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The sound of music in St.Albans

The introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) has led to increasing integration of children with special needs and disabilities into mainstream education. This has presented challenges to many schools and has led to an examination of the physical and educational needs of these children in and around school buildings.

The ultimate objective of government policy in the area is to ensure that children with disabilities and special needs are integrated into the learning environment in a way that allows them to benefit equally with all other children. By necessity, schools have concentrated on the provision of both physical improvements and educational resources that facilitate access to, and movement around, the buildings and the delivery of appropriate standards of education.

Providing access to the physical school environment and delivering high quality education is only addressing part of the issue, however. In order to fully integrate into mainstream education, pupils must also have access to other leisure and social facilities that ultimately enrich their experiences and make them feel part of the school community.

Recent surveys have revealed that little attention has been paid to disabled children's experiences in primary school playgrounds and as a result children can feel excluded from a key part of their educational experience.

One school that has made positive moves towards addressing this issue is Aboyne Lodge County Primary School in St. Albans. The school currently has 19% of its children classified as special needs pupils and wanted to extend its existing outdoor play facilities to provide more play options. These needed to cater for the needs of all its children whilst standing up to the attentions of the local skateboarding community during out-of-school hours.

The solution chosen by the school, and funded primarily by the school's PTA, was to opt for items from an innovative range of sound play equipment supplied by SSP Waterplay based in Windlesham, Surrey.

Sound and music are recognised for their ability to provide sensory stimulation. Children of all ages and abilities benefit on physical, cognitive and emotional levels from these responsive mediums. Yet these modes of play are rarely available for pupils to use on an on-demand basis, outside the confines of a structured session.

SSP provides large-scale musical instruments specifically designed for outside use. Playscapes consisting of tuned percussion instruments ranging from drums to xylophones and glockenspiels, can be deployed individually, in an outdoor orchestra setting or as part of an activity playground. SoundPlay equipment is imaginatively designed for interactive play, with animal drums available in the shape of a turtle or dragon, or elaborate pipe drums to create a symphony of sound, all of which have fixed beaters.

The equipment chosen by Aboyne Lodge School included the Metallophone, an enormous xylophone featuring aluminium tone bars with PVC resonators, an African variation of this, the Amadinda which is a xylophone without resonators, and a brightly painted Dragon Drum. As Linda Crawley, Head

Teacher of Aboyne Lodge commented, "We've found that the equipment is exciting and interesting for all the children allowing them to interact with each other very well and play on an equal footing".

SoundPlay acts as a creative outlet, heightening self-esteem and listening skills. But it also provides real learning, enabling pupils to develop an understanding of vibration, resonance, pitch and tone.

SSP's SoundPlay equipment complies with DDA requirements (all of the components are accessible from a wheelchair) as well as meeting NCCA guidelines for special educational needs. These structures can be used to achieve concrete learning objectives, enabling pupils to increase their spatial awareness, hone their fine and gross motor skills, and increase their levels of concentration on an individual basis. But they are also an excellent means of encouraging pupils to interact with and take control of their environment through exploratory play.

Evidence for this is provided by Linda Crawley who made the following observation, "Autistic and Downs Syndrome children are often frightened by loud noises and at first some of them were reluctant to use the instruments. It was noticeable, however, that the surprisingly mellow tones produced by the equipment encouraged these children to become more actively involved and to start enjoying the experience".

Following the success of this investment in play equipment designed to provide sensory stimulation, Aboyne Lodge School is keen to investigate SSP's modular PlugIn & Play waterplay system as a way of broadening still further the options for children of all ages and abilities at their school.

For more information on Plug-in-and-Play and Soundplay please contact Greg Seale, Managing Director of SSP Waterplay on 01276 489999 or go to www.sunsafe.co.uk.