



Guide To... Improving your outdoor play provision

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Headteacher Update Guide To... Improving your outdoor play provision

As the number of primary children grows and the pressure on school places increases, schools' outside space is becoming more and more squeezed.

Analysis by the Local Government Association has shown that 130,000 extra primary school places will be needed by 2017. Extra classrooms will be required to accommodate these numbers and headteachers up and down the country are busy adding new buildings to their school sites.

But even though outside space is being reduced as a consequence of the building work, primary heads are determined to ensure that pupils still have the opportunity to learn and play outdoors all year round.

With parents becoming increasingly protective and youngsters spending more and more time in front of computer screens at home, school is often one of the few places where children get the chance to play outside.

Indeed, recent research from Sweden has shown that children who do more physical activity are not only likely to improve their health, but their attainment too.

Primary schools are therefore creating fitness and adventure trails, building climbing walls and space frames, and in some cases even installing play equipment on roof gardens.

From multi-coloured play surfaces covered with snakes and ladders markings to trapeze swings and

clatter bridges, schools are keen to give children the chance to push themselves physically, improve their body strength and develop their motor skills.

"School represents some of the few times during the average child's week when they get the opportunity to play with peers without parents watching over their every move," explained James Gowans, commercial director of Fawns Recreational Services, a Hampshire-based company that designs and builds school and nursery playground equipment for all ages and abilities.

"Play, experiencing risk and challenge are a vital part of a child's wellbeing, crucial for learning important life-skills and preparing for life in the wider world. Studies appear almost weekly about the importance of a healthy body, healthy mind and how exercise can enhance academic success."

Fawns Recreational Services has done everything from installing play trains, picnic tables and multi-use games areas for schools, to working with UNICEF to create seven playgrounds in Libya as part of the country's regeneration. The company has installed more than 6,500 playgrounds over the last 15 years, as well as supplying thousands of items of stand-alone equipment.

"But every project is unique," Mr Gowans continued. "Each client has their own particular needs and this is reflected in our approach."



Planning your project

The scale of your project will depend on your school's budget so it is worth finding out at the outset if any additional funding is available – via the local authority, the government's PE and Sport Premium (designed to help primary schools improve the quality of the PE and sports activities they offer pupils) and/or your PTA.

When your school has the necessary funds in place it is important to establish the amount of space available and the outdoor provision you are looking to provide.

How many children do you need to cater for? How old are they and how flexible do you need the space to be? How much of the area needs to be covered and how much needs to be used all year round?

Don't forget that landscaping is important too. As David Yearly, head of play safety at the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), points out in the booklet *Safety of the Playground!*: "A good play area is an experience. The use of such things as planting, ground graphics and ground contours all add to the ambiance of the site."

Consult the experts

Once you know what type of outdoor provision you are looking for and the budget you have it is time to talk to the experts. Contact a reputable company – preferably a member of the Association of Play

Industries (API). The leading trade body within the play sector, the API represents manufacturers, installers, designers and distributors of indoor and outdoor children's play equipment and play area surfacing.

Talk to other schools about their projects and the companies they have used. Read relevant case studies – companies feature these on their websites and they are an effective way of ensuring that firms understand the specific needs of educational settings.

Choosing the right company for the job is key to the success of your project so it is advisable to meet a variety of providers on-site to discuss your ideas.

"Companies should offer to come and meet with the school, spend time understanding your needs and carry out a site survey," Mr Gowans explained.

"They should then come back with specific designs and costings based on your requirements. The whole process should be very consultative. The sales consultants should show a good knowledge of play and a clear understanding of what schools or nurseries need in terms of play space.

"This understanding should include flexibility, sustainability – equipment that is low maintenance and will look good for years to come – an emphasis on challenge and managed risk, and equipment that is suited to children of different abilities and different levels of confidence, even within the same age group."

Checklist for planning your outdoor play provision

- Establish what space you have, your budget, the facilities that already exist, and how flexible you need the outdoor play area to be.
- Work out the age range of the children who will be using the space – early years, key stage 1 or key stage 2.
- Find out if funding is available for the project, such as PE and Sport Premium funding, local authority funding and/or PTA fundraising.
- Consult with experts, visit other schools to look at their provision, and involve pupils, teachers, parents, governors and the local authority in the project.
- Think about the design of the play area and the materials and equipment you want.
- Check the legal requirements for play areas (including EN1176 and EN1177) and find out if you need planning permission.
- Make sure the site is prepared properly for the work.
- Check that the site will be safe at all times during the installation period, particularly if the work takes place during term time.

Get the whole school involved

Involving the student council in consultation meetings gives children a sense of ownership and allows them to have a say in the decision-making process. Other ideas include asking suppliers to present to student councils as well as governing bodies and, later on, arranging visits to factories and timber suppliers for pupils to watch the production process.

Making a decision

Play companies should present their designs to your school, talking through the features and benefits of what they propose. They should describe the dynamics of the area, taking into account health and safety, supervision and access so that play opportunities can be maximised. Companies should also provide a full breakdown of the costs (without any hidden extras).

Legal issues

All play areas need to meet European standards EN1176 and EN1177, which cover playground equipment and surfacing. To find out more about these, download the *Safety of the Playground!* booklet (see further information for the link).

Check whether you need planning permission or not. It may be necessary, for instance, if your school is in a conservation area or has listed buildings, or if the space is likely to have an impact on neighbours. Reputable companies will be able to advise you on this.

Managing the project

When you have decided on a particular design and company, arrange a pre-works meeting.

It is important for the company to meet key stakeholders at your school to agree timescales,



details of the installation, how the health and safety of children, staff and parents will be prioritised during the work, and how disruption to school life can be kept to a minimum. Companies should give schools method statements and risk-assessments, make agreements about moving on and off site, and discuss how deliveries of materials will be dealt with.

Larger projects and installations in areas that are difficult to access may have to be completed during the school holidays, but most can take place during term time with minimal disruption.

Mr Gowans added: "If anything, we have always felt that it is more advantageous for the children to see the area take shape on a daily basis, rather than it just springing up miraculously over the course of half-term or the summer holidays."

Communication is key throughout the installation period and companies should provide you with 24-hour contact numbers. They should also give you exact start dates and times, progress reports and expected finish dates. Some companies use sub-contractors to carry out installations and surfacing work, but the project should be co-ordinated by the lead company throughout.

Completion and handover

When the work is complete, check that you are happy with the result. Make sure that the company gives you specific information about maintenance of the new equipment and keeps in contact to ensure that the play area remains in tip top condition all year round.

Further information

Mr Yearly's information booklet – *Safety of the Playground!* – can be downloaded via www.playgrounds.uokik.gov.pl/download/en_booklet.pdf





Case study: Martin Primary School

The children's faces lit up at the sight of their newly completed play area. "It's better than Highgate Wood," beamed one pupil, comparing it to 70 acres of ancient woodland a mile away from the school.

Martin Primary School in East Finchley, north London, has expanded in recent years. Formerly two separate schools, the infant and junior school merged in 2008 and the school now has 600 pupils. A new two-storey classroom block has been added at the back and the school, which celebrated its centenary in 2013, is midway through changing from two-form entry to three-form entry.

When headteacher Helen Morrison was appointed to lead Martin Primary in 2009, one of her first priorities was to refurbish the inside of the school. Once that had been completed, she and her team turned their attention to the outside space and how they could make the best use of the area for learning and play.

They began with the top playground, which is mainly used by younger pupils. The aim was "to make it as exciting as possible" and with that in mind the school asked Fawns Recreational Services to create an area that the children now call the Jungle Gym, complete with turrets, bridges and a sandpit.

Next on the list was improving the outside learning provision for the nursery and reception children. The nursery space was divided into zones, all with different coloured surfaces and featuring areas for climbing, water play, sand play and even scientific exploration.

The whole project cost in the region of £70,000. The Jungle Gym was part-funded by the local authority, school and the Martin Home School Association (MHSA), which organised fundraising events like cake sales, summer and Christmas fairs,

auction nights and film nights. The new outdoor space for nursery children was funded by contributions from the MHSA and the school budget.

Ms Morrison firmly believes that involving parents and pupils from the outset was key to the project's success.

"I have always been committed to developing strong partnerships with parents," she said. "Parents are happy to help raise money for school projects if they can see the value they will bring.

"The parents and children love the new outdoor provision. Our community is very diverse and we have a mixed parent body. Parents are by no means wealthy, but they like the fact that they can see what they have contributed to. They feel a sense of ownership."

As the project progressed, Ms Morrison and her staff made a point of consulting with the school council: "The new outdoor play provision has definitely made a difference to the children. Play and recreation are very important and the Jungle Gym means that they are able to let off steam then come back into the classroom ready to learn."

Each age group gets the chance to use the play areas and the children are encouraged to use their imagination and to devise fantasy games, such as pretending to be pirates or explorers.

"It's lovely to see the reception children acting out the Three Billy Goats Gruff on the bridge, with a member of staff playing the part of the troll," added Ms Morrison. "The staff are very enthusiastic about what we have done and use the areas as a vital part of the children's learning."

Top tips from Martin Primary:

- Prices vary, so shop around and negotiate to get the best deal.
- Saving up to have several things done at once often means you can get better prices.
- Involve the whole community – so everyone owns it.
- Think carefully about how the space is going to be used before committing to permanent structures.

Case study: Gosford Park Primary

While older pupils at Gosford Park Primary School in Coventry have always had huge playing fields to run around in, nursery and reception children previously had to make do with a small playground surrounded by grey railings.

“It was a bit of a concrete jungle and looked very old and tired,” said Michelle Clemons, deputy headteacher and foundation stage leader at the inner-city school, which has 440 children on its roll.

Staff were keen to transform the school’s early years outdoors provision and this became even more of a priority after Ofsted inspectors advised in 2012 that “the resources for learning outside the classroom” should be improved for nursery and reception children.

Supported by the school governors and with a £71,000 budget (with judicious planning, the school funded its new early years outdoor provision entirely from its own budget), Ms Clemons and former headteacher Tricia Wilkinson planned the project carefully.

“We had a very clear vision of what we wanted,” Ms Clemons explained.

“I scanned catalogues and websites for ideas and created a mood board. We saw several design companies and all of them were impressed that we had gone into such great detail about what we wanted to achieve and why. For instance, we wanted to make sure that the children had a range of challenges, not just balancing and climbing.”

Ms Clemons and her colleagues asked the nursery and reception children about their favourite play equipment and also sought the views of teachers, teaching assistants and parents.

“A project like this is a huge investment for a school and will have a huge impact, so it is important to get it right,” she said.

The Gosford Park team chose Fawns Recreational Services to create its new outside space, impressed by the way the company listened to the school’s needs and worked with them to achieve their aims.

The school started planning the project in the spring term of 2014 and it was completed in July 2014, just before Ms Wilkinson’s retirement.

The new space has been given a firm thumbs up by teachers, parents and, most importantly, by the children themselves. The area is open plan, with an artificial green and blue surface and turquoise strips that look like a river running through it, a mound with a tunnel, a canopy so that children can play outside in all weathers, and an open-sided structure that can be transformed into anything the children want it to be – like a garage, hospital, stable or house.

“It has made a huge difference to the school,” said Ms Clemons. “Parents say how visually enticing and beautiful it is and the children absolutely love it.

“Our focus was to enhance the children’s engagement and their learning opportunities, and the impact of such well-planned provision is evident every day when they are communicating, investigating and exploring the new challenges that the outdoor environment provides.

“We are delighted with the outcome. We firmly believe that our children deserve the very best start to their educational journey and we see this financial investment as an investment in them and their future.”

Top tips from Gosford Park:

- Have a very clear vision of what you want – and why. Creating a mood board will help to firm up your ideas.
- Be flexible and realistic. We were very prescriptive about what we wanted but we had to accept that some ideas were outside our budget.
- Listen to the experts. They will be able to advise you on aspects like health and safety.
- Make sure the area is adaptable and can be used for open-ended play.



This Guide To... has been produced by Headteacher Update with support from Fawns Recreational Services, which designs and builds school and nursery playground equipment for all ages and abilities. For information, contact 01252 515199, email sales@fawns.co.uk or visit www.fawns.co.uk