

PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT IN SCHOOLS

Introduction

Schools are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of play and wish to improve the opportunities within their playground. Sadly they are often sold equipment which is not fit for purpose. With existing equipment they are often told by over-zealous health and safety officers that the equipment is “unsafe” and must be put out of action. On independent inspection the equipment is found to be of acceptable risk and the same as equipment which is commonly installed in unsupervised playgrounds.

How “Health and Safety” can go wrong

The examples below show what can happen:

The school which kept its playground equipment closed for a couple of years because someone had told them that the depth of the bark underneath it was not sufficient. In actual fact the grass which was underneath was absolutely adequate for the purpose as the fall heights were below 600mm and the bark was just cosmetic.

The school which was advised by the local authority health and safety advisor to put extra barriers at its playground equipment. Barriers weren't necessary and increased the risk because it obstructed the sightlines to where the children were playing making supervision more difficult.

A school which was not allowed to use tyres in its playground because of “toxicity” issues. The playground was adjacent to a busy road where airborne particles from car tyres rubbing on the road would be much more likely to be ingested than would happen from just touching the tyres. People changing car tyres do not have to wear protective gloves.

Play equipment cannot be totally safe. Major organisations in children's play and the Health and Safety Executive accept that play opportunities need to provide challenge and that the normal childhood bumps and scrapes are an inevitable and acceptable part of children's play.

Purchasing Equipment

Schools can be particularly vulnerable when purchasing playground equipment. They usually only purchase equipment or develop their playgrounds once every 10 or 15 years. This means that there is no expertise within an individual school and with devolved budgets there is rarely any specific expertise within the education department.

A further complication is that equipment may well be bought by a parents group or some local benefactor and so, not wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, a school may well accept the gift and assume that the it is fit for purpose.

When purchasing equipment the school should first go to a reputable supplier. Though as an independent consultant I do not recommend a particular manufacturer, I suggest you contact the Association of Play Industries (API) www.api-play.org which has a code of practice and can provide a list of suppliers/manufacturers.

Independent Inspections

It is also good practice to make a post installation inspection by an independent consultant a condition of contract. This means that the school will not pay for the equipment until a satisfactory inspection has been carried out. A good consultant will also give advice prior to installation perhaps having a quick look at the plans or drawings and making comments. Obviously it is easier to make changes before the concrete is set rather than afterwards.

This independent advice can be important in overcoming over-cautious advice from non-play specialists. Schools are often asked to include unnecessary “safety” modifications which can be expensive, reduce the play value and occasionally create additional risks.

Schools often get poor advice on their existing equipment often being told that it does not meet the “European Standard” and therefore cannot be used. I have often found that on a risk assessment basis (Health and Safety At Work Act) it is suitable for use and the failure to meet the Standard is minor or even irrelevant. The European Standard EN 1176 has useful recommendations and requiring compliance from suppliers is usually good practice but it is only advisory whereas the Health and Safety at Work Act is mandatory.

A local authority closed almost all the playground equipment in its schools because someone had told them it didn't meet the British Standard. The metal rods they then put round the equipment to fence it off were more dangerous than the actual equipment, most of which was safe to use as they had only marginal failures to meet the Standard.

Natural or landscape features can be installed and risk assessed as a satisfactory alternative to compliance with the European Standard.

Risk and School Playground Equipment

It should be remembered that most of the equipment likely to be sold to schools is suitable for unsupervised use in playgrounds in public parks and housing estates. The risks therefore are of an already established acceptable level. The fact that in the school there will be more supervision than in a public playground means the level of risk is lower. If an accident does occur assistance is close at hand and can be summoned within seconds.

Sand and Water Play

Sand and water play give high play value and are commonly found in unsupervised playgrounds. They are therefore equally suitable for school playgrounds. Sand benefits from the cleansing action of sun and rain and need not be covered unless there is a significant problem with animal fouling. Keeping a sand pit away from bushes and shrubs and in open view tends to deter cats.

Sand can be used as a safety surface under equipment and is used in public parks. If the fall heights are low the type of sand is unlikely to matter. However, there are different types of sand. The type that is best for sandcastles binds together whereas the type that gives best impact absorption for high fall heights remains loose.

Sand and water play require higher maintenance than standard playground equipment. However these can be justified in terms of the play value. In the autumn for instance dead leaves will need to be removed. Sand will periodically need to be raked back into position and over time it will migrate and need topping up. Putting equipment such as a table (or even funnels, wheels, etc) in the middle of the pit encourages children to go to the middle where the sand will fall back into the pit rather than at the edge where it will tend to drift away.

Managing the Rush

There is one management issue with equipment in school playgrounds, and that is when the children are let out for a break they all tend to rush at once which does not happen in a public playground. The school should therefore have some procedures to manage that risk by only allowing a certain number (perhaps a class at a time) to go on the equipment at a time. This is particularly important in the early days as new equipment inevitably does engender additional excitement.

Out of Hours Use of Playgrounds

There is increasing encouragement for schools to open up their playgrounds for informal use by local children during out of school hours. There is no simple health and safety reason why this should not be the case. There are, however, management issues which need to be agreed at an early stage. Ensuring everyone knows who is responsible for what and when and that the inspection and maintenance procedures are reviewed periodically are essential good practice. Experience has shown that "open access" can be either very successful or very problematic so you need to have good management procedures.

Inspection Regime

Most routine inspections of the playground equipment can be carried out by members of staff, school caretakers or others along with other duties. A short training course will equip them to undertake the inspections.

It is good practice to have an annual inspection by a competent person. This will identify both issues of design and deterioration. The report can then be used as a quality control measure to ensure that the routine inspections have been carried out thoroughly.

For both of the above the cost will be much cheaper if a few schools join together or if the education department organise it so that schools can buy in. It's obviously cheaper to inspect or train a few schools on one day rather than individual schools on separate days.

Conclusion

The simple lesson is, therefore, that if you are being told something is unsafe and common-sense says it's not, check with a competent play specialist first. Reassurance at this stage can avoid wasteful expenditure or putting good play items out of use. It is good practice to have compliance with the European Standard EN 1176 but minor failures are probably not serious enough to prevent usage.

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Children's Play Advisory Service
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