

Vandalism of children's playgrounds

Vandalism is generally defined as the wilful destruction of, above all, the property of others, in particular public property, without the offender gaining any use benefits.

The term vandalism is frequently used to explain damage to playgrounds, often erroneously. This means that often the effects of childish play are labeled as vandalism, although there may be completely different causes behind it. Children learn, they experiment and explore and sometimes they are not able to assess what could happen when, for example, they use a cigarette lighter. The motive here can rather be viewed as the urge to discover and not simply destructiveness.

The triggers for vandalism are often very diverse. Certainly they most often include boredom and monotony but also a combination of frustration and aggression and a display of power can be reasons. An important aspect is existing damage that has not been immediately repaired or a high level of neglect. Both are strong triggers for vandalism. The probability of acts of vandalism being committed also increases when children have the feeling their needs are not being respected.

There are very many outward manifestations of vandalism and it is important to carefully consider whether the act was really one of wilful destruction. In cases where posts are sawn through, ropes cut or huts burned down, it can be said with some certainty that this is vandalism. However, a tipped over rubbish bin and a few beer bottles lying around can rather be considered as expressions of youth behaviour. This conflict becomes particularly clear in the case of graffiti. Some graffiti sprayers are highly paid and their work is praised as art while, on the other hand, the same picture viewed by other people is spoken of in terms of destruction and soiling.



A vandalised hut burned down using petrol



Graffiti as artwork, Yank & Boste, Crazyank 2009

The so-called offender profile can be relatively explicitly summarised. It can be said that most acts are carried out by groups of male youths between 12 and 16 years of age. It also appears that the majority of vandalism offenders come from the middle class.

The first line of offence to prevent vandalism is to carry out a precise analysis of the needs of the children and young people in the areas around the playground. Where a playground provides play equipment that meets these needs and creates a space where children and young people feel comfortable, acts of vandalism very rarely occur.

In particular the level of risk the equipment offers plays a decisive role here. When young people are challenged at a level corresponding to their ability and age and are able to determine their limits during play, they will experience the playground positively and not react with vandalism.

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