falls from play equipment clearly stand out as the leading cause of injury in playgrounds. The proportion of injuries associated with falls varies across studies but appears to be at least 75%;
- ◆ Fractures of the arm and head injury are the leading cause of significant injury and account for about one third of hospital presentations associated with play equipment;
- ◆ 95% of hospital admissions are aged 1 to 14 years;
- ◆ NSW and Victorian hospital data show that 1 to 4 years olds and 10 to 14 year olds have high rates of admission that are roughly the same, while children aged 5 to 9 years have three times as many admissions as the other age groups of children.

Key risk factors and safety issues are:

- ◆ Fall height – including issues of measurement and assessment of where children fall from;
- ◆ Provision of adequate impact absorbing surfaces in fall zones;
- ◆ Fall zones – the measure of where children fall;
- ◆ Guarding – preventing or inhibiting falls and other injury events;
- ◆ Entrapment – injury risks associated, in particular, with entrapment of head, hands and feet
 - ◆ the presence of pinch points or entrapment spaces;
 - ◆ poor functional design relative to the needs of the users;
 - ◆ the specific design of items of equipment;
 - ◆ poor layout, the location and design of internal walk ways and barriers;
 - ◆ the size and ability of the children who use the playground;
 - ◆ structural failure; and
 - ◆ other issues – including siting, crowding and child flow.

This advice will assist schools to implement strategies to identify risks and to take appropriate action to minimize, control or remove them.

The initial assessments of the maintenance condition, as well as the safe function of the play equipment areas and equipment, are critical first steps in forming a basis upon which an effective safety management system can be established.

This is a systematic method of ensuring that all risks are eliminated or minimized. The approach needs to be structured and quantified. Some important aspects of implementing a safety management system are also highlighted below.

Keeping up to date

With changes in community attitudes towards playground safety and litigation, and a better awareness of the causes of injury, the requirements for playgrounds are also subject to changes or additions, and schools are expected to keep informed of up to date requirements.

Requirement to Keep a Register

Operators of playgrounds (ie any person or organisation who provides a piece of playground equipment for children's use) are required to keep a Register of the playground items. This is a requirement of the Australian/New Zealand Standard 4486.1: 1997:

Playgrounds and Playground Equipment - Part 1: Development, Installation, Inspection, Maintenance and Operation. See clause 9 of this Standard, which spells out other components of a register and a Safety Management System. which need to be addressed by schools.

The following documents form part of a school's Register:

- ◆ Site and Area Sketch Plans;
- ◆ Area Audit and Task Sheets;
- ◆ Equipment Audit and Task Sheets;
- ◆ Maintenance Instructions;
- ◆ Inspection and Maintenance Schedule;
- ◆ Manufacturers' Maintenance and Operation Instructions and Warranties;
- ◆ Accident/Injury details as reported to the Office of Schools;
- ◆ All records of purchases, assessments and maintenance prior to the issue of this advice;
- ◆ Current advice from DEET;
- ◆ Documents recording the decision made in regard to the adopted priorities and order of executing the date the school initiated the required improvements, and upgrading, and the time-line set for the work to be done.

These records are to be kept as permanent records. All work done thereafter should be added. All audit reports of any new areas or equipment including any relocation, removals and contracts related to the playground purchase and work performed by others need to be added to the register.

As compensation claims for injuries can be made long after an injury occurs, the keeping of accurate and dated records is essential.

Inspections and Maintenance

Inspections and maintenance play an important part in the safety management system. Their purpose is not only to protect the capital investment in the playground, but more importantly to reduce the risk and severity of injuries in the play area and on play equipment.

Three different types of inspections are recommended. These are:

- ◆ routine visual inspections;
- ◆ regular (operational or functional) maintenance inspections; and
- ◆ comprehensive inspections.

Instructions to schools on the subject of maintenance have been long standing.

Schools cannot be excused for not having repaired or maintained equipment, even if they had intended to replace or improve the item at a later date.

Setting Priorities for Upgrading Playgrounds

When areas or equipment items are found not to comply with the requirements of this advice and not all work can be done at once, it will be necessary to set priorities for removals, modifications, or relocation of the equipment. It may also be necessary to temporarily close off access to some of the equipment.

There may be circumstances where a play area or play equipment item does not comply with the requirements included in this advice but the school believes that the particular situation can be managed to avoid the risk of an accident or injury. Such cases should be

documented and kept in the register. The decision to continue to accept a non-compliance situation should be reviewed at least once a year.

Factors which will contribute to the likelihood and outcome of injuries will vary. Each school should assess its own environment.

Factors such as crowding, the mix of age groups and abilities of users, and aspects of the physical environment will need to be taken into account. Time-lines for the improvement and upgrading according to the priorities set by the school should be recorded and taken up in the Register.

Safety Training

Staff and students should be instructed in the safe use of playgrounds, and caring for the play equipment.

It is critical that the **responsibilities** and warranties for the quality, design and safety of the installation are clearly defined and understood. Disputes can be avoided by clearly stating the responsibilities of each party.

The designer or manufacturer who has supplied but not installed equipment could be invited to inspect the installation after completion. In addition the school should also inspect the installation for compliance with this advice. An independent inspection could also be carried out. All such reports should be kept as part of the Register.

INSPECTION AND MAINTENANCE

Most play equipment items have a limited lifespan however it is not possible to accurately predict how long an item should be retained as this will be influenced by the intensity of use, the construction materials, the local environment and the history of maintenance. It is crucial that regular inspections and consequent repairs are carried out.

Regular inspections and maintenance will not only ensure the safe use of the equipment but will protect the school's capital investment and also help to retain the original intended play value.

The following types of inspections are recommended.

ROUTINE VISUAL INSPECTIONS

These inspections aim to detect anything unusual in the equipment or area, such as anything broken or worn out, damage caused by vandals, excessive loss or displacement of loose soft undersurfacing materials (perhaps caused by extreme weather or usage), and old furniture, rocks or other objects brought into fall zones by students.

School staff or school council members will be able to conduct these inspections and arrange remedial action quickly. Students as part of their safety awareness education can also be encouraged to report any of the above problems. In cases of structural damage or other hazards, the problem should be recorded and passed on immediately to the person(s) responsible for the maintenance in accordance with the school's Playground Safety Management System.

Where the problem unreasonably jeopardizes the safety of the students, the area or equipment should be declared out of bounds until the problem is rectified.

It is recommended that this visual inspection be carried out every school day or at intervals determined in your inspection frequency schedule in the school's Playground Safety Management System.

REGULAR MAINTENANCE INSPECTIONS

Where a competent maintenance person has been engaged, the inspection and the actual maintenance tasks may be combined. Any problems should be recorded as well as the work which is subsequently completed to rectify the problems. This record should show the area and equipment number, dates of inspection and completion of work. It should be signed and filed in the Register.

It is recommended that Regular Maintenance Inspections be carried out every one to three months, or at intervals determined by the inspection frequency schedule in the school's Playground Safety Management System.

COMPREHENSIVE ANNUAL INSPECTIONS

The specific objectives of this type of inspection are:

- ◆ to inspect and check the quality and effectiveness of the maintenance and upgrading carried out since the last comprehensive annual inspection;
- ◆ to inspect and compare the information in the Register with the actual situation to see whether all prioritized work has been executed within the target dates;
- ◆ to set new priorities and time lines for all outstanding upgrading work, if required; and
- ◆ to help decide whether existing equipment is worth maintaining over the next 12 months.

This inspection should be carried out annually. Where members of the school community have limited expertise the school council may wish to engage a playground specialist, a playground maintenance specialist or an engineer.

INJURY REPORTING, RECORDING AND ANALYSING

All government departments have procedures to be followed in the event of a school-based injury.

Action following Playground Incidents

Following an incident or injury it is important that a review of the circumstances which related to the incident is undertaken to establish whether any action can be taken to improve the safety of the playground area and/or equipment. Such a review would typically include:

- ◆ a detailed investigation into the incident, including discussion with those involved in the incident and any witnesses;
- ◆ an examination of the information collected for both the playground area and equipment to verify whether the area and/or the equipment comply with the specifications and guidelines in this advice;
- ◆ an assessment of the playground area and equipment to determine whether or not they meet the necessary requirements and whether any problems contributed to the incident;
- ◆ in the case of falls, a measure of the depth of the soft undersurfacing in the landing zone where the incident occurred;
- ◆ consideration of the weather conditions prevailing at the time of the incident; and,

- ◆ consideration of other factors which may have impacted upon the incident such as supervision, skill level of those involved in the incident, the behaviours of those involved in the incident and those nearby, and rules for the use of the area or equipment.

Following the review, decisions may be needed on action to be taken to improve safety.

Such action might include:

- ◆ alterations or maintenance to the area or the equipment (eg. More soft undersurfacing to meet Australian Standard requirements);
- ◆ further instruction of students on how to use playground equipment appropriately;
- ◆ a change to the school rules for using playground areas and equipment; and,
- ◆ adjustments to the supervision provided for the playground area and equipment.

HAZARDS IN THE SCHOOL GROUND

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.

While the scope of this information does not include these issues, the 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.

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