

child's play

Deborah Holt is Association Manager for the Association of Play Industries. In this issue Deborah focuses on the challenges facing providers in this serious business

I magine you are five years old. You are between three to four feet – about a metre tall and with as yet undeveloped peripheral vision your view is as sort of tunnel vision. To get anywhere close to that as an adult, kneel down and look through ‘binocular hands’. Welcome to the world of a small child. It is quite a good place to start when designing play equipment and planning a play area: bottom up, rather than top down.

Over simplified? Yes, of course but no less valid. Certainly it is not for children to define the available space, schedules, budgets or resources to enable playground creation. Nor is the development, definition and application of European and British standards and guidelines to deliver safe play and best practice in safe play area design child's play. However, it is for children that play areas are created, maintained and renewed. Children's play is a serious business. Play is how children develop the vitally important building blocks on which they will depend for their entire lives. Play matters. Children are the customers. They are the users. They must be included in consultation in a way which works for and with them and their families.

We find play wherever we find children. For some play, children need next to nothing for imaginative play and some play may make use of everyday items at home. Other play may be stimulated by children's playgrounds and play equipment. These are traditionally found in public parks and maintained by local authorities, town or parish councils or sports and social clubs. Outdoor play equipment is also to be seen in hospitals, travel termini, shops and retail shopping malls and in pub and restaurant gardens. Some ferries, passenger ships and converted warehouses offer indoor or contained/soft play.

WHO KNOWS WHAT?

Fortunately, there are two groups of people who have an informed approach to children's play. Obviously the first group is children from tots to teens and their parents, siblings, carers, teachers – mainstream and special needs play workers and all of the adults who know children as individuals.

The other main group are the people whose daily activity is focused on children's play; it



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is one of their specialist subjects. They include the Children's Play Council, RoSPA and the RPII and continue though to play equipment manufacturers, play area designers. Play providers – who may be a local authority, a school or a commercially run adventure playgrounds are also part of the supply side in play provision. When designing or developing children's play, outdoor or indoor, finding out what these

dedicated bodies advise is very worthwhile. Most important is thorough consultation with parents, teachers and carers and especially children who may have useful contributions and need to be heard.

Within one of these two groups are the play equipment manufacturers and safety surfacing companies. Their trade association is the Associations of Play Industries (API) to which some 85 per cent of suppliers to the >>

>> UK's £160 million market belong. The API requires members to meet all of the criteria local authorities would see as normal contract pre-conditions. Members' equipment must meet current European and British standards and guidelines and have certificated evidence to prove it to potential customers.

SAFE VS. EXCITING

European and British standards and guidelines aim at making play areas as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible. Indeed the latest in playground equipment and play areas can be very challenging and rewarding. They are there to exercise and develop body and mind and in schools be part of daily activity as an outside classroom, quiet or reading area and, becoming very popular, trim trails so children unconsciously burn off energy in the fight against childhood obesity. Designs vary with site and children's needs.

CONSULTATION

Engaging with play equipment users and the adults around them can give huge benefits. Examples include head teachers at schools for special needs children developing ideas with API play area designers and achieving something better than either would achieve individually. API members do this all the time. Long gone are the days of local authority officers selecting play equipment from a catalogue and it appearing in part of the borough some months later. Indeed, current practice is for local authority officers to require tender submissions for turnkey solutions which includes all appropriate consultation for and with the local authority.

Another important part of the consultation process is educating the public who participate. For many it comes as a surprise that for an multi-play unit with the maximum approved fall height of three metres the budget for the ground works and safety surfacing can be as much as the cost of the unit. Safety surfacing includes bark chippings or rubber mats or that 'rubbery Tarmac' called wet pour made from ground-up vehicle tyres. Safety surfacing also has to meet European and British standards and guidelines and has the primary purpose of minimising a head injury from a fall.

THE RISKS

Serious injuries in UK play areas are rare although wherever there are children accidents are possible. Where they do occur in playgrounds many are due to collisions from children running into each other and trip hazards – remember that tunnel vision. Thus play area design must allow for adequate protection in 'fall areas' as well as circulation space to meet appropriate criteria and foot paths for walkers, buggies, prams and wheelchairs (children's or adult's) between pieces of play equipment. Informed, experienced compliant design with the benefit

THE ASSOCIATION OF PLAY INDUSTRIES (API)

The Association of Play Industries (API) www.api-play.org is the lead trade body within the play sector, representing the interests of the manufacturers, installers, designers and distributors of both outdoor and indoor play equipment and safer surfacing. Founded in 1984 it represents approximately 80 per cent of the market with more than 60 members. Its aims are:

- To improve the quality of play and play equipment
- To promote safer play
- To assist with the creation of British and European Standards
- To improve the image of the Industry
- To establish dialogue with other relevant organisations in the UK and abroad
- To ensure all member companies comply with the relevant standards
- To act as a spokesman for the industry.

In accordance with its aims, the Association works closely with all agencies involved in the play sector including: Children's Play Council, Children's Play Policy Forum, Children's Play Safety Forum, ILAM, NPFA, RoSPA, and the HSE.

Together RoSPA, ILAM, NPFA and the API have developed the RPII – The Register of Play Inspectors International to certify and certificate professional competence (CPC) in play equipment inspectors. www.playinspectors.com

The API has also assisted in the very recent development of The Play Providers Association (PPA) to assist providers of indoor or contained play and soft play. www.playproviders.org.uk

of consultation and a cooperative design development are the routes by which API members seek to minimise risk and maximise value for money, play content and play value.

Contracts carry risks. However clients of API member companies have reduced contract risk because, in the very rare event of a problem, client's of API companies may call on the free, API Mediation Service to achieve a satisfactory result.

INSPECTION

All public access play areas must have an Annual Safety Inspection and Report, ideally by an inspector with the Register of Play Inspectors International www.playinspectors.com. In addition, play areas need Operational Inspections approximately every few month depending on use and daily or Routine Inspections grounds maintenance staff and the like. Good inspection regimes and good maintenance can prevent problems developing which cause accidents. In addition local authorities litigation experience is that properly recorded inspection and maintenance may be enough to stop claims getting to court and even being dropped totally.

DISABILITY AND INCLUSIVE PLAY

In the UK population nine million people are sufficiently disabled to be covered by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of those, only two percent use wheel chairs. Access applies to children and their parents and the adults around them. Ease of access for a parent for example using a wheelchair or with impaired sight is as important, as is having equipment accessible to children of

all abilities.

Children's ability varies with age so while young children are not able to do everything in a playground there must be equipment they can enjoy. So too for children with disabilities, there must be equipment they can enjoy but current thinking is that, as with younger children, all items may not be accessible to them.

The aim of accessibility is inclusiveness; in order that children of all abilities can play together within their capabilities. Thus ensuring that children of all abilities, their siblings, parents, carers and teachers are all included in consultation and design development is a route to achieving accessible and inclusive play. It is doing things the API way. □

► FOR MORE INFORMATION

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