Guidance

Using tyres as a resource in school playgrounds

This resource has been created to offer advice to schools and early years settings in the use of tyres for play and features within school grounds. It has been made by collating the first-hand experience of our delivery team in school settings and from conversations with different schools and practitioners. It is intended to support schools to make a balanced decision in the use of tyres as a resource and offer suggestions to manage and reduce concerns and risk.

Throughout these suggestions we will refer to tyres generally, but there are obviously different sizes and types available e.g. tractor tyres, car tyres, bike tyres and mini tyres. The scale you choose to use might be dictated by the size of your play area, but each offers different play opportunities and a mixture will bring even greater experiences.

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If you would like to develop your outdoor learning knowledge and skills, take a look at our range of training courses at ltl.org.uk/outdoor-learning-training

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Common uses and benefits

Using tyres within your school grounds offers a range of benefits for your children, the school and the wider community.

Here are some of the key advantages and uses:

Recycling

If sent to a landfill site, tyres will take hundreds of years to decompose so re-using them for other purposes reduces the amount of waste being sent to landfill.

Play opportunities

Tyres are great for loose parts play and children of all ages will enjoy moving, stacking, climbing, rolling and building with them, especially if they are bigger than they are! You can also use them to create obstacles courses, swings, seating, drums, racetracks and dens. There are many other products available to add to tyres such as mirrors, cushion pads, trampolines and den poles and don't forget the value for small world play too e.g. creating fairy or dinosaur gardens.

Holding other materials

Tyres can make great storage areas for other natural materials such as sand, soil, gravel or pinecones. Adding a bowl or lining within a tyre means they could also be used for water play or as a mini pond! Stacking up tyres can also create storage for larger loose parts or equipment such as den building poles or planks.

Gardening

Due to concerns about possible chemical leaching into the soil, we would not recommend using tyres to grow anything edible in your grounds. However, they can be great to use as planters for flowers or sensory plants.

Larger tractor tyres allow children to sit around the edge to access the soil too, or even plant grass turf inside different sized tyres to create seating. Bamboo or willow planted in tyres will be contained and grow tall to make screens or zoning in your school grounds too.

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Overcoming concerns around using tyres

Fire risk

During extended periods of hot weather or heatwaves, tyres can get very hot, so consider storing them in the shade if this is the case. It is also recognised that tyre dumps are a fire hazard and would burn at high temperatures for a long time if deliberately ignited. A sense check would probably find many more flammable items and fire risks within your school grounds and building, but it is important to consider safe storage to reduce any dangers.

Some Local Authorities will have guidance around this which is worth checking for and being mindful of the risk of vandalism specific to your setting. We would recommend using a long chain and waterproof padlock to chain the tyres to a boundary fence while not in use to keep them secure and away from the school building.

Standing water

The shape of a tyre means that they will collect rainwater unless they are emptied daily which is tricky to manage. Standing water can pose risks such as leptospirosis, algae growth and insect breeding which can pose significant risks and therefore needs to be dealt with. We would recommend either covering tyres with a tarpaulin or drilling holes in them to avoid stagnant water from collecting.

Hazardous materials

Hazardous chemicals and materials are involved in the creation and composition of tyres so there are common concerns about the potential impacts of this on children's health and the environment. However, shredded and crumbed tyre products are frequently used as a play surface which has a much greater area and volume. Wear and tear on tyres used in play will be relatively low, meaning the breakdown of these materials is significantly lower than when in use on moving vehicles.

There are also concerns around the microplastics that tyres can shed, however this is the same for any item manufactured using plastic. This includes many other

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things you will find in your school and grounds such as toys, play equipment and even clothing.

Any tyres that are 'crumbling' or creating a lot of black dust should be removed from play immediately.

Injury risk

Introducing any new equipment into your play space can have concerns around injury risk, so ensure children are involved in creating any sensible rules to keep themselves safe. For example, asking a friend to help them move tyres bigger than they are, ensuring the path is clear if they are rolling a tyre, only stacking to waist height around a friend etc. Tyres can gain a lot of speed when rolled down a slope, so involve children in auditing your space to decide where the safest and most suitable place is for their play.

Tyres should be inspected regularly for any damage and not put into use until any exposed wires, nails or other risks are removed.

As with any incidents of accidents, keep a record to spot any patterns and see if children or staff require retraining on how to use your play equipment safely.

Maintenance

Before collecting any tyres, inspect them thoroughly inside and out to check for any piercings or exposed wires. Inspect all tyres regularly and remove if there are any signs of damage and/or they are no longer in a good condition.

Clean them thoroughly before first use with soap and water and check that they will not leave black marks on clothes and hands.

Risk benefit assessments

Take time to put procedures in place for managing the risks of tyre use in your school and ensure these are detailed on a risk benefit assessment. This should include how you intend to minimise any possible dangers and explain the positive reasons why you are using them. Involve children in this process and ensure they understand why any rules are agreed and how they can be responsible for themselves and others.

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In conclusion, although there are concerns about the use of tyres in school grounds, we would encourage you incorporate them into your school grounds design and play features. There is an abundance of ways they can be used to enhance both play practice and spaces. With a pragmatic approach of the potential dangers and issues, we believe the benefits can outweigh any possible risks.

This document was created in collaboration with Juliet Robertson from Creative Star Learning. We would recommend taking a look at this blog for further information and research: Tyres in School Grounds | Creative STAR Learning

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