

Over one in ten children, and even more adults, live with a disability. Is your playspace welcoming to people with special needs? Your current playspace might never be used by children and adults with disabilities, but perhaps it's because they can't access the playspace and/or structures. Your new or renovated playspace can make everyone feel welcome with some simple considerations.



Often, we think of wheelchairs when we hear the word special needs, but people have a wide variety of special needs that strangers and acquaintances might not be able to see. For example, people living with illnesses often need special medical accommodations. People with cognitive impairments or mental health diagnoses from injuries or genetic disorders might need extra help navigating daily tasks. Some people with visual disabilities may read signs in Braille.

In reality we're simply not able to easily know the special needs of the majority of the individuals within our community. The best way to plan an inclusive playspace for everyone is to make your space as accessible as possible, using the principles of universal design.

If your playspace is a community space, consider designing it so the whole community can use it.

Auditory Disabilities



Children and adults with auditory disabilities will find your playspace accessible, safe, and enjoyable when you keep a few considerations in mind.

The degree of hearing loss varies greatly from person to person.

Approximately 1 to 3 children in 1000 are born with hearing loss, but many children also experience trouble hearing from colds and ear infections.

Occasionally, plastic slides and equipment cause static interference for children with cochlear implants. Static isn't harmful but can give a shock to the child or make the implant temporarily ineffective. An audiologist can reboot the hearing device. Researchers are trying to develop plastic equipment for playspaces that won't interfere with cochlear implants.

For children with mild to severe hearing impairments, be sure to include lots of visual and tactile elements at your playspace:

- Bright, but not overstimulating, colors throughout

- Use of colors and symbols to signify meaning and place
- Frequent, large signs using both words and pictures
- Plenty of tactile toys like manipulatives and fingerpaints
- Plenty of room between equipment

Autism Spectrum Disorders



Children with various autism spectrum and other sensory integration disorders might struggle with the increased levels of sensory stimulation at a playspace. Their nervous systems (senses) over-respond and they might behave disruptively or in ways that seem strange to others.

With certain considerations, however, children with sensory integration disorders can enjoy your playspace and even thrive there. Incorporating a few special calming spaces into your playspace provides children with autism spectrum and sensory integration disorders, as well as all children, an opportunity to peacefully re-focus and re-center.

Your calming places might be a separate room in an indoor play area or a cave in a playground. These can be tunnels or any place children can be

apart from the chaos of the play. These special places integrate the need for calm with the need for excitement. For children with sensory integration disorders and autism spectrum disorders, this need can be acute.

What does this room or cave look like?

- Few windows or openings
- Quiet but accessible to the flow of the play area
- Insulated against outside sound
- Neutral or white colors
- Soft surfaces

If indoors:

- White floor mats and pillows
- Consider including fiber optic lights and projectors
- Calming music and nature sounds
- Tactile blankets and pillows
- Vestibular swing system

Cognitive Impairments



Children with cognitive impairments might have greater difficulty with one or more types of mental tasks than a peer who is typically developing. There are too many types of cognitive impairments to list here, each unique to the

individual. Cognitive impairments can impact a child's memory, judgement, perception, planning, orientation, concentration, or attention.

Simple things can be done to support children with cognitive impairments in your playspace:

- Design for safety
- Include a variety of challenge levels in your playspace activity areas
- Be sure to have a variety of activities to hold attention
- Use color-coded pathways to support memory of areas within your playspace

Mobility Impairments



You can help parents and children who use mobility devices enjoy your playspace by providing accessible routes, surfaces, and play equipment. If your playspace is accessible, adult caregivers who use mobility devices can more easily play with their children and truly enjoy your playspace!

Routes should:

- Be at least 60 inches wide
- Be bordered from loose-fill material
- Have a maximum slope of 1:12 (1:20 Universal design standard)
- If sloped, have plenty of platforms for resting
- Read more on [routes](#)

Surfaces under and around accessible structures should:

- Be pour-in-place rubber or another safe, accessible material (loose materials are not accessible for the most part)
- Be wide enough to provide safe, accessible landing
- Provide access to the structure
- Read more on [surfaces](#)

Structures should:

- Have accessible entries and exits (ramps or transfer stations)
- Provide handgrips, rails, or holds
- Provide support as necessary

Visual Disabilities



There are a variety of ways to make your playspace accessible and inviting for children and adults with visual impairments. By doing so, you will probably find your playspace is easier for everyone

Visual impairments are generally divided into two categories: blindness and low vision. Only 10-15% of people with visual impairments are clinically blind. The remainder of people experience very low vision.

Post frequent, easy-to-locate signs in:

- Braille
- Large print
- Contrasting colors

Keep your playspace bright and well-lit, so children and adults with low vision can see more easily.

Add auditory elements into your playspace:

- Musical areas
- Sound tubes
- Recordings

Provide tactile stimulation:

- Blocks and manipulatives
- Sand and water areas
- Large objects

All children, with and without visual impairments, can play together with these elements.

(Photo courtesy of the Free Play Network)