

swings and roundabouts

The secret of playground success is revealed by the Association of Play Industries

Successful play area design depends on much more than selecting play equipment. With the Association of Play Industries (API) supplier developing a good understanding of what is wanted from the buyer including 'natural play' and the buyer understanding what is possible, feasible, manageable and affordable, they take a basic but vitally important step towards design that is a success for the children and the community. That includes consultation outcomes, working in line with children's play strategies and of course, funding and budgets, time plans, complying with safety standards and planning maintenance. Success does not just happen.

THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

Play equipment catalogues are attractive, but be warned! While catalogues may seem like the obvious place to start planning a play area, when it comes to achieving the best possible outcome, there are better routes and better places to start. Indeed with a successful play area, to use a cliché, 'the whole is usually greater than the sum of the parts'. It is hard and most likely impossible to find the secret of success in a catalogue. The secret is that there is no secret. Success lies mostly in a well-informed and well-developed brief. To create one, help is at

allocation of £200,000, which has been allocated to areas via local authorities. Like all excavation for gold, local authorities have to work for the reward by developing a play strategy with their local area. Fortunately, help is at hand from Play England – a five-year project of the Children's Play Council, part of the National Children's Bureau – funded by the Big Lottery Fund with the very clear objective to promote strategies for free play and create a lasting support structure for children's play in England. To this end, Play England has published local strategy development guidance 'Planning for Play', has development and support teams in each of the nine English regions, and has employed some 40 enablers to assist 'as required'.

One of the new Play England regional managers, Wendy Brookfield, speaking recently to an API Member's meeting, said: "Of course the real value is the development of local authority bottom-up, joined-up thinking – based on communities and consultation – to ensure every child has the best opportunities for the best of play. It is about as far from 'catalogue buying' as you can get." Local authorities' strategy-based submissions, proposals and applications have to be received by one of three remaining deadline dates: November 2006, March and September 2007. The funds will then be released in relation to project progress in stages for up to three years.

GOLPPLAYERS HAVE MORE FACILITIES THAN CHILDREN

Ms Brookfield looked at the need and demand for play and quoted Margaret Hodge, (former) Minister for Children and Families, 2005 who said: "The overwhelming cry from both parents and young people is around the lack of activities and facilities... the thing they say would improve family life is the provision of places to go and things to do." Wendy Brookfield revealed that: "For every acre of land in England given over to public playgrounds, over 80 acres are given over to golf." She added that: "On average, there is only 2.3 sq m of public play space for each child under 12 in the UK ... about the size of a kitchen table." More at: www.playengland.org.uk

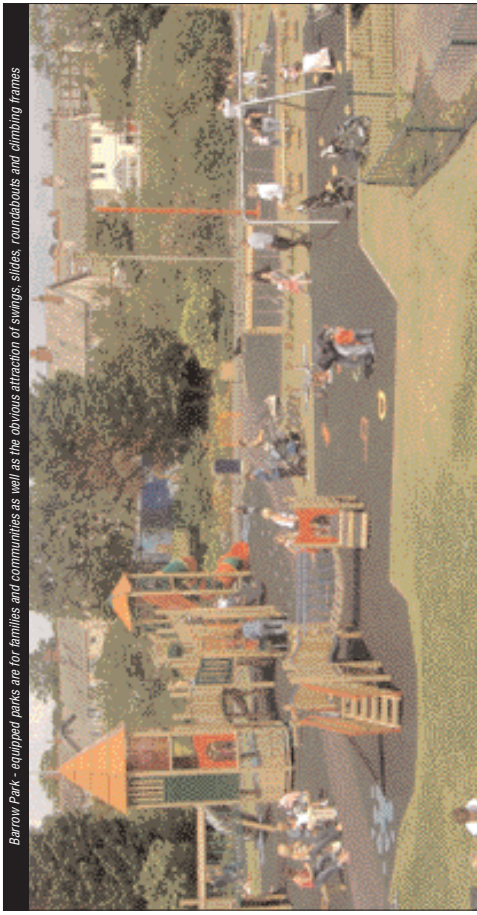
The very positive response from the API >>>

hand from play equipment manufacturers and their designers who will work co-operatively with the buyers and their staff for start is with the list of members on the API website at: www.api-play.org From here there are links to members' websites with many examples of play projects. The section called Published Articles includes several already published articles with more good advice for buyers and designers. From 1 November a new API publication: 'The API Guide To Playground Layout and Design' is available to download and print.

Clients need to define total requirement beyond the short term, which is where strategies help, because planning a whole area, perhaps to be built in stages, maybe age group by age group can allow designers to produce the best relationship between areas and achieve economies in total ground works, drainage, safety surfacing, paths gates, fencing and parking.

FOR CHILDREN, THERE'S GOLD IN THEM THERE STRATEGIES!

The 'gold' amounts to a very welcome £124 million for England, with a minimum



Barrow Park – equipped parks are for families and communities as well as the obvious attraction of swings, slides, roundabouts and climbing frames

As specialists in constructing children's play, API members relish the challenge of innovation of new ideas in play provision and of working with local authorities to help them achieve the best possible outcomes from available funding.

SWINGS AND THE ROUNDABOUTS

Ex-local authority parks and play manager, Andy Furze, now a consultant in children's play, strategies, consultation and funding welcomes the £124 million from the Big Lottery Fund but asks: "What about traditional playgrounds' play equipment?" Mr. Furze has detailed his question and evidenced the research behind it in his paper: 'In Praise of Playgrounds' available free at: www.loveparks.org.uk under 'Children & Young People' – or at www.api-play.org under News.

Andy Furze told Government Business, "The Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play Programme has created exciting possibilities for children's play. I hope it will stimulate greater interest and awareness of children's play in local authorities across the country. The guidance document, 'Planning for Play' has some excellent suggestions and comments. However we should take a look at what it does not say. The document seems largely to ignore the roles and benefits of play equipment. Quite rightly, the document urges local authorities to think beyond simple play equipment.

"Playgrounds have an important local community and social role for children and parents of younger ones. As adults we will probably recognise the fact that often we meet new people through children and animals'. Many parents and families have become friends through meeting in the playground." He said.

>>> has been to say, "How can we help? How can we help to ensure best value from available funding? As the play industries specialist constructors, we would like to be involved with discussions on design and be the builders." asked The API's Chair of Outdoor play, Richard Lumb who confirmed: "The UK's Play Equipment Makers, the API, want to help.

"Whatever the outcome of Play England's inspired approach to bottom-up strategies and through community consultation, as the UK's builders of playgrounds and makers and installers play equipment, we want to be part of it, part of the design debate and we are ideally equipped to build it."

Richard Lumb explained: "In the UK we frequently tender for local authority turnkey contracts. We, API members, then do everything from removing old equipment, through installing new play equipment, benches, litterbins and fencing. We lay concrete, tarmac, safety surfacing and turf. Before starting, for the client, we may be asked to do consultation and when completed organise the opening launch event. Local authority clients trust us to do it all based on their experience of us. As a consequence, we hope to be part of the debate about the best use of Big Lottery Funding for Children's Play."

CONSTRUCTORS OF ALL TYPES OF CHILDREN'S PLAY

As suppliers to local authorities initially of play equipment, API members and local authorities are very experienced in working together with API members providing year-by-year a continuously increasing range of services. Indeed, to become an API member companies must meet typical local government pre-qualification requirements.

"Most importantly of all," argues Andy Furze, "Play equipment is valued by children." He cites the study by Rob Whewey and Alison Milward who found: "When asked for their regular and favourite play places children consistently referred to green open spaces (parks, fields) and, if there was one available locally, an equipped play area." Andy Furze also quoted Whewey and Milward, who state: "In ... describing the ideal place to play, equipment was of key importance, and in order of popularity were: swings, slides, climbing frames, roundabouts, seesaws and assault courses."

API AIMS

- 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

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Deborah Holt, association manager
The Association of Play Industries (API)
Federation House, Stoneleigh Park
Warwickshire CV8 2RF
Phone +44(0) 24 7641 4999 ext 208
E-mail: api@api-play.org
Web: www.api-play.org



Rope climber – modern play equipment offers challenges akin to some forms of natural play with for example zip wires and rope climbers