

CHILD CARE **Business**

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Playground Safety

Screen the sun, keep the fun

By Jay Jensen and Sarah Van Wezel

Landscape architects and designers are constantly faced with the challenge of designing safe and attractive play areas. One particularly important aspect is the need for shade and weather protection. The importance of adding a shade element to playgrounds is emphasized as daycare owners and playground designers realize the importance of sun protection, especially for children who are so susceptible to the sun's damaging effects. A rapidly increasing number of these designers have found that fabric shade structures provide the perfect solution for both weather protection and aesthetic appeal.

Sun Protection and the Need for Shade

When it is sunny outside no one wants to stay indoors, especially children. But heading outdoors without adequate sun protection can lead to a sunburn that lingers long after the fun in the sun has ended.

Playground safety was first officially addressed with the publication of the first Consumer Products Safety Commission's Guideline to Public Playground Safety back in 1981. Safety on the playground is being further defined with the results of testing confirming the vulnerability of children under the age of five exposed to the UV rays of natural sunlight. Skin cancer is a very real concern. But at the same time kids have a genuine need for play, and for their health it is important to develop active lifestyles at an early age.

Protection from ultraviolet radiation and heat has become a critical health issue. UV damage to property and equipment powerfully impacts facility managers and business owners. Adding a permanent shade structure to the playground area is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity.

Unprotected playground equipment can get too hot to touch during the summer months, which can lead to children and adults being



Deer Springs Park near Las Vegas, Nev., is an example of what is now possible through fabric in architecture. The playful park features 25' x 25' freestanding butterflies and flowers in varying angles utilizing HDPE fabric. The different wing angles of the butterflies was meant to simulate the creatures flying through the flower patch — a theatrical touch that makes the park all the more unique and inviting.

severely burnt. Equally troubling is that one of the most pervasive threats to the health of children is also often overlooked — one that affects them every time they step outside into the sun. Children who are unprotected from the harmful rays of the sun could face skin cancer.

Research indicates that most people receive as much as 80 percent of person's total lifetime

sun exposure during the first 18 years. The dramatic increase in the incidence of skin cancer has highlighted the urgent need to protect the public, particularly children from harmful sun exposure. As few as two severe sunburns during childhood may double the risk of developing melanoma, one of the deadliest forms of cancer, later in life.

Adding a permanent shade structure to a play area is one way to create a cool and sun safe play environment. A number of shade manufacturers have been operating in the United States for more than a decade.

Fabric Structures do something solid-roofed structures cannot — they breathe. Fabric is permeable so as hot air rises through it, it creates a movement of air that reduces the temperatures beneath the structures by as much as 15 degrees.

Imagination, Innovation and Creative Flair

Fabric shade structures can be designed in a variety of shapes and sizes. Tensioned fabric can be twisted, overlapped and angled into a virtually limitless array of forms and color combinations. A number of overlapping sails can create an attractive accent and shaded shelter around playgrounds and parks.

Innovative custom designs are now possible because of advances in fabric architecture. Increased style options from which to choose has led to choosier buyers. Styles are expected to become more and more distinctive as facilities, such as playground operators, try to create an image they want to project. It's about setting the facility apart.

Customizing designs of outdoor shade structures is one way architects and designers can create an identity or theme around something that they can connect to and be proud of. Fabric allows for the perfect design channel through which creativity can be expressed.

Permanent fabric shade structures can be designed and manufactured in a wide array of fabric and steel colors which make the units aesthetically appealing to a wide audience. Structures can be customized to either echo the existing playground equipment for the sake of continuity or to establish a unique identity.

A number of material choices are available in today's market, including Teflon-coated fiberglass or PTFE, Hybrid forms of PTFE, Ethylene tetra ethylene (ETFE), vinyl-coated polyester (PVC) and high-density polyethylene (HDPE) and laminates are among the most commonly used.

If water protection and protection from the elements is the premier consideration, vinyl-coated polyester (PVC) is the choice. It is a cost-effective solution, has a life span of 10-15 years and comes in variety of colors.

If shade is the primary concern, the material of choice is high-density polyethylene (HDPE) that is UV stabilized. The material is perforated and transmits light.

When looking at all the options — including canvas, wood, metal roofing, tiles, shingles, etc. — shade devices should be evaluated based on

the applications. Child care facilities may need shade devices that are any or all of the following:

- porous, allowing for cool air circulation
- lightweight
- aesthetically pleasing
- economical
- available in a wide range of attractive colors
- capable of providing high UV protection rating

When assessing the look your child care facility desires, consider both the style and the materials that will go into the structure. Making the decision between metal and fabric the choice is an easy one when cost is considered. The cost of a metal roof can be twice as much as a fabric roof. Generally fabrics cost less per square meter than virtually any other building material. They are less labor intensive to install and can be more easily maintained and replaced than any other competing element in the landscape. Each user has to evaluate their own situation in terms of cost, appearance, type of use, etc.

Landscape architects are increasingly realizing the great potential that fabric in the landscape holds. Natural light reflected on fabric creates a soft glow and pleasant ambiance. Integrated lighting can also be combined with an overhead shade structure or canopy. Fabrics, such as mesh, breathe, which lowers the temperature underneath the structures with up to 15-30 degrees. The visibility underneath the fabric material, the imaginative design possibilities, not to mention the affordability of being 35 percent to 45 percent less than their solid-roofed counterparts are increasingly giving fabric a cutting edge. **CCB**

Jay Jensen is the director of promotion and marketing and Sarah Van Wezel is a public relations specialist for USA SHADE & Fabric Structures, which is the parent company of Sun Ports, FabriTec Structures and Shade Structures. Sun Ports and Shade Structures specialize in modular and custom shade structures. FabriTec specializes in custom tension fabric structures. To date, USA SHADE has installed more than 100,000 structures nationwide in an unparalleled diversity of market segments. With a 250,000-square-foot manufacturing facility and in-house experts in design, engineering, project management, fabrication and construction, the company proudly offers products and services that are uniquely suited for playground applications. For more information, contact Mr. Jensen at (800) 50-SHADE; e-mail Jay4USAShade@aol.com; or visit <http://www.usa-shade.com/>.

Tips to Assess Application Needs

- Commit to operating within your budget
- Know what you want to do with the space; know its purpose
- Know what building materials are right for your application - metal, fabric, wood.
- Calculate occupancy numbers for the structure carefully to determine correct size
- Have your structure fit a theme or complement other structural styles on the property
- Find a company that is service-oriented, easy to work with, with a good track record



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Playgrounds - Superspan



Seating Areas - Pyramids



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Seating Areas - Hip



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