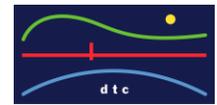


How to Properly Plan Play Areas



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It's an undeniable fact that children today are more comfortable indoors with an electronic device in their hand than outside with a stick, rock or even a football. However studies show that:

- **Children are spending half as much time outdoors as they did 20 years ago.** (*Juster et al 2004*); (*Burdette & Whitaker 2005*); (*Kuo & Sullivan 2001*)
- **Today, kids 8-18 years old devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes using entertainment media in a typical day (more than 53 hours a week).** (*Kaiser Family Foundation*)
- **In a typical week, only 6% of children ages 9-13 play outside on their own.** (*Children & Nature Network, 2008*)
- **Children who play outside are more physically active, more creative in their play, less aggressive and show better concentration.** (*Burdette and Whitaker, 2005; Ginsburg et al., 2007*)
- **Sixty minutes of daily unstructured free play is essential to children's physical and mental health.** (*American Academy of Pediatrics, 2008*)

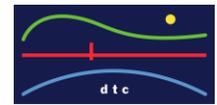
Why is this information important to site designers? Because child obesity, depression, anxiety and general stress can be mediated and good developmental health for students can be aided with inclusion of quality outdoor play at all levels of primary education.

When designing a school campus, understanding how the end users will interact with the site is just as critical as bus circulation, site grading or security. Here are some creative ways to make site features a part of the play process:

- An underground retention system can sit below a beneficial athletic field while contributing to a reduced field installation cost
- Paved future expansion space for portables can be line painted and converted into a satellite hard surface play area
- Rain gardens can be adjusted with walking paths for educational as well as maintenance purposes. Pedestrian circulation can be designed in circuits as fit trails or measured loops
- Wayfinding signage can tell a story or play a game and can be artistic in expression not just a sterile form on the landscape
- Benches become spaceships,
- Shrubs become forts and
- A well-engineered cut slope may become the new community sledding hill



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When designing play areas designers should also take into account the five senses:

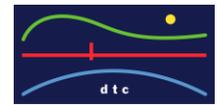
- **Auditory Sense:** Some examples of introducing sound in a subtle, yet positive way into the play experience include the rustle of the leaves from an existing tree, the sound of water splashing in a water table, the introduction of an interactive drum wall within an early childhood experimentation area, or even the simple introduction of wind chimes outside the front entrance to a school.
- **Tactile Sense:** Utilization of varying surface treatments (wood, plastic, stone) as well as finishes (smooth, stippled, rough, soft, stiff). By affording variation in both our built and vegetative forms within the landscape you can stimulate a true understanding of man-made and natural textures in the outdoor space.
- **Olfactory Sense:** The crisp smell of a brisk fall day, the smell of shrubs in bloom in the spring, the smell of pizza cooking from the cafeteria! All of these smells can evoke a certain reaction and can be designed to blend into the outdoor environment of a school. Attention to placement of fragrant elements of the outdoor space as well as program elements can really define certain areas.
- **Gustatory Sense:** Perhaps the most difficult to incorporate into a school environment is taste. Designers can either think outside the box or consider something as simple as correlation of elements. Since apples are harvested in the fall, plant a few apple trees and the educators can offer locally farm grown apples for the children to taste while they learn about the trees on school grounds. A school garden is also an option for hands-on nurturing of crops followed by a feast of friendship with locally grown fruits and vegetables and can easily be adapted to a teacher's curriculum.
- **Sight Sense:** There is value to looking beautiful. Aesthetics do make a difference in any area where humans spend considerable time. Understand what the space will be and make sure to spiff it up a little! With that said take time to detail these environments. Developmental school campus are molding and shaping the future leaders, designers and stewards of this planet. Basque flowers at entrances in areas of prominence that can be rotated easily with the seasons. Take a little extra time when specifying site furniture to afford something that is tied to the school or local community. Create place not just space!



Unfortunately, when budgets need to be trimmed, the first to go is typically the landscape budget. Here are some items to consider if value engineering threatens outdoor play site improvements.

1. **Plan for future power use.** Even if not intended your design should anticipate future need and plan accordingly. Have spare electrical conduit chases homerun to spare panel locations within the building. It is far easier and less expensive to do it during a major building renovation or new construction than as a separate project later on.

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2. **Plan for future water use.** Provide space for future water harvesting and cistern storage areas, along with oversized potable water access tie in points outside the building footprint in close proximity to outdoor play areas.
3. **Plan space for paved play.** Oversized future expansion areas, slightly widened access walks, auxiliary parking lots. All of these areas can be utilized for open hard surface play (especially in the winter months in the northeast).
4. **Plan space for unpaved play.** Natural and synthetic have their place in play. Synthetic can be more appropriate in urban, heavily utilized and to provide an area free of mud.

Natural areas can promote differing textures, greater grade transition and visual impact.

5. **Plan space for structured play.** Understand your end users and plan accordingly. Don't be afraid to ask the tough questions. Do you really need six tennis courts or can it be four with two multiuse courts? One big play scape or three small pay nodes?
6. **Plan space for unstructured play.** A field, a berm or a shady spot all can evoke a sense of free or imaginative play. So can utilization of tricycles on a basketball court, or chalk on a site wall.
7. **Plan for future drainage use.** Insure downstream drainage systems are designed with future site drainage in mind. It is easier and cheaper to oversize during initial projects for future additions.
8. **Plan for future utility runs.** Anywhere you believe a future utility may pass through a driveway, walkway, etc. design in empty oversize conduits. They are cheap to have installed and marked and are a real long term benefit to the site.
9. **Use the specifications to your advantage.** Identify play items and call for them in an outdoor play specification. You may be able to compromise on providing equipment in the project even if you do not get all of your play areas. You can get equipment through even with federal and state funding.
10. **Think Like a kid.** Remember the end user or ask yourself what I as a kid would fight to keep!!!

