"BEST PRACTICE" Opinion:

Natural Play Elements

Question: Can I include natural play elements (ie: stumps, logs, rocks) into my playspace environment?
Answer: Yes, of course!

The Canadian Playground Standard includes a clause within it's text that defines it's scope and intended application.

CAN/CSA-Z614, National Standard of Canada for Children's Playspaces and Equipment
Section 1 – Scope

Sub-section 1.5 *This Standard provides requirements for outdoor public-use playground equipment in a playspace that is provided for children for play, although in some cases this playground equipment was not originally produced for that purpose. Other objects or furnishings in a playspace not primarily intended for play, such as fences, benches, tables, landscape elements, and plant and natural materials, are not covered. Loose play materials are also not covered.*

Sub-section 1.6 *This Standard is intended to promote and encourage the provision and use of playspaces that are well-designed, well-maintained, innovative, and challenging, and in so doing, contribute to the development of healthy children.*

It is my opinion and position that "Natural Play" elements should then be recognized and encouraged (as noted above) to the development of healthy children. However, with that said there must also be a balance between the inclusion of risk and challenge to the playspace with that of the more serious aspects of risk and hazards.

My first suggestion is to identify and recognize the purpose or intent of the considered elements. Are the stumps, logs, rocks, etc being provided first and foremost as climbing opportunities? Or are they being provided as elements to be explored and experienced as part of nature? There may only be a fine line between those two statements, however in risk-management liability terms the distinction becomes critical! If you are then indeed providing elevated play (climbing) opportunities you MUST also then consider spatial clearances and impact fall protection. As such, the standard has very clear (and restrictive) dimensional and technical requirements that MUST be accounted for.

Regardless, there are many fundamental aspects of the playground Standard that can/should be included as a minimum practice of due-diligence to help minimize the likelihood of injuries.

- ✓ **Stability**: Any item that may be used as a climber (intentional or not) should be securely fixed/stabilized from inadvertent falls
- ✓ **Protrusions**: All items should be reviewed and adjusted against protrusions
- ✓ **Sharps**: All items should be reviewed and adjusted relative to sharp edges, corners, fasteners, and splinters
- ✓ **Intent**: All items should be regularly monitored and evaluated as to how, when, and if they are being used as intended
- ✓ **Fall Protection**: If an item presents a significant concern as a climbing opportunity, then adequate (for the fall height) protective surfacing should also be considered for impact fall-protection
- ✓ **Spatial**: If an item presents a significant concern as a climbing opportunity, then adequate (reasonable) spatial clearances should also be considered for appropriate play (relative to itself and/or any other designed-for-play component)

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