

Beyond the Minimums: Disability Park Awareness







“Who is being Excluded”?

This is the question to consider when creating inclusive outdoor recreation experiences for everyone to participate and enjoy. The process must start early in the planning, designing, and programming of these unique spaces. Choose inclusion over exclusion!

– Bill Botten, Retired U.S. Access Board,
Inclusion Specialist, PlayCore Consultant

Understanding Diversity, Inclusion & Social Equity in Outdoor Play and Recreation Environments

Addressing diversity in outdoor play and recreation environments demonstrates how a community respects and values all forms of inherent differences we possess as individuals. These differences might be obvious or invisible, slight or profound, and include age, race, gender, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, or ability.

Disability should be seen as the complex interaction between the features of a person's body and the features of the environment and society in which they live. We can shift society's perspective of the word "disability" to be understood as part of the human experience of not being able to equitably participate with others due to the unreasonable or unnecessary demands of the environment. When a narrow skill set is expected or required by the built environment or program to participate, it often creates physical, psychological, and/or social barriers.

Children with and without disabilities visit community playgrounds with family members, caregivers, and friends. All visitors come to the park as unique individuals with their own lived experiences, interests, strengths, and challenges. Though every person is unique, all people want to play, recreate with friends and family, and have fun; and they should have the same opportunity to do so regardless of their differences and similarities.



For over 15 years, PlayCore, has partnered with Utah State University's Institute for Disability, and scholar, Keith Christensen, PhD; both have made significant contributions in the field of disability research, earning the respect as foremost authorities in the advancement of the field. We are passionate about investing in ongoing independent research, sharing evidence-based best practices and knowledge, and developing advocacy tools to demonstrate the positive impact of inclusive play and recreation destinations have on community health and wellness.

The 7 Principles of Inclusive Playground Design® create universally designed play environments that are usable by more people, to the greatest extent possible, and therefore better serve a diverse community. As the industry's only evidence-based design philosophy for inclusive playgrounds, these design best practices have been adopted by thousands of communities across the world to address the needs of the whole child, whole environment, and whole community.

Although children are the primary user group of playgrounds, truly inclusive outdoor play and recreation destinations should be designed with a broader multigenerational approach in mind. Inclusive environments are for everyone, providing all people a place to play and recreate with family, friends, and their fellow community members. Consider the various needs of park visitors, including adults or adolescents with disabilities, aging adults, caregivers pushing strollers or with multiple children of various ages and abilities, the neurodiversity of visitors, and individuals with various adaptive equipment, mobility devices, and/or service animals.

Ultimately, the whole environment should celebrate the diversity of the community. Well-designed inclusive parks are a primary attraction for all community members which contribute to greater appreciation for diversity, increased healthy behavior, and sustained repeated social interactions that provide a catalyst for increasing civic engagement and cooperation between individuals, growing the social capital of a community. Programs, special events, and marketing efforts that promote acceptance and understanding can create a deeper sense of belonging and a healthier place to live, work, and play. We must work together to promote an understanding that all children and families need and deserve access to quality inclusive play and recreation environments and programs.

Diversity:

Attributes that contribute to people having unique life experiences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, abilities, educational background, religion, national origin, and political beliefs.

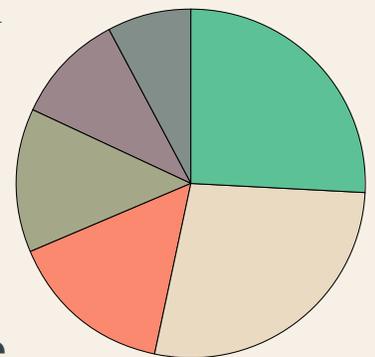
Inclusion:

The act of supporting the diversity of people within a society, recognizing their value and importance, and helping them achieve their full potential. Inclusion is focused on the removal of barriers to social equity, not accommodations to mitigate barriers.

Social Equity:

The fair and just access to the benefits of society. Social equity should promote fairness to access livelihood, education, recreation, and full participation in the political and cultural life of the community as well as self-determination in meeting fundamental needs.

Up to 1 in 4 adults in the United States have some type of disability.¹



12.1% - Mobility

6.1% - Hearing

12.8% - Cognition

4.8% - Vision

7.2% - Independent Living

3.6% - Self-Care

¹ Disability Impacts Us All Infographic <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>

Language Matters!



Create a positive, welcoming environment and raise everyone's comfort levels when interacting with people who have disabilities. Use these disability terminology tips to raise awareness and champion inclusive programs and spaces in your community!

DISABILITY LANGUAGE TIPS:

- A simple approach is to use person-first language. This puts the person before their disability to recognize that the person is not defined by their disability or condition, for example 'a person with a disability'.
- An important exception to the rule of person-first language is Identity-first language. This is a way some individuals with disabilities prefer to emphasize what they consider to be an inherent part of their identity. In this case, a person may choose to put their condition or disability first as a positive label, for example, 'autistic person'.
- Language should focus on the abilities of the individual and the accommodations that support them.
- Avoid making statements that reinforce negative stereotypes or that generalize characteristics of individuals with specific disabilities. No two individuals are alike.
- Only refer to the person's disability if it is relevant.
- Language is complicated and always evolving. The language you choose to use may depend on your audience, whose experience you are trying to capture, and to honor the individual's unique language preferences and rights to decide how they wish to be described.

When in doubt, just ask!

DISABILITY LANGUAGE EXAMPLES

Preferred	Outdated/Avoid
A person with a disability, special needs	handicapped person, disabled individual, special needs child
An individual with Down syndrome	a Down's child, Down's syndrome
People who are neurodivergent	a neurodiverse person
a person with autism or autism spectrum disorder is a safe bet, however many in the autistic community strongly prefer identity-first language, such as autistic people	Asperger's syndrome
people who use wheelchairs, other mobility devices, adaptive equipment	a person confined/bound to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
people with a communication, language, or speech disability	people who are nonverbal, can't communicate/talk, have a speech impairment or disorder
people with cognitive, intellectual, learning, or developmental disabilities	mentally challenged, mentally retarded, slow, low-functioning
person with traumatic or acquired brain injury	brain damaged
child who is non-disabled or children without disabilities	healthy, able-bodied, normal, typically developing
person with a congenital disability	birth defect, abnormality
people who are deaf (use with profound hearing loss), have a hearing loss, or hard of hearing	the deaf, deaf person, deaf and dumb, hearing impaired
person with physical disability	person who is crippled, handicapped, deformed, has an abnormality, or that is physically challenged
persons of short stature	midget, dwarf, vertically challenged
people with emotional or psychiatric disabilities	the mentally ill, emotionally disturbed, bipolar, crazy
people with cerebral palsy, autism, diabetes, Tourette syndrome, dyslexia, epilepsy,	suffering from, afflicted with, victim of, or stricken with cerebral palsy, autism, diabetes, Tourette syndrome, dyslexia, epilepsy, etc
people with health/medical needs or specific related conditions	medically fragile, sick



OTHER LANGUAGE CONSIDERATIONS

Therapies
vs treatments

General education
vs regular education

Students receiving special education services
vs special education students

Service dog or assistance animal
vs seeing eye dog

Accessible bus, parking, or restrooms reserved for people with disabilities
vs handicapped parking, restrooms, bus

The playground structure is not accessible/inclusive
vs the individual can't access the structure because they use a wheelchair (place the issue and emphasis on the issues related to the design of the environment, not the individual)

For more disability specific etiquette tips and resources, visit the United Spinal Association www.unitedspinal.org/disability-etiquette.

Inclusive Features to Positively Enhance Park Experiences for All Visitors

In order to create inclusive community park experiences, considerations must include the needs of the whole environment and the whole community. Use this comprehensive park checklist to thoughtfully create a welcoming atmosphere and outdoor play and recreation destinations that are more usable, by more people, to the greatest extent possible.





1. Parking

- More than the minimum required accessible parking spaces that include van spaces with wider access aisles and appropriate signage.
- Parking areas conveniently located to create an accessible route to the park entrance(s).



2. Pathways

- Firm and stable surface materials along accessible connecting routes (concrete, asphalt, or boardwalk preferred).
- Railings and edge protection on routes with running slopes greater than 5% or where there is a drop off.



3. Surfacing

- Unitary, fall attenuating safety surfacing, such as poured-in-place rubber provides the most consistent surface for accessibility in play and recreation environments.
- Various surface materials, textures, or colors to provide cues to help visually organize the environment so that it is easier to navigate and understand.



4. Playgrounds

- Robust assortment of activities that thoughtfully meet the physical, social-emotional, communication, sensory, and cognitive needs of all people, including those with disabilities.
- Go beyond the minimum ADA Standards for Accessible Play Areas to meet the 7 Principles of Inclusive Playground Design®, the only evidence-based design best practices for inclusive play environments. Visit playcore.com/inclusion to request the design guidebook.
- Selection of playground equipment that has intentionally been designed to provide additional gross motor and fine motor supports for more active, independent play.
- Accessible routes to, around, and on the play equipment, using unitary safety surfacing and accessible ramps.



5. Wayfinding

- Accessible visual signage that identifies accessible routes and facilities within the site.
- Picture symbols to identify equipment with raised images, words, Braille, etc.
- Bilingual options on signage, QR codes with videos, or options to download in different languages.
- Detailed website information about the park and inclusive features.
- Tactile 3D site models where possible.
- Various surface material textures or colors to provide behavioral cues and help visually organize the environment so that it is easier to navigate and understand.



6. Site Amenities



a. Accessible Toilet and Bathing Facilities:

- Accessible sink(s) with touchless operation.
- Paper towel/hand drying features within accessible reach ranges.
- Family/Unisex restroom with at least one adult size changing table.
- Signage with Braille characters and raised pictorial symbols at toilet room doors.



b. Picnic Tables:

- Tables positioned on an accessible route and protected from weather by using shade or shelters where possible.
- Wheelchair spaces integrated into picnic tables which allow space for multiple individuals that use mobility devices to comfortably gather at the same table and offer choices of where to sit.



c. Benches/Sitting Areas:

- Adjacent accessible wheelchair spaces/areas near benches with a firm and stable surface.
- Shade trees or shade structures surrounding seating areas to increase comfort.
- Back and armrests on benches when possible.
- Benches with charging ports for personal electronic devices and mobility devices.



d. Shade and Shelters:

- A combination of integrated shade (manufactured) and natural shade (tree canopy) offers relief from elements and increased comfort.
- Shade shelters and pavilions on an accessible route and provide a firm and stable surface throughout.



e. Drinking Fountains and Water Bottle Filling Stations:

- A wheelchair accessible and a standing height drinking fountain provided at each location.
- Stations to include accessible features such as switch/bar or automatic touchless sensors.



f. Universal Fields:

- Each area of sport activity is connected with at least one accessible route.
- Unitary surfacing on fields that permit wheelchair access and play.
- Wheelchair accessible dugouts with a wheelchair space adjacent to team benches.



g. Customer Service Areas:

- Wheelchair accessible sales and service counters no higher than 36 inches.
- Accessible point of sale systems.
- Condiment stations within accessible reach ranges.
- Menus with large print, pictures, and Braille.



h. Bleachers/Spectator Seating:

- Wheelchair spaces integrated within each spectator seating area.
- Circulation paths are behind the designated wheelchair spaces to avoid obstructing the view.



i. Aquatic Play Environments:

- Aquatic access wheelchairs of varied sizes for adult and child visitors are available to use.
- Changing/bathing facilities include an accessible changing bench.
- Showers provide a handheld shower device and a shower bench for transfer in each accessible shower.



j. Dog Parks & Pet Amenities:

- Pet waste, water stations, and gate latches are positioned at an accessible approach, reach heights, and operation for individuals using mobility devices.
- Accessible route and surface to and throughout the environment.



k. Adult Outdoor Fitness Parks:

- Universally designed equipment that provides individuals using mobility devices the opportunity to engage in aerobic and muscle strengthening activities alongside others.
- Accessible routes of travel to and around the equipment and include safety surfacing when appropriate.
- Signage with simple graphics and verbiage for instruction or QR codes to provide video instruction.



l. Musical Instruments:

- Musical elements installed on an accessible route with a hard surface, and at an appropriate height so that individuals of various sizes and individuals using wheelchairs can comfortably approach and reach the activity.
- Adapted mallets to promote independence and usability for individuals that need additional fine motor support.



m. Communication:

- Opportunities for visitors to communicate through pictures and/or symbols that are easy to recognize, paired with the written word, and are organized using color-coding to represent different parts of speech.
- Communication boards installed on an accessible route with a hard surface, at an appropriate height so that individuals of various sizes and individuals using wheelchairs can comfortably approach and point to or gaze at picture symbols.
- Printed communication boards for download or available to check out for visitors and/or their caregivers to use in preparation for and during their visit.



Special Events & Programming:

- Activities located on accessible routes and with accessible surfacing.
- Accessible portable toilet facilities and parking at temporary events.
- Sign language or bilingual interpretation at special events.
- Special events designed and marketed to ensure people of all abilities can play and interact meaningfully.
- Adaptive equipment such as all-terrain wheelchairs, adaptive swing harnesses, adaptive switches for play panels that offer switch capability, and adaptive sports equipment available for visitors to check out or to use during programs/events.
- 'Sensory Kits' that include noise cancelling headphones, fidget toys, communication boards or picture symbols, or other adaptive tools available for visitors to reserve/check out.

Keep Learning!

PlayCore's Center for Outreach, Research, & Education (CORE) is committed to researching and advocating for the impact of play and recreation on a community's vitality and why it's valuable to invest in community health and wellness. In collaboration with the scholars that make up our Research Institute, we gather and share knowledge to positively advance diverse community needs.

CORE | RESOURCE LIBRARY

We partner with our scholars to translate their research into evidence-based publications to help you plan and advocate.

Request the new, updated 7 Principles of Inclusive Playground Design coming soon at <https://www.playcore.com/7-principles-request>

CORE | PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT HUB

We combine research and resources to offer world-class learning opportunities where professionals can share learnings and earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs) through a variety of tailored events and diverse topics.

Join us for our upcoming events with Accessibility Specialist, Bill Botten at <https://education.playcore.com>

CORE | DATA SERVICE LAB

Our National Demonstration Site (NDS) Network helps communities demonstrate the positive impact they are making on Community Vitality. National Demonstration Sites utilize scholarly best practice design to implement high-quality play and recreation environments, receive recognition, demonstrate impact through data services, and receive site-specific reports to share and showcase the value and impact of the space on community health and wellness.

Become an Inclusive Play National Demonstration Site at <https://www.playcore.com/nds>

