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Photo by Kelleen Smith, Center for Persons with Disabilities

Comprehensive Inclusive Play Spaces!

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Recently, the general public and playground equipment manufacturers have begun to see the benefits of inclusive play environments. This is tremendously exciting for long time advocates of social inclusion who have spent countless hours educating their peers and fundraising for their own inclusive play spaces. Thanks to these efforts, hundreds of inclusive playgrounds have been installed throughout the country. Somewhere during the process however, the very purpose for creating these play spaces (children's play) is routinely lost in the details of Americans with Disabilities Act regulations, ASTM safety standards, equipment selections and budget restrictions.

It is important to remember that though these issues are essential to successful playgrounds, they are peripheral to the design process and not the focus! While necessary, physical accessibility does not guarantee social accessibility or the opportunity to participate. Play is very much a social process and the opportunity to be included should be available to every child. Often, planning efforts related to mobility impairments overshadow the necessity for a more comprehensive approach focused on understanding children with disabilities, understanding developmentally appropriate levels of risk, and using the principles of universal design to provide social and emotional inclusion, sensory integration, graduating levels of

physical and mental challenges, cognitive engagement and opportunities for discovery and exploration.

Understanding Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities are part of our nation's largest minority group, individuals with disabilities. Out of 1,000 children between the ages of 3 and 21 years old, 89 children will have a disability (8.9%). Of these, approximately 1 child (1.1%) will have a physical disability, 1 child (1.1%) will have a sensory disability, 17 children (19.1%) will have a communicative disability, 10 children (11.2%) will have a social/emotional disability, and 48 children (53.9%) will have an intellectual disability. Additionally, 2 children (2.2%) will have multiple disabilities and 9 children (10.1%) will have a chronic health impairment such as cancer¹.

Disability is often mistakenly understood as a child's inability to experience the play environment because of limitations from their impairment. Defining disability in this way usually results in efforts to fix the child's impairment, rather than the play environment. Disability is better recognized as a child's inability to experience the play environment because of very specific requirements on the part of the environment in order to participate. Disability results from differences in what a child is able to do, and what the play environment requires the child to be able to do. When disability is recognized as a result of the abilities required by the play environment, the focus becomes adapting the environment to accommodate the diverse abilities of children, which is the way that thoughtful design should be approached.

The abilities often demanded by play environments require children with disabilities to participate in play through the assistance of others or much greater personal efforts that place them at a disadvantage with their peers. The child's right to equality of opportunity, full participation, and independence in play implies the promise that children should not be subjected to inequality by characteristics over which they have no control. The fail-

ure to consider the needs of children with disabilities in the development of play environments produces environments incompatible with the child's right to play. Those who create play environments must recognize that the design of the play environment is much more than a problem of complying with accessibility standards, but rather a statement of how much we value children with disabilities as full participants in play.

Socially inclusive play environments are based on this understanding of disability where the emphasis is not on helping the child with a disability to adjust and accept the play environment, but rather designing the play environment to accommodate the abilities of the child and their right to an equal, independent, full participation in play.

Opportunities for Risk

A critical feature of any effective play space is the opportunity for the child to take risk. Taking risks, or to

try something new, speak to someone new, or think something new, is necessary for children's development. The development of children starts at birth and continues into adulthood. Children need to develop in five crucial areas for proper growth: social/emotional, intellectual, sensory, perceptual-motor, and physical development. All children, regardless of their abilities, pass through the same developmental stages in the same sequence; only the timing and rate vary.

It is important to understand that a child with disability is a child, and in reality, the similarities between children with and without disabilities are far greater than any differences.² Opportunities to take risks and be challenged should not be absent from play environments for children with disabilities. The opposite is actually true. Equality of play opportunity, full participation in play, and the independence of the child mean allowing children with disabilities the Dignity of Risk.

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disabilities is often an issue that must be overcome in traditional play spaces. At first, the protection of a child with disabilities may appear to be kind, but it can strip children of the right to play equally and independently. There is healthy development in risk taking and crippling indignity in overprotection.³

Principles of Universal Design

Comprehensive inclusive play environments recognize the individuality, dignity, and abilities of children with disabilities and their right to equal, independent, full participation in play. These play environments should be developed following principles of universal design to remove physical and social barriers to all children participating in play. The principles of universal design encourage play environments to be designed for equitable use to

- (1) Be Fair for everyone; designed for flexibility in use so everyone can
- (2) Be Included; designed to be simple and intuitive so everyone can
- (3) Be Smart; designed with perceptible information where everyone can
- (4) Be Independent; designed to be tolerant of error to

(5) Be Safe for everyone; designed to require low sustained physical effort so everyone can

(6) Be Active; and designed with the appropriate size and space for approach and use so everyone can

(7) Be Comfortable⁴.

Following these principles supports thoughtfully considering the child and their strengths and ability to participate in play independently and equally alongside their friends, siblings, and neighbors. The emphasis then evolves from helping the child with a disability to adjust and accept play environments, to designing play environment that accommodate the needs and abilities of the child. When planning or designing playgrounds, remember that a comprehensive approach based on knowledge of the needs of children with disabilities, including risk for differing levels of abilities and using universal design principles, will improve the success of playgrounds and lead to well used spaces enjoyed by children of ALL abilities.

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Dr. Keith Christensen is a landscape architect at O'Dell Engineering, a faculty member for the Utah State

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Chad Kennedy's interest in advocacy for persons with disabilities originates from employment at the Center for Persons with Disabilities and from a year-long interdisciplinary disability course he participated in at the Center. His employment at the Center made a lasting impression and has been a guide and passion during his subsequent career. He is a licensed landscape architect, a certified playground safety inspector, an active member of his local ASLA Executive Committee and an active member in the Children's Outdoor Environments Professional Practice Network.

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Endnotes

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