Playground Topography: Making it Fun for Kids

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When creating or updating a playground, you want to make it interesting, challenging and fun.

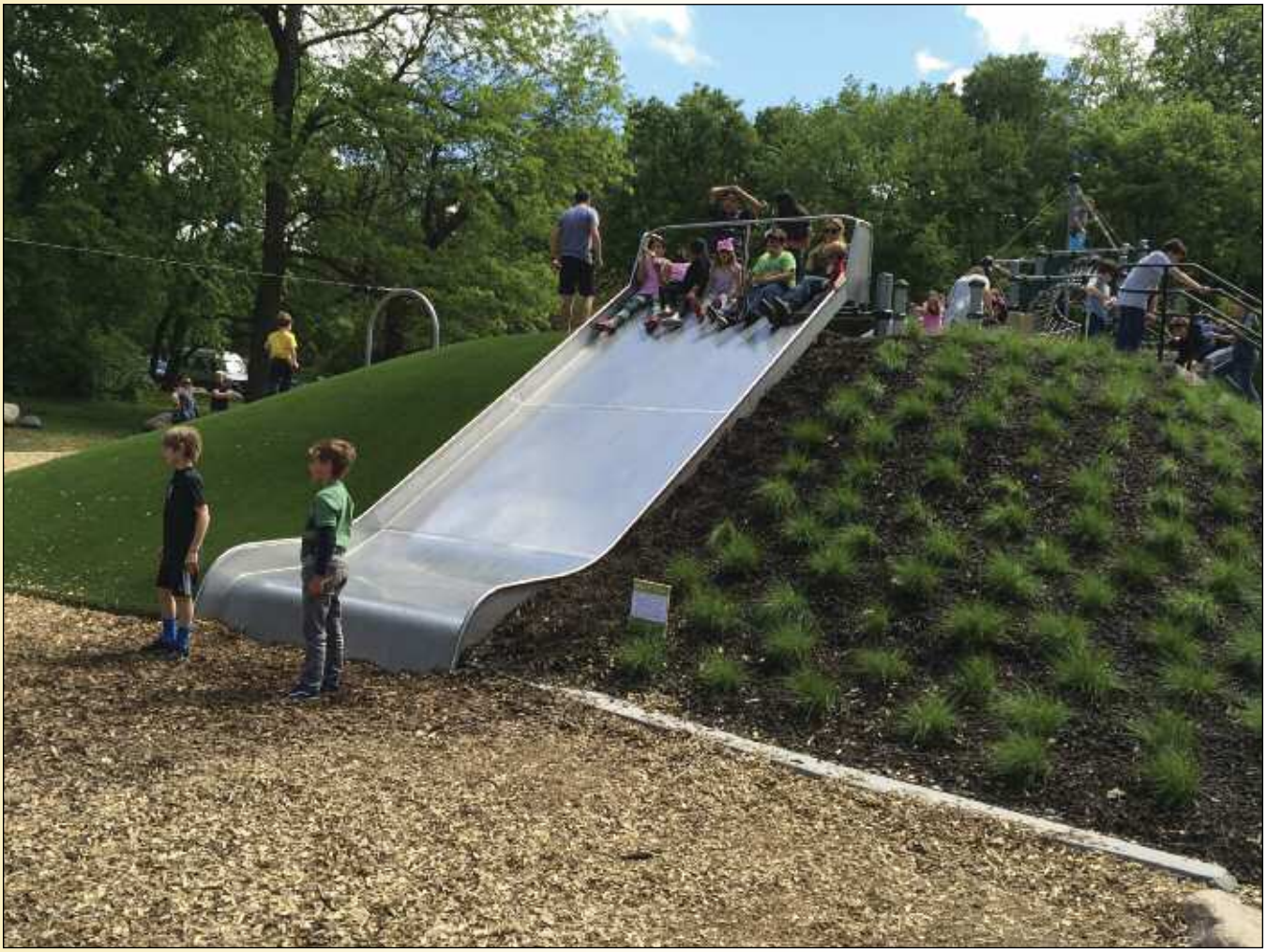
Topography is a natural asset to your playground, one that can be used in its design to add visual interest and diverse activities that will appeal to kids and adults alike.

Integrating your play space with the topography of the site may mean taking advantage of existing grade changes, introducing grade changes to a naturally flat site, embedding play equipment or adding structural elements to the topographical design.

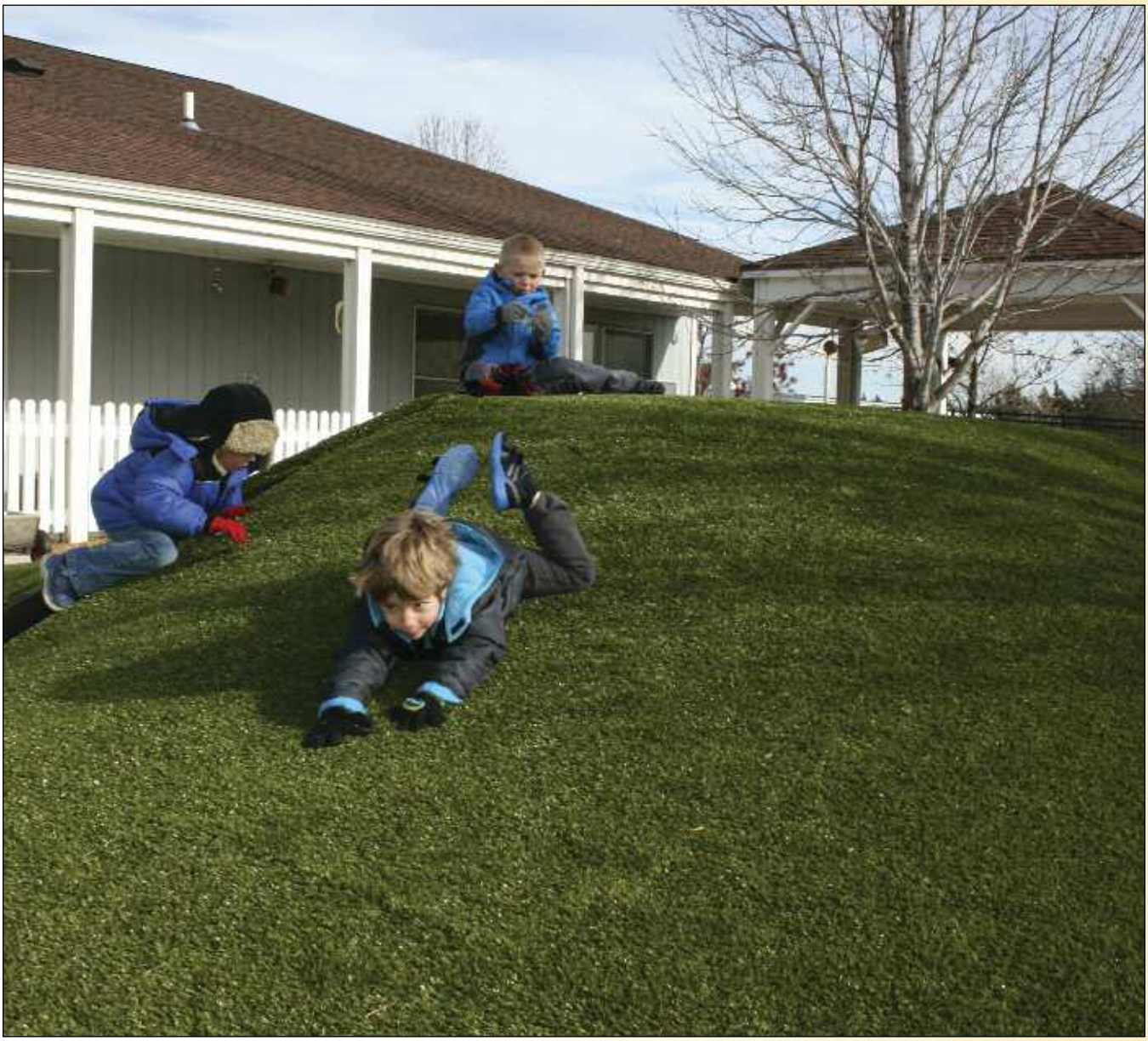
Why Use Playground Topography?

Topography is the arrangement of the natural and artificial physical features of your play space. Integrating it into the playground's design offers several benefits.

- Playgrounds that use a combination of natural elements and manufactured play equipment tend to be more exciting and challenging to children.
- Grade level changes attract children, enabling them to stimulate themselves by



An extra-large embankment slide follows the contours of the hill at Karnes Playground in Kansas City's Roanoke Park.



Custom berms and mounds create additional play value – a place where kids can roll, slide and climb on a soft playground grass surface.

running up and down or rolling around.

- Topographical designs encourage children to explore what may be more physically challenging terrain.
- Playground equipment can be embedded into the topography, such as installing an embankment slide into a slope or putting equipment on top of higher elevations, adding additional play value where there might not have been any.

Using the topography helps set your playground apart from others. In a community playground, these features can encourage repeat use and the feeling of a 'new' play environment with every visit.

Creating the Right Topography

Topography Elements. Determine if modifications need to be made to the existing topography or if you will be adding new elements such as berms, mounds and Funserts, or even using multicolored artificial turf to create a design.

Berms and mounds can typically be added in most locations using a foam base or compacted baserock, or by creating a series of retaining walls or stacked stone to create a hillside. These elements add visual interest and can be used with ramped play spaces to achieve higher deck heights. Land forming is a process used by ID Sculpture to help shape the landscape, creating accurate, 3-dimensional shapes that seamlessly integrate into the play area.

An integrated approach can change the

type of play equipment you choose. Embankment slides can be embedded to follow the contours of the ground and can vary in width. Rope play equipment can be added to travel the embankment. Swinging and spinning pieces need to be on flat ground with the right amount of use zone space.

Retaining Walls. Often a necessity of a project, retaining walls typically offer no play value.

"By leveraging these structural elements, you can turn infrastructure into opportunity, creating play value that otherwise wouldn't exist," says Ian Glas, ID Sculpture.

This is an element that needs to be planned for in the early stages of design; however, your playground consultant can help you choose the right elements for your space.

ADA Compliance. A site's natural topography may need to be molded to maintain accessibility and provide play opportunities for all abilities, ensuring it meets ADA standards.

- Be accessible through ramps and/or paved, barrier-free travel routes.
- Include a range of accessible play options.
- Provide an appropriate surface beneath all accessible equipment.

Entrances and pathways can be created using the natural topography, providing experiences for all abilities.

Proactively integrating topography into your playground's design may mean there are other safety codes and regulations that need to be met. Your playground consultant will help ensure that these are addressed in the design of your playground.

Safety Surfacing. You may choose to do a combination of safety surfacing on the playground. For instance, a wood mulch or loose fill surfacing works well on the more level surfaces but not so much on the berms and mounds. You may want to consider pour-in-place rubber or artificial playground grass turf for topographical shapes

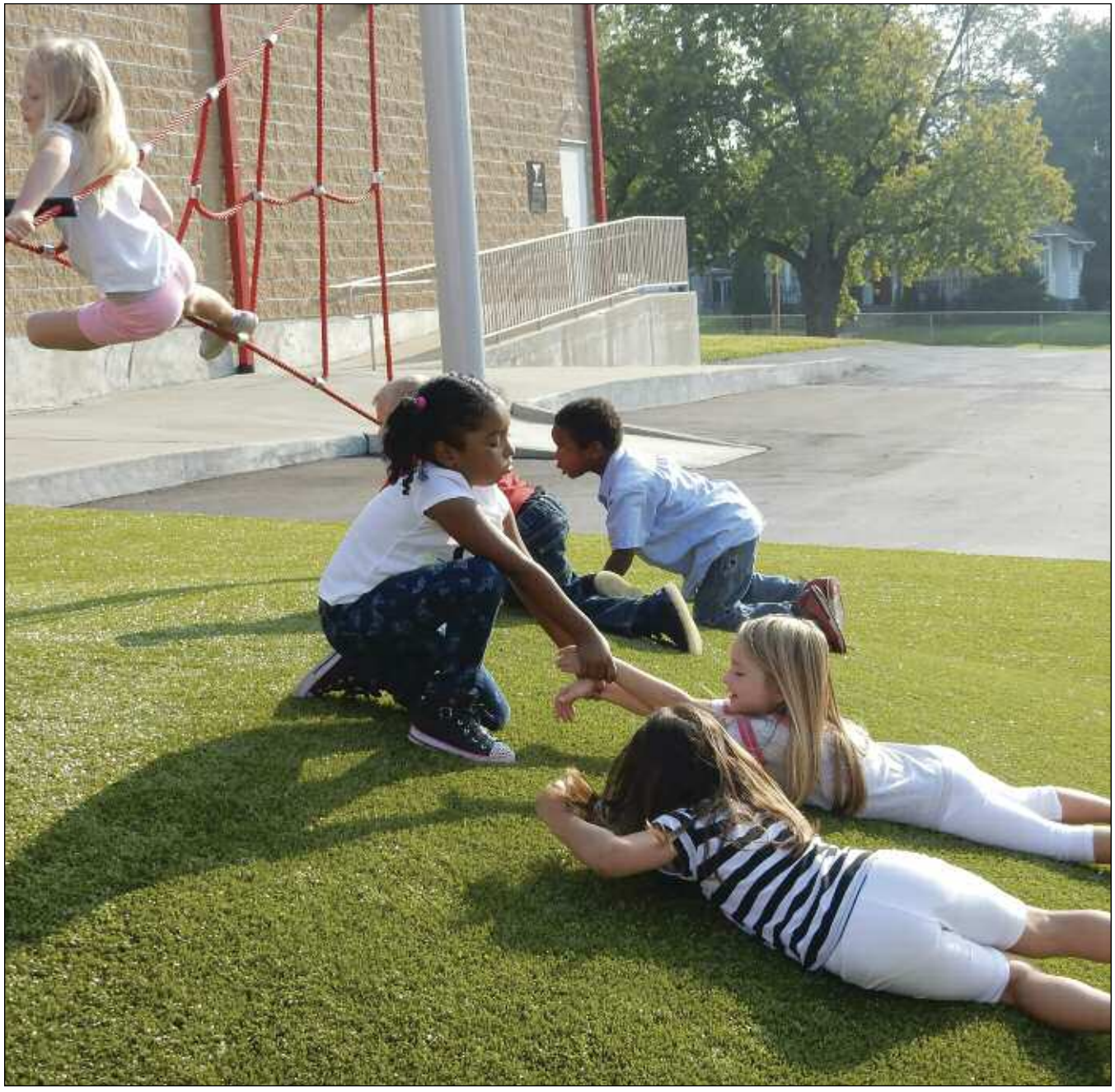
Colorful designs can be added to both pour-in-place and Playground Grass to offer another form of stimulus.

"Artificial turf, like Playground Grass, gives kids a soft surface to roll or slide down along with the fall protection required while also providing additional play value. Offering the ability to do custom mounds and berms sets us apart from other surfacing options," according to Austin Meyers, ForeverLawn Kansas City.

Funserts. These colorful predesigned inserts stand out from artificial turf, adding excitement and fun to playground designs. They enable you to maximize creativity on the playground, again, creating play value where there might not have been any.

Dear Elementary School

As part of a school playground revamp, Dear Elementary in Richmond, Missouri, added a 30-inch mound built with foam and



Children love playing on the mound at Dear Elementary in Richmond, Missouri.

topped with artificial grass.

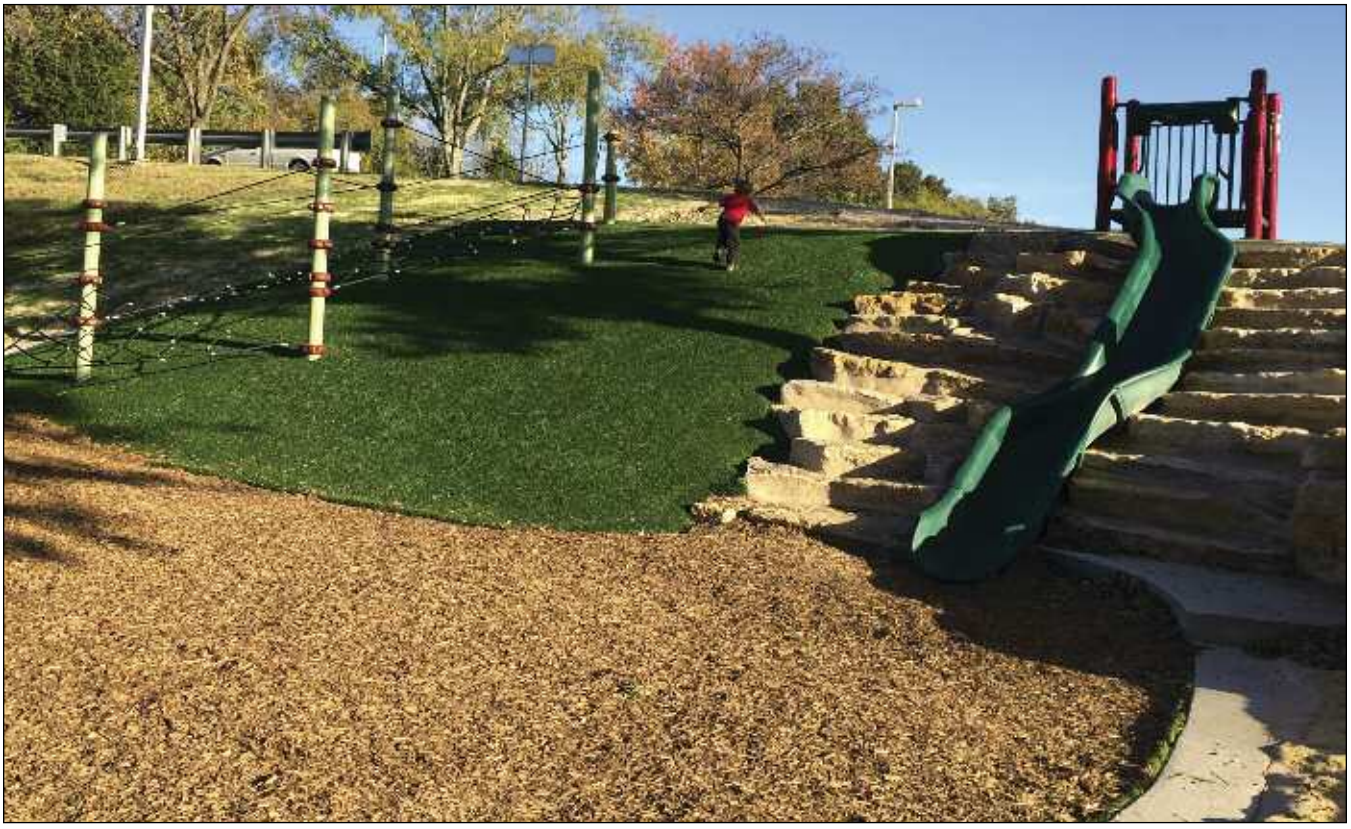
According to the principal, Piper Peterson: "The kids love this. They can roll on it, sit on it, roll down, run up and down, and it gives them a place to lay down and rest but not be totally flat on the ground. I'd like to add another mound and more grass."

Hartman Memorial Park

The cargo net play equipment at Charles David Hartman Memorial Park in Lee's Summit provides kids with a rope course play environment. Start out at the top of the hill and kids can travel along a net walkway/suspension bridge to the bottom where they will find flubber pads (rubber membranes) that offer different play opportunities and more rope play fun.

The net play equipment easily adapts to the landscape underneath – installed on both wood mulch and synthetic turf as well as flat and hilly terrain.

Playground Grass artificial turf was installed on the embankment beside the slide turning this area into another great play feature for kids to run, roll and slide down the turf hill.



Net play equipment, artificial turf and wood mulch surfacing are a few of the components of play area at Charles David Hartman Memorial Park.

Infrastructure can be transformed into opportunity, as with this climbing wall.

When creating the plan for your playground, you should always be able to count on the playground consultant you work with to help guide you. He or she can help you determine what topography elements will work well in your space and guide you to the right types of play equipment and safety surfacing.

Tim McNamara is a Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI) and a design consultant for ABCreative, a company focused on creating the perfect park and playground for your school and community. Visit ABcreative.net for more playground solutions.