

I have a right to play out too!

Celebrating outdoor play for disabled children

PIP briefing paper



young people accessing outdoor play drawn from the PIP seminars and National Inclusive Play Network members. It is intended to complement the KIDS briefing on play and health, and will be particularly useful for play rangers and play providers who want to promote more outdoor play opportunities for disabled children, as well as local authority play pathfinders and playbuilders who are currently in the process of developing new playgrounds or refurbishing existing outdoor play spaces with government funding from the National Play Strategy.

Introduction

This **Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP)** briefing celebrates outdoor play for disabled children – the theme of the PIP regional seminars held in Spring/Summer 2009. It is being published alongside a more in-depth KIDS briefing looking at the wider issues around play and health. The latter examines the barriers disabled children and young people face in accessing play and leisure opportunities, the national policy context, the detrimental effects of play deprivation and the health benefits of play, sport and physical activity (1).

This briefing focuses on practical examples and case studies of disabled children and

The Play Strategy has a focus on both promoting outdoor play (with funding specifically earmarked towards the building of 30 new adventure playgrounds), and on ensuring that all play areas are accessible and welcome disabled children. Equally, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) reinforces the importance of outdoor play stating that: 'it has a positive impact on children's sense of well-being and helps all aspects of children's development'. The government is also trying to get children more active through its Outdoor Play Campaign (conceived by the Department for Children, Schools and Families – DCSF) (2) and Play4Life, part of the Department of Health's Change4Life Campaign (3).

All children need to play out

Outdoor play is essential to the healthy physical, social and emotional development of all children. But according to a 2009 Natural England survey, children spend far less time playing in natural places than they did in previous generations (4). The survey also found that 81 per cent of children wanted more freedom to play outdoors – echoing research carried out for Playday in 2006 (5). Both surveys revealed that although the majority of parents would like their children to be able to play out unsupervised, fears of strangers and road safety prevent them from giving much freedom to their children.

Disabled children are denied this freedom even more than their non-disabled peers due to a range of social and environmental barriers. A recent consultation with over 4000 children and young people carried out by Dudley play pathfinder, revealed that disabled children are disproportionately susceptible to bullying and therefore least likely to use outdoor play spaces. In response to these findings the Midlands Architecture Centre (MADE) – in partnership with Dudley play pathfinder – drew up a design manifesto with recommendations to encourage disabled children to enjoy outdoor play spaces. The **Play Together** manifesto was endorsed by KIDS and Play England (6).

Allowing children to play freely outdoors and have access to natural environments is particularly important for disabled children. Children with more complex impairments will benefit greatly from exploring sights, smells, textures and sounds found in natural environments. Sensory exploration of outdoor spaces will not only enhance children's appreciation and awareness of nature – it will contribute to their overall health, happiness and well being. This in turn is conducive to improved levels of confidence and self esteem.

The role of natural play in improving the well being of all children was highlighted at the London seminar in a presentation by Ute Navidi from London Play. She talked about London Play's mobile natural playscheme which aims to bring natural play opportunities to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and highlighted a piece of research which shows that children with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) would benefit from more time in contact with nature.

KIDS has been working closely with organisations such as London Play and Play England (as well as with local authorities) to raise awareness of inclusive design and the benefits of outdoor play for disabled children. The inclusion of disabled children and young people crosses a wide range of sector and policy areas so working in partnership is key to ensuring that disabled children can access rich and stimulating outdoor play opportunities wherever children play – in natural play spaces, parks and playgrounds and within all early years and school settings.

Key themes and recommendations

All of the PIP seminars stressed the importance of providing an inclusive play space – the vital ingredients being access plus appropriate support to enable disabled children to play out. The key themes that were discussed at the seminars are summarised briefly below – illustrated by case studies.



Wildplay! - Herefordshire Nature Trust

Publicity and outreach

Assess who is using your service and who is not. What are the barriers? Make sure you publicise your project widely to disabled children and their families in your community via Family Information Services, schools, children's centres, extended schools, disability groups, GP surgeries and appropriate local websites. Ensure that all information is, or can be provided, in accessible formats and appropriate community languages. If the service you are offering is inclusive – make sure you shout about it!

Balloon Woods Adventure Playground

Balloon Woods Adventure playground in Nottingham welcomes disabled children and this is highlighted on its publicity material with the following statement: 'We welcome all disabled and non-disabled children and we can make adjustments or provide additional support to include you or your child.'



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Inclusive policies and practice

Inclusion is something that has to be actively promoted so make sure you have a vision of what you want to do, policies and procedures in place and a process of monitoring and evaluating how it is going. In the following case study we can see how ALL the policy objectives are being met as the child is enabled to control his own play and test boundaries, interact socially with others and gain in confidence, independence and self esteem.

Northampton Borough Council Play Development Team – Play Rangers

The policy

We provide a free, open access play provision for children between the ages of 4-16 years. Our objectives, based on the Northampton Play Strategy 2008-2011 are:

- The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their own play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain.
- The provision recognises the child's needs to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.
- The provision manages the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe.
- The provision fosters independence and self esteem.
- The provision fosters children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.
- The provision fosters the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity, and capacity to learn.

The practice

When Dan turned up at the first play session, his mum stated that he would not join in but preferred to play alone or with his little brother. Dan is 9 years old and has a complex medical background. He is on the autistic spectrum and has ADHD.

We soon found his activity of choice was jewellery making which he proceeded to do for the first four sessions, but over the next couple of sessions he became increasingly talkative and eventually started to join in with the other children's games. By the end of the play ranger sessions, not only was Dan playing football, which his mum said he found particularly difficult, but he was playing with 10 or more other children.

It was clear that Dan had gained great enjoyment from the sessions and grew in confidence day by day. "From the shy boy that turned up on that first session, to the confident and happy child who swiftly presented us with a parting box of chocolates and cards at the last session, Dan had been on a journey, and took us with him. The look on Dan's face and his mums' expression when she arrived to collect him and saw him playing football said it all." (**Jemma Locke, Play Ranger**)



Wildplay! - Herefordshire Nature Trust

The play environment

Both KIDS and Play England have a number of useful resources on inclusive design and natural play respectively (see back page & ref 7). However, the most important point is to try and provide as much variety as possible – not only in terms of access to outdoor space and natural/sensory play, but also in terms of access to risky and challenging play environments, equipment and activities. Again, this is particularly important for disabled children as they are so frequently overprotected and denied access to challenging and risky play.

Wildplay! Nature Play Rangers has been running for 7 years and is based at Herefordshire Nature Trust.

We provide free, outreach play activities for children in local green spaces, Our policy states that 'activities should be accessible to children and families from all sectors of the local community regardless of gender, race, colour, disability, financial or ethnic background... each child should feel confident that the adults who work and play with them value individuality and diversity'. A number of children with ADHD and children on the autistic spectrum have accessed Wildplay's activities.

Because we are based at the Nature Trust we encourage children to think about their environment via play activities. This might include den building, bug hunting, river dipping, cooking on a campfire, exploring with maps or trails, identifying flowers/plants/trees or birds via fun, simple and age appropriate games. All our play activities take place outdoors. If it's raining we build tents and dens out of tarps, rope and hazel rods. The idea behind the project is to help children to reconnect with nature and to try and inspire them to continue playing outside.

Nature Play Rangers encourages children into more wild spaces near their homes and offers challenging risky play activities like setting up rope swings, using appropriate tools and building dens in woodland.

Often the children we play with bring us pictures they have drawn at home to show what they would like to do next. A lot of children tell us that 'Wildplay is Wicked!' but mostly they just want to know when we will be coming back next and are always glad to see us when we return.

Most of all I think the children appreciate being part of a group where the adults allow them to play in the way they choose, and talk to them about the things they are interested in. Getting to know the kids for who they are and them taking an interest in you - that's the real satisfaction of our job, building good strong relationships through play.

Training & workforce development

Good quality playwork practice is inclusive practice. So it is important that staff are proactive in including disabled children. Your staff are your most important resource in facilitating inclusion so it is vital that they feel valued and have access to appropriate training.

KIDS offers a range of inclusive play training courses for workers from entry level volunteers and workers to managers of settings, and has a new course specifically aimed at playworkers and play rangers: **Let's All Play Outdoors!** to be put forward for endorsement at Level 2. The case study below demonstrates the importance of training and highlights the use of the 'bridging role' - also one of the key elements identified in **KIDS' Strategies for Inclusion** briefing paper (www.kids.org.uk/publications).



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Hackney Play Association - Facilitating Inclusive Play Project (FIP)

The FIP project aims to include disabled children and young people, aged 5 to 13 years, into mainstream play provision at out of school play settings and sites across Hackney. The project provides fully trained and experienced inclusive playworkers, who will enable disabled children to access local play opportunities during term-time. The FIP project takes a child centred approach, and aims to have the flexibility to respond to the individual play needs of children and their families.

The FIP team will work to support staff on playgrounds to extend inclusive play opportunities to all children who are local to their sites. They are adamant about tackling the barriers within settings rather than focusing upon supporting individual children. The FIP team identify specific barriers within play services and then support the setting to remove/overcome these and are thus able to withdraw their service slowly over time.

Typically, they provide on site training and support for the staff team as well as advice and assistance regarding organisational policies and procedures to management committees, play professionals and parents.

A welcoming attitude

Research carried out by the Playwork Inclusion Project has demonstrated that attitudes are the biggest barrier to inclusion. However, with the right training, support, environment and attitude, inclusion is possible and can result in a positive experience for everyone. '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' (8).

Evergreen Adventure Playground

Evergreen Adventure Playground in East London is a setting that was predominantly accessed by non-disabled children in the local area. Gradually more and more disabled children began accessing the service due to the fantastic play experiences, the welcoming attitude and the support made available to include all children.

They are doing nothing at Evergreen that couldn't be reproduced elsewhere. Evergreen doesn't have a large amount of funding or state of the art accessible equipment, but this is more than compensated for by having staff with such positive 'can do' attitudes. This is what makes Evergreen so inspiring. The playworkers at Evergreen take responsibility for supporting and playing with all children who access the play area. Those children who require a higher level of supervision (perhaps only at specific times) will have a keyworker to provide additional support.

The playground has a wide range of play opportunities and is constantly evolving depending on what the children want to do

with 'their' space. The outdoor area contains large wooden climbing structures, swings, a garden with a pond, a vegetable patch and lots of overgrown natural play areas in which children have been making dens.



Evergreen Adventure Playground

Consultation and communication

It is vital that you consult with disabled children and their parents to find out about what support they need in order to participate and what their preferences are. The focus should always be on children's abilities and not their impairments. If children cannot communicate verbally, there are many other means of communicating. For further information on consulting with disabled children about play refer to the KIDS briefing paper: **Our play – our choice** (www.kids.org.uk/publications).

Lichfield District Council – Play Ranger Sessions

This setting is always outdoors, open access and inclusive. We travel to various sites, usually parks, sometimes containing Multi Use Games Areas (MUGAs) taking play and sports equipment with us. We also carry den-making gear and are fully equipped for arts & crafts and cooking outdoors.

One day a mother dropped off about 4 children including her 10 yr old son who uses a wheelchair. She told me that he could run about but as he had cerebral palsy he would sometimes get very tired and need his wheelchair. This child was unusually positive and energetic! We arrived at our site, near a MUGA and a den-making area. We placed his chair within the MUGA in the corner so he could reach it if he needed to use it, but in the end he wanted nothing more than to play football. He played an enthusiastic game of football with his friends and thoroughly enjoyed being 'just one of the gang'.

Working with parents

Parental perceptions about the safety of allowing their children to play out and take risks is a big barrier. Therefore, working with parents to address their fears and concerns is a key issue. Where disabled children are concerned there is a natural tendency for parents to want to protect their children from both physical risk and negative attitudes. The case study below demonstrates how one parent of a disabled child forced herself to 'step back' (with a little help from a friend) with immediate benefits and positive results.

Ferndean Park (Gateshead) developed with playbuilder funding

As a qualified Nursery Nurse who has worked in numerous play settings and now as a mother of three young children, one of whom has mobility difficulties; I have always been willing to provide challenging play opportunities for any child in my care. So when I heard about the new play area in Ferndean Park, I was really looking forward to taking my children to access the varied play experiences this park promised to offer.

When we arrived my twin two year olds were beside themselves with excitement when they caught sight of the sand and water play and immediately broke free from my grasp to go and explore this new and exciting place.

However, I'm sure if the other people accessing the park at the time listened carefully enough they would have been able to hear my heart beating over the noise of my children's screams of delight as I caught sight of the steps that were positioned in the middle of the play area. My initial reaction was to grab hold of my son (who has mobility problems), and help him to access the water play that ran down the middle.

It was only when a very wise friend saw my reaction and encouraged me to step back and let my son tackle this new challenge for himself, that I was able to calm myself. I watched as Harry discovered how to get up and down the steps safely; whilst at the same time managing to work the water pump at the top of the steps and follow the water running down into the table at the bottom. The sand area and the climbing frame were equally successful; the children played for hours digging, climbing and burying toys.

The park was a huge success for all of us. We had a fantastic day out and I saw new skills being learnt and old ones reinforced by the variety of play opportunities there. A week later my children are still talking about the park and asking when they can return, and I am pleased to say the whole experience was a positive one with the only casualty being my embarrassment at the lack of faith in my son's ability to tackle new physical challenges!

(Parent of a disabled child)

KIDS – working with disabled children and young people

KIDS is a national charity working towards a vision in which all disabled children and young people realise their aspirations, and their right to an inclusive community which supports them and their families. KIDS provides a wide range of services and promotes inclusive play and leisure nationally across the children and young people's sectors through workforce development and support. The **Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP)** is funded by a 3 year strategic grant from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and is run by KIDS National Development Department (NDD). Please visit our website or contact KIDS NDD for further information about inclusive play training, publications and briefings.

KIDS publications

- **Inclusion by Design - a guide to creating accessible play and childcare environments** (Clare Goodridge 2008)
- **Pick & Mix - a selection of inclusive games and activities** (Di Murray - 2nd Edition 2006)

KIDS briefings

All KIDS briefings can be downloaded from: www.kids.org.uk/publications

Thanks to children, families and staff at the following settings for the case studies and photographs in this briefing paper. Some children's names have been changed.

- Northampton Borough Council Play Development Team
- Wildplay, Herefordshire Nature Trust
- Hackney Play Association, London
- Evergreen Adventure Playground, London
- Lichfield District Council
- Ferndean Park, Gateshead

All photographs, unless otherwise stated, show activities in KIDS playgrounds.

References and resources

1. Promoting play and physical activity for disabled children

Available to download from the KIDS website: www.kids.org.uk/publications

2. Outdoor Play Campaign (DCSF)

For further details go to: www.dcsf.gov.uk/campaigns/outdoor_play/

3. Change4Life (Dept. of Health)

Change4Life also incorporates sub-categories such as Play4Life. Go to: www.nhs.uk/Change4Life

4. Childhood and nature: a survey on changing relationships with nature across generations (2009)

See also: A sense of freedom – the experiences of disabled people in the natural environment (Natural England). Go to: www.naturalengland.org.uk

5. Play, naturally – a review of children's natural play

(Stuart Lester and Martin Maudsley, Playwork Partnerships 2006) Go to: www.playday.org.uk

6. Play Together – A Design Manifesto (2009)

Designing play spaces to give all children the confidence to play outside. Go to: www.made.org.uk

7. Nature play: Maintenance guide (Play England)

Nature play can be downloaded from: www.playengland.org.uk

8. Can Play - Will Play: Disabled Children and Access to Outdoor Playgrounds (Alison John and Rob Wheway, 2004)

Available to download from: www.fieldsintrust.org/downloads/can_play_will_play.pdf

If you would like a copy of this briefing in large print or an alternative format, please contact the PIP Team.



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