

Dealing with the new Playground Standards in a cost effective way

2003 is the year of the Goat in the Chinese Lunar calendar. Don't be a goat about playgrounds this year. Prepare a strategic approach ahead of the herd!

This year Standards Australia is likely to release the long awaited new safety standards for playgrounds. While this is welcome news, we await with interest the final decisions on many controversial issues that will affect the cost and practicalities of playground construction and design, and whether or not playgrounds will remain relevant to the children they are intended to serve. Whatever the outcome, playground providers will have to prepare a response to the standards and some kind of implementation strategy. A 'knee-jerk' reaction to this situation will prove particularly expensive in the long run, especially for schools, local government and early childhood centres.

THERE ARE THREE CRITICAL ISSUES NOT ONE

The new standards provide an opportunity for a measured, considered approach to playground provision. Take this opportunity to assess each site.

There are **three** critical issues that need to be addressed in playgrounds.

Safety is only one of these. Whenever a playground is being designed, assessed, replaced or renovated, the important issues needing consideration are:

- o **Play value** for the target population;
- o **Access** to children and adults with a disability; and
- o **Safety.**

None of these should be addressed in isolation and a playground which does not address all three is a waste of money because:

- o Every playground provider is obliged to meet the obligations of the Disability Discrimination Act and the various Access Standards
- o No playground is worth building if it does not attract and hold children's interest
- o Every playground must be designed to minimise the risk and severity of injury to comply with relevant Safety Standards.

Keep in mind that **poor maintenance** will affect all three of these issues and may make a once-safe playground dangerous, reduce accessibility of a site, and ultimately reduce play value. There must be a regular maintenance system in place for every playground.

TIPS FOR THE NEW YEAR

- o Consider your capacity to realistically manage playgrounds to the standard required today. Fewer well located, high quality playgrounds may prove far better value than numerous small, poorly maintained and under-used sites.
- o Manage the political processes which can affect playgrounds in your organisation. You need firm policies to help you resist pressure to place playgrounds in places you know they will never be successful or viable.
- o Consider the play needs of the catchment around each site.
- o Look carefully at the potential of the site and its structures to provide for these identified needs. Some sites are more suitable as playgrounds than others, and you will need a consistent set of criteria to establish which are which.
- o Move towards making your key playgrounds accessible. Not just miles of rubber and ramps, but provide interesting things which really work for people with a disability.

