



**The size, quality and quantity of indoor play sites has come a long way since the first stand alone, privately run play centres opened as children's leisure attractions in the late eighties.**



# Broadening choice in indoor play

SOFT PLAY systems supplied by members of the API had been around for many years before then and were seen in nurseries, pubs and other corporate facilities. However, the prospect of all-year-round indoor adventure play – not subject to British weather – proved attractive. Aspiring entrepreneurs filled local marketplace gaps. By the nineties an idea that had begun in special schools and children's hospitals, started to attract the interest of the commercial sector. Soft indoor-play manufacturers enlarged their product ranges accordingly with this new demand.

Today, this industry is at a point of change. It is clear that a number of the 'older' indoor play centres based on the early business model are struggling to compete with the new breed of operators – some are planning on 20 or more sites. They have raised the bar on the quality of the product and service offering. New businesses have opened larger units on retail and leisure parks, a move the rest of the industry is following. Even the new single site operators are opening sites with a stronger safety focus and a wider adult offering.

## Parties Pay

The 60% of revenue that comes from parties and catering operations are being maximised by the better operators. They spend wisely on a decent toddler area so that midweek business is strong and capture the pre-school market. This new era of operator has coincided with the creation of the Play Providers Association ([www.playproviders.org.uk](http://www.playproviders.org.uk)). It assists operators, who take high standards of operation and service consistency seriously, to differentiate themselves from others, to learn and develop best practice.

Successful indoor play centres find a key requirement for sustainability is quality of location. The industry will always be affected by seasonality and the weather but long term success can be achieved if management with solid experience in either play or leisure is combined with well-trained staff with a customer focused mindset and good financial management systems.

Add in a high quality broad product, clean and safe facilities, a quality food & beverage offer and the successful package is almost there. The jury is still

out on whether the multi-site operator model will be successful over a prolonged period of time. Meanwhile, market demand for the indoor play product is clearly there.

*The full text of this article is available free in the API 2009-2010 Directory from [www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org) ■*

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Association of  
Play Industries  
[www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org)

*For a copy of the current API Directory of members, contact:*

*Deborah Holt,  
Association of Play Industries,  
Federation House, Stoneleigh Park,  
Warwickshire CV8 2RF.*

*T: +44 (0)24 7641 4999 ext 208*

*F: +44 (0)24 7641 4990*

*E: [api@api-play.org](mailto:api@api-play.org)*

*W: [www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org)*