One of the biggest challenges in designing a playground is creating safe, developmentally appropriate play experiences for children of different ages.

In its *Handbook for Public Playground Safety,* the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) has this to say about the topic of age-appropriate play:

> *"Preschool and school-age children differ dramatically in both physical and social skills."*

Preschool and school-age children differ dramatically not only in physical size and ability, but also in their cognitive and social skills. Therefore, age-appropriate playground designs should accommodate these differences with regard to the type, scale and the layout of equipment.

The CPSC *Handbook* divides playground users into two groups:

- *Preschool children,* 2- to 5-years-old
- *School-age children,* 5- to 12-years-old

A third group, *infants and toddlers,* includes children under 2 years of age. The CPSC doesn't address the needs of this group in its *Handbook* guidelines. However, the growing importance of non-parental childcare makes it obvious that the safety needs of infants and toddlers can be an important consideration in playground design.

The emotional and developmental differences between these age groups can be dramatic. For example:

Infants and toddlers

Infants are sensory creatures who explore relentlessly with their eyes, hands, feet, torsos, noses and mouths. They creep, crawl, sit up, pull up, and otherwise exert themselves at ground or floor level until they learn to walk, when they launch themselves on the journey to being "toddlers" — a term that is defined more by state licensing requirements than by any universally recognized developmental standard.

Toddlers need space to exercise their new physical freedom while avoiding territorial conflict with their peers.

Preschoolers

Two-year-olds (in some states, 2-1/2- or 3-year-olds) represent the lower age limit of the preschool group. These children are new to the playground, and like having a place of their own, sized appropriately. These youngsters have a limited attention span. For this audience, the best playground challenges involve climbing over, under and around things, plus activities that foster fine motor skills.

Older preschoolers, in the 3- to 5-year-old range enjoy dramatic play and imitating others. Social skills are just developing, and a desire to be like the "big kids" may result in conflicts and exposure to physical risk. Supervision is quite important at this age.

School-age children

Children ages 5 to 12 are learning and building skills rapidly. They are working on fine motor skills, gross motor skills, coordination, strength and balance. Their social skills are becoming more evolved and elaborate games and competitions abound on the playground.

At the older end of this age range, there are children who are about to make the transition from elementary school to junior high. These 12-year-olds (or older) can be nearly twice the height of a preschooler and can have more than eight times the grip strength. They are high-spirited, subject to peer pressure and fond of "goofing off" on the playground. These traits can lead to aggression and vandalism on the playground. In addition, older children often forget that preschoolers are smaller and weaker and accidents can result. For this reason, it just makes good sense to have separate areas for preschoolers and older kids. Trying to blend kids of all ages into a single play area for economic reasons is irresponsible and self-defeating, since unnecessary risk is the quickest path to injuries and lawsuits.

One way to short circuit an unpleasant outcome is to provide sufficient challenge for older kids, both physical and mental, to keep them engaged in their own space. Web climbers, natural rock-type climbers, fitness equipment and other age-appropriate components keep older kids busy and active. They can work on spacial skills, hand-eye coordination, motor planning and use their imaginations to create games.

Match abilities with appropriate activities

To minimize your risk and provide children of all ages with a safer, more satisfying play experience, you should consider separating age groups.

1. An **infant and toddler** area for babies and children under the age of 2. This might include:

■ Tunnel mazes and activity panels with "pull-up" handles for infants.

■ Small multi-level playstructures for toddlers, with crawl tunnels and slides of modest height.

2. A **preschool area** for children between ages 2 and 5. This play area should include one or more of the following items:

■ *A linked playstructure* that is scaled to young children's dimensions, with age-appropriate play activities such as crawl tunnels, small slides, enclosed play spaces, activity panels that develop fine motor skills and decks of modest height.

■ *Independent play events* such as spring riders, talk tubes and "theme" climbers that promote active and fantasy play.

■ *A sandbox with play tables* for manipulative play.

■ *Learning wall clusters* at ground level for young children of all abilities.

3. A **school-age area** for 5- to 12-year-olds should feature:

■ *A linked playstructure* with decks and play activities geared to the body dimensions and play needs of older children.

■ *Swings, climbers, fitness clusters, spinners* and other independent play events designed to provide physical challenges.

■ *Sports equipment* such as basketball outfits or tetherball.

Provide a buffer zone

A buffer zone will provide separation between the age-specific play areas. This can be an area with benches and picnic tables, a pedestrian path, a decorative fence, or landscaping such as a hedge or a row of closely spaced evergreens.

For security, each play area should be visible from the other as well as from nearby benches. Having rest rooms and drinking fountains nearby (and within view) is also desirable.

Allocate your budget

In building a playground, a good rule of thumb is to spend 60 percent of your budget on equipment for older children and 40 percent for toddlers and preschoolers. This ratio should be varied if infants are present or to suit other specific needs on your playground.

Obtain expert advice

Your play equipment manufacturer should be able to help you design a total play area that serves all the ages of your users. Increasingly, outdoor playground equipment has been designed with specific age groups in mind. Landscape Structures offers specific play systems for children 2 to 5, 5 to 12 and for the pre-teen/teen years, as well as independent play items based on each age group's interests and abilities.

For more information on how to design and equip your play area to meet the challenge of age-appropriateness, call your local Landscape Structures representative.

Appropriate Landscape Structures play systems and play events by age group

Infants*	Toddlers*	Ages 2-5*	Ages 5-12*
Infant Maze	ToddlerTown	PlayShaper® structures	Evos™ and PlayBooster® structures
Learning Walls	Clubhouses	Decks 48″ and under	Spacenet™ Climbers
	Independent Tunnels	Low swings	Mobius™ Climbers
	Talk Tubes	Crawl tunnels	Natural Elements
		Cozy Climber™	Orbiter™ Spinner
		Bridges and ramps	Decks up to 72″
		Balance beam	Higher swings
		Single/double poly slides	Corkscrew/Loop poles
		Tunnel slide	Climbers
		Activity panels	All slides
		Spring riders	Upper-body equipment
		3-Panel Mobius™ Climber	Track rides
		Tetrahedron Spacenet™ Climber	Spring platform
			Fitness equipment
			Sports equipment

* Many of the examples listed can be used for other age groups. However, such events should be located in separate areas rather than being shared. Care must be taken to avoid crowding and traffic conflicts. Infants, in particular, should always be under close supervision.

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