

Playgrounds enhance well-being in society

Federation of the European Play Industry (FEPI): bringing legislation concerning playgrounds into conformity across Europe.

The far-reaching social and political implications of playgrounds extend from children to families, from day care centres and schools to playground owners and right across society. Playgrounds are a part of social infrastructure but according to FEPI, the lack of consistent legislation in Europe means that they are not used to their full potential to promote well-being, learning and a healthy lifestyle.

Few people today deny the positive influence that play has on a child's development. Several studies have shown that a child learns social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional skills in the playground. Furthermore, as the amount of family leisure time declines, playgrounds provide them with the opportunity to spend time exercising and playing together. The increased prevalence of child and adult obesity in many countries is raising the incidence of cardiovascular disease. The right kind of diet and exercise contribute to reducing obesity. Exercise habits learnt in the playground progress naturally into later life.

The percentage of elderly people in several European countries will increase sharply in the years ahead. Playgrounds provide senior citizens with the opportunity to look after their physical condition and emotional welfare. For instance, results obtained from the SmartUs partnership project in Finland indicate that improving balance, muscle fitness and motor coordination in the playground appears to slow down degeneration in the body's ability to function and to perceptibly improve balance. One of the subprojects in the SmartUs project¹ arranged shared exercise and play activities for children and senior citizens. These events were a joyful experience for all involved, and the senior citizens found they were exercising almost without noticing, thanks to the children.

Playgrounds have a multi-dimensional importance for the whole of society. Playful exercise enhances health and balance in people of all ages, which in turn is manifested in reduced health care costs, the well-being of citizens and even in increased safety. Moreover, schools and day care centres should also be allowed the opportunity to use playgrounds as learning environments, where a child's natural enthusiasm for play and activity is maximised in teaching, studying and learning. This is backed up by the research in the SmartUs project, where the improved results of preschool children in learning maths coincided with playground exercise.

Playgrounds are an integral part of a good living environment. In some countries, the use of playgrounds is determined through legislation. However, several EU countries lack consistent recommendations and binding directives concerning the location, size and quality of playgrounds. In European countries, investments in playgrounds and their fixtures are estimated at around 4 euros/inhabitant. Day care and education budgets amount to around 2,000 euros/citizen. Allocating an additional one percent to the day care and education budget could bring about a significant increase in the promotion of learning, development and well-being in playgrounds.

¹ Exercising Senior Citizens' Balance and Motor Coordination http://www.smartus.fi/tiedostot/folder_3/H9tIB42P.pdf

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The Federation of the European Play Industry is a non-profit association at European level comprising European-based companies and European national play industry federations. FEPI represents the interests of the most responsible manufacturers and distributors of both outdoor and indoor play equipment and safety surfacing. The products can range from inflatable structures to traditional slides, swings and everything in between. For further information, please visit our website at <http://www.fepi-play.org>.