



**Association of
Play Industries**
www.api-play.org

How to avoid a dream play area becoming a nightmare.

Playing for time

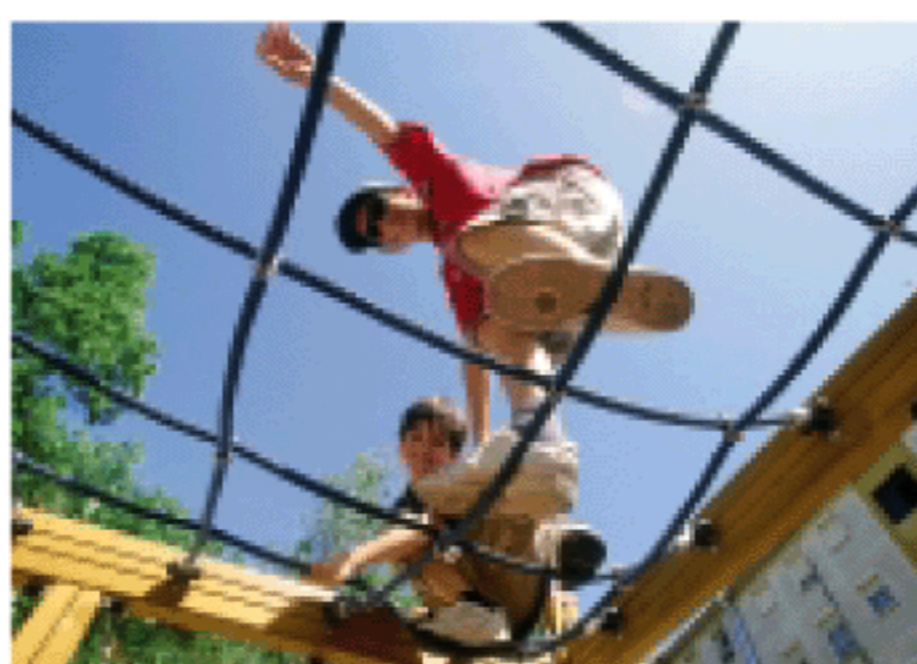
The sums are simple. With £5,000 a PTA, parish council or club may be halfway towards the cost of a well-installed and well-designed piece of children's play equipment. But there is a temptation to buy what you can for £5,000 and hope for the best. But if this job goes wrong, you are back to square one and broke!

And things can go wrong if the purchaser is inadequately experienced.

According to Keith Dalton, a Register of Play Inspectors inspector (RPII) 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," he comments. "New playgrounds designed by these manufacturers are excellent." Not everyone gets the benefit of buying from this type of company; for example, 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.

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 adds.

Normally play equipment is installed for the manufacturer by specialist play equipment installers. For the more complicated equipment and 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. So the advice is look around and shop around but buyer beware; a word to the wise is buy from a reputable company, almost certainly an API member – and ask for advice.

Do's and don'ts

Do: Check on grants or Lottery funding. Be certain to have enough to do it properly.

Don't: Run out of fund raising energy and just buy whatever you can get.

Do: Get information from several potential suppliers and get two or three designs and quotes.

Don't: Appoint a supplier until you have seen a few, or rely on 'someone you know'. Although do include them if they can help.

Do: Design the whole area and add equipment pieces as budgets allow, this could save surfacing costs

Don't: See this a one-off. Play areas grow and can last a very long time, don't rush into it.

Do: Go and see previous customers and their equipment from your potential supplier.

Don't: Assume what a sales person says is true.

Do: Check on the availability and cost of spare parts and the warranty period.

Don't: Assume things won't break, wear or be damaged.

Do: Insist that your supplier is a member of the API. The member list is on its website.

Don't: Just take a supplier's word for it. Don't imagine you will get the benefit of API Mediation of disputes for non-members. You won't.

Do: Insist on a fully detailed contract, the API's can be seen on its website

Don't: Agree on a handshake and then assume that you are protected. You are not.

Do: Name an independent RPII inspector in contracts for post-installation inspection. See www.playinspectors.com

Don't: Let the supplier self-inspect or name the 'independent' inspector. If in doubt, check with the API or the RPII.

Do: If you are not using an API member, have the final plan, proposal, design and budget checked before on-site construction starts by, for example, the RPII Inspector.

Don't: Assume as a PTA, parish council or club you have experienced buyers' expertise. You don't. You can't.

Do: Demand to see equipment certification. For example TÜV, EN1176, a BS Kite Mark or Letter of Standard Compliance

Don't: Accept a statement that the equipment is designed to 'the spirit' of the standard.

Do: Retain some of the payment, for example 10%, until the area is approved by an independent RPII inspector

Don't: Hand all the money over at once. ■

The Register of Play Inspectors is an examining body established by the API, ILAM, NPFA and RoSPA.

*For a copy of the current API Directory of members or further information contact:
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