Children and Young Adults: Inclusive Play
A Manifesto

Introduction

The Access Association is committed to championing accessibility and inclusivity in all areas of public life, and play is no exception. We believe that every child and young adult, regardless of ability or disability, deserves the opportunity to engage in play that is enjoyable, stimulating, and meaningful. Play is a fundamental right that fosters physical, social, and cognitive development, and it is crucial that no child nor young adult is excluded from this vital experience.

This Manifesto on Inclusive Play outlines the key principles that should guide the creation and development of play environments across the UK. It presents a vision for inclusive play that addresses the diverse needs of all children and young adults, ensuring equal access to safe, engaging, and supportive spaces. By integrating these principles, we can create play areas that bring disabled and non-disabled children together, enabling them to play side by side in a manner that fosters inclusion, social interaction, and mutual understanding.

We urge legislators, policymakers, and developers of future standards to adopt these principles as a framework for shaping accessible and inclusive play spaces. By embedding these recommendations into planning policy (at national and local authority level), design guidance documents, and regulatory standards, we can ensure that inclusive play becomes the norm, not the exception.

The Access Association calls on all stakeholders to work collaboratively, engaging with communities and actively consulting with them, to create a future where every play space is designed with accessibility and inclusivity at its heart, ensuring that no child nor young adult is left behind in the enjoyment and benefits of play.

We advocate that public funding of play areas should be dependent on the development of a robust inclusive design strategy.

Through this manifesto, we aim to inspire change, engage with others, drive the adoption of best practices, and ensure that inclusive play is prioritised in legislation, standards development, and the planning of future public spaces.

Definition of Inclusive Play

Inclusive Play refers to the creation of environments and experiences where individuals of all abilities, including children and young adults, can engage in a pleasurable, stimulating, and meaningful play experience. It emphasises equity, accessibility, and diversity, ensuring that everyone, regardless of physical or cognitive abilities, can fully participate in activities that stimulate a broad spectrum of senses and imagination.

Play, in its widest context, should provide enjoyment, interaction, and the opportunity for challenge and achievement. It should include a range of activities that appeal to all senses, including sight, sound, touch, smell, and movement, promoting holistic development and social integration. Inclusive play also recognises the importance of designing environments where disabled and non-disabled individuals can play side by side, fostering a sense of belonging and community.

Key Principles of Inclusive Play

1. **Accessibility for All Abilities:** Play spaces should be physically accessible to disabled individuals, including those using mobility aids, and designed to engage a broad range of sensory needs. This includes considering not only mobility but also sensory, cognitive, and developmental differences. For example, path surfaces should allow wheelchair access, wet-pour surfacing should be used around equipment to meet safety standards (BS EN 1177) and surface materials should provide sensory feedback in accordance with PAS 6463.
2. **Diverse and Engaging Play Options:** A wide variety of activities should be available to cater to different interests and abilities. This includes traditional play experiences like swinging, sliding, and spinning, which stimulate vestibular senses and proprioception. Some equipment should offer challenge and a sense of achievement, but even if certain pieces are not fully accessible, they should still provide an interactive experience for all participants.

3. **Sensory Stimulation and Inclusion:** Play equipment should actively engage the senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and movement. For example, sensory play elements like sand, water, or musical instruments should be included to provide rich, tactile experiences. However, heightened response (hypersensitivity) should be avoided by spreading out sound-making equipment rather than grouping them together. The design should include quiet refuge areas (acoustically separated) for individuals who may need a break from stimulation due to sensory sensitivities. A communication board should be provided to help nonspeaking children to make choices and communicate those choices. Providing access to sensory tools, such as fidget toys, is likely to help those who experience hyposensitivity (reduced response to environmental stimuli).
4. **Social Integration and Inclusion:** One of the core principles of inclusive play is to ensure disabled and non-disabled individuals can play side by side. Fully accessible equipment should be integrated into the overall play area, rather than isolated, allowing social interaction and shared experiences. Group play structures, multi-height activities, and spaces designed to accommodate different levels of physical engagement foster a sense of community and inclusion.
5. **Varied Heights and Full Body Engagement:** Play equipment should be designed at different height levels to cater to children and adults in both seated (e.g., wheelchair users) and standing positions. There should be opportunities for full-body engagement, allowing users to transfer onto equipment. This encourages participation and enjoyment for those with mobility challenges, offering equal opportunities for play.
6. **Safety, Comfort, and Emotional Support:** Play spaces should offer back, head, and lateral support in seating (e.g., bucket swings and springers) for individuals with impaired stability. Safety should extend beyond physical elements, ensuring emotional and psychological safety through clear visual signage, contrasting pathways, and well-defined handrails and grab handles. Quiet areas offer a respite for those experiencing sensory overload.
7. **Flexible Play Opportunities:** Equipment should accommodate various levels of difficulty, allowing users to engage with play in ways

that suit their ability. Not every piece of equipment needs to be fully accessible, but all should offer some level of interaction. Seating and play spaces should be appropriate for both younger and older individuals, with specific provisions for caregivers who may be disabled themselves.

8. **Visual and Wayfinding Considerations:** Avoiding busy graphics on main pathways helps neurodivergent individuals avoid sensory overload. Simple, clearly defined pathways with contrasting colours help vision-impaired individuals navigate the space. Stainless steel and overly reflective surfaces should be avoided, and equipment should have high contrast with its surroundings to ensure visibility for all.

9. **Community and Caregiver Inclusion:** Inclusive play spaces should enable participation for both disabled children and disabled parents or caregivers, allowing everyone to engage in play together. This includes providing seating at various heights, with some benches designed for wheelchair transfers, as well as picnic benches accessible for wheelchair users. All-weather shelter should be available to make the space enjoyable in any condition, including shaded areas when needed. Additionally, nearby accessible facilities, such as toilets and Changing Places, are essential to ensure full inclusion for all participants.

10. **Sightlines and visibility:** Essential for safety and accessibility, especially for disabled children and their parents/carers. Clear sightlines are needed to and through all play equipment, so no child can be hidden behind structures like large climbing frames or earth tunnels. All gates and designated access points (where provided) should be visible from most of the play area. This enables one parent/carer to supervise multiple children (depending on support needs) and allows children, particularly disabled children, to enjoy greater independence without constant close supervision.

Features of an Inclusive Play Environment

1. **Accessible Play Equipment:**
    - Wheelchair-Friendly Equipment: Ramps, ground-level play elements, and transfer platforms allow easy access for those using mobility aids.
    - Varied Activities: Equipment offering swinging, sliding, and spinning provides sensory stimulation while accommodating a range of abilities. Sensory play, such as water tables, sand play, and tactile surfaces, enhances engagement.
    - Supportive Seating: Bucket seats and springers with back, head, and lateral support ensure that children with multiple disabilities can participate.
2. **Sensory Play Zones:**
    - Auditory and Tactile Stimulation: Musical equipment and sensory walls should be included but spaced apart to avoid overwhelming individuals with sensory sensitivities. Tactile experiences like sand and water play are key for cognitive and sensory development.
    - Quiet Refuge Areas: Calm zones with muted colours and soft textures provide a safe space for individuals needing a break from sensory input.
3. **Inclusive Seating and Accessibility:**
    - A range of seating options should be available, including seats with and without armrests, varying heights, and spaces for wheelchair transfer. Picnic tables should accommodate wheelchair users.
    - Pathways should be wide and surfaced with materials that facilitate wheelchair access. Easily detected edges, clear visual guides and contrasting colours on pathways aid navigation for vision impaired individuals. Vegetation should not overlap with

any path. Loose materials should not be used as a surface finish to paths.

4. **Social Integration and Side-by-Side Play:**
    - Integrated Play Structures: Accessible equipment should be incorporated within the larger play environment, enabling disabled and non-disabled individuals to play together rather than being separated.
    - Play areas should encourage social interaction through group activities and cooperative play equipment.
5. **Safe and Clearly Defined Spaces:**
    - Fencing should be context specific, not a prerequisite to inclusive play. Where fencing is installed, gates should be clearly visible, open inwards, and provide ease of access for wheelchairs and pushchairs. Stainless steel should be avoided, and handrails and step nosing should be clearly marked with high-contrast colours for better visibility.
6. **Accessible Restrooms and Changing Facilities:**
    - Nearby accessible toilets and a Changing Places facility, when possible, should be provided to accommodate caregivers and disabled children.
7. **Transport Links:**
    - Nearby parking (including blue badge) so that play facilities don't require a long walk to access them. Dropped kerbs between parking spaces and pavements should be provided.
    - Proximity to public transport, including bus routes, is essential for play areas to be truly accessible and inclusive, enabling children, families, and caregivers of all abilities to reach them easily. Public transport access reduces barriers for families without private vehicles, lowers transportation costs, and supports sustainable, eco-friendly travel options.

Conclusion

Inclusive Play ensures that all children and young adults, regardless of their abilities, can engage in play experiences that are not only pleasurable but also beneficial for physical, sensory, and emotional development. By adhering to principles of universal design, accessibility, and social inclusion, we can create environments where everyone can participate in a range of activities, from tactile sensory play to physical challenges, and where disabled and non-disabled individuals can play side by side. This fosters community, inclusion, and equality, while providing all children with opportunities for growth, interaction, and joy.

For further information contact us via our website:

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