

How to be 'API' with Your Play Equipment

written for and with The API and The RPII by Mike Heath, M & MS

If you are 50+ you last played in a play area about 40 years ago. Times have changed. Where experience is limited, knowledge is everything. Knowing where to get informed help and asking for it is one key to success. Experience takes longer - and you can't go back. The good news is; the work has been done. For play areas, the API has an excellent standard form of contract, freely available on their website. It requires suppliers to meet industry guidelines and European standards for play areas and equipment designs and installations. An API member company, listed on the API website, will only operate to these guidelines and standards, or better, and to any individual contract demands.

Once built, the play area must pass a safety inspection. Members of the Register of Play Inspectors International (RPII) will inspect and approve play areas as 'safe' only when they comply with the appropriate guidelines and European Standards. This 'best practice' is deemed to be Health & Safety compliant. However, inspections are an on-going requirement. All play areas require regular inspection at varying intervals and a mandatory annual safety inspection by, e.g., an RPII inspector. Their website lists them. Job done? No! The devil is in the detail.

The Contract

The API contract, Section 1, Definitions and Scope says this:-

"All playground equipment and surfaces shall be fully described by manufacturer's name, product number and necessary words in the tender documents and will be installed in full accord with manufacturers designs, if applicable, and specifications with layout and spacing in accordance with relevant standards."

The key point here is that for a manufacturer to be an API member, their equipment must be certified to meet the current industry standards and European guidelines by a qualified independent third party. Manufacturers with this certification, expensive for them to acquire, will readily point out their achievement. Where it is not apparent, beware.

An added bonus of using an API member is that in the unlikely event of a dispute, both the client and the API Member have access to API's little-used Independent Mediation Panel Service. It is free to API members and their clients.

To select a play equipment supplier there are options. By selecting a play equipment manufacturer, proposed designs are included. Alternatively landscape architects and freelance play area designers will design and project manage a play area development for council but for a fee.

Funding may be tight so explore grants and assistance with e.g., County Councils and community schemes. Normally local councillors, council officers and their contacts will have good grasp of available funding. The watchwords are; look everywhere. Play equipment and its proper installation are not cheap. They are designed last a long time - ten years or more and must meet all the standards and guidelines. Quite simply, that costs money. One rule of thumb is that for something like a top-of-the-range multi-play unit with a fall height of up to three metres, the ground works and safety surfacing underneath may cost as much as the equipment. So for a multi-play unit costing £10,000, a budget of £20,000 may be needed to buy and install it to pass safety inspection. Thus getting well funded is the place to start.



Health & Safety via Inspection & Maintenance

Inspections are vitally important. The first priority in design and installation standards and guidelines in children's safety. It does not either compromise play value, excitement, challenge or thrill for kids, nor does it mean there will not be accidents or injuries. Children can get hurt. The aim is to minimise accident likelihood and limit damage seriousness. So regular inspection is essential. Remember: Play areas are remarkably safe. So the guidelines and standards are working but there are no free rides. Play areas have costs in installation and inspection and maintenance.

The best-designed and most robustly made play equipment will wear, it may be damaged accidentally by, e.g., a grounds maintenance vehicle or worse, vandalised. Three branches may need trimming. Surfaces may become slippery. Flooding can cause problems and anti-social debris of dog mess, broken glass, drug injection needles and vulgar graffiti are common problems. They must be cleaned up. Pretending they won't happen is 'head in the sand' stuff and play areas for children's safety, play value, enjoyment and to comply with likely demands of insurers or claims managers. Litigation is an area for planned cost avoidance. Both demand a structured, managed and well-recorded approach.

Play areas need maintenance, repair and replacement of broken or worn components. For that councils need a small budget which is difficult to estimate. Thankfully, due to the high quality and durability of well-made play equipment, these costs are usually minimal. What is needed is defined by inspection. It must be done. Grounds maintenance staff or sports field users or 'friends of the play area' can do the daily or weekly 'Routine Inspections'. Damage can be reported and dealt with. Every few months, typically quarterly, depending on usage, an 'Operational Inspection' by a more informed inspector should point out any other requirements. The 'Annually Safety Inspection' by an approved inspector, e.g., an RPII Certified one, is a mandatory requirement. The Council must attend to its findings. However if the play area was recently installed to current guidelines and standards and passed its first Safety Inspection, with regular inspection and proper maintenance it should also pass its Annual Safety Inspection.

One danger for any Council is for its members to believe, 'There is nothing to it and we can do as we did when we were kids'. Sorry, you can't and we can't. Times have changed. An open minded and learning approach is needed to make the best use of excellent and freely available help. Just ask. Ask the API.

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