

# What Makes a Playground a Great Place for ALL Children to Play?

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Play is the most important activity for a child's development. It is through play that children learn about their world, learn to manipulate it and succeed in it. One of the many places that children play is on the local playground. Be it in a local park, area school or large community center, the playground is a major environment for free play for all children. It is important that children of all abilities have the chance to engage with each other on these playgrounds so that they can all play, learn and grow together.

There are multiple benefits to having children of all abilities play together. Often the focus is on the benefit to the child with the disability, but the benefits for those without disabilities are just as important. Jennifer Van Buren shares these in her March 2011 article in *Austin Family Magazine*.

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Benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities:

- Friendships, interactions, and social relationships
- Increased achievement of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals and a greater access to the general curriculum
- Greater sense of belonging to school community for parents and children
- Access to peer role model
- Higher expectations
- Increased inclusion in future environments
- Increased school staff collaboration
- Increased parent participation and families are more integrated into the community

Benefits of inclusion for students without disabilities:

- Meaningful friendships
- Increased appreciation of individual differences
- Respect for all people
- Preparation for an adult life in an inclusive society
- Opportunities to master activities by practicing and teaching others
- Greater academic outcomes

Ultimately, when children of all abilities get to play together they all gain a better overall understanding of what they can do together.



A key way to make a playground inclusive is to be deliberate in its design, for it is often the environment that disables the person not their disorder or impairment. As Pullin (2009) so brilliantly states in his book Design Meets Disability:

*“In the context of an environment or society that takes little or no account of impairment, people’s activities can be limited and their social participation restricted. People are therefore disabled by the society they live in, not directly by their impairment.”*

So, if we design the playground well all children should be able to engage with each other in play. The National Association for the Education of Young Children provides the following questions in their Inclusion Checklist for Outdoor Spaces (2009):

- Can children playing in different areas of the playscape maintain eye contact and interact with each other?
- Does the program provide a variety of outdoor play activities?
- Are all areas of outdoor play accessible to all children?
- Are outdoor surfaces even enough so all children can move safely?
- Do wheeled toys allow for a variety of motor skill development?

These are questions to start with especially for those running early childhood programs. The Center of Universal Design at North Carolina State University also has a series of principles that can be used to create an inclusive playground environment. These are known as the Seven Principles of Universal Design and can be applied to any environment to create spaces where everyone can engage.

These principles are as follows:

1. Equitable Use: The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.
2. Flexibility in Use: The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
3. Simple and Intuitive: The design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.
4. Perceptible Information: The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities.
5. Tolerance for Error: The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.



6. Low Physical Effort: The design can be use used efficiently and comfortably with a minimum of fatigue.

7. Size and Space for Approach and Use: Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility.



These principles can be applied throughout the playground design as well as to each specific play element. When looking at these principles as they apply to a whole playground the following questions can be considered for the principles.

1. Equitable Use:

a. Can everyone get to each component of the playground? For example, the parking lots, the restrooms, each of the play structures and play elements?

2. Flexibility in Use:

a. Are there different ways to play in a given area of the playground? For example, are there different types of swings in the swing area (baby swings, sling swings and adaptive swings)?

b. Do the facilities provide a variety of restroom sizes that can accommodate the different sizes of people with varying disorders (for example adult size changing tables in a restroom)?

3. Simple and Intuitive:

a. Is it easy for visitors to find their way around the playground?

b. Is it easy for visitors to understand how to play with each play element?



#### 4. Perceptible Information:

- a. If there is important information that a visitor must know to engage in the park or playground is this information available in a variety of formats?
- b. Does the park include tactile maps so that visitors know where they are in the park?

#### 5. Tolerance for Error:

- a. Does the playground provide the chance for children to play safely with a balance of risk (for example, safety surfacing in the appropriate places)?

#### 6. Low Physical Effort:

- a. Does the park or playground have shaded areas where visitors can get out of the heat?
- b. Are there places to sit and rest especially along long pathways?

#### 7. Size and Space for Approach and Use:

- a. Are the pathways and ramps on the playground wide enough to allow children to walk and/or roll side by side?
- b. Is there enough room to play at a given area without being in the way of other children moving through that area?

Sometimes playground spaces are pretty small and it's hard to design a ramped play structure in the given area. In these cases it is important to be able to look at a stand-alone playground element and decide if it provides inclusive play opportunities. Here are several stand-alone playground elements that could be considered for smaller areas and how the Seven Principles of Universal Design can be used to evaluate them.



This updated version of the merry-go-round is a stand-alone playground element that can be included in a playground design. It allows a group of children the chance to socialize while they experience rotation through space (this stimulates the vestibular system). It also works a variety of muscles (proprioceptive input) to the children who will be pushing and stopping the spinner. Looking at the OmniSpin through the Seven Principles of Universal Design, we see that it is designed so that all children can engage in it (Principle 1). A child using wheeled mobility can transfer into the OmniSpin on the lower sides. They can engage in it in a variety of ways (Principle 2). They can push it in a variety of ways and sit in it a variety of ways. The high back seats provide additional support for those who might need more support while they enjoy the ride. It is obvious to children how to use it (Principle 3 & 4). The surfacing around the OmniSpin will always be a safety surface (wood fiber or unitary surfacing) protecting children if they should fall getting in and out while they play (Principle 5). The speed of the OmniSpin is controlled so that it does not go too fast. This makes it easy to stop (Principle 6). The design allows for children to be able to enter and exit from multiple sides (Principle 7). There is also plenty of room in the OmniSpin to allow multiple children to go for a spin together.

A family and friends enjoy the ride on the We-saw.

Photo: Landscape Structures, Inc.



This is another playground element that has been updated to be more inclusive. The We-saw is designed to allow everyone to have the see-saw experience in their own way. Because socialization is a key part of the playground experience, it has been designed to allow for more socialization than the traditional see-saw. Looking at the We-saw through the Seven Principles of Universal Design, we find that it is designed to allow all users a chance to go for a ride (Principle 1). The bucket seats and the center platform can be accessed from a wheeled mobility device. The different seating options allow the visitor

to choose where they want to sit for the ride (Principle 2). The seats are large enough that children can sit together or a parent can sit with a child on their lap. It is very easy for the visitor or child to use requiring no directions whatsoever (Principle 3 & 4). Wood fiber or a unitary surface is required around the We-saw protecting a child should he or she fall off (Principle 5). The range of height is also controlled and a bumper on the ground keeps the We-saw from bottoming out. The system used for movement requires minimal energy to begin up and down movement, while it controls the overall speed keeping the We-saw from going too fast (Principle 6). The seat design was created to provide enough room to make getting on and off easy regardless of where the user decides to sit for the ride (Principle 7).

These are just two stand-alone playground elements that can be considered for smaller playground areas that still provide a fun, inclusive play experience for everyone on the playground. Inclusive play does not always require huge playground structures with lots of ramps. Smaller areas can have a variety of stand-alone elements that are placed together to create a great place for all children to play, learn and grow together!

#### **Resources:**

Inclusive Play, Landscape Structure, Inc. Retrieved 10 February 2013  
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