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# 9

# Which playspaces are appropriate for our children?

Helen Lynch[3]

## Play and playspaces

As we have seen in earlier chapters, play is fundamental to how the child engages in the world. Enabling play requires a combination of factors; but the most playful events are usually a result of having a strong match between the child's play needs, and the **just-right challenge** in the social and physical environment. These environments are often called playspaces: **playspace** is a term applied to any place where a child plays, such as parks, greens, and yards, and is not limited to a purpose-built playground.

Therefore, before thinking about spaces for play, it is important to think about your child, your family, and your play needs. While play is something you know about as a carer or parent, you may not be aware that it is highly influenced by you, your family, your culture as well as your child's play needs and preferences.

In relation to your child, think about:

- How does s/he like to play?

- What are his/her play preferences?

- Where does s/he like to play?

- Where do his/her friends like to play?

- Are there local places they go?

- What are the main challenges for play for your child?

- In the ideal world, what would enable your child to play?

In relation to you, your family, your culture, and context, think about:

- What do you like to play, what is important to you and your family?

- What kind of spaces do you have available for play, for the whole family or just for the child?

- Where do you like to go as a family to play?

- What are the main challenges for you and your family for play?

- In the ideal world, what would be your play solution?

For example, for some families playing together is very important, while for others the adults like to provide play opportunities for their children but prefer to engage in more adult-like sport activities. Knowing your play style as a family is an important place to start. You and your child are the experts in knowing what is important for play in your family!

# Playspaces

So how can we find playspaces that have the **just-right challenge** for your child? Once you have thought about what is important to you and your family, next, we need to understand the core characteristics of playspaces, and explore **which spaces are appropriate for our children for play.**

Play can happen anywhere: at the kitchen table, in the sitting room, out the back garden, in front of the home, in the car, along the footpath, at school or in a local town park playground. We know from research that children use many places for

play in different counties, including derelict sites, waterfronts, parking lots. These examples show that sometimes play takes place in public settings, or designated play settings, but play also happens in unexpected places. The important thing children say about these places, is that they are fun (high in **play value**), and they are places to gather and meet friends. **Play value** means that there are play opportunities available that the children can access and use, and wish to use. These opportunities often include loose parts such as sticks, sand or water: they do not always involve purchased toys.

Therefore, playspaces are any place a child uses for play. For your child, and for your family, think of a favourite playspace that offers high play value, and consider:

- What environmental features makes this playspace successful? Space? Safety hazards? Accessibility? Variety of stimulation?

- How can your child play successfully in this playspace?

- If there are some parts of this playspace that do not work so well, can play be enabled with adaptation to the environment, or by providing physical help?

This picture shows an example of a playspace that has been designed to maximise accessibility for a range of different children, with different abilities and play needs by designing accessible routes and surfaces:



*Source: PlayCore®*

# How the physical environment supports play: matching the child needs with the design of the built environment in accessing play opportunities

It is likely that you have many ideas about why some playspaces work well for your family and your child, and other playspaces do not. It maybe that you can see times when your child's disability is affecting his/her play opportunities. This can be due to difficulties in motor, sensory, cognitive, social, or emotional skills and abilities. However, it can also be attributed to the design of the environment (including toys or playspaces). For example, a child with visual impairments may not enjoy visits to a typical playground, but if the playground is designed with visual features to maximise accessibility, then this can make a significant difference. Similarly, if playground components are designed with multiple users in mind, everyone can play together.  Figure below shows how having a carefully designed play component promotes social play



*Source: PlayCore®*

This example introduces the idea of finding the **just-right environment**: a just-right environment is one that has the best match between the child's play needs, the family/social needs and the opportunities in the physical environment.

# Where is the just-right environment at home?

Children with disabilities spend more time at home than children without disabilities and so potentially play happens more frequently at home than elsewhere. Play at home involves family and friends, when playdates are organised for the child. The physical space available to the child and the characteristics of the environment and the availability of play materials and partners influence children's participation in play. It is therefore important that parents are well informed and aware of how to make home environment accessible for play. From what we know in research, children report that their homes are the most usable playspaces, which shows that parents are most effective at adapting the home space according to their child's needs, compared to school and community settings.

Although there may be many play preferences for home-based play, studies have shown that typical play choices include watching TV, and playing computer games for children with different disabilities in Ireland, Canada, and Sweden. Enabling play so that friends can play together is a core aspect. In addition, some families organise a separate play area or play room to support play. As we noted earlier, this is often linked with your family preferences or your cultural perspective on how places in the home are used.

However, many children prefer to be near other family members and so, providing nearby playspaces might be more successful in the home. For example, for children who are at the exploratory stage of play:

•  Have play activities in the kitchen for when adults need to prepare meals (e.g. have a bottom drawer or cupboard shelf with kitchen utensils for the child to explore and play alongside while you cook);

•  Encourage more outdoor play by bringing some chores outside so you can work alongside your child if they are playing in sand trays or exploring in the garden.

# Where is the just-right environment outdoors?

## Play in Communities

There are many challenges in finding outdoor play solutions for children in many countries, including children with disabilities. With an increase in city living and urbanisation, families are challenged to find welcoming community playspaces. This includes families of children with disabilities. For example, in studies of playgrounds, researchers have found that many playgrounds are not designed to be accessible, or if they are, the play value or challenge is missing.

However, families in urban settings have also been exploring new ways to provide play in their communities. One example is the Playing Out initiative in the UK. This is a community strengths-based approach to enabling play, where families plan to gather on a regular basis and enable play on their street. Permission is gained from the Municipality to temporarily close the street where the community lives (e.g. once a week for two hours). The community members gather on the street to support their children to play together; no traffic is allowed through the street during this time. See link in Chapter 11 to Child-in-the-City for more information.

In other contexts, families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have worked on solutions to designing just-right environments that are autism-friendly. For example, one initiative that has been growing in popularity recently, is to have a 'disability-friendly' time in a supermarket for shopping. During this allotted time, the noise levels are reduced to accommodate children with ASD who have sensory sensitivities. In other research studies, parents have suggested that something similar needs to be done for playgrounds: to ask the local playground manager to hold special times each week that are 'disability-friendly'. The goal here is to work towards inclusion, and reduce segregation and stigma, so that families of children with special needs can go to the playground and not be anxious about feeling unwelcome. Their suggestion shows that sometimes small steps are needed to work towards inclusion in a community. By developing initiatives such as in the Playing Out programme or by having special times in a public setting, communities can change and play can be enabled. See Chapter 11 for some links.

# Play in Schools

As schools are places where children spend a significant amount of time, they provide an important source of play opportunity also for children with impairments. However, in many countries, families and educators have reported increasing pressures from the school curriculum to reduce time spent in free play. Furthermore, in some countries such as Ireland, outdoor play areas in schools are places to run about, with no play equipment to foster other forms of play.

In recent years, it is exciting to see how play experts have responded to these problems, for example:

1.     Schools are being targeted now as sites for promoting physical activity play (see Chapter 11 for examples from Australia and the USA). In the USA study, the researchers adapted the physical, built environment to increase play activity. These adaptations included: having garden areas, providing wheeled toy pathways, providing natural elements such as logs, rocks and shrubs. Similarly, in the Australian study, Bundy and colleagues introduced 'loose materials' which is the term for objects with no apparent play value, such as ropes, empty boxes, and wood. Her study has shown how play can be enabled using such materials for all children in a cost-effective way.

2.     This renewed focus on play and the schoolyard has led to a new movement called **schoolyard greening**, which refers to changes made to school environments to restore natural elements within them. Schoolyard greening is taking place in North America, Australia, the UK and Northern Europe based on the strong evidence that green school yards encourage more active play, promote positive behaviour as well as augment play and learning. Thus, schools provide a rich environment in which children can engage with nature and the outdoors.

However, there are still no clear, universally accepted guidelines on how to provide accessible playgrounds in schools and public settings (see Chapter 3, on play policy and barriers). The next section looks at Universal Design as the way forward in finding a solution for communities everywhere.

# Playspaces: Universal Design, usability and accessibility

With some thought and careful planning, community playspaces can be designed for maximum play value, to provide the **just-right challenge** for children of all abilities. Universal Design is the approach that can enable such design. Universal Design (UD) is about making products usable for people of all abilities. When a place is universally designed, it is both accessible **and** usable. Accessible means that the space is a place where you and your child can get to: for example, to get to the local play park or playground. Accessible environments are usually guided by minimum standards set out in legislation in each country. Universal Design goes beyond minimum standards for accessibility however: it also includes usability.

Usability means that once you get there, you can use the play opportunities that are there: for example, to climb the slide or use the swing.

Applying UD to playground design is quite new, and has not yet been researched in any great detail; however, it provides us with some important considerations and guides us in designing just-right environments for play.

Good playground design for accessibility and usability considers varied needs of the broadest range of users possible. For example:

**1. For families with physical impairments**

• Providing a firm pathway to the playground to ensure accessibility.

• Avoiding the use of sand or loose wood chippings around play components (swings, slides, climbing frames) so that people with wheelchairs can make their way about easily.

**2. For families with visual impairments**

• Providing clear information that outlines the route in playground so that people with limited sight can visualise the route through the space (e.g. through using maps/braille).

• Use of colour to denote edges of pathways or play components.

**3. For families with social-emotional impairments**

• Providing places for solitary play in the playspace for a child who gets easily overwhelmed and who may need a short time away from others during play activity.

**4. For families with intellectual disabilities**

• Providing a clear layout of the playspace so that it is easy to follow and use independently.

• Having equipment that is self- explanatory in how it is to be used (intuitive).

PlayCore® is one organisation in the United States that has developed tools to help designers and municipalities to design playgrounds from a UD perspective. Seven principles of UD have been identified:

1. Equitable Use: Be Fair!

2. Flexibility in Use: Be Included!

3. Simple and Intuitive: Be Smart!

4. Perceptible Information: Be Independent!

5. Tolerance for Error: Be Safe!

6. Low Physical Effort: Be Active!

7. Size and Space for Approach: Be Comfortable!

However, it is also important to figure out how to design playgrounds that are fun, that have a high play value. Universal Design is an important way for considering how accessible and usable a place is for a **person**. But we need to go beyond focusing on the person and make sure we also focus on what happens there: **play**. This is currently the focus of a number of projects in Europe, and also among researchers from the International Play Association – links to some examples are provided in Chapter 11.

# Universal Design and the just-right environment: exploring solutions

Based on our knowledge of play, every playground has some play components (i.e. swings, climbing frames, slides) that **are not** usable by all children. Playgrounds need to provide challenge and have some play challenges that are too difficult for some children or too easy for others. This is because playgrounds need to cater for different play skills and abilities. It is therefore important to note that playgrounds cannot be fully accessible: if this was the case, the play value may be missing.

In the Netherlands, there is an interesting example of how one project has developed to address this issue. Play workers have set up an organisation to assess the play value of local playgrounds, using the experts (children!) to carry out the assessment. A national programme has been put in place aiming:

- For every playground to be 100% welcome,

- With 70% accessibility,

- With 50% usability.

This message clearly establishes the need to understand that for every child, playgrounds cannot be 100% accessible, otherwise there may not be any challenge and the playspace may inadvertently be boring for the child!

# Development of an Audit tool for playground assessment

For a Universal Design project in Ireland, a Playground Audit tool was developed to help assess playspaces. The Audit tool gathers together questions to consider: accessibility, usability, natural elements for play, built environment for play, and play preferences.

The current version of this tool can be found in the Appendix to this book. It is currently being used in research to see if it can help designers, landscape architects, playground workers, to plan for public playgrounds that are **Universally Designed for People and Play**.

# Conclusion

• Play can happen anywhere and in any place, but the most valuable play happens when there is a **JUST-RIGHT CHALLENGE** in the physical and social environment.

• Playspaces can be structured or unstructured. Plan to develop play opportunities where your child likes to play. This can be near you at home or with friends in the street. By careful planning and using your insight of your child's needs and what is available to you, you will be able to figure out which places are appropriate for our children: the **JUST-RIGHT ENVIRONMENTS**.

• When playspaces are structured, they need to be designed with Universal Design in mind, i.e. designed for accessibility and usability.

• However, playgrounds should not be designed to be 100% accessible and usable, as this would mean that they may have limited play challenge and therefore reduced play value.