



PLAY AREAS

A quality play area is more than just a collection of play equipment. It is a place for play and learning—a place where children develop essential physical, social and cognitive skills, where different generations share common experiences, and where community members gather and build relationships.

Play areas should support a range of both mental and physical challenges. Well-designed play areas provide access for a person to physically arrive at a play element, interact socially and choose whether to do an activity on or at the play element.

Play areas are heavily regulated by safety and accessibility codes. The guidelines described here emphasize inclusive planning and design principles based on the assumption that compliance with all applicable codes and regulations will be achieved.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public park design must consider the needs of children with and without disabilities, adults with disabilities and the elderly. Site analysis and planning should include surveys to identify any physical and perceptual barriers to accessibility.

- Community workshops that bring together a park's various constituent groups can help assess needs and involve people in the design process. First, ask the group to define the term "people with special needs" so that everyone understands the variety of abilities and disabilities, and the level to which people's needs are being met.
- Second, ask the group to walk the park site, using maps to identify opportunities and constraints for accessibility. Individuals should observe and note physical accessibility (i.e., slope, path width, drop-off area, proximity to restrooms, access to equipment, activity and natural areas,

etc.), program accessibility (for use by people with a range of abilities) and communication accessibility (i.e., maps and signs, telecommunication devices for the hearing impaired and wayfinding).

Discussion at community meetings may also lead to the identification of place-based themes when held in the early stages of the planning and design process. Designers should ask about the historical, cultural and natural elements that are meaningful to people and that invoke pride of place. The theme can be developed using these aspects of a community, helping to make the park distinctive and, at the same time, providing an ongoing education about the place in which people live. For example, at Ibach Park in Tualatin, Oregon, the play environment draws on the natural and cultural history of the area by including a Mastodon rib cage climber, a climbing meteor, Native American Indian petroglyphs carved into the sand play area, and a stylized river that runs

through the park—historical elements that have been adapted and interpreted for this contemporary setting.

CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT

A children's design workshop is an excellent way to gather information directly from one of the primary users of the park, especially regarding the imaginative play opportunities that provide the context for manufactured play equipment. Children's ideas can be drawn out creatively by asking kids to build models or draw pictures of an ideal park (Figure 25), selecting their favorite idea using photos of different environments or telling a story to a "park reporter."

To recruit children who use or may use the park, post flyers or set up a booth at



Figure 25. Children can construct simple models using preconstructed elements to convey their ideas for a park's design.

the park itself, make announcements at nearby schools or local youth groups, and authorize youth to invite or speak to their friends. If an event is not possible, questionnaires or surveys can be a good, quick way to get input on what children would like or dislike in a park.

SOCIAL ACCESSIBILITY

Play areas must make the social experience accessible to all. Children, including those with disabilities, can interact in many ways. Placing less challenging activities next to those that are more physically challenging encourages interaction across all ability levels. Providing access to a featured play structure by using synthetic or rubberized safety surfacing allows a wheelchair to roll right up to, through and underneath the structure so that a child can be in the center of action.

ACCESSIBLE ROUTES

An accessible route should connect every activity and accessible play component in the play area. The route provides children with an opportunity and allows choice and integration with others. It can be designed to be a play

experience in itself, such as a pathway that supports wheeled toys, running games and exploration.

SETTINGS

Provide a variety of settings and diverse play opportunities within the settings. Inclusive design addresses a variety of interests, senses and skills. Settings should incorporate a diversity of elements so children have choices. Provide a range of settings that address functional needs as well as play opportunities as described throughout this section.

ENTRANCES

Entrances help orient and inform play area users, introducing them to the site. Entrances are transition zones, places for congregating and areas for posting local information.

The entrance should convey the message: "All users are welcome."

PATHWAYS

Pathways can be designed to create different play behaviors and experiences. Consider pathways as play elements, supporting wheeled toy

activity and running games, as well as opportunities for exploration. Pathway patterns set the tone: they can be wide with small branches, long and straight, or circuitous and meandering. They can wind through trees or lead directly to a primary destination. A pathway can be enhanced for play if it has unique items embedded into it such as colorful mosaic tiles, stamped animal tracks, leaf impressions, letters or numbers. Access throughout the area must be provided for all children without creating hazards (for example, don't design access ramps that double as skateboard ramps). Synthetic surfacing will allow wheelchair access alongside, under and through equipment and different areas.

FENCES AND ENCLOSURES

Boundaries are not only safety devices; they differentiate the children's play area from other areas within a park or urban area. They help children orient themselves to the places designed for them. Fences and enclosures can be used to define spaces, protect planted areas or fragile environments and define pathways. Fences and enclosures can also enhance social settings (Figure 26): a

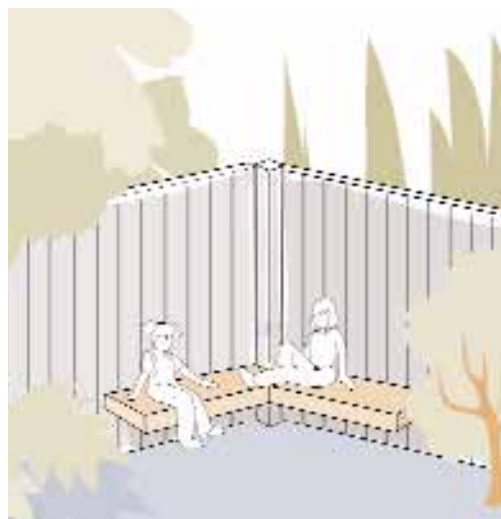


Figure 26. Fences can define areas for social interaction.

nook in a fence creates a small gathering space; a hole in a fence creates a passageway.

SIGNAGE

A combination of text, color, form, pictures, graphics and tactile qualities make signs—and the park—more accessible (Figure 27). Graphics and tactile information, such as Braille, should be placed at a child's level. For young children, tilted signs should be approximately 24–30" above the ground, or if vertical, about 36–42" high. Consider anthropometric data for the primary user. For example, average eye level for a stand-



Figure 27. Informational and identification signs should be placed at a child's level.

ing six year old in the U.S. is about 41", and about 38" for a five year old in a wheelchair.

PLAY EQUIPMENT

Play equipment offers unique experiences such as swinging and sliding, and activities that require large-muscle coordination. Equipment also supports nonphysical aspects of child development. It allows children to experience height and can serve as wayfinding and landmarks for orientation. Equipment also becomes a gathering place for social interaction—a place to display skills, hide, chase and practice sharing. The small, semi-private places on or under equipment and themed elements such as steering wheels, windows and counter tops encourage a quieter social and dramatic play. Allowing children

with disabilities to get into the middle of the action is as important as being able to reach the highest point.

MULTIPURPOSE GAME AREAS

Flat open spaces, either a hard court or soft groundcover such as turf, are valuable spaces for large group games, ball games and team sports. Hard surfaces also accommodate wheelchair access very well.

LAND FORMS AND TOPOGRAPHY

Topographic variety stimulates imaginative and creative play. Children use hills to create hide and seek games, develop orientation skills, roll, climb and jump. High points or summits should be made accessible to wheelchairs and provide support to children with other disabilities.

TREES AND VEGETATION

Vegetation and trees provide sensory stimulation that cannot be replicated by manufactured materials. Children use natural materials as backdrops and props in fantasy play (for example, trees become a magic forest and sticks become horses), and in cognitive activities (for example, counting and comparing, etc.). If trees and vegetation are used as a specific play feature, provide a means of access to and around the natural elements (Figure 28). Tree grates and other site furniture can support and enhance use by persons in wheelchairs and those using other mobility devices.

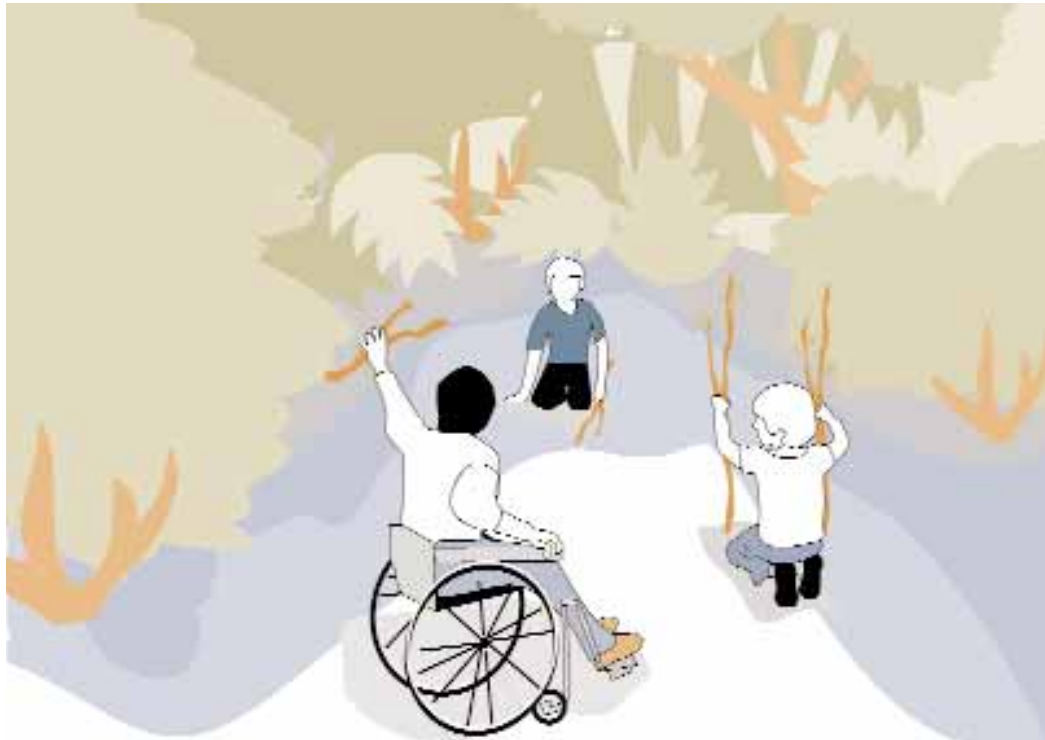


Figure 28. A small grove of trees becomes a “forest” for children’s play.

GARDENS

Gardens enhance the multi-sensory experience in a play area through the visual, scented, sound, taste and tactile qualities of the plantings. Gardens should be made accessible by providing at least one garden bed in an area that is raised above the ground surface with adequate circulation around it. This not only makes it so that persons in wheelchairs can garden, it’s good for teachers and adults who have trouble bending over and reaching down.

ANIMAL HABITATS

Children develop responsibility by caring for other living things. Often, children in urban areas haven't had much contact with natural animal habitats. Plantings, feeders and birdhouses can attract insect and bird life. Contact with or observation of wildlife and domestic animals produces a therapeutic effect and offers learning opportunities. Animal habitats should offer adequate protection for the animals and all users.

WATER PLAY

Water is a universal play material because it can be manipulated in so many ways. Children can splash and pour it, float objects in it, and use it to mold dirt or sand. At least a portion of water play areas must be wheelchair

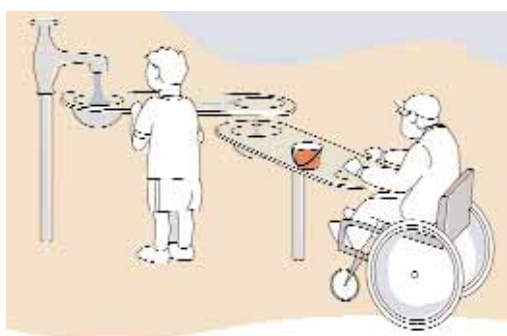


Figure 29. Water tables provide access for children using wheelchairs; there are many design alternatives.

accessible. Water sources and courses can be raised to allow children to roll up to and access the water (Figure 29).

SAND PLAY

Children will play in dirt wherever they can find it; a sandbox, essentially a structural version of plain old dirt, works best if it retains some natural dirt

play qualities including small rocks and twigs. Sand play areas can be made accessible through raised areas so that wheelchairs can roll up to the sand and children can place their hands in the sand's surface (Figure 30). If children are allowed to get into the sand with their whole bodies in a digging area, a

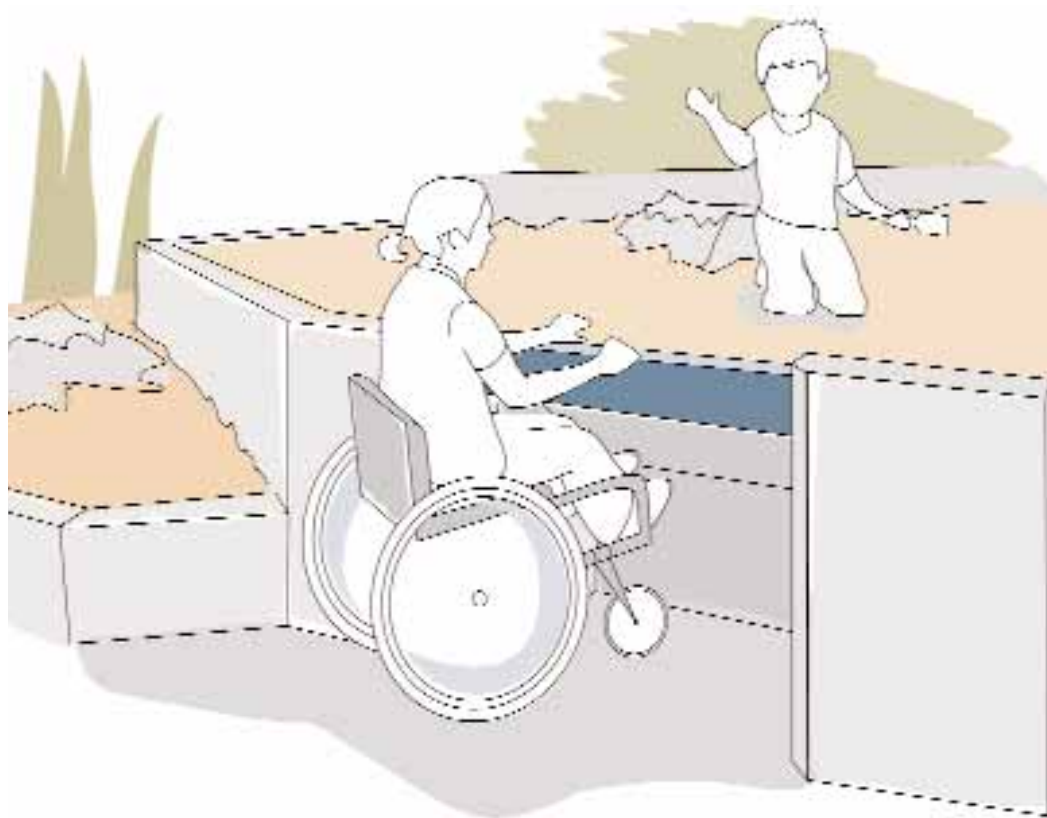


Figure 30. Elevated sand areas allow children in wheelchairs to play. Natural elements such as logs and boulders add interest and aid in transfer into sand play area.