

How To Improve School Playtimes

A Guide to Creating Engaging and Inclusive Playgrounds

Many people are increasingly concerned about children's lack of social skills and their ability to play. Often, we hear people say things like, "It wasn't like this in our day. Children knew how to play; we played street games; the roads were safe; and we didn't have computers. Children don't seem to know how to play anymore."

As a Teacher, Parent, and Education Consultant, I have often heard a common plea from teachers, lunchtime supervisors, and parents: "Help," they say, "what can we do about playtimes and behaviour?"

Playtime can be a tricky period. Sometimes, all our energy goes into organising the indoor learning environment, and we forget about the outside. From my years working in education and with schools, I've seen that playtimes and playgrounds often need re-energising.

As a whole school team, we need to reflect on whether the behaviour we observe in the playground is genuinely bad behaviour—or just bored behaviour. The right environment

can make a huge difference: I've seen many a concrete jungle transformed into a thriving, creative, active, and engaging play space with just a bit of thought, teamwork, and imagination. Unwanted behaviours in the playground can be significantly reduced, which can also positively impact learning.

So, how can we improve our school playtimes?

Top Tip Number One: Create Playground Activity Zones

Don't know where to start? A great idea is to conduct an audit of your playground space and current resources. If you need a ready-made playtime audit, check out our Playtime Audit service.

Then decide how to best utilise the space you have and make playtimes a more exciting and vibrant experience for your children.



The right environment can transform a concrete jungle into a thriving, creative, and engaging play space.

It's beneficial to collect a whole school pupil voice on what activity zones the children would like. If you are unsure, you could use some of the activities below to help. Having different activity zones means we meet the needs of all children.

Getting input from lunchtime staff, teacher aides, playground supervisors, and the adults who know the space and the children best is also important. They are an invaluable resource in supporting our children and can share a wealth of wisdom from their daily experiences in the playground.

Once you have decided on your activities, simply divide your playground into different activity zones and provide the appropriate resources.

Here are some ideas for zoned activity areas:

- Imaginative play zone
- Traditional playground games zone
- "Friendship stop" zone
- Quiet zone
- Craze of the week (one type of equipment used every day of the week)
- Construction/small world play equipment
- Ball games – football, netball, basketball
- Parachute games
- Performing arts - music and dance zone
- Painted games – hopscotch, etc.
- Nature zone (if your school has a wooded area or a garden)

Top Tip Number Two: Imaginative Play Equipment

Playgrounds tend to be full of sports equipment, but not all children enjoy playing sports. We often talk about meeting the needs of all our children and do this well indoors, but we may forget about it when we are outside.

Consider some of these options for playground equipment:

- Road track set
- Giant plastic playing cards or giant snakes and ladders
- Giant plastic X and O's
- Colouring-in books
- Dressing-up boxes
- Tower and cube set – like Polydron, but huge!
- Lego and big build blocks
- Small world play
- Bubbles
- Sensory play equipment
- Construction play – like plastic crates, smooth off-cuts of wood (e.g., unused decking), plastic pipes—you may be able to source these for free from local companies.

Equipment like this can help younger children transitioning to a bigger playground with older children, but older children also love these activities.





Top Tip Number Three: Craze of the Week

The craze of the week is a successful lunchtime strategy. As you know, children love learning new crazes, from card swapping to marbles, elastics, yo-yos, and clapping games. The “craze” is changed weekly for another new and exciting activity.

How to organise the craze of the week:

First, talk with the children about activities they would love to have in the playground. Choose and buy enough equipment for that craze. Crazes can include items like skipping ropes, French skipping ropes, bean bags, plastic stilts, space hoppers, ankle skips, shuttleball, hoops, lolo balls, cat’s cradle, etc.

There is so much equipment for children to choose from, so you could go through our Equipment Shopping List with your children to get ideas and decide on the most popular activities. You will need roughly 10 to 15 of each item, depending on the size of your school.

A great way to keep equipment from getting lost, and to ensure it is safe and easily accessible, is to create labelled playground craze activity boxes. There are some excellent storage containers available.

Then create “Craze of the Week” signage so that children know what the craze is for that week.

Every Monday morning, the week’s craze is introduced, either in assembly, by the class teachers in class, or by prefects who could go around the classes and let the children know.

Top Tip Number Four: Quiet Zone

Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

Are there children in your school who don’t enjoy running around at playtimes? Who would rather sit in quiet contemplation, maybe in a quieter area of the playground, a

garden, or a more solitary space? Who would prefer to read a book, colour in, or play a quiet game or activity?

If you have answered yes to any of the above, then it’s time to create a quiet space and offer the choice of quieter games and activities.

Educationally, it is important that we offer children a breadth of experience, and playtime is no exception. We can provide a range of games and activity zones that cater to all our children’s varying needs.

Some Ideas:

- Teach all children quiet games from 101 Playground Games in their PE lessons.
- Create a quiet zoned activity area with picnic tables, rugs, and mats when the weather permits.
- Organise “Quiet Games Activity Boxes” for the quiet zoned area. These may include cat’s cradle, wooden dominoes, Jenga, giant noughts and crosses, pick-up sticks, tiddlywinks, board games, Lego, cards, colouring in, bricks, and more.
- Create a secret garden or quiet space away from the busy playground. If you have access to a green area or garden, this is ideal.
- Develop a gardening club; many children enjoy connecting with nature at playtime.

Bringing a variety of activities into the playground can really re-energise a whole school—children and staff included.

In this article, I’ve covered a few ideas and suggestions on how to improve your playground, but there are many more ideas and not enough space to write about them all.

If you would like to learn more, please refer to our website www.theresehoyle.com. You might also like to purchase our *101 Playground Games* and *101 Wet Playtime Games* books or email me at therese@theresehoyle.com. 



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