

PLAY SPACES

The importance of play

Playing outside is not just about letting off steam. It is a vital part of childhood that helps children develop physical strength, coordination and balance, social and cognitive skills. Play spaces in parks provide hubs for parents to interact, and provide opportunities for children to learn and develop social skills, imagination, creativity, problem solving, a sense of self and a sense of connection to the community and environment.

Play spaces include much more than just a few pieces of play equipment. Successful play spaces use a mixture of custom designed and 'off-the-shelf' play equipment, provide universal access, offer shade and incorporate natural elements including planting. Many children have limited access to nature and wilderness, therefore planting and natural elements should be integrated into play spaces, or play spaces should be integrated into natural areas. Play spaces should also include seating and amenity for all ages and visitors to enjoy. Safety is important in play spaces and this must to be carefully balanced with the need to provide risk and challenge for children of all ages.

DESIGNING A PLAY SPACE

Involve the community by:

- holding workshops with local children and the local community to understand their needs and aspirations
- identifying demographic trends in order to meet the needs of the community
- mapping out surrounding facilities to ensure there is a variety of facilities and play experiences within the local area

Design for safety by:

- following NZS 5828:2004 Playground Safety Standards
- using proprietary equipment will mean that many safety standards have already been met, and only positioning and surfacing will need design guidance

Respond to the surrounding context by:

- considering the site's unique landform and drainage characteristics in the design
- creating site specific designs that incorporate a combination of both 'off-the-shelf' play elements and bespoke or natural elements that respond to the local character
- using local materials and colours, incorporating neighboring trees and areas of natural planting to provide shade
- incorporating structures such as lookouts, slides and climbing frames into steep areas
- incorporating natural materials into the space, especially at coastal sites or those in ecological or rural environments
- sensitively incorporating built elements, such as boardwalks, platforms, bird hides and fort structures into the surrounding landscape
- identifying opportunities to provide educational outcomes, either through the sensitive incorporation of ecological areas or the use of interpretive signage or sculpture

Design for variety by:

- providing a variety of play experiences including individual, social, active and creative play types
- providing challenge and risk through a series of graduated play experiences
- designing to include play experiences which provide for:
 - rocking and spinning
 - swinging

- sliding
 - tunnels and squeeze experiences
 - activities which promote gross motor skills e.g. climbing
- providing for sensory stimulation e.g. sounds, textures, smells, taste, visual interest
- creating recognisable elements which promote imaginative play, storytelling and language development
- incorporating a theme
- providing opportunities for children to interact with and manipulate the natural environment. This could include the use of natural materials (e.g. rocks and logs) as play experiences, using planting in the design of the play space, soft fall areas and providing water play
- providing for adolescents by planning for unstructured outdoor activities close to shops, public transport routes, skate facilities, cycle paths and linear parks
- designing for different ages and ethnicities, and encouraging boys and girls to play in the same space, promoting care, social interaction and role modeling
- including group play elements
- designing challenges by age ranges e.g. a tot's area, small children's area and older children's area
- providing swings – the most universally popular play item for all age groups
- researching the latest 'off-the-shelf' play equipment. Many playground supply companies continue to invest enormously into research and development of a wide range of play equipment to produce cost effective, durable, functional and popular play pieces
- ensuring any custom designed play equipment can be successfully integrated, and will serve the fundamental function of giving good play value
- selecting play equipment which could also be used for active exercise e.g. monkey bars for chin ups
- designing for wilderness play, encouraging children to actively engage in natural areas containing trees, rocks, earth etc.

Keep play spaces accessible by:

- limiting barriers to access and providing greater levels of universal access where practicable for children and their caregivers
- considering sight impairments, social impairments and mental impairments children may have and providing opportunities for those children to play
- ensuring that every play space has at least one component which can be accessed by those with disabilities
- encouraging ease of use by locating car and disabled parking nearby
- ensuring paths are accessible around and through the play space
- locating playgrounds away from busy roads and using fencing in exceptional circumstances only. If containment is necessary to protect children from harm, soft edges such as landscaped areas should be used
- providing lights on play areas and on connecting path networks to encourage use into the evening hours
- choosing surfaces that encourage universal access

Provide for care givers by:

- providing shaded seating and catering for small and large groups to sit in the area immediately adjacent to the play space
- ensuring all seating areas have clear surveillance of the play areas
- providing relevant amenities, such as toilet facilities with changing tables, and drinking fountains at both adult and child heights in close proximity to play spaces
- integrating fences into the design, should they be required. Consider creating barriers with landscape treatments like earth mounding, planting and low walls, which can form part of the play space

- designing for children to have independent access to the play space
- designing play spaces to allow caregivers to supervise more than one child simultaneously

Provide comfort for users by:

- ensuring shade is provided for both play and seating areas
- considering the location of playgrounds in relation to existing mature shade trees
- considering the strategic planting of trees on parks identified for future playgrounds
- considering the use of either fixed or seasonally installed shade structures, such as tensile fabric sails
- considering the use of oversized roofs or sculptural elements in play equipment to provide shade
- limiting the use of unpainted steel in seating, sculpture and play elements which become too hot under direct sunlight

Ensure good maintenance and management by:

- continuing formal inspections of all structures and play space equipment, to ensure they are maintained to a high standard
- maintaining an inventory of common replacement parts
- carrying out annual safety audits, and allowing for this in maintenance budgets
- ensuring equipment replacement cost are included in the budget, to ensure the ongoing safety and quality of all play spaces
- ensuring manufactured structures and components can be serviced by New Zealand-based contractors

Prevent graffiti and vandalism by:

- locating play spaces in areas of high passive surveillance
- removing or repairing vandalised equipment immediately to prevent any potential safety hazards
- allocating adequate funds to remove and replace vandalised equipment

Technical standards

- Playground Safety standards NZS5828:2004
- Auckland Council's Play Strategy

Other resources

- The Good Play Space Guide: "I Can Play Too". Sports and Recreation Victoria, State of
- Design for Play: A guide to creating successful play spaces. Play England 2008
- <http://www.playengland.org.uk/>

Good practice examples

Kuaka Park, Waterview <i>Interconnected octagons offer a squeezed space and climbing challenge.</i>	
Victoria Park, Auckland Central <i>Opportunities for swinging, rocking and climbing are provided in two separate areas for younger and older children. The areas are beside each other, enabling caregivers to supervise both.</i>	
Pakuranga Rotary Walkway, Farm Cove <i>Develop design solutions which work with the existing land contours, such as this series of interconnected slides which form part of a 'Snakes and Ladders' themed play space.</i>	

<p>Tui Glen Reserve, Henderson</p> <p><i>Tall tower structures offer views across the reserve, connecting children with the wider area, as well as a thrilling slide experience.</i></p>	
<p>Omaha Regional Park</p> <p><i>Natural materials allow for imaginative play and hands on interaction with the environment.</i></p>	
<p>Orakei Domain</p> <p><i>This play area references the sea and enhances its seaside location, creating a distinct sense of place and adventure.</i></p>	

