



KIDS Literature Review: Inclusive Play

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This literature review has been completed by KIDS to capture the areas where research into inclusive play and childcare has already been completed and where gaps in research appear to exist. Although KIDS has 40 years' experience of developing and supporting inclusive play and childcare services, it is important that we are aware of existing evidence supporting the development of inclusion, and that we acknowledge that this can guide good practice. This information provides validity to our work.

We are also interested to see whether there are any specific areas which are under-researched and which could possibly be the focus of future KIDS research.

This review of literature concentrated on answering the following questions:

1. What is effective inclusion in children's¹ services?
2. What works when trying to develop inclusive children's services?
3. What are the barriers to including disabled children in services?
4. What are the benefits of inclusion in children's services?
5. Is there any evidence to suggest that inclusive services are more cost effective than specialist services?

What is effective inclusion in children's services?

Effective inclusion in children's services is something that should benefit all children and young people, and the aim of any child- or youth-orientated programme should be to develop a community that meets the needs of all the individuals within it (Harris *et al*, 2009).

Disabled children are often kept in the company of adults and remain under their supervision, especially if the child is lacking in confidence or has complex support requirements. Effective inclusion may be achieved by staff gradually reducing supervision to encourage the child to mingle, and to work alongside disabled and non-disabled children to help them to get to know each other and enable them to build mutual trust, understanding and friendships. As the child gains confidence and makes friends, they often become more independent of the adult and no longer need as much supervision. All children should be supported to become autonomous and as independent as they possibly can be in order to live 'ordinary lives'. A successful service would promote an approach where all children, regardless of their impairment, have access to adult support only when required and ideally a shared communication system is used by children to request this adult support (Murray, 2002, Woolley *et al*, 2006).

¹ This research looked at inclusion within both children's and young people's services but for brevity this document refers only to 'children' and 'children's services'.

In a study of primary schools, Woolley (2006) found that letting a disabled child engage in positive risk and challenge was beneficial. This research demonstrated that engaging disabled children in 'risky play' challenged children, young people and practitioner's assumptions about which activities disabled children could be included in.

It seems that when young disabled people are involved in decisions about developing inclusive services, it is beneficial for everybody involved. For example, in Essex, a club called Youth Plus was set up by a sixteen-year-old disabled boy and his younger sister. Around 70 young people attended weekly, with around half disabled and half non-disabled children, with activities to access such as badminton, basketball and dance. Overall, the literature on this subject suggests that letting disabled children decide their own level and type of involvement, while also encouraging them to take part in leisure and educational activities with other children, is well on the way towards achieving effective inclusion (Shelley, 2002).

Practitioners having and promoting positive attitudes towards inclusion is also crucial. Individual members of staff cannot often easily or immediately change the organisational structure of their setting. However, they can work to make a setting more inclusive with the belief that it is possible to engage and support all individuals. In particular, an understanding of how they can support and respond to individual differences and requirements in a group setting, and how they can utilise specialist knowledge, is crucial to effective inclusion.

Outdoor playgrounds and play areas should be designed with the needs of all children in mind (John and Whewey, 2004). Examples of inclusive features in play spaces include: having space around pieces of play equipment to enable children using wheelchairs to move about easily; benches and tables designed to blend into the play space to allow parents to supervise their child without feeling that they are intruding in their play; signs at eye level and in Braille for visually impaired children; and a variety of available play types and activities, including sensory play, to provide choice and opportunity for all children. It must also be acknowledged that there is a difference between having access to a play space and being included in a play space. Access is about people being able to get into and around a play area, but inclusion is about being welcomed and respected and having choice and control over play experiences. Although it is important to make play spaces accessible to disabled children and their families, it is also important to tackle some of the societal and cultural factors that have an impact on inclusion. Inclusive play spaces help disabled children and their families build up relationships and a sense of community that can promote social inclusion on a wider level (Dunn *et al*, 2003).

Dunn and Moore (2005) provide a very fitting quote to conclude the debate on what effective inclusion in play is, that “the aspiration of those providing play facilities must be to create challenges for all and barriers for none”.

What works when trying to develop inclusive children’s services?

The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO) states that it is difficult to say “what works” when trying to develop inclusive children’s services because there is a very limited amount of research in this area, and therefore very little data; “It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about best practice because of the limited amount of data available”. Woolley (2006) corroborates this, by saying that there is little existing research which has looked into the provision of play and services for young disabled people. Therefore, this is an area which requires further research.

There are varying definitions of inclusion within and between organisations too, which makes it difficult to review what works when trying to develop inclusive services. It would be beneficial for the promotion of inclusive play if one universal definition was in use (C4EO). Murray (2002) found that definitions of inclusion varied, from providing support in a segregated ‘safe’ environment to providing one-to-one support, to including young disabled people in a universal service. KIDS has adopted Alison John’s definition of inclusion: it is something that “is open and accessible to all, and takes positive action in removing disabling barriers, so that disabled and non-disabled people can participate”. C4EO advises that future research should look at the different ways the term ‘inclusion’ is interpreted and then implemented by differing services, and should highlight the need for the use of one universal definition of inclusive play.

What is clear is that listening to the ideas and wishes of disabled children is important when developing an inclusive service. Disabled children state that they want to see existing friends and make new ones in their local area, have more choice as to how and where to spend their free time, and to be able to access the support they need to pursue their own leisure interests (C4EO). Murray (2002), on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, stated that young disabled people found the following as key to their inclusion in services: friendships and relationships; sharing of mutual experience; information; communication; support; redefinition of ‘participation’; transport; and money.

All services should have their target audience in mind when developing something new, especially those who are often overlooked. MacBeath (2006) sets out some guidelines for the principles that should be kept in mind when developing an inclusive service. The service should be continuously evaluated so mistakes can be identified

and improvements made; they should be flexible; and they should also make full use of expertise that is on offer, both locally and nationally.

When developing an inclusive service, it would be beneficial to know the numbers of disabled children in the area and the number of children who may require a service. Unfortunately, local authorities don't always have this information. In a study by Mooney *et al* (2008), just over half of the 115 authorities could provide a figure for the number of disabled children in holiday clubs or after-school groups.

The Disability Rights Commission established six inclusive design principles to use when developing a play space. These are: ease of use; freedom of choice and access to mainstream services; diversity and difference; legibility and predictability; quality; and safety (Shackell *et al*, 2008). Although these principles are a very useful guide when developing inclusive play spaces, engaging with disabled children, young people and their families directly will be particularly useful. Casey *et al* (2004) encourage consultation with disabled children and young people, parents and families when planning an inclusive play programme, using a 'plan-do-review' formula that should reflect a continuing process. Routinely, consulting helps to build relationships and develop trust, and it is widely acknowledged that consultation with users ultimately leads to the production of a better service (Dunn *et al*, 2003).

What are the barriers to including disabled children in services?

Barriers to inclusion have been researched and discussed in many journals and articles. There appear to be barriers in place, including a lack of information, the control from adults and also the child or family themselves. (These will all be discussed further.)

Knight *et al* (2008) says that increased staffing costs when young disabled people attend play schemes or leisure activities create a barrier to developing inclusive provision. Resources and funding have been cited as a main inhibitor of accessible play space development in the UK (Dunn and Moore, 2005). A Contact a Family survey (2002) found that parents cited reasons such as the following as having an impact on their access to play and leisure services: lack of transport (or inaccessible transport) to a play or leisure setting; lack of suitable local facilities; not enough range in what is available; their family or child made to feel uncomfortable by other people; and finally a lack of information about play or leisure settings. This last statement is supported by Knight *et al* (2008) who call it a lack of 'bridging', with a need for someone to provide information to families and link them with relevant suitable provision. Some families find their nominated social worker doesn't have the relevant knowledge or information at their disposal (Kagan *et al*, 1999). This barrier is summed up by an Audit Commission report: "it is often a struggle for families to find out what is available, as information is fragmented" (2003).

Staff training also affects inclusion, and it is vital this barrier is overcome as “staff are the most important resource in facilitating inclusion” (Children’s Play Information Service, 2006). Some inclusive services do not provide appropriate training or have the expertise to support children with a range of impairments, leaving families worried and anxious about the care provided (Kagan *et al*, 1999). Woolley (2006) found that training offered by schools focused more on the health and safety aspect of working with disabled children than encouraging or facilitating disabled children to play, and this results in a lack of knowledge about inclusion (Florian, 2008). Dunn and Moore (2005) found in a study of developing accessible play spaces that many playground officers, planners and other professionals felt they had a lack of knowledge about the implications of disabled children having certain impairments, and the ability of the child to use a play space, which obviously negatively affects planners’ confidence when trying to develop an inclusive play space.

A child’s age can be a barrier to inclusion. As children become teenagers, they want to have more independence and begin to organise their own leisure activities and play. However, both Contact a Family (2002) and Knight *et al* (2008) say that disabled children may still need some supervised provision at this age due to the challenges they may face in organising their own activities. Sometimes, local authorities or those in charge of commissioning youth services make assumptions that teenagers do not need and are not interested in attending a supervised service, without listening to the views of a diverse range of young people.

Some adults unintentionally create barriers to inclusion. The Children’s Play Information Service comments that there is “more control from the adult world in general” (2006) for disabled children and young people. Goodley *et al* (2010) discusses how many adults tend to control disabled children’s play, as it is seen as lacking and needing normalisation. Adults can often feel a need to ‘mother’ disabled children and young people, and this is reflected in the use of teaching assistants in schools and one-to-one support workers in play settings. These adults are often beneficial to disabled children in specific ways and at specific times, but children can also become quite dependent on their support and consequently be left out of group learning, play and social situations with their peers (MacBeath *et al*, 2006). This is supported by Murray (2002), who found that many young disabled people who had a teaching assistant or one-to-one support felt this was a barrier to forming and maintaining friendships. Other barriers to inclusion include possible bullying or teasing from a non-disabled child, which will discourage disabled children from taking part in activities, and poor access to buildings and the facilities inside, which contributes to the perception they are different from others (Murray, 2002).

A final point on this issue is that barriers to inclusive play can sometimes come from the child or family themselves. C4EO suggests this can be due to the personality of the child. Some children can be shy, reluctant to participate or, equally, not know how

to join in. C4EO also says that parents may be over-protective and might not want their child to participate in an inclusive setting, as they may be concerned about bullying or the capabilities of staff. This is something which is also discussed in the Department for Children, Schools and Families document 'Managing Risk in Play Provision' (2009): "Parents' fears for their children's safety are sometimes cited as a reason for not offering children potentially risky play opportunities".

What are the benefits of inclusion in children's services?

Research comments on the abundant benefits of inclusion in universal children's services. Inclusion doesn't just benefit the disabled child themselves, but also their families, the non-disabled children attending the services, staff working at the setting and also the wider community.

Friendship is probably the most frequently mentioned benefit of inclusion for disabled children (Knight *et al*, 2008) and in a study by Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson (2010), disabled children made it very clear that they wanted to make friends and not feel lonely. When discussing inclusion with disabled children, friendship is usually at the centre (Casey, 2010). Disabled children also need stimulation, like any child, and many get bored if they are left out of services, especially over the long summer break (Knight 2008 *et al*).

Play is beneficial for many reasons, including enjoyment, physical exercise, development of communication and social skills, understanding about the world and exploring creativity. Inclusion for disabled children is even more beneficial because segregated provision often has limited play opportunities for children to socialise with other children of their choice, especially non-disabled children. Therefore, inclusive play can improve disabled children's understanding and learning and, in particular, about social skills and how to interact with other children (Woolley, 2006). Play can be a process through which disabled children can regain a sense of control or work through difficult or challenging experiences, with both risk and challenge being an integral part of the play experience (Casey, 2010), as mentioned earlier in the discussion of effective inclusion.

Non-disabled children benefit from the inclusion of disabled children in universal children's services too. For example, through a strategy called 'peer-mediated intervention', non-disabled children can be paired with disabled children and work on tasks and play together. This benefits non-disabled children as it teaches them to accept and value difference, to develop leadership skills and also to develop higher self-confidence (Harris *et al*, 2009).

Parents can also benefit from inclusive services. A study by Petrie and Poland (1998) found that play services were beneficial for parents because they enabled them to

access employment. Inclusive services also gave them and their families a short break from their care responsibilities, whilst knowing that their child had the chance to be an 'ordinary' child and interact with other children.

Murray (2002) found that there appears to be a lack of awareness about the wide-ranging benefits of inclusion to all involved. There is often a focus on benefits gained solely for the 'included disabled child'.

Is there any evidence to prove that inclusive practice is more cost effective than specialist provision?

There seems to be very limited research into this area. However, the Council for Disabled Children (Contact a Family, 2004) estimates that 80% of disabled children would be able to use universal provision with no or only minor adjustments to staff training or premises.

A study by Dobson *et al* (2001) found that specialist provision costs more than inclusive services. However, there is a lack of evidence about whether the unit cost of supporting a disabled child in an inclusive setting is more than in a specialist setting. It also appears that the cost for a disabled child to attend an inclusive setting can often be more expensive than for a non-disabled child.

On a related but slightly separate topic, parents of disabled children encounter many more costs in raising their child than those with non-disabled children. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (1999) found that parents of disabled children have to pay three times more to raise a disabled child. On average, the cost per year to bring up a disabled child is £7,355 compared to £2,100 per year to bring up a non-disabled child.

Thoughts for the future

This literature review into inclusive play had the aim of finding out what research had already been undertaken into this area, to inform KIDS about which topics could be the focus of future research. A number of potential areas for future research have been identified within this piece of work.

There has been much research into barriers to inclusion and the benefits of play and inclusion. However, much of the research is focused on schools. There is, comparatively, an absence of research into the barriers to inclusion into out-of-school activities.

There is some limited research on what works when it comes to developing and sustaining inclusion, but the topic of whether or not inclusive services are more cost effective than specialist services seems under-researched. There also appear to be opportunities for more research into the benefits of inclusive children's services for stakeholders other than disabled children themselves. The link between inclusive children's services and a more cohesive and altruistic community does not seem to have been explored.

A prominent theme that has been raised is there are many differing definitions of inclusion within and between organisations. This undoubtedly has an effect on the development of inclusion. Research into these differing definitions may help to develop an agreed definition, which in turn could help the process towards inclusion for settings and services.

There is also a lack of broad information on disabled children's out-of-school lives, with few statistics on how many attend youth and play services. This is coupled alongside limited general data about how many disabled children live in each local authority. This makes it difficult for children's services to know how many disabled children they could be supporting in their local area.

Conclusion

This literature review has been compiled over a very short timescale and, as such, is presented as an initial overview of some of the research which has been carried out, and is currently available, about inclusive play.

However, the strength of this initial literature review for KIDS, and for all of those who are passionate about inclusive play, is that it has identified where the evidence is much scarcer, harder to access or possibly absent altogether.

The results of further research into these identified gaps would lead to new benefits, firstly and most importantly for disabled children and young people, and secondly for all the settings and services who are striving to improve the inclusiveness of their provision.

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