

New Play Equipment Can Be Fun

But amateurs beware!

The sums are simple. With £5000 a PTA, parish council or club may be halfway towards the cost of a well-installed and well-designed piece of children's play equipment. Now, the decision is simple. Either buy what you can for £5000 and hope for the best or hang on and find the appropriate amount of £10,000. You are already half way there. If the £5000 job goes wrong, you are back to square one and broke!

Things can go wrong. Mostly for PTAs, parish councils or clubs making their once-in-a-lifetime purchase for which they may be woefully inadequately experienced. Fewer problems occur for the experienced buyers especially for large local authorities who are maintaining, upgrading and building new playgrounds regularly.

We spoke to the UK's Association of Play industries (API) and some members of the Register of Play Inspectors (RPII). It is an examining body established by the API, ILAM*, NPFA* & RoSPA*. RPII inspectors see it all, the best, the average and the worst and usually too late.

Here are some key do's and don'ts.

DO

- ... check on grants or lottery funding. Be certain to have enough to do it properly
- ... get information from several potential suppliers and get 2 or 3 designs and quotes.
- ... design whole area. Add equipment pieces as budgets allow. Could save surfacing cost.
- ... go and see previous customers and their equipment from your potential supplier.
- ... check on the availability and cost of spare parts and the warranty period.
- ... insist that your supplier is a member of the API.
- ... insist on a fully detailed contract.
- ... name an independent RPII inspector in contracts for post installation inspection from www.playinspectors.com
- ... if you are not using an API member, have the final plan, proposal, design and budget checked by eg. the RPII Inspector before on site construction starts.
- ... demand to see equipment certification to eg. TuV, EN1176, a BS Kite Mark or letter of Standard Compliance.
- ... retain eg. 10% payment until approved by an independent RPII Inspector.

DON'T

- ... run out of fund raising energy and just buy whatever you can get.
- ... appoint a supplier until you have seen a few. Don't rely on 'someone you know' but do include them if they can help.
- ... see this as a one-off. Play areas grow and can last a very long time. Don't rush into it.
- ... assume what a sales person says is true. Don't forget to get other customers' experience.
- ... assume things won't break, wear or be damaged. Don't think 'it won't happen to me'.
- ... just take their word for it. Don't imagine you will get the benefit of API Mediation of disputes for non-members. You won't.
- ... agree on a handshake and then assume that you are protected, you are not.
- ... let the supplier self-inspect or name the 'independent' inspector. If in doubt, check with the API or the RPII.
- ... assume as a PTA, Parish Council or club you have experienced buyers' expertise. You don't, you can't
- ... accept a statement that the equipment is designed to 'the spirit' of the standard.
- ... hand all the money over at once. Don't pay last 10% until independently inspected, approved and required work completed.

According to Keith Dalton, an RPII inspector who runs The Play Inspection Company, there is a predictable route to avoid problems. "Select a reputable company that is an API member. We hardly ever see any problems with their work. New playgrounds designed by these manufacturers are excellent," he said. Not everyone gets the benefit of buying from this type of company; for example, Keith Dalton recently condemned a skate park ramp after only four years. It was made out of timber and plywood which are unsuitable for outdoor use without good maintenance.

API Chairman, Phil Holden, Managing Director of Wicksteed Leisure, has run the API's dispute mediation service for three years. It has rarely been used and then mostly in the case of a single manufacturer who has been 'sorted' and where solutions were found. "The lack of need by API members or their customers for a free, independent dispute resolution service speaks well of API members and the professional expertise and experience of their customers," he said. "We are approached by schools, clubs and parish councils who have not purchased from API members but there is nothing we can do for them," he added. Mr Holden said that to qualify as an API member applicant companies were carefully 'vetted to benefit customers and the industry.

Another RPII inspector from The Play Inspection Company, Peter Heseltine, has years of experience inspecting brand new play equipment and the bargain-basement horror stories to go with them. "The problem for small buyers is that they are driven by relatively small budgets and you only get what you pay for. Reputable suppliers spend a lot on design and certification. Less reputable companies may simply make copies in which the specification, structural strength and safety can be compromised by not understanding what they are copying," he said.

Peter Heseltine was appalled to hear of a school where the headmaster had nothing more than a handshake from a sales representative and no contract or certification to protect his purchase. He has seen slides put in facing the sun, this is the wrong way round as they can get so hot they burn children. He condemned the wrong bolts which had been used on timber and were corroding and weakening the join which they were there to make strong. In one almost laughable incident, an installer did not wait for the plan drawings for a small kid's adventure trail but paced it out. As his strides were so much greater than kids, he had to completely remove and re-install most of the equipment. "He was not pleased but that's the benefit of a proper contract, paying in stages and keeping a retainer until inspected and approved," said Peter Heseltine. "The trouble is that it is those with least to spend who are most vulnerable and often lose the most," he added. Peter explained that it can be hard to get the smaller, non-API type supplier back on site to sort out problems. Generally, larger companies make certain the project is done well and the customer is well served and pleased with the result.

Normally, play equipment is installed for the manufacturer by specialist play equipment installers. For the more complicated equipment with greater fall heights and special safety surfaces, experienced installers are essential. However, there is some self-assembly equipment. For example, well-supervised amateurs with good instructions could install low-level balance bars on grass. The budget on higher equipment normally splits to half on the equipment and half on appropriate safety surfacing. So the lower the equipment, the more play equipment can be bought for the budget. The advice is to look around and shop around but caveat emptor, buyer beware. A word to the wise - buy from a reputable company, almost certainly an API member - and ask for advice.



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