
External School Play Areas

MUNDY C OF E JUNIOR SCHOOL

[Version 3]

Last Reviewed	JULY 2021
Reviewed By	
Next Review Date	

External School Play Areas

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to advise on safe practices across the range of activities that may be included in the playground.

A suitable and sufficient risk assessment should be in place for the use of the playground and play equipment which cover the significant risks including but not limited to such things as, supervision levels, inclement weather, use of equipment, mixing of ages in playgrounds etc.

Playgrounds

- Siting equipment in confined spaces can create problems in playgrounds.
- Play activities should be arranged to ensure overcrowding does not cause collision or incompatible play activities do not occur in the same area, e.g. ball games should take place well away from glass windows and have designated areas, separate from other play areas.
- Play activities should be arranged to prevent running into walls or other obstructions.
- Playground surfaces should be sound with no loose materials present.

It is essential that schools develop and operate an effective monitoring and inspection system of their playgrounds and that this is documented and recorded. If equipment is faulty, it must be repaired immediately, removed or replaced. If this is impractical, steps must be taken to ensure that it presents no danger to pupils by immobilisation, protective fencing etc. The permanent repair should then be carried out as soon as possible.

Frequency of inspection should be determined by risk assessment but could include for example:

- A daily visual check.
- A more detailed recorded inspection at termly intervals.
- A full inspection by a competent person at intervals not exceeding twelve months. We would strongly advise that this check should take place.

All inspections should cover the whole playground and not just the equipment. Fencing, gates and seating should be assessed.

Inspections will enable schools to identify hazards that require remedial action, but also assess the overall condition of playgrounds and equipment. It is good practice to maintain a site register for each playground which should include:

- A site plan
- Full equipment details.
- Inspection and maintenance programme along with details of departmental responsibilities which should be recorded.

Safety

It is important to report and record all accidents that happen in the playground. These records should then be regularly reviewed. The information will be vital for determining future priorities and isolating items of equipment or specific areas where accidents are occurring regularly that may need remedial action. Schools should encourage staff and other users of the playground to make this information available.

Playground Climbing Equipment and Safe Play Surfaces (Impact Absorbing Surfaces)

Playground climbing equipment will form part of the outdoor provision for play in many primary schools. The provision of climbing equipment in playgrounds creates a risk of falling from a height.

This guidance is not definitive and there are two European standards covering Play equipment and safety surfacing. You should ensure that if you have or are installing this type of equipment that it complies with these standards. The relevant standards are:

BS EN 1176 Playground Equipment
BS EN 1177 Impact Absorbing Surfaces

Climbing Equipment

For the purposes of this guidance climbing equipment can be taken to mean purpose built climbing frames or fixed equipment designed for outdoor use e.g. balance beams fixed in playgrounds. It can also include portable climbing frames used outdoors.

It also includes features added to playgrounds to enhance play which pupils can climb onto (e.g. tyres concreted onto playgrounds).

A suitable free space should be maintained around climbing equipment which is kept free from obstacles. In reality this will mean ensuring that climbing equipment should not be placed too close to walls or other fixed obstacles or placed close to other climbing equipment. It will also mean ensuring other obstacles are kept away from the designated free space area around climbing equipment. Particular care should be paid where the area of free space comes close to glazed areas. In this circumstance you should consider increasing the area of free space (e.g. moving the equipment further away from any glazed areas).

Traffic routes should not pass through the area of free space.

Guardrails and Barriers

The following information is intended as a guide and you should refer to the relevant standard as outlined above.

Guardrails should stand between 600mm and 850mm above the standing surface of a platform and completely surround a platform except for access points.

Barriers must be at least 700mm in height and should have an infill and must not have horizontal or near horizontal elements that encourage climbing. The tops of barriers must be designed to discourage children from standing or sitting on them.

If the equipment is accessible to children of all ages then any platform over 0.6m will require a barrier

If the equipment is not easily accessible by younger children (under 3's) then:-

- Platforms up to 1m: No barriers or guardrails required but suitable impact absorbing surfaces are required for all platforms over 600mm high.
- Platforms 1-2m: guardrails 0.6-0.85m high required and suitable impact absorbing surface.
- Platforms 2-3m: barrier 0.7m high required and suitable impact absorbing surface.

Safety Surfacing

Impact absorbing (safety) surfacing will be required if falls of over 600mm are possible from any part of the climbing equipment. It will not reduce the likelihood of accidents but may reduce the severity of any resultant injury. There are generally considered to be three types of surface used for outdoor equipment:-

- Grass is often seen as impact absorbing surface and indeed some sources state it has some impact absorbency up to 1m, the drier the condition the more this diminishes. Indeed when the ground is hard in summer, grass surfaces can be as hard and un-giving as hard play surfaces. For this reason we would advise that grass should not be relied upon as an impact absorbing surface.
- Loose fill materials, e.g. sand, bark and pea shingle can be used around fixed outdoor climbing equipment. If of a suitable depth they offer good impact absorbency. However, there are many disadvantages to this type of surface. These types of surface can hide contaminants, e.g. broken glass/needles placed there by vandals. Animals will often use this type of surface as a toilet; young children may throw the bark, sand, shingle at each other or pick it up and place it in their mouths. The surface due to its loose nature will move about which could lead to "hollow" spots where the surface is not of a sufficient depth, or to the surface spilling out of its retaining area leading to it needing to be topped up. These types of surfaces therefore whilst initially appearing a cheaper option will require a thorough and regular inspection and maintenance regime. We have in the past therefore advised that these may not be appropriate, indeed this is still the case unless there is no other option. In this case there will need to be a detailed inspection and maintenance system put in place.
- Synthetic surfacing – these are generally surfaces such as impact absorbing tiles or wet pour surfacing. They can be expensive but are generally efficient and long lasting. These have been the preferred option for many establishments over recent years.

All impact absorbing surfaces should have an appropriate critical fall height, ie be impact absorbent to the maximum height of fall from the equipment. The surface should extend beyond the fall back area from the equipment a minimum of 1.75m beyond the base of the equipment is recommended.

General Considerations Installation and Use

Before setting up playground equipment, the greatest care should be taken to ensure that the following points are considered.

Design and Siting

- All playground equipment must be installed by a competent person in accordance with the relevant British Standards.
- Low frames are better than high ones - 2.5m is the maximum recommended suitable height.
- There should be no protruding parts that might trap clothing. Any joints should be smooth.
- Surfaces should offer a good grip for hands and feet.
- Play equipment should be sited away from other structures where they can be supervised correctly.
- The surrounding surface should be level and uniform.
- The equipment provided should be suitable for the user age group.

Supervision

- Climbing frames should be supervised when in use. (It would be advisable to display disclaimer notices for parents waiting with young children after school or trespassers).
- Staff must be familiar with the equipment and the abilities of the pupils.
- Staff must be aware of the maximum number of pupils using the equipment at any one time.
- It is not advisable for younger children, especially nursery or reception age, to use the equipment at the same time as older pupils.
- Special care must be taken during inclement weather conditions. This may mean not using the equipment in certain weather conditions e.g. when slippery due to ice/snow or excessive rain or when extreme cold could affect ability to grip.

Manufactures instruction should be used to give appropriate information to help make decisions around supervision where this exists.

Inspection and Maintenance

It is important to ensure all play equipment is suitably inspected and maintained as highlighted earlier.

In regards to play equipment it is advised that it should be checked before it is used for any obvious defects.

There should be weekly and monthly formal recorded checks to look for any issues such as vandalism, wear and tear (ROSPA produce guidance on this) and staff may be able to obtain training from the manufacturers/installers on what to look for.

There should be an annual detailed inspection by a competent person, this may be an insurer/ROSPA or other similar specialist not directly connected to the site.

Playing Fields/All Weather Areas

- Playing fields/all weather areas can be affected by the aftermath of trespass. Broken glass, discarded syringes, tins and rubbish in general can cause a serious risk to pupils.
- It is advisable that all games lessons should be preceded with a visual sweep before the activity takes place. All dangerous objects should be removed immediately, using appropriate safe methods.
- All practical measures should be taken to keep animals off the playing area and encourage owners to remove any offending deposits immediately.
- Surfaces vary according to the weather. Where there is a real risk, for example frozen ground, excessively muddy or waterlogged ground, games should not be played.
- Playing fields should be regularly maintained.
- Long jump and high jump run-ups along with sandpits should be regularly maintained and must be thoroughly inspected before use for animal fouling or items such as broken glass etc as listed above.
- Appropriate footwear and clothing must be worn at all times when using playing fields and all weather surfaces.

Portable Freestanding Goal Posts and Similar Equipment

If portable freestanding goal posts, basketball hoops, netball rings etc are used in external play areas then the guidance on safe use of portable freestanding goal posts and similar equipment must be followed.