



Photograph by author

Just before the Fourth of July 1993, the swing set on our 25 year-old playground collapsed. We were lucky! There were no injuries. The children immediately began asking, "When will the swings be fixed?" Our first thought was that we had to find the money to replace the swing set as quickly as possible. A review of safety factors and current licensing regulations indicated that we needed to look at all of our outdoor equipment. The staff began generating a wish list, playground equipment companies were contacted, and proposals were submitted. The board of directors emphasized the need to comply with current safety and licensing regulations as they launched a major fund raising effort to raise money for the new playground equipment.

Accessibility for Children with Special Needs

We were about eight months into our planning when we began to consider accessibility. Four members of our staff and a board member were involved with the Community Connections Project at The George

A. Phoebe Meyer has served as executive director of the Falls Church-McLean Children's Center in Falls Church, Virginia, since 1986. Together with board member Susan Poretz and staff members Judi Glatter, Gloria Turner, and Velma Williams, she participated in the George Washington University Community Connections Project to promote and support inclusive environments for all young children. The mission of the Falls Church-McLean Children's Center since it opened in 1968 has been to serve all children.

More Than a Playground: Accessible Outdoor Learning Centers

by A. Phoebe Meyer



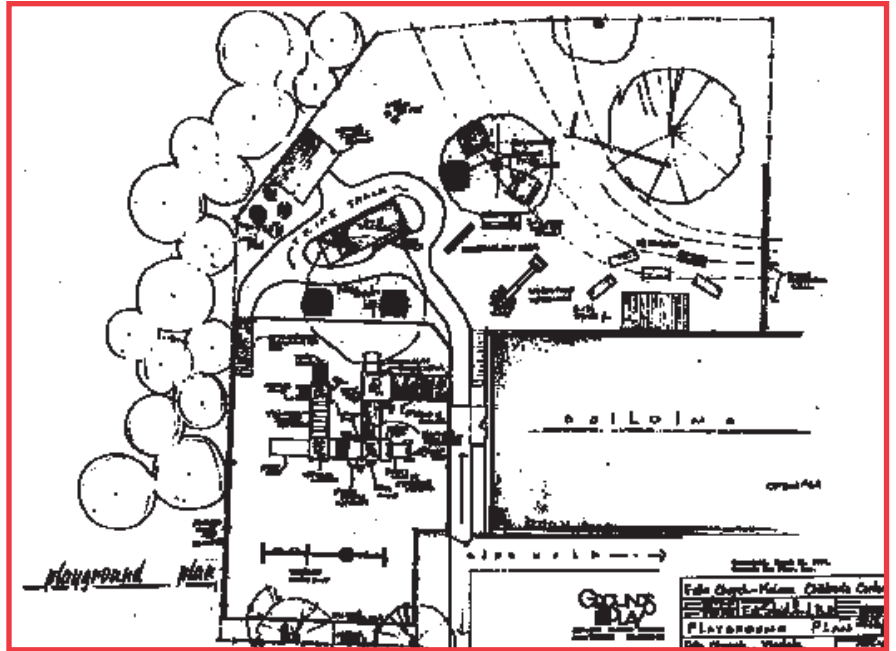
Washington University. This project was designed to help early childhood professionals include children with special needs in their programs. We quickly decided that our new outdoor learning center should be accessible to all children including those with physical or sensory disabilities.

Our Wish List for an Outdoor Learning Center

Our tree shaded playground is next to a wooded area with occasional deer and a rabbit family that makes regular visits to our garden. This 9,000 square feet of space provides a wonderful relaxing outdoor setting for the staff and our 57 children, ages three through five years, to work and play together for many months of the year. We were already engaged in the following activities outside on a daily basis, weather permitting: climbing, running, rolling on the hill; ball play; water and sand play; gardening; woodworking, hammering nails in tree stumps; table activities, art activities; riding tricycles; dress-up and music activities; using large wooden blocks, tires (loose parts); collecting and observing insects, and other nature activities; and snack time.

We wanted to be able to add the following activities: challenging age-appropriate climbing equipment to encourage various types of play; tricycle path inside the play yard; permanent art easel; stage with a removable shade cover for music and dramatic play activities; play house; new storage shed for convenient storage of all supplies and equipment for outdoor activities; large plastic blocks to replace the wooden building blocks; quiet area; and digging area in addition to the sand box and garden area.

A staff member said: "The children love to be outside and so do we. We want to be able to do everything outside that we do inside. We want to do more than just provide activities that will promote physical development. We want to be able to also provide activities that will foster the children's cognitive, social, and emotional development." Additionally, the staff stressed the importance of easy supervision, separating active play areas from quiet areas, and raising the height of the fence to keep balls inside the play yard. A professional analysis of our plans for physical accessibility resulted in the following adaptations to our plans:



Playground by Grounds For Play, 3501 Avenue E East, Arlington, Texas 76011 (800/552-PLAY).

- A wheelchair access ramp was added to the major climbing structure.
- A transfer point and another slide were added to the climber.

Safety/Accessibility Check List

- Access to outdoor area and equipment
- Height and spacing of equipment
- Width of doors and pathways
- Transfer platforms to use equipment
- Use of equipment in different positions
- Handholds and railings
- Surfacing
- Potential head entrapment areas
- Dangerous projections of hardware
- Provision for a variety of activities



- A wheelchair access ramp was added to provide access from the play area to the climbing and swinging area.

- The paved tricycle path was connected to the sidewalk at the front entrance, to the climbing area access, to the permanent art easel, to the play house entrance, and later, when funds permit, to the stage.

- A swing structure was chosen that would allow an adapted body swing to be added and used as needed.

We were surprised that these relatively few changes would allow **all** children to enjoy our new outdoor learning space. We learned that children with disabilities are more like other children than they are different.



Photo by author. Children in wheelchairs are able to access this slide. There is a transfer platform behind the slide so children can move from a wheelchair and use the slide. The WOODCARPET™ used in the fall zone around the slide is wheelchair accessible.

occupational therapist advised that swinging provides opportunities for linear movement, increases alertness, soothes and calms some children, and satisfies other children’s need for rapid, intense movement. Our final decision was to include a tire swing and two strap swings. An adapted body swing can be added later.

Type of surface to use in the fall zone: Our old playground included a combination of grass and wood chips. WOODCARPET™, a natural looking wood fiber material, was chosen for use as a resilient surface in the fall zone surrounding the major climber and the swings and to provide accessibility for wheelchairs.

Cost: The decision to have an accessible playground increased our costs. The addition of the two access ramps, the extra slide and the transfer point increased the cost of the climbing structure by approximately one-third. We were elated when the funding source for the climber chose to fund the accessible version over the less-expensive non-accessible climbing structure.

Initially, we planned to cut costs by having volunteers do the installation under the supervision of a representative of the playground company. After evaluating the number and abilities of our volunteers and considering

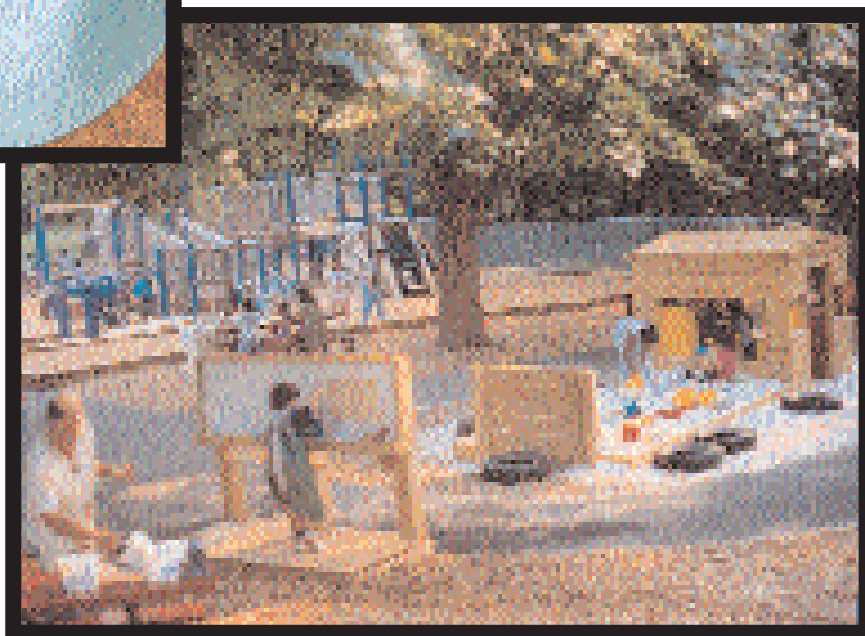


Photo and plan by Grounds For Play, Inc. This photo and the plan give an overall view of the many activities available to the children.

Major Decisions

Several major decisions needed to be made.

Safety: We wanted a safe playground and debated the inclusion of swings. Many playgrounds were not including swings because of safety concerns. The first plan included a single tire swing. The children were still asking, “When will the swings be fixed?” Our

warranty and liability implications, we made the decision to have the company do the installation of the major pieces of equipment. We made our own arrangements for the



purchase of the shed and the installation of the tricycle track. Volunteers were used to remove the old equipment, to prepare the site, to install the 90 cubic yards of WOODCARPET™ in the fall zone, and to build the stage. Several pieces of additional equipment are located on the plan and can be added when funds become available.

We received funds from a federal Child Care and Development Block Grant **Quality Enhancement Incentive**, local civic organizations, a community foundation, and other individuals and religious groups who are part of the “caring community” that regularly supports our center. Even our parents, the majority of whom have limited incomes, contributed enough funds for the tire swing. Over 50 contributors and 58 volunteers contributed to this project. Some programs may be eligible for a tax credit or deduction under the American with Disabilities Act to make structural alterations to increase accessibility.

Accessible Outdoor Environments Benefit Everyone

Almost a year to the day after our old swing set collapsed, our new outdoor learning center was finished and waiting for the children and staff to return from the two-week June break. Staff, children, parents and visitors alike arrived with wide-eyed expressions of delight and excitement. Our year-long process of learning and planning had resulted in more than a playground. We had an outdoor learning center for everyone!

Annotated Resources

Dempsey, J. D. “Safety and Inclusion Go Hand in Hand: Creating Environments for Special Needs Children.” Unpublished Manuscript. Arlington, TX: Grounds for Play, Inc., 1994.

This article discusses the theory that the safety, developmental appropriateness, and inclusiveness of play environments are interrelated.

Frost, J. L. *Play and Playscapes*. Albany, NY: Delmar, 1992.

Child development theory, adult roles in play, safety, and practical issues are addressed in this comprehensive reference book.

Frost, J. L., Marcy Guddemi, Aase Eriksen, and Frances Wallach. “Outdoor Play and Play Environments.” *Dimensions of Early Childhood* 20(4), 5-40, Summer 1992.

This special issue includes a series of articles on current research, design of outdoor environments, and playground safety.

Greenman, Jim, Jim Dempsey, Eric Strickland, Joe Frost, et al. “Going Outdoors.” *Child Care Information Exchange* 91, May/June 1993.

The “Beginnings Workshop” in this issue includes ideas for planning outdoor environments and an evaluation tool for playgrounds.

Rivkin, M. S. *The Great Outdoors Restoring Children’s Right to Play Outside*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1995.

This book includes guidelines for playground accessibility and other references on accessibility in the appendix C.

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). *Handbook for Public Playground Safety*. Washington, DC: 1991.

This document includes standards for playground safety and a detailed discussion of playground surfaces.

Tips for Planning your Accessible Outdoor Learning Center

- Become familiar with all applicable regulations.
- Consider the interests and abilities of the children.
- Involve the staff in every step of the process.
- Involve the parents in the process, especially parents of children with special needs.
- Have representatives of a disability group review your plans.
- Consult with a pediatric physical or occupational therapist, if possible.
- Plan for active and quiet areas.
- Provide areas for different learning centers.
- Include open spaces to run, play ball, or to use a large parachute.
- Plan for convenient outdoor storage space.
- Use volunteers/parents to install the parts of the playground that can save money without affecting safety or warranty criteria.
- Consider all possible funding sources.
- Allow time to think about and revise your plans.

