

Points to ponder in purchasing outdoor play structures

Buyer's Guide to Playground Equipment

Playground equipment is likely to be your center's largest single non-staff expenditure. Therefore, it is important to make wise choices. This guide is designed to help you with this decision. Listed below are six factors to consider when evaluating outdoor play structures. This advice was provided by the playground equipment manufacturers and dealers listed in the directory at the end of the article.

1. Appropriateness

Start with your center's goals. What are you trying to accomplish with your outdoor program? What do you want children to experience? Having clarified your objectives, evaluate how well different playground structures will help you meet them.

In general, the equipment you select should encourage children to engage in a wide range of social, motor, and imaginative play experiences. It should provide opportunities for both upper and lower body development. It should be appro-

priately scaled and equipped for the ages of children who will be using it. And it should comply with the spirit of the new Americans with Disabilities Act so that children of all abilities can enjoy access to it.

2. Construction

A variety of advantages and disadvantages are customarily associated with different materials used in the construction of play structures:

Wood structures are often less expensive and more aesthetically pleasing, offer children the tactile stimulation of well-worked natural

materials, and are biodegradable. They do require more ongoing maintenance and may pose the risk of splinters and exposure to toxic chemicals used in their treatment.

Metal structures are more durable, require less maintenance, and are available in a wide range of colors. On the other hand, they are more expensive, are subject to rust, and can be hot to the touch in the summer and slippery in damp weather.

Plastic structures are colorful and need minimal care, are less expensive, and can provide unique designs and shapes. However, plastic systems can lack structural integrity and can have a problem standing up to the elements season after season.

Keeping these pros and cons in mind, it is important to recognize that the methods by which a structure is manufactured and finished are as important as the type of material of which it is constructed. Modern construction techniques can overcome most of a material's disadvantages. For example, well manufactured and treated wood is splinter resistant and free from toxic chemicals. Coated metal structures do not get as hot and are rust resistant and slip resistant. Commercial grade plastics are more resilient in climatic conditions and more sturdy than lower grade plastics.

3. Installation

Installation can be as complicated and as expensive as the purchase of the equipment itself. You'll need to determine the suitability of the site and investigate the impact of drain-

age, soil conditions, and underground utilities. You'll also need to insure that your site allows for ease of access and supervision. You may need to consult a landscape architect for many of these factors.

In addition, you must select a safe surface to install under the equipment. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), falls to the surface account for nearly 70% of all playground injuries. As a result, CPSC recommends a fill or surface that has a critical height rating equal to or above your play equipment's highest accessible part. In selecting an equipment seller, look for one who is well-versed in these requirements and can knowledgeably advise you as to your options.

One way to cut down on installation costs is to recruit parent volunteers to help. Many companies have programs designed to help centers do this. They may assign a consultant to work with your novice crew to insure that everything proceeds smoothly and correctly. In any case, before deciding to do some or all of the installation in this manner, be sure to determine what impact this will have on the warranty and on the center's liability.

4. Safety

Both the CPSC and the American Society of Testing Materials (ASTM) have established standards for playground equipment. To insure that your equipment is safe, you need to verify that it complies with these standards. Manufacturers are now building to these standards; but to be on the safe side, you should ask for a written statement from the seller verifying that the equipment is in compliance as installed.

A key element of safety is maintenance. A significant portion of

accidents on playground equipment are the result of poor maintenance. No matter what type of equipment you buy, you should establish and adhere to a strict schedule of inspection and maintenance. Your seller should be able to supply you with such a schedule as well as instructions on how to perform maintenance.

5. Support

You need to know that if you are experiencing a problem with your playground equipment you will have someone readily available to help you with a solution. Don't commit to a purchase until you have satisfactory answers to the following questions: Who will provide service, the seller or the manufacturer? Will I have a specific company representative that I can always turn to for help? Does the company have a full-time customer service staff assigned to after-sales service? How long does the company guarantee keeping parts in stock for a particular piece of equipment? If a part needs to be replaced, what will be the turnaround time on fulfillment?

A second aspect of support is the warranty. When evaluating different types of equipment, include a comparison of the companies' warranties. This is not always a simple task as warranties typically provide for different lengths of coverage for different parts of the structure. For example, moving parts are usually guaranteed for a much shorter time frame than the major structural elements. Also, if a part needs to be replaced, find out whether or not the warranty covers shipping and labor.

6. Experience

One of the surest ways to evaluate playground equipment is to check

with current users. In the early "shopping" stage, it's a good idea to do your research while attending a conference. Not only can you see many of the products in the exhibit hall; but, as importantly, you can talk to a large number of early childhood professionals in a short time, and get a broad spectrum of opinions on various structures and companies.

Once you have narrowed your choices down to a single product, it is valuable to do a more rigorous "reference check."

Ask the seller to supply you with a list of all the centers in your area that currently have this equipment. Don't settle for a short list of two or three of the seller's happiest customers. Ask for names of centers that have had the equipment in place for five or more years so you can check out its durability.

In talking to these references, ask questions such as the following: Was the equipment installed on schedule? Did the seller meet his promises both in terms of price and quality? Has after-sales service been satisfactory? Has the company honored its warranty? Have there been any problems with the equipment? How do the children use the equipment? If you had it to do over again, would you buy the same product?

As a final step, you should visit a center with the equipment you plan to buy. In this way you can evaluate directly the quality of the installation as well as the durability of the product.

Most importantly, you can observe how children are using it. Are the children taking full advantage of all its features? Are all children drawn to it? Do children using it exhibit joy?