

# Risk is a key part of natural play



Truly natural play is inclusive. It includes every possible kind of play. In its currently constrained use an apparent meaning of 'natural play' implies that it excludes provided play, especially the playground in the park. It does not. Playing in streams or on the swings, making fires or riding a BMX on ramps, climbing trees or rope structures and sliding down or running up a slide the wrong way are all part of children playing naturally. To quote play guru, Robin Sutcliffe, "Natural play is one of the things offered or 'affordances' in the best forms of play which has many sets of affordances none of which deny each other." It says the same thing in other words.

Nor should 'natural play' be confused with the freedom to roam for children of a possibly bygone age by comparison with the lack of that freedom these days. Given the reduced level of roaming freedom, it is better that children's play facilities of all types are provided than not at all. Within provided play there should be, risk and obstacles which give opportunity, challenge, reward, thrills and some spills. Children can break bones tumbling on a lawn. It happens. Bone breaks mend. They are not serious. A serious injury might reasonably be defined as an injury where the chance of being permanent is greater than 1:1000. Bone breaks have something like a 1:2000 chance of being permanent.

There should be spills, tumbles, bumps and bruises: Falling down is part of growing up. Indeed, the API is passionate about play which encourages appropriate thrill and reward from assessing and taking risk. Best practice in play design offers visible challenge and risk and API members use their years of experience to design and create environments that deliver this within well-developed safety standards. These aim to avoid hidden and thus un-assessable dangers. The API exists to represent member companies and to promote best practice.

One of the biggest challenges for the API lies in one of its aims; to promote good play space design, installation and workmanship industry-wide. Identifying a problem in this marketplace is easy, changing it is not. API member companies build facilities demanded by the market, mostly local authorities. These specifiers and companies are well intentioned and while often they jointly build some excellent play areas too many sterile spaces are still being created. These are usually the result of less than ideal design and specification during procurement - a matter for continued API focus in seeking improvements for everyone's benefit. In its passion for play design excellence, the API welcomes Play England's Play Design Document initiative and looks forward to offering its wealth of play design experience.

In seeking to promote an understanding of play and risk, the API fully supports local authorities and their officers who seek to provide safe children's play as defined by current standards. Jointly the API and play providers have the opportunity to further develop play facilities which offer more challenge and risk to excite and engage with children throughout their developing years.

Nationally, the government also takes play seriously. Politically impartial, the API aims to provide a united play-industry voice and liaise closely with government and all relevant national and international bodies including progressing positive two-way working with eg. Play England. That will hopefully ensure risk in play - naturally!