

20 PRACTICAL WAYS TO A FRIENDLIER PLAYGROUND

Playgrounds should be places where children can play and have fun in a safe and secure setting. However, they are sometimes places where children are bored, or frightened, or frustrated, and where bullying and fights happen everyday.

You don't need a great deal of money to turn even the most unprepossessing asphalt area into a place which even timid children can enjoy using. We hope that this brief leaflet will give you some practical and inexpensive ideas, which you can use to improve your own playground.

Conduct a survey using a Questionnaire to find out what the children think of the playground: ask them

- what do they do in the playground?
- what games they play?
- what they like about the playground?
- what they dislike about the playground?
- do older children monopolize all the space?
- do younger children feel vulnerable?
- is there bullying?
- do children fight in the playground?
- what causes trouble?
- what would they like to have in the playground?

Find out what the staff and playground supervisors think of the playground:

is full use being made of the space?

- is it being used as educational resource?
- are playground conflicts spilling over into the classroom?
- are there areas which are hidden from general view?
- is there enough supervision?
- what do they think could be done to improve the playground?

Hold a Parents Meeting and make sure the PTA are fully involved in all the planning and decisions. Ask for parents' advice and suggestions. Ask them to suggest people in the local community who might be able to help. Find out if any of them have skills which could be used for improvements (e.g. builders, painters).

Talk to local contractors (builders, landscape gardeners, painters). Ask for their advice and help.

Find out if local companies would be prepared to sponsor new equipment or contribute towards the cost of refurbishment.

Have a working party or playground committee - give them a term to come up with a design for a new-style playground and plan of action.

Put up a playground noticeboard for announcements, competitions, suggestions.

Make it clear that fighting and kicking are outlawed. Involve the children in a project to decide on a series of positive rules for acceptable behaviour in the playground. Get each class to come up with five or ten points. Some of the things children have suggested include:

- no kicking,
- no punching or pulling hair
- no fighting
- asking before joining in a game
- sharing space
- respecting the quiet area
- inviting left-out children to join in
- making sure new pupils have someone to talk to

Use the children's suggestions to draw up with a five or ten point Playground Code. Put it up on the playground noticeboard, and make sure every child and parent has a copy. Explain that breaking these rules will not be tolerated.

If fighting or bullying are common, complement the positive changes to the playground by introducing a whole school anti-bullying policy (Kidscape has a model policy and a comprehensive guide for information and reference).

Use role-plays in class to find different ways of resolving conflict. Ask the children to dramatise situations they have witnessed in the playground which resulted in bullying or fighting. What could they have done to help? Encourage them to think of alternative ways of responding to aggressive behaviour.

Whenever possible, stagger children's playtimes so that there are not too many children in the playground at any one time. Separate the older children so that they play at a different time to younger ones.

Install a camera overlooking the playground (it could be a dummy-many security firms supply them) or take photographs very obviously (it doesn't matter if there is no film in the camera- the idea that they are being recorded makes children think twice before bullying anyone!) Make sure all the children know that their actions are being recorded - it's amazing how quickly bullying decreases when the perpetrators realise their every move is being captured on film. Real photographs are also helpful as they do away with the "I didn't do it. It wasn't me" excuse.

Make a 'quiet' area: cordon off a section of the playground with tubs of plants or put up trellising to support climbing plants. Install some fixed seating. Explain to the children that this area is just for sitting and talking - it is not for noisy games or for hide-and-seek.

Turn the care of plants over to the children - perhaps the responsibility of one particular class. As they look after the plants over the year, they can monitor growth and try out different planting schemes.

Paint games on the playground: a noughts and crosses board, hopscotch squares, a number snake or ladder, or a 'champ' square. (Use non-toxic paint). County ground maintenance teams often have useful templates and are experienced in marking out playgrounds. No other games should be allowed to 'encroach' on the painted areas - football games, for example, can take-over every available inch of space unless there are clear limits.

Designate an area especially for ball games, skipping, and anything else that involves running, jumping and shouting!

Hold a series of "playground workshops" with parents and grandparents. Get older members of the community to teach children some of the games they used to play as children, and some of the songs and rhymes they used to sing. Many of the old school games are being forgotten but children still find them just as much fun as our grandparents did when they are taught how to play them. Ask the children to make up new games.

Have skipping ropes, elastic for French skipping or jingle jangle, basketballs and footballs available.

Fix a basketball net to a wall or install a freestanding net.

Think about turning a corner of the playground into a garden. Classes could have their own plots or areas, or one class could be responsible for maintenance. Children could try out different varieties of seed and fertilizer. Playground gardens, even small ones, can be used very successfully as an additional resource for the science curriculum.

If several classes or children are involved, ask a local nursery to sponsor an annual gardening prize. Successful plants and produce could be entered in local shows.

Use the improvement project to increase the children's awareness of their surroundings. Making a garden and planting trees or shrubs is a way of 'greening' the environment. Contact local environmental groups and the local natural history society. Involve them in designing the playground changes.

Install a simple weather station: rain gauge, thermometer and anemometer. Have a 'weather watch team' to record day-by-day results. Hold a competition for children to guess the total amount of rainfall from the beginning of the winter term to a date before the end of the summer term. Post up the running total on the playground noticeboard so children can keep track of how they are doing.

RESOURCES

"Can I stay in today Miss?" Improving the School Playground by Carol Ross and Amanda Ryan, Trentham Books 1990, ISBN 9-780948-080425, Price £6.99. An excellent, practical handbook with a step-by-step guide to planning playground changes.

Bright Ideas: The Outdoor Classroom edited by Brian Keaney and Bill Lucas, Scholastic Publications Ltd. 1992, ISBN 9-780590-530347, Price £7.99. Full of interesting, easy and inexpensive ideas for using the playground as an educational resource. All the ideas are linked to specific areas of the curriculum. Age 5-11.

Children's Games in Street and Playground by Iona and Peter Opie, OUP 1984, Price £7.99, provides a fascinating source for all sorts of children's games.

Using School Grounds as an Educational Resource by Kirsty Young of Learning through Landscapes Trust, 1990

ISBN 1-872865-04-6, Price £4.00. Includes 13 case studies, a detailed action plan and a pull-out wall chart.

For detailed advice and suggestions contact:

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