

Taylor's Dream:

Inclusive Play Spaces Can Unite Communities

By Blake Hobson

It's time to re-imagine inclusive play. To begin the process, we must realize that the terms "inclusive" and "accessible" cannot be treated as equal. Accessible design is limiting because it only meets the minimum accessibility guidelines for people with disabilities. We at Playworld Midstates strive to create truly inclusive play spaces with each and every playground we design. Being inclusive means going beyond access to foster true engagement among all children. When we incorporate inclusive thinking into the playground design process, no one is excluded from the joy of playing outdoors with others because of any physical or developmental disability. This simple idea is at the heart of inclusive play. By definition, inclusive playgrounds are universally designed, barrier-free play spaces that meet the needs of the widest range of users by creating a comparable, integrated experience for everyone who uses the play area.



INCLUSIVE PLAY RESOURCES

The concept of inclusive play is consistent with the principle of "doing to others as you would have them do to you." According to this tenet, play areas should be open to all people. Until now, making playgrounds inclusive meant adding ramps. But inclusive play means so much more than making sure wheelchairs can reach the upper decks of a conventional playground structure. To truly meet the recreational needs of children with disabilities and their families, inclusive play must be a fundamental consideration beginning at the playground design conceptualization stage.

I recently had the opportunity to discuss the important topic of inclusive play with Jim Dziazkowicz, a senior landscape architect with EMH&T, while we were participating in the Indiana Park and Recreation northern district meeting in March. During that meeting, we discussed elements of the Inclusive Play Design Guide, a free resource that both Jim and I helped to develop.

The guide is focused on five key areas:

- Planning and preparation
- Layout
- Access
- Selecting equipment
- Play richness

Playworld Systems also developed supplemental resources to go along with the guide including flash cards, which help communities identify playground and fitness equipment that directly meet the needs of their constituents. For example, if there are children with autism in the community, the inclusive playground design should incorporate products that offer children a cozy place to retreat from the action and stimulation of the central play space. For children who may be on the Autism Spectrum, cozy places provide an area to regulate their sensory systems after a time of high sensory input. With this in mind, the IPDG flash cards suggest the following Playworld Systems products to meet the sensory needs of a child with autism: Cozy Cocoon, Origins™ Garden Gates, or Cave Boulder.

In our local community, we've been fortunate to install an exemplary inclusive playground: Taylor's Dream Playground in Kreager Park, Fort Wayne, Indiana. The idea of Taylor's Dream began when a young girl, Taylor Reuille, realized that there were children with disabilities who couldn't fully utilize many playgrounds in the area. The new playground, which opened in June of 2011, includes amenities that address the needs of children with physical, developmental, cognitive and sensory disabilities.

BUDGET-FRIENDLY INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUNDS

While Taylor's Dream is a larger, higher-budget playground, you don't need to have six-figure funds to develop an inclusive playground. Careful planning and preparation can help achieve inclusion. Equipment layout is critical, so even playgrounds with a \$30,000 budget can foster inclusion if the equipment is thoughtfully placed. By placing similar types of equipment in the same area – referred to as co-located play – you encourage engagement between children of diverse abilities. Every playground usually has a piece of equipment that tends to be the most popular. Make sure to identify the piece of equipment that children will be most excited about and ensure that this play activity is accessible and usable for all. For example, Playworld Systems AeroGlider is strategically located in Taylor's Dream playground so that it's accessible by all.

One cost-effective solution for creating inclusive play spaces is to provide more ground-level equipment. If more children played on ground-level equipment, there would be more opportunities for swinging, swaying and jumping – all the activities children need to develop their vestibular system, which is the sensory system that contributes to a person's balance and sense of spatial orientation. Ground-level activities allow more opportunities for social play, such as swinging next to a friend, facing another on a seesaw, and running or wheeling around through different challenges laid out with a variety of play equipment. If the majority of children engage in ground-level activities, then a child with even the most profound disability can still be included. It's important to remember to include activities that involve everyone – playground designs should be selected with both the typically developing child in mind as well as a child with disabilities.

Adding creatively designed ground-level equipment to the playground creates a social space where all children and adults can play together and encourage one another. For a parent raising a child with a disability, there is nothing more rewarding than having your child cheered instead of jeered.

In addition to incorporating ground-level activities throughout the play area, other elements to consider include decks that are comfortably roomy. Play equipment should offer a wide range of sensory experiences, with activities that are challenging and feature motion, tactile experiences, quiet places, sounds and music. Playground designs should incorporate solutions, such as transfer stations or ramps, that allow a child with disabilities to not only exit but return onto the play structure.

INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUNDS HELP TO UNITE COMMUNITIES

The process of planning for the playground and learning about the importance of inclusion has the power to educate, change attitudes and build fellowship. Inclusive playgrounds will increase people's acceptance of others and generate goodwill for years to come.

TIPS FOR BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND

Some points to consider when planning an inclusive playground include:

- Understand that inclusion is relevant to everyone. As mentioned in the foreword of the Inclusive Play Design Guide, one in three Americans is affected by a severe disability -- i.e. one in three of us either has a disability or knows someone who does
- Remember to develop a design for everyone --- both the typically developing child as well as the child with a disability
- Involve the entire community – those with disabilities and without – in the planning, designing and building
- Set a budget
- Consult with a trusted playground design specialist
- Use the Inclusive Play Design Guide™



About the Author: Blake Hobson has been a playground consultant and sales representative for over twenty years. More importantly, as a father, he has walked in the shoes of parents who have children with significant challenges. He knows the paths are emotional, physically challenging and frustrating, not only for the child, but also the child's parents, siblings, grandparents and caregivers. Since 1993, Blake has observed children and adults with disabilities struggle to play. He has watched loved ones and caregivers become exasperated and saddened as they try to enjoy what should have been a pleasant outing. Instead, these play areas provided limited and frustrating opportunities. Today, Blake is more committed than ever to help playground decision makers understand the importance of inclusive play.