

# KIDS Playday Survey 2013

## Examining the survey responses and the impact on disabled children



*“The right to play is a child’s first claim on the community. Play is nature’s training for life”*

*David Lloyd George, 1925*

### Background

Between 2001-2011, KIDS ran the Playwork Inclusion Project, a government funded initiative to support the inclusion of disabled children and young people in mainstream play and leisure activities.

The project reached thousands of professionals during its lifespan, offering free training, workshops, support, advice and publications to help develop inclusive practice across England.

When Play England was tasked to ‘Support and Challenge’ the Play Pathfinders and Playbuilders, KIDS was engaged to help develop tools that local authorities could use to ensure that newly built adventure playspaces considered the requirements of disabled children in order that they could play alongside their non-disabled friends.

Both of these projects ceased in 2011, after the Department for Education decided to stop funding the Play Strategy in England.

During the past two years, it has been noted the number of playwork professionals employed by local authorities has dropped significantly.

Although this was predictable due to the reframing of government priorities, KIDS wanted to know what impact this has had on disabled children and young people being able to access mainstream play and leisure provision.

The purpose of the survey has been to see if the level of play provision for disabled children has improved, stayed the same, or declined since March 2011.

### Why play is important

*The Playwork Principles* (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff 2005)<sup>1</sup> state that:

- All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.
- Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.

## The right to play is recognised in **article 31** of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**<sup>2</sup>

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

This is in conjunction with **article 23** that highlights the rights of disabled children:

1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.

Play is children's culture and it is vital that all children are enabled to have their say on where, how and what they want to play – as well as who they want to play with.

Children and young people are finding themselves under increased pressure to perform well academically and prove themselves as useful members of society. The opportunity to engage in personally fulfilling play and leisure is becoming limited as these expectations are threaded through activities that previously had been there for their own sake and without monitoring.

The nature of the play experienced is also changing, with a reported move from outside play in natural or street environments to play in homes or buildings and the advance in technologies that promote online games on handheld devices as well as games consoles and social media.

For disabled children and young people, free time for play is eaten into by the need to take part in various therapies or undergo medical interventions. Inevitably these take priority over the need to socialise and interact with peers.

The vast majority of disabled children in England do not have equal access to play.

Many have no play opportunities at all. Those who are able to access play often find it offered in quite tightly controlled environments that do not necessarily have access to outdoor spaces, or allow free flow from inside to outside areas.

It is important to consider the twofold impact on disabled children on not being able to freely play with others, or to freely play outdoors.

During October 2011, KIDS surveyed parents of disabled children on their ease of access to play and childcare provision over the Summer Holiday period, the results were sobering:

- One in ten disabled children were refused a place in play/childcare provision over the summer of 2011.
- One in three parents of disabled children received no play/childcare provision over the summer holidays.
- One in five families with a disabled child pay more than twice as much as the national average for their childcare.
- Two in three families found it difficult or very difficult to find appropriate play / childcare provision for their disabled child.

*"All children need to play and have a right to play. All children should have equal access to play opportunities"*

*The new charter for children's play<sup>3</sup>  
(Children's Play Council 1998)*

Parents who did manage to secure play / childcare provision for their disabled child often had to make use of specialist services, separating their child from siblings, friends and their local community.

In the study *A world without play: A literature review* (2012)<sup>4</sup>, Play England suggested: “[a] combination of poor play environments, busy school schedules and an increase in structured activities” has impeded opportunities for children to engage in free and unfettered play.

Children in general – and disabled children in particular – are often assumed to be dependent and vulnerable rather than competent to make choices and actively participate in decision making. Deaf children and children with communication impairments, autistic spectrum disorders or complex health requirements are among the most isolated and least likely to be consulted.

A consultation with over 4,000 children and young people carried out in the West Midlands (Dudley MBC/MADE, 2009) revealed that disabled children are disproportionately susceptible to bullying and therefore least likely to use outdoor play spaces.

Improving access to inclusive outdoor play requires the co-operation of multiple agencies and, significantly, the involvement of disabled children and young people and their families.

It is vital that disabled children and their families are seen as active participants in their local communities to normalise their presence in society and reduce incidents of bullying and/or hate crime.



## Social concerns for families with disabled children

It is estimated that around half of all families with disabled children live in poverty.

Figures released from the **Office for Disability Issues**<sup>5</sup> in August 2012 report that:

- 6% of children in the UK are reported as being disabled (approx 770,000 or 1 in 20 children).
- 21% of children in families with at least one disabled member live in poverty, a significantly higher proportion than the 16% of children in families with no disabled member.
- Around a fifth of disabled people report having difficulties related to their impairment or disability in accessing transport

In 2012, the Contact a Family *Counting the Costs*<sup>6</sup> survey reported that, nearly 86% of families with disabled children reported that they cannot afford days out, and that access to leisure facilities and holidays is radically reduced when a family has a disabled child.

Barnardo's<sup>7</sup> reports that it costs twice as much to raise a disabled child with complex support requirements, rather than a non-disabled child, and that disabled children are much more likely to be socially excluded due to poverty, discrimination and segregation. Therefore free access to inclusive play and leisure opportunities can be vital for the economic and social wellbeing of disabled children and their families.

Children and young people have emerged as the “group most severely affected” by local government cuts according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

*Serving deprived communities in a recession* (2012)<sup>8</sup> used budgetary data and surveys with 25 local authorities to understand the early impacts of local authority budget cuts since 2010 and noted that

“Play schemes, youth volunteering projects and specialist support in schools were the casualties mentioned most often.”

In the *Holiday Childcare Costs Survey 2013* (July 2013)<sup>9</sup>, The Family and Childcare Trust mapped cuts to youth service budgets across England.

It estimates that local authority youth service budgets have fallen by an average of 4.9% between 2012–2013 and 2013–2014, although some local authorities have cut deeper and a few have ceased all local authority youth service provision entirely.

The obligation of local authorities to assess the sufficiency of childcare was introduced in 2008 in England and Wales.

These childcare sufficiency assessments were meant to identify gaps in supply and contain action plans to ensure that these gaps in provision were filled.

Nationally, across England, local authorities have reported a 2% drop in childcare sufficiency for disabled children from 20% in 2009 to 18% in 2013.

For young people aged 12 years and over, the drop in childcare sufficiency is greater at 4%, reported as 20% in 2009 to only 16% in 2013.

How this impacts on local authority provision for young disabled people can only be estimated, but in light of these figures, this group looks to be doubly affected by cuts in provision.

**The Children's Society, *Good Childhood Report 2013* (July 2013)<sup>10</sup>** questioned 42,000 children and young in the UK.

They reported that the top three keys to children and young people's wellbeing were:

1. **Choice**
2. **Family**
3. **Money**

These three elements reflect in simpler terms the concerns expressed by parents and carers of disabled children and young people.

## Legal requirements

Current legislation promotes the participation of disabled children and young people in the design and delivery of services. The Children Act of 1989 (as amended) and the Disability Equality Duty (2005)/Equality Act (2010) were important landmarks to achieve this.

The Children and Families Bill is due to be enacted by 2014, but is still undergoing amendments as it progresses through parliament. Consultations on various part of the Bill have been ongoing.

The Aiming High for Disabled Children initiative ceased in 2011, however some funding for short breaks continues. Local authorities have a statutory requirement to provide a variety of short break services, and publish a short breaks duty statement, but it is not clear whether an element of choice is involved and if these short breaks consider inclusion to be an important aspect of the provision. A local offer for disabled children is being tested in the SEND pathfinder programme which is piloting the reforms to provision for disabled children in the Children and Families Bill. The local offer will be integral to the provision of services to those disabled children who are not eligible to receive a personal budget under the planned reforms. All local authorities will be required to publish a local offer.

Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act (1990) allows a local planning authority to enter into a legally-binding agreement with a developer to provide something or to restrict the use of a development.

Developments that create new residential dwellings were required to pay an open space contribution if it was granted permission before 1st August 2013.

Open space contributions are spent within the vicinity of the development they came from to enhance the quality and quantity of all type of open space, including play areas, green spaces and woodlands.

### Children's Rights Alliance England.

#### *State of Children's Rights in England 2012 (January 2013)*<sup>11</sup>.

This annual review of Government action on the United Nations' recommendations for strengthening children's rights in the UK found that:

- There is no comprehensive national strategy for the inclusion of disabled children in society. In December 2011, the Government published Fulfilling Potential, a discussion paper on enabling disabled people to play a full role in society, which was updated by a Next Steps document in September 2012.

The strategy is not specifically targeted at disabled children, and save in relation to special educational needs, children are rarely mentioned in the document. (page 59)

- There remains a lack of accessible play spaces, and space and time dedicated to play and sport in schools is reducing.

A survey of 10 to 15 year-olds in England and Wales found that 37% of this age group did not feel that there were enough activities for children in their local area. A survey among parents with children aged 13 years and under found that 45% of parents wanted 'more local safe places to play' as an incentive to allow their children to play freely outside. (page 82)

Section 12 of the Childcare Act (2006) states that each local authority Families Information Service has a statutory duty to provide comprehensive, accurate, up to date information on childcare and other local services and support for parents of children and young people up to the age of 20 (and age 25 if the child is disabled).

These complex issues relating to children's rights and our legal responsibilities towards them all come in to focus when investigating the availability of play and leisure to disabled children and young people in England.

## The survey

The survey was aimed at those working with children and young people across the play, leisure, childcare and disability sectors across England. Inevitably respondents largely worked within local government or voluntary organisations.

We did not anticipate the large number of parents that responded as the survey was not designed with them in mind (we would have created a different survey aimed at this group), it was a tool to assess how those who work 'on the ground' were feeling about how play and leisure was working for disabled children and young people.



Between May and June 2013, KIDS invited interested parties to complete an online survey on how they viewed play and leisure opportunities as accessed by disabled children and young people.

952 responses to the survey were recorded, of these 20 responders agreed to follow-up phone calls to answer further questions. In the interests of transparency, all of the responses have been made available for examination in a separate appendix (70+ pages) which will be available for download. This will enable other organisations to use the data we have collected to inform their research around this subject.

For the purpose of the survey, disabled children and young people fall in the age bracket from birth to 25 years old, this is an extremely broad age range, and as such we expected the answers to the questions to be complex and varied.

It was important to us to try and gauge what inclusive provision was available, and found that some responders who wanted to contribute felt that they could not because of the nature of their provision. As this note explains:

*“While we completely support the ideal of the young people we work with being included in mainstream or ‘inclusive’ community provision, our club was set up at the request of teenagers who were seeking a peer group, as they described it, ‘like us’ for leisure because even when they had been welcomed in mainstream provision they had found that the intrinsic, varied and subtle difficulties they can have with processing spoken language meant they didn’t feel fully comfortable at a level of making friends in a more lasting sense even if the activities were designed in such a way as to be accessible to all. As they don’t have more generalised ‘learning disabilities’ they are often very self-aware about not being able to ‘keep up’ socially with mainstream peers that they would like to identify with, and many who come to our club are experiencing social isolation in their mainstream secondary schools and want somewhere to ‘chill out’ where they can feel relaxed and good about themselves. It also means that they feel confident to take on leadership roles and for their disabilities to feel insignificant as once in the Project it is not at all focused on their difficulties.”*

At KIDS the emphasis is on choice, and the ability of disabled children to make the choice to use a group geared towards their specific requirements is to be supported and celebrated. It is not our intent to deny any disabled child or young person the choices they make and is right for them.

However, we also recognise that many are not presented with these choices or options, and it is our hope that exposing a lack of choice will motivate providers to properly consult with disabled children and young people when designing services.

*“Enabling all children to play, and to play together, is about a benefit to the whole community.*

*It is not about overcoming legal hurdles or making expensive provision for a small section of the community.*

*If any child is prevented from playing then it diminishes the play experience of all”*

*Can Play – Will Play: Disabled Children and Access to Outdoor Playgrounds, 2004<sup>12</sup>*

## Findings from the survey

### The responder’s profile

We wanted to reach a broad array of people who may have interest in either the provision of service to disabled children and young people, or play and leisure, or both. To this end we asked few establishing questions about the responders’ background

#### Q. What is your role (you may indicate more than one role)?

Parent of a disabled child	178
Manager of Department	143
Adviser / Development Officer	103
Face to Face Worker (Children)	196
Face to Face Worker (Families / Carers)	144
Senior Policy / Strategy Officer	22
Playworker / Play Ranger	106
Childminder	26
SENCO	56
Teacher	58
Trainer	39
Social Worker	38
Manager of Setting	130
Inclusion Officer	42
Bridging Role	14
Communications / Campaign Officer	9
Other	291

The responding group came from a diverse array of backgrounds, and many inhabit more than one role when examining the kind of work they do.

Although it is useful to note that the largest identified group worked directly with children, the second largest group identified themselves as parents of disabled children, however these roles are not mutually exclusive.

**Q. What kind of organisation do you work for?**

Public / Statutory	484 (53%)
Voluntary / Charity	250 (27%)
Social Enterprise / Community Interest	22 (2%)
Private	60 (6%)
Self Employed	40 (4%)
Not applicable	75 (8%)

Over half of responders worked within local authorities or services contracted to provide services to local authorities.

**Q. Are disabled children or young people included in any of your work/using any of your services?**

Yes	808 (85%)
No	92 (10%)
No response	52 (5%)

The vast majority of responders worked with disabled children and young people directly or worked in areas that impacted on the lives of disabled children.



**The state of play in your area:**

We wanted to gauge the level of knowledge about play services that were available to people locally and if they needed to, how they would go about making contact with them.

**Q. Do you know if there are any play services provided in your area?**

Yes	600 (63%)
No	152 (16%)
No response	200 (21%)

It was encouraging to note that two thirds of responders were aware of the play services available locally, although the exact nature of the service was not clear.

**Q. If 'Yes', do you know who to contact about play opportunities in your local area?**

Yes	477 (50%)
No	190 (20%)
No response	285 (30%)

Half of responders knew who to contact, and in some cases had a specific named person that they could go to for information. However, some services that had existed no longer operate.

*"The Play Rangers project has ended. There is no Play Team"*

**Q. Do you provide play services to children?**

Yes	428 (45%)
No	309 (32%)
No response	215 (23%)

A large group of responders provide some form of play or leisure service, but the nature of these would not necessarily be counted as 'play' in the playwork sense of the word.

Some settings were clearly youth clubs or childcare rather than play focused, and others were definitely in the realm of freely chosen play.

**Q. Are disabled children included in local universal play opportunities/services?**

Yes	546 (58%)
No	136 (14%)
No response	270 (28%)

Although over half of responders considered that disabled children were included in local opportunities, the reality is hard to interpret as many settings may describe themselves as open to disabled children and young people, without actually having any amongst their user group.

*“Little play opportunities left after cuts. No real inclusive services, service to support kids into mainstream has been cut. No real interest within the authority/disability service towards inclusion.”*

*“Not sure, I opt for a lot of the disabled services as often feel isolated when in mainstream, especially if my son causes a scene.”*

*“Mixed views - some groups and clubs have worked hard to make their services accessible through the support of Aiming High money however, even with the support from this it is still clear there are groups / clubs / activities which are not accessible and makes the inclusion of children / young people with disabilities non existent or the workers showing resistance which then makes integration difficult.*

*Whilst their service may say inclusion, this is not always the case.”*

*“It’s getting better but there are still many barriers. One of our most common is changing facilities and the fact that ‘disabled toilets’ do not cater for those with complex disabilities where you need a hoist and a changing table to meet their personal care needs.”*

*“Inclusion is a huge problem. Services are commissioned with the best intentions but not tested or challenged and the reality on the ground is that opportunities for disabled children and young people are very limited. Most providers think ‘accessible’ means having a wide door for wheelchair users.”*

*“Lip service is paid for including disabled children and there is a lot of talk that facilities should be provided but there is not much evidence that it is. Lack of funding is always given as a reason for not updating play spaces.”*

**Q. Would you say that local services and playspaces are accessible to disabled children?**

Yes	444 (47%)
No	241 (25%)
No response	267 (28%)

Almost half of responders considered that local services were accessible to disabled children and young people, however the tension between describing a service as inclusive or accessible and the experience of families with disabled children trying to access those services is an issue we have heard related many times over.

*“Yes and No! Some play spaces and schemes are very accessible to disabled children where others aren’t. It’s a case of supporting those that aren’t to consider how they can change.”*

*“There are some areas that contain equipment suitable for children with impairments however more often than not the entire space has not been designed to be as inclusive as possible, e.g - there’s no point in putting a wheelchair roundabout into an area if the surfacing surrounding it is loose fill.”*

*“When we develop/refurbish play areas & spaces, we take a whole site approach to the design, meaning that sites aim to provide access for all. Play Ranger Services provide activities that do not exclude anyone - in the nature of the sessions it is turn up and play, whoever you are.”*





**Q. Are there any plans to build new or update existing playspaces in your local area?**

Yes	97 (10%)
No	100 (11%)
Don't know	539 (56%)
No response	216 (23%)

Over half of responders did not know if there were any plans to develop playspaces locally.

Those that did were usually aware of a specific site that had been promoted as due to open, or were aware of plans that had been revised due to local funding issues.

*“The usual tiny play space built as part of 100 new houses.”*

*“We are currently reviewing the existing provision through annual inspections and play value reports which will contribute to our Play Strategy. From this we will produce a new refurbishment and renewal programme which identifies need and priority. Again this will then depend on limited funding available.”*

*“Government cuts mean there will be no further investment, and existing facilities which fall into disrepair will be removed.”*

*“New accessible outdoor gym equipment recently installed at Rutland Water through consultation with parents on how to spend Aiming High capital grant.”*

**Q. What is the one thing you would like for disabled children to improve their access to play opportunities in your area?**

This open-ended question gave responders the scope to outline their ideal provision for disabled children.

For some it was the ability to have a play-space dedicated for disabled children or those with a specific impairment, for others the dream of truly inclusive provision.

Some key issues came up repeatedly around:

- the easy provision of information, so that families do not have to work hard to find places
- access to Changing Places accessible toilets and changing facilities
- meaningful consultation with children and young people to create environments they can positively engage with
- provision for age groups often excluded (either very young disabled children or the older young disabled people)
- better understanding of the specific requirements of disabled children and young people
- better training for those providing services so that parents and carers feel confident leaving their child with them
- the ability for children to make friends and not be exposed to bullying
- ease of transport and access to play spaces, including public transport and adequate parking facilities



*“Parents always talk about better toilets and changing areas - would be nice to see these located specifically at more destination play spaces.”*

*“Knowledge of such schemes. I would like things to be made open rather than have to hunt things down like reluctant prey. Just tell us what’s available without us having to beg for help.”*

*“I would like there to be a greater awareness of disability within local communities and greater involvement for young people in decision making.”*

*“For providers at universal settings to be more disability aware.  
Meaning that disability is not simply children in wheelchairs or children with sensory impairments. Disability includes autism, ADHD, emotional and behavioural disabilities which don’t tend to be accommodated. More training making staff aware and also how to manage these children would go along way to address these issues - many of these children are relatively easy to manage given a little knowledge of the specifics of their additional needs.”*

*“Include disabled young people in an audit of current provision and they will tell you about the barriers. We work with groups of disabled young people who assess their communities to build capacity for greater inclusion including swimming pools, gyms, cinemas, museums, etc. They provide the information needed to increase inclusion because they are the experts.”*

*“Taster sessions in wild places to encourage families to come to nature reserves and other outdoor spaces to see how their families could access these areas and what they could get out of visiting.”*

*“Two things in fact:  
1. let’s stop talking about ‘disabled’ - kids are kids but all have different needs and opportunities. 2. improve access for all then everyone will be better off.”*



*“When creating new play areas the council must think about parking and transport. Not everyone lives close enough to walk or is able to, and some people rely on public transport. There are at least two play areas, one with equipment suitable for disabled or that are only accessible if you have a car. There are several play areas where the only available park is for local residents.”*

*“Access to a wider variety of play equipment in playspaces. Also being able to access play schemes without the need for parental support, eg qualified support workers who are trained to care for or support disabled children employed on play schemes.”*

*“I would like to see a much wider group of professionals offering access to services that are totally inclusive to those services already offered to other children that have no disability. It is very important that our children of today can mix with all children with a range of ability levels, even if this means some groups coming together in the future and joining services offered.”*

*“A buddy system, someone close to child’s age to help them, introduce them and have fun with them. Make them feel part of what is going on and to help other children feel at ease with them and answer any questions they may have.”*

*“Mainstream activities to be much more inclusive with well trained staff on hand at ALL times - not by appointment with disabled children having to book when they are attending so they can have extra staff in if needed.”*

*“People who have an understanding of the needs of the children and the families. What it is like to be rejected and the need to be accepted and understood.*

*To treat all children as children first and their special needs second.”*

*“A holistic design that considers all aspects of inclusion, access to the site, access on and off equipment, surfacing, rest areas, natural spaces, quiet/relaxation space, challenging equipment and so on.”*

Many parents who responded were very keen for specific pieces of play equipment such as wheelchair swings or roundabouts to be installed, however it important to note that fewer than 8% of disabled people are wheelchair users.

When thinking about disabled children and their use of play spaces there can be a tendency to focus on wheelchair users and overlook children with other impairments. It must be remembered that the majority of disabled children are not wheelchair users, it is essential to provide play spaces that are accessible and inclusive for all disabled children.

Sensory elements and the opportunity for different types of challenge are just as valuable to children, and each child will have their own preference for different activities.

Physical access is of course important, but disabled children require more than just being able to get into a space or setting. They should be able to play, make choices, feel welcomed and make friends with peers of their own choice.

Sometimes, when specialist pieces of equipment are installed, it may not always support inclusion, perhaps due to where it is located and/or its focus on solitary play. Public play spaces should promote social interaction between all children rather than segregate groups based on an assumption that disabled children will always need ‘special’ equipment. Instead it is much more important to have flexible equipment and spaces that can be used in different ways by different children.



It is also important that all children are able to indulge in risky (not dangerous) behaviour and are able to experience new challenges, whether physical or emotional.

By taking sensible and positive risks, disabled children and young people can learn about the world and their own abilities and skills.

The document *Managing Risk In Play Provision*<sup>13</sup> is very clear in stating all children need time and space to experience challenges and risks in play.

Disabled children often have fewer opportunities to take risks, both in the home environment where parents are naturally concerned for their children’s safety and within play and leisure settings where an overzealous approach to safety can prevent disabled children from taking part in activities that may be regarded as too risky.

However, the use of a risk/benefit analysis can ascertain the benefits as well as the risks to children of taking part in specific activities rather than a complete focus on negative aspects.

From understanding the value of risky play, practitioners can then make a judgement on when to step back and when a child may require support.

*“Children and young people of all ages - like adults - should be able to ‘go shopping’ for their play. They need variety and choice. The essence of play provision must be to give children the freedom to choose.”*

*Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Planning for Play 1968*<sup>14</sup>

**Further questions**

We contacted 20 randomly selected responders who agreed to a telephone interview, in order to tease out some additional information triggered by the survey.

**Q. Do you know if your local authority has a play service.**

Yes	9
No	3
Don't know	8

We wanted to confirm if people knew what we meant by a play service, and if one existed within their local authority.

**Q. How important do you feel that providing a play service is? Do you view it in a positive or negative light?**

Positive	20
Negative	0

Across the board, everyone agreed that the provision on play was important and needed supporting, although some questioned the reasons why their local play service had ceased.



*“Important, really crucial that there is something like that in place.”*

*“I think it is imperative that disabled children and young people have opportunities to play, explore, do normal things, mingle with other children.*

*Children learn a great deal through play e.g. learning about relationships is important for children with autism, crucial the children have a safe environment in which to learn these skills.”*

*“Very, but I don't necessarily think that the council should be the one providing play services so long as they commission professional/specialist organisations and have a good comprehensive coverage of the area.”*

*“I think a play service combined with other services is very important, but it has to be fit for purpose, of good quality and be available to all ages. I'm a big fan of free play and open access play because a lot of traditional play services can be a bit contrived.”*

*“Very, it's important for all young people to have the opportunity to play. We don't have a play team anymore but we have a number of officers that look after play.”*

*“It probably is important. Most parents don't allow their children to use it though, people probably didn't use it if we don't have one anymore.”*

**Q. Do you have a specific offer for disabled children to be included locally in universal or separate play opportunities/services?**

The offers for disabled children varied depending on the respondent, some were geared up solely for disabled children, others were inclusive, yet others offered a service to improve the inclusivity of other settings so they could accept disabled children.

Availability of inclusive provision was limited, often due to location or cost.



*"We wouldn't set that up ourselves but work constantly with local authorities to improve inclusivity."*

*"All our services are specifically aimed at children and young people with complex health and disability needs. There are some mixed peer groups but largely we are aimed at children who would not be able to access mainstream services for whatever reason."*

*"Yes, there is a great programme, but it's a big county so it's not available everywhere."*

*"The majority of schemes are self-referral. The youth scheme is universal, disabled and non-disabled can access. We also fund an organisation to help disabled children and young people to access these mainstream services."*

*"Everything we do is available to children and young people with disabilities as well as non-disabled people. We had a contract with Aiming High and before that the Community Partnership Fund amongst others to ensure we could deliver for disabled children and young people.*

*We have always taken disabled children right from the very start and in fact the majority of our service users do have a disability of one kind or another."*

*"There is Aiming Higher for disabled children which some families can access, but not all parents can afford the hourly rate. Not available to all families who need it."*

**Q. How do you view disabled children's access to play and leisure? In what way(s) has it improved or got worse since the Aiming High programme.**

The legacy of Aiming High continues in most places due to the requirement for local authorities to provide short breaks funding and the need to develop a local offer for disabled children, however since ring-fencing for this ceased, the availability is patchy and limited in some places.

*"I came into post in 2008 to develop the Compass Card programme and most of my work is funded by Aiming High, so from my perspective things have improved.*

*There is opportunity to play in quite a few offers, e.g. soft play centres, free swimming for families with a disabled child, multi sports session, quite a few significant things that we have facilitated.*

*"That's a difficult one because Aiming High improved a lot of services and brought lots of things into profile, but since it ended fairly abruptly a lot of things have died with it. It raised awareness perhaps, but the funding is gone now."*

*"It has improved tremendously, but still not quite there yet. We have seen massive increases in figures of disabled children and young people accessing short break services, it now has 1313 registered users compared to 300 before. We are having to get a bit more creative with funding though."*

*"I wouldn't know about the services themselves, but the linked work is worse."*

*"Initially it improved, but since personal budgets have come in there has been a shift to parents wanting specialist care instead of access to universal provision.*

*I think it can be isolating for these children, they should be out in the community with their peers. So initially it was better then became worse."*

**Q. How do you feel about open access play for disabled children, e.g. the ‘three frees’ (free of charge, where they are free to come and go and free to choose what they do whilst there)**

Free play and the ‘three frees’ is a vexed issue for many. Theoretically the concept is sound, but those who work in childcare environments can sometimes struggle with the reality, especially when it comes to supporting disabled children who are often limited in the freedom that is available to them.

*“I think the local authority is learning, there has been some progress. They have taken on board that there are certain things to consider in terms of access. Something they don’t consider is that some children want to ‘escape’ and open playgrounds/lack of fences lead to parents fearing their child getting hurt. But the local authority is getting better, opening up the debate.”*

*“I was one of the architects of it! I really like it and think it’s very important. Interestingly in talking to groups of young people when I was involved in open access play facilities, in the consultations it was always what the children wanted – open access, not to be separated, accessible to all.”*

*“I don’t think staff in mainstream settings necessarily have the skills and experience to fully support the disabled children in those settings. As such disabled children may act out, become disruptive and not have a very positive experience.*

*With open access for disabled children and young people there has to be a carefully approached plan to ensure the child is able to continue attending and get the most from it.”*

*“I agree with it, they should be allowed to play freely like other kids, but it’s a difficult question because really it depends on the child’s abilities, whether the play area is accessible to them to begin with. How can they be free to come and go when they can’t even get there or play without help?”*

*“Disabled children and young people should definitely have the opportunity to be more integrated but there is danger that the reality will be that the necessary adaptations won’t be made and they may get left out.*

*I think it would be good to have as an option, but there is a danger of it being presented as the only philosophically good solution and the authorities will hide behind the philosophy of open access in order to put everyone together and save money. What it needs is a good watchdog made up of young people and those who work with them to keep an eye on those services, make sure they’re accessible.”*

*“It can work, but a lot of families need a lot of hand holding. Some concern that staff won’t be properly trained.”*

*“Absolutely, disabled children want to take risks as well, have a bit of fun. As a society we have become very risk averse, people are afraid of disabled children especially becoming hurt, and of being sued as a result. It has become more about corporate responsibility than whether it’s good and healthy for the child to have access to these things.”*



**Q. Do you think any plans to build new or update existing playspaces in your local area should include designing them to provide more play opportunities for disabled children?**

The overwhelming response was that including disabled children and young people in the design process helped deliver playspaces that were accessible. The problem was that very few new sites are being developed.

*“They should, yes. The local authority has made a big effort to refurbish play facilities. Two years ago seven central parks were spruced up and there was some consideration for disabled children. The Level is a big integrated playground about to open, strong commitment on the planning for disabled access, they are talking about it being very accessible. I know families who have had a sneak preview and they like it, although it having no boundaries is a concern to some parents. It’s in a busy part of the city and people feel strongly about it, it is a significant space, has helped change people’s perception of the area for the better.”*

*“Yes, disabled children and young people should definitely be included in the design. There is lots of regeneration going on in the area, but I’m not sure yet whether children’s spaces will be part of that plan. Parks and playspaces seem to be low in the pecking order. Local authorities are more into creating affordable housing but they don’t think that those children are going to need space and need to be able to play somewhere.”*

*“Absolutely, one good thing we do locally is allow the young people to do the auditing. They were given cameras to do spot checks on local services. Their opinions should feed into the design of future playspaces and they should be as involved as possible.”*

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**Q. Where do you think play is now compared to 2010, do you think it has got worse or better?**

It was here that location came to the fore. Some had very good experiences of play where the playbuilder and pathfinder money had been spent before the national project came to a premature end, these areas had generally well-regarded provision of good quality (although not necessarily accessible to all). Other areas had clearly missed out and were suffering as a result.

*“I can only talk about this area really, and for us it feels like it has got better.”*

*“Indescribably worse, at least locally.”*

*“With the budget cuts at present and those that might occur in the future, there is a fear that play is being de-prioritised. This is reflected in cuts to the youth service, we don’t have the funds to maintain our interaction with families and provide transport etc as we used to. There was some improvement but things have stagnated.”*

*“Difficult to say, but generally I don’t think it’s very easy for people to access, there isn’t a lot of information and not a lot to choose from.”*

*“If you can afford to access it, it’s got better, but free things have got worse. Lots of free adventure playgrounds and adventure playdays have closed or ended, councils have cut funds.”*

*“Within the London region it has been a bit patchy, but in our borough generally it is better. The only problem is that we were encouraged to apply for three year funding for our work but got turned down because specialist centres are not the priority. Because their vision is inclusion, there is a fear some groups of children and young people will not be properly represented. A danger of becoming dogmatic in the ‘right’ way of doing things.”*

## Conclusion

The purpose of the survey was to see if the level of play provision for disabled children has improved, stayed the same, or declined since March 2011.

KIDS has discovered that *in general*, responders feel that opportunities for play are worse now, than they were in 2011, even though some identified improvements in their local area.

Within this survey a number of different areas of concern have been identified. These deserve to be highlighted and should be acted upon to improve provision. These improvements could make the difference between play opportunities being utilised or not by all members of the communities they are intended to serve.

The statistical information derived from the survey indicates that a majority of respondents considered that services in their area offered accessible provision. However the qualitative information revealed that even though a service may consider itself to be open and accessible to disabled children and young people, barriers were still in place which prevented those groups from gaining access.

Most positive was the overwhelming response to this survey, demonstrating an interest and commitment from responders that play services should be provided for disabled children and young people.

A dominant theme expressed in the survey was a very clear commitment that inclusive provision should be available for disabled children and young people amongst the other choices being made available to them.



However, the reality of providing an inclusive, welcoming service was not always demonstrated by those who thought they were providing this. In some cases this was because they did not know how to reach disabled children and young people so they could prove they were inclusive.

Provision of play opportunities for disabled children is very varied across the country, as is the perception of its provision.

Definitions of play and inclusion are varied as has been evident in the responses to the survey and could be one of the barriers to reporting on this kind of provision.

Disabled children and young people's access to play is clearly limited by availability, accessibility, cost, location and the attitudes of staff and other children who use the service.

One clear message that came across from parents who responded is that they do not have the confidence that their child will be properly understood and supported when accessing mainstream services. This drives them towards the familiarity of specialist provision.

The availability of well trained staff in properly resourced settings was identified as the key to good quality provision.



**Key areas for improvement were clearly and repeatedly identified throughout the survey:**

**Information:** It is essential to provide clear information, so that families do not have to work hard to find places, or struggle to understand what is available and when. Families Information Services should be able to provide this information.

**Attitude and Understanding:** Staff at all levels should be welcoming towards all and have policies in place to encourage children to make friends and not be exposed to bullying.

**Competence and Confidence:** Better training for those providing services so that parents and carers feel confident leaving their child with them, including a better understanding of the specific requirements of each disabled child that accesses their provision.

**Accessibility and Consideration:** Access is more than a ramp and a wide entrance, think holistically about your provision and how the environment can be adapted for different needs. Also consider the provision of a Changing Spaces toilet accessible to all.

**Location and Transport:** Provision of accessible public transport to destination sites and plentiful parking are important to families of disabled children and young people.

**Range and Choice:** Consider provision for age groups often excluded (either very young disabled children or the older young disabled people). Both adventurous and calming activities available in a variety of supported environments, outside and indoors.

**Consultation and Participation:** Meaningful consultation with children and young people in order to create environments they can positively engage with and have the power to audit and change if they do not come up to standard.

## Summary

KIDS was encouraged by the number of people who responded to this survey, which demonstrated a clear commitment to play and the provision of play opportunities, including inclusive provision for disabled children and young people.

The responders to the survey represented a wide range of organisations, over half came from the public sector, a quarter from the voluntary/charity sector, with some professionals also identifying themselves as being parents of disabled children.

63% of responders identified an awareness of what play services were available, and 50% knew who to contact locally.

Although 45% of responders said they provided play or leisure services to children, some of these were primarily childcare or respite services, which may or may not have been offering free / unstructured play opportunities.

The statistical information gathered from the survey needs to be viewed with caution if treated in isolation as it could be misleading, it is essential to also consider the qualitative comments responders recorded as these provide a more accurate picture of the types of service being described.

The percentages of responders saying that disabled children were included into universal services (58%) and that they were accessible (47%) were not backed up by the statements made describing those services. In many cases these gave a less positive opinion of the reality for disabled children, suggesting the good intentions and the actual delivery of inclusive / accessible services did not correlate.

*“Access is getting in,  
Inclusion is wanting to stay.”*

*KIDS conference attendee, 2008*

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## Useful Resources

KIDS hosts free briefings and resources on including disabled children and young people in play and leisure:

<http://www.kids.org.uk/briefings>

<http://www.kids.org.uk/resources>

You can also purchase books on inclusion:

<http://www.kids.org.uk/books>

Changing Places:

<http://www.changing-places.org/>

National Association of Family Information Services:

<http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/nafis>

Every Disabled Child Matters:

<http://www.edcm.org.uk/>

Council for Disabled Children:

<http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/>

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