

2024

# IPEMA INSIGHTS REPORT

*Exploring Recent and Emerging Trends in  
Playground Design, Surfacing Innovations,  
and Play Space Dynamics:*

*A Comprehensive Report by IPEMA*



Prepared by:

**International Play  
Equipment Manufacturers  
Association**

# STATEMENT FROM **IPEMA:**

The IPEMA Insights Report is based on the collective thoughts, opinions, and research compiled from industry experts. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data and analyses provided, IPEMA does not guarantee the completeness or precision of the information. Readers are encouraged to consider the findings within the context of their own knowledge and professional judgment. Any actions taken based on the contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the reader.

# ABOUT US



The **International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association (IPEMA)** is a non-profit, membership, trade association. In addition to membership for manufacturers of public play equipment and surfacing materials, we extend membership to consultants and suppliers related to the industry. IPEMA also provides a product certification program for public play equipment and surfacing materials.

IPEMA maintains an ongoing initiative, **Voice of Play**, to promote the benefits of children's play and playgrounds and to provide information and resources to help us all improve the quality and quantity of children's play and playgrounds. Visit [Voice of Play](#) for information about the physical, social, emotional and cognitive benefits of play; playground certification and standards; and resource kits for parents, caregivers, teachers, and more.

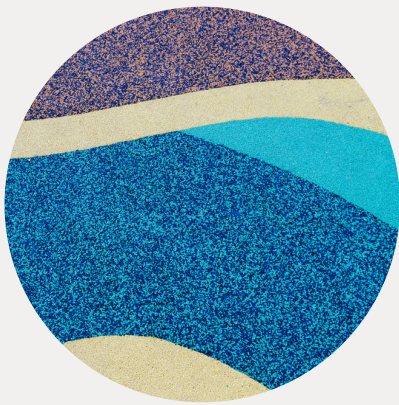


# **IN THE ALWAYS- CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT AND SURFACING...**

Staying updated on industry trends is paramount for manufacturers, designers and experts alike. As communities prioritize safety, inclusivity and innovative play experiences, the playground equipment market shifts to meet these demands. From advancements in surfacing and material technologies to the growing emphasis on inclusive design, the world of playground equipment is ever evolving. In the International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association (IPEMA) Industry Insights report, we investigate the latest trends shaping the playground industry, offering insights into emerging innovations, market dynamics and the future of playground equipment design and community impact.



# WHAT'S TRENDING WITH PLAY EQUIPMENT?



**SURFACING**



**NATURAL  
ELEMENTS**



**INCLUSIVE  
EQUIPMENT**



**RISKY PLAY  
EQUIPMENT**



# SURFACING

Advancements in innovation and updated surfacing materials are making playgrounds safer for children. Between **minimizing hazards and maximizing accessibility**, there is a lot to do when installing, upgrading and maintaining playground surfacing. For playgrounds to truly be safer and more accessible, the surface should extend directly underneath and be at least six feet in all directions from play equipment.

“Improving surfacing materials and their installation addresses the evolving trend of incorporating renovated features and innovative play systems that unlock educational exploration, problem-solving and balancing safety with risky play.”

*Brad Pittam, 2022-2024 President, IPEMA*

The ideal surfaces for setting a foundation of safety include poured-in-place (PIP) rubber, safety-tested rubber mats, rubber mulch, engineered wood fiber or artificial turf designed specifically for use as a playground surface. Many playgrounds that previously had hard surfaces, such as concrete, asphalt and grass, have **replaced these surfaces with more cushioning, engineered wood fiber, artificial turf or rubber mulch**. However, paved surfacing can be used to make playground exteriors more inclusive and accessible to those who may have mobility challenges — especially when trying to reach elevated surfaces or seating areas.

# NATURAL ELEMENTS



Themed playgrounds that include natural elements such as logs, trees, flower beds or boulders are on the rise as appealing destinations that **utilize the natural space around or within the playground**. Research and industry knowledge has shown that introducing children to nature at an early age can **encourage them to form a lifelong appreciation for the world around them** — its beauty, diversity, delicate balance and life cycles — and help them understand their place within it.



Communities with modern playgrounds need to consider how many natural elements they can **safely build into their design to encourage more cohesiveness with their surroundings**. There are important considerations to make in the initial planning process to maximize a new nature playground. This includes site design, layout, gardens or other special areas and overall safety surfacing. Playground **industry experts see that local municipalities want designs that feature natural materials**, whether they're existing or added to well-established playground spaces.

# NATURAL ELEMENTS



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Natural elements like boulders, tree trunks, trees, and flowers are increasingly being incorporated into play areas — enhancing the natural beauty and providing sensory elements.

*Karla Thomas, Marketing Manager, Playdale Playgrounds Ltd*

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There is truly natural — like a stream running through a park where kids can play in the stream, or a tree where kids can climb the tree. These are examples of truly natural materials in a natural setting. But there is also a spectrum with using natural materials with manufactured components that enhance the usability of those natural materials.

*Greg Miller, Principal Landscape Architect  
Pland Collaborative*





# INCLUSIVE EQUIPMENT



According to the 2018 poll\* by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), **nearly 9 in 10 Americans feel strongly that all playgrounds should offer inclusive options**, yet many communities and schools are behind when it comes to ensuring children and parents of all abilities can play together equally.

This focus extends far beyond addressing physical disabilities; it **encompasses a broad spectrum of neurodiverse children**.

Moreover, it suggests that within our lifetimes, **we may all experience or encounter individuals with diverse abilities**, emphasizing the universality of this issue. Inclusive play equipment is about recognizing and accommodating the unique strengths and challenges of every individual, fostering an environment where **everyone can participate and thrive**.







# THE ART OF RISK TAKING

Research has shown that children who learn early on to take **safer, more calculated risks benefit from improved confidence, positive self-esteem, self-control and the importance of following rules.**

Parents may feel more confident about their children taking risks in certain environments, like in or around the home. People may not realize, however, that **today's playgrounds are often made with safer risk-taking in mind.** Additionally, playground equipment is required to be **placed on safety-tested surfacing made from materials that help absorb shock from a fall** — which helps mitigate serious risk of injury. These elements make playgrounds a great place for children to explore freely, while also being supervised by a parent or guardian. Playgrounds offer children a place to run, jump and test boundaries more safely.

“For kids who may not be quite as excited to jump from play element to play element, parents can take a more hands-on approach by trying new things together at the playground.”

*Brad Pittam, 2022-2024 President, IPEMA*

# BRINGING GENERATIONS TOGETHER



# **PARKS ARE PLACES THAT SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ACROSS THE GENERATIONS.**

An important new trend in parks is to bring generations together through the **intentional design of spaces** where young children, adolescents, young adults, middle aged people and older persons can participate in satisfying and effective physical activity. These **multi-generational places** not only offer opportunities for physical activity across age ranges, they are places for people to interact and develop relationships that create healthy communities.

## **CHOICE.**

The choices of **activities for play** and fitness should be **tailored to all of the ages and abilities in the community** - for example, play equipment for infants, children ages 2-5, children ages 5-12, and teens. Fitness equipment should be designed for young adults who use their body weight to exercise, but also have effective cardio equipment as well as equipment that supports balance and coordination for active aging.

## **FLEXIBILITY.**

Play and fitness equipment can be **flexible and multi-purpose**. For example, play equipment that supports different types of climbing activities, and fitness equipment that supports strength training as well as cardio activities for individuals and groups.

# ATMOSPHERE.

Choose equipment that will **support clear sightlines**, rather than equipment that is bulky and obstructs your view of the environment.

# LAYERS.

Choose play and fitness equipment that offers a **variety of challenge levels** for those who are just starting to those who are more experienced in play and fitness.

# MEANING.

Create a beautiful space with **high quality materials and a generous amount of natural elements**. Make sure that there are places to rest and gather, and places with shade so that people can stay longer and will return again and again.





# PLAYGROUND RENAISSANCE: COMMUNITY BENEFITS





Playgrounds not only provide health and social benefits for children, but also give families an outdoor recreation area where they can connect, learn, grow and spend time together. These areas can also bring value in other ways, such as raising property values, growing communities, and bringing health and wellness to neighborhoods.



In talking with customers, we've heard the benefits to a community come up a lot. These people are building destination playgrounds and seeing the economic benefits to their surrounding community. People are coming from all over to visit this playground, and they're making a day of it — either packing a picnic or having lunch at a local restaurant — and then coming back to the playground to impact the entire community.

*Katie Swanson, Communications Specialist,  
Landscape Structures*



## RAISES PROPERTY VALUES

Public parks, outdoor recreation areas and playgrounds are excellent assets to community members, especially when it comes to their wallets. Research shows\* that the **presence of a playground amongst residential homes can increase property values by five percent or more**. Not only do playgrounds offer an outdoor space for kids to play, but they can directly add value to neighborhood property.

# ATTRACTS FAMILIES AND BUILDS COMMUNITY

One of the major reasons it's so important to have an outdoor recreational area is so that **more families simply come to the neighborhood**. A sure way to attract families to residential areas is to provide a **safer, quality outdoor gathering spot** where they can come together to connect, play and socialize. Bringing people of all backgrounds together helps eliminate biases and forge connections. This is a great opportunity to **build a sense of community among residents** and create a safe place where parents can befriend other parents, and kids can befriend other kids.

## PLAYGROUND EQUIPMENT ENHANCES YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

According to research\* from Kathleen Wolf, Ph.D, research social scientist at the University of Washington, studies have shown that **homebuyers are willing to pay more for a property that is located close to a natural park or open space** than a home that doesn't offer such a space — this is known as the “proximate principle.” These studies point to a need for communities to consider the positive impact that parks or playgrounds may have on neighborhood home values.

The benefits of play for kids and adults cannot be overlooked; neither can the **benefits of playgrounds and parks in communities**. By making sure that playgrounds exist in neighborhoods, property values will benefit, communities will continue to grow, and families will **reap the health and wellness benefits that playgrounds and outdoor spaces have to offer**.

# TRENDING ON THE HORIZON: TECHNOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY







# PLAYGROUND TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

Technological advancements in the way new materials are manufactured give manufacturers and local communities' greater peace of mind, knowing playground materials are tested, properly installed and safer for children.

On the opposite end of the technological advancement spectrum is the integration of **interactive games and physical technology into playgrounds**. Some popular trends in playground technology include interactive panels, augmented reality (AR) and electronic games incorporated into the playground's actual landscape.





Playground manufacturers continue to explore different ways of safely incorporating technology. One major success of new-age playground technology: multi-sensory playground games where children tag corresponding light patterns on a table or on the ground. This technology improves children's hand-eye coordination, action/reaction skills and gets their muscles moving.

Reflecting the rise in screen time amongst today's youth, some play spaces have **launched applications or games where parents and children can use their cell phone** to be guided through a park or playground. Industry experts are welcoming this innovation in new playground technology **but do caution parents to be mindful of any tripping hazards around the play space.** Parents should encourage children to **enjoy the playground to its fullest potential** and **find ways to balance their screen time.** Technological applications like these also require maintenance to keep the integrations up-to-date and functioning properly.



Pokémon Go is a recent example of an augmented reality game that enables players to utilize their cell phones and encourages them to go outside, visit their local park or recreation area, and capture Pokémon by interacting with both the game and each other. While players use their cell phones, they are also talking with other players while walking and active, congregating at parks and recreation areas, and having fun in the process.

*Denise Calabrese, CAE, Executive Director,  
International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association (IPEMA)*







# PLAYGROUND SUSTAINABILITY

Manufacturing playgrounds for children isn't just about fun anymore; it's about the **future environmental impact**. Manufacturers' choices in materials, as well as their approach to manufacturing and their business processes overall, are all critical parts of sustainability and being environmentally conscious. How manufacturers and communities choose to create local playgrounds resonates deeply, playing a **vital role in limiting environmental effects and instilling values for the next generation**.





# MATERIALS

Recycled materials are critical to building a fun, green-spaced and eco-friendly playground. Timber, for example, is **sustainably sourced through accredited, renewable forests**. Nonprofit organizations, such as the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), have practices in place to prevent deforestation and ensure trees are harvested and managed responsibly.

**Stainless steel is another sustainable product** that can be re-used and melted down to repurpose for when playgrounds near the end of their life cycle. Stainless steel tends to have a higher end cost as a product with a few extra steps involved, but it could also be a **positive outcome to the environment and for generations to come**.

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Timber is such a sustainably sourced material and is a brilliant product to use in playgrounds due to its longevity and life cycle.

*Karla Thomas, Marketing Manager, Playdale Playgrounds Ltd*

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# MANUFACTURING PROCESS



Materials and more green spaces are only a part of the playground sustainability process. To help reduce waste and their carbon footprint, manufacturers are aware of the **need to improve the packaging of playground equipment** and protect resources. From how the equipment arrives to the site to the transportation systems that companies use, **there are ways to reduce the effect on the environment through travel.**

Involving **sustainable processes or certification programs — such as IPEMA, Kitemark or GS Mark** — may add more cost to products, but results in an independent third party testing the products to verify their compliance to various standards. This can result in peace of mind as children are playing on compliant equipment and surfacing. With best practices in place, the impact on the environment lessens and, in turn, builds a healthier future for children through a strong environmental ethos.

## PROCESSES IN THE BUSINESS

Beyond choosing **recycled materials and more sustainable manufacturing processes**, companies are integrating policies to reduce their environmental impact. By looking at the recyclability of playground materials that are used and manufactured, **companies are dedicating their efforts to be more sustainable** and drive change across their businesses.

Environmental management principles — any eco-friendly practices across the business — help people see their accreditations being put to good use.



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