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Splash Play

A New Generation of Splashpad

Focusing on Play Experiences to Meet Community Needs

By Stephen Hamelin

In Recreation Management's 2016 State of the Industry Report, it was determined that 23.3 percent of respondents with plans to add features to their facility identified splash play areas as the most likely new addition. It was the third year running that aquatic play areas had been identified as the most sought after, and 6.3 percent more than dry playgrounds.

The connection between humans and water is intuitive, natural, necessary. Aquatic play in some form has been around since people came into contact with water.

We all have some memories of splashing in water, whether it be in the street around a fire hydrant, in a backyard with a hose pipe, in the sea on a family vacation or in the bath with a sibling. Splashing is fun.

About 20 years ago, we developed the first Splashpad—an attempt to bring this refreshing, instinctive water play to everyone—regardless of age or ability.

Now, we've learned from two decades of design and observation. We've studied water effects, play behaviors, interaction points, development opportunities and so much more that occurs in these unique aquatic play areas. We've seen the effects these oases have had on children, families and communities as a whole.



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And it's helped us design better, sustainable, eco-friendly aquatic play environments. The next generation of splash playground is deliberately designed to offer the most in childhood development, family engagement, community revitalization and, of course, fun!

Fun, Play & Development

Exciting, attractive and memorable aquatic play is much more than an arrangement of brightly colored features on a concrete pad; it is carefully thought out and extensively researched to focus on the play experience itself and how that encourages the educational, physical and social development of its users.

Playing with and in water has been shown to provide opportunities for children to experiment with math and science concepts, strengthen their physical skills, advance their social and emotional skills, and enhance language development. We've also observed the positive impact of aquatic play on those children with learning or physical disadvantages.

Successful Splashpads now include intentionally designed features to cultivate cognitive skills like planning, imaginative thinking, focus, problem-solving and self-control as children interact with moving water. These neurological building blocks shape and carry children through life, in the workplace and in their families.

This next generation also fosters physical development, providing sensory stimulation through tactile interactions with water sprays, streams and jets, and encourages the development of gross motor movements through jumping, running and dodging.

Importantly, splash play design now puts great emphasis on social development, thanks to the variety of interactions and types of play possible between water features and their users. Universal design of features enables all users to participate, regardless of age or ability. Play becomes personally directed, and allows children to choose whether they would like to play alone, alongside or with others, imaginatively, or even engage in healthy competition. This type of free play also elicits different types of interactions between children and water, children and parents, as well as children and children, helping them expand their concepts of self-discovery, language formation and emotional development.

Sustainability—More Than Just Water Management

One of the preconceptions and misconceptions about play areas using water is the notion that the water is wasted—that it's not a sustainable solution. In fact, two decades of water management system development and meeting policy and social requirements all over the world has made these solutions extremely eco-friendly.

Recirculation or repurposing of water enables kids to splash and play without using excessive resources. A typical recirculation system, where water is used, recaptured, treated and returned, will use a small amount of water during a season. Repurposing water—using it to water your soccer fields or plants—enables us to double up the usage of the water you were going to use anyway. If you're going to water that field, why not have the families in your community play with the water first?