# Every Playground, Every Child: Inclusive Playground Design

by Ian Proud

To me, nothing can match the sound of kids playing. Belly laughs and shrieks of joy are music to my ears. But fewer and fewer children are playing together outdoors. All children aren't getting enough outdoor play, and many children with differing abilities aren't getting any outdoor play at all.

Outdoor play should be available to everyone. From infancy to adulthood, play is vital to physical fitness, cognitive health, and emotional well-being. Play is essential for developing a sense of equality, connectedness, and concern for others. With benefits to every aspect of wellness, play has the power to enhance the quality of life for all of us.

Outdoor play areas are places where children can exercise their bodies and imaginations, solve problems, challenge their limits, and build social skills by interacting with others. Research shows us that playing early in life can help kids deal with others and build stable relationships. This helps them become more competent over time and have fewer problems than children who don't cultivate those relationships.

Ian Proud is the market research and inclusive play manager of Playworld Systems, Inc. He has led the Inclusive Play initiative since its inception, culminating in development of the Inclusive Play Design Guide, a manufacturer-neutral, inspirational and educational resource for inclusive play. He championed development of the nation's first electronic outdoor play product, and created the company's first market research department. Proud has taught product design, marketing, and creativity courses at Bucknell University and Penn College. He earned an MBA from Loyola College. See more at http://playworldsystems.com/blog/author/ian/#sthash.S19yWtMM.dpuf

In *Free to Learn*, developmental psychologist Peter Gray (2013) says that when children are free to "do their own thing" through play, they'll not only learn all they need to know, but they'll do it with passion and energy. According to Gray, "To foster children who will thrive in today's constantly changing world, we must entrust them to steer their own learning and development." Basing his theory on evidence from anthropology, psychology, and history, Gray believes free play helps kids learn to get along with peers, control their lives, solve problems, and become more emotionally resilient.

We know play builds strong family bonds and healthy communities through connections that build tentatively and increase as participants wish. When we, as parents, teachers, and other adult caregivers play with kids in ways that emphasize equality, children develop essential social skills. When we play with kids in our care in a balanced and responsive way, they'll learn the skills they need to be socially competent citizens. And more children of all ages and abilities will gain the benefits of outdoor play.

## The Evolution of Inclusive Play

We know play is important to children — all children, no exceptions. The concept of inclusive play promotes the accessibility of outdoor play opportunities for all children, regardless of age or ability. Recently, the United Nations adopted Article 31 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Every child under the age of 18 has a right to play. The article states that children have a right "to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child." The convention declares play as important as freedom of expression and religion. Now that's taking a strong stand to support play.

We've seen the inclusive play movement evolve over the years. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year, was signed into law on July 26, 1990, by President George H. W. Bush. Considered to be one of America's most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation, the ADA prohibits discrimination and guarantees

that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life. However, accommodating people with disabilities has focused on people in wheelchairs, even when this population represents a small percentage of the total number of people with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Data Center lists all children with a disability. The majority of children in the United States who are categorized as having a disability are identified as having autism, a speech or language impairment, an emotional disturbance, or an intellectual disability. Only 1% of children with a disability have an orthopedic disability. Yet it is those children who often get our attention when it comes to answering their needs on the playground.

Perhaps this is because we are far more accustomed to dealing with physical rather than psychological challenges, but the reality is we can take steps to design playgrounds that do answer the needs of children with all kinds of disabilities. Not only are we not doing that, we aren't offering inclusion to children with mobility problems very well either.

Some playground designers assume that ramps are the answer because they meet the ADA requirement that playgrounds are easy for children in wheelchairs to approach, enter, and move through. However, having ramps will not automatically mean the equipment offers the best possible play experience for children. Adding elements such as a ramp here or a level path there may help meet the letter of the law, but it doesn't fulfill the spirit of the law: to engage all people with each other. The ADA law should be considered a starting point to providing play experiences for everyone.

## Eight Keys to Inclusion

An inclusive playground is one that invites and welcomes everyone, not just typical kids, families, and caregivers. Here are some simple guidelines from the Inclusive Play Design Guide™ (see Resources) developed by a committee of play and child development experts to help create these spaces:

**Physical, Sensory, and Social Activities:** Offer activities that improve the physical, sensory, and social well-being of all children. Keep in mind that kids don't all march to the same tune: they have different abilities and needs. So give them a mix of activities on the playground to encourage them to reach individual goals.

**Multiple Challenge Levels:** No boredom allowed! Choose play activities that provide graduated levels of challenge to ensure that all ages and abilities are actively engaged on the playground.

**Elevated Play:** This one isn't surprising: Kids really like being high off the ground. Being above everyone else is exciting and provides a sense of accomplishment. Be sure there are activities for all abilities at all elevations, not just a slide to go down.

**Grouping of Activities:** Get kids together. Invite engagement between children of diverse abilities by locating similar types of equipment in the same area.

**Pods, Rooms, and Zones:** On larger playgrounds, create specialized areas of play around either stimulating or calming activities. These areas are easily found via orientation pathways that guide people to different areas of play. For people with spatial issue disabilities, these pathways offer security without the fear of getting lost.

**Unitary Surfacing:** Keep things smoothly moving along. There are two major categories of playground surfacing: *loose* and *unitary*. Unitary surfacing (such as rubber tiles, mats, and turf) offers less rolling resistance than a loose surface. This makes it easier for wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers to enter and move through the play space, unlike loose materials such as engineered wood fiber.

**The 'Coolest Thing':** Identify the piece of equipment that children will be most excited about. Ensure that it's accessible and usable by all.

**Routes and Maneuverability:** Travel routes around and through the playground and surrounding areas should be wide enough for people and wheelchairs to pass, transfer onto and off of equipment, and get close to activities.

## SPD and ASD on the Playground

Though children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may have other challenges, what they have in common with children who have Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) is difficulty processing signals from their senses. Some people are **hypo**sensitive, others are **hyper**sensitive.

A **hypo**sensitive child is going to seek more stimulation than a typically developing child. They will seek tactile (touch) stimulation over their whole body, like listening to loud music, and they love a carnival-like mixture of sounds and lights. However, the sensitivity may only affect one sense. For example, only sight or only hearing might be where the sensitivity occurs.

The symptoms of **hyper**sensitivity might include difficulty tolerating a label on the inside of a shirt, or having trouble concentrating on a task because the fluorescent lights are buzzing.

There are ways to select equipment and arrange it on the playground that anticipate these needs and allow the child to be accommodated without a significant increase in the cost of the project.

**Thoughtful Location**

Control: It's what we all want in our daily lives. Equipment location can make a huge difference in how much control a child with SPD/ASD can have over her situation. For example, a climber that has an enclosed space underneath would allow a child to withdraw if the stimulation of the playground becomes too much; but if that climber is placed next to a music activity, it no longer offers seclusion.

**Perimeter Fence**

Eighty percent of people on the Spectrum will at some point in their lives run away from a source of stimulation. They become 'a runner'. They must escape the source of the problem regardless of the danger posed by other activities around them, such as road traffic. A fence around the perimeter of the playground will allow a caregiver to take a child with ASD or SPD to the playground without fear of a tragedy.

**Orientation Opportunity**

Some children will need the chance to review the playground and think about how they can get out before they enter the play area. A path that encircles the playground is sometimes used, but if that isn't in the budget, an alternative is to create a relatively calm area at the entryway to the site, similar in function to a foyer in a building.

**Social vs. Independent Play**

Socialization can be a challenge for children with ASD. This means activities on the playground need to be chosen with socialization in mind. For example, a seesaw requires communication and cooperation between the children using it. This forces a user to process and act on the signals sent by the other user. Including seesaws, talk tubes, and other games that require cooperation in order to work will help a child with ASD deal with people in other areas of her life.

Connecting people with one another simply won't happen on playgrounds where two separate areas have been created — one for children with differing abilities and one for everyone else. All playgrounds should be inclusive playgrounds, designed to meet the play needs of everyone.

A few years ago, I participated in an inclusive play date at Millstone Creek Park in Westerville, Ohio. A young girl named Leah, who uses a wheelchair, was in the middle of — and sometimes directing — the action. She was included; her right to play, per Article 31, was being fulfilled.

## Building an Inclusive Playground

First, familiarize yourself with the particular challenges that face the children in your care:

- Are their challenges physical or emotional? Talk with their parents.
- How does the family accommodate the child's needs?
- What are their expectations for their child's learning experience and playtime at school?

Today we know that 1 in 68 children are on the Autism Spectrum (ASD), and 1 in 20 show signs of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). Both of these disorders change the way that children interact with the playground. Their needs can be addressed with the thoughtful location of standard equipment; don't forget to consider both the equipment itself and how it is placed within the space.

## Play For All

If play is valuable to all children, it should be available to all children, not just a select few. It's essential to support early childhood educators in their efforts to provide inclusive play oppor-

tunities to every child. This requires applying inclusive play principles to every playground, not just those designed with inclusion in mind. 'Inclusive thinking' is a fundamentally generous way to think about public spaces and those who use them — including parents, grandparents, and other adult caregivers who also may have differing abilities.

We must place value on the limited time kids have for unstructured outdoor play and make it more meaningful. Such play alleviates stress, reduces obesity, and encourages socialization. It unites us and strengthens our sense of community by creating a collective sense of belonging. Play enhances understanding, tolerance, empathy, and cooperation.

Creating a space where people of every age and ability can gather and play truly has the potential to change the world. Encouraging inclusive play brings communities together and generates amazing opportunities for life-enriching interactions. When I saw a toddler who had just learned to walk push an older girl in a wheelchair, I understood the true meaning of inclusive play.

More than simply a 'nice to have' amenity, an inclusive, accessible play area will increase children's acceptance of others who may not be like them and generate goodwill that can last a lifetime.

## Reference

Gray, P. (2013). *Free to learn. Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life.* New York: Basic Books.

## Resources

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), U.S. Department of Justice
(800) 514-0301 (voice); (800) 514-0383 (TTY)
www.ada.gov
www.access-board.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
"Autism Spectrum Disorders: Data and Statistics"
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html

Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center
Information on the Americans with Disabilities Act
(800) 949-4232 (voice/TTY)
www.adata.org

Inclusive Play Design Guide™ (free resource):
http://playworldsystems.com/inclusive_play_design_guide?pmc=FORM-001

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs'
idea.ed.gov

Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation:
www.spdfoundation.net/newresearch/