

I don't have an accessible playground—or do I?



Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has focused much attention on accessibility. Since then, a lot has been learned about making child care and preschool programs physically accessible as well as playfully accessible to children with disabilities. Outdoor play spaces are especially challenging; many of the really great solutions to outdoor accessibility are expensive and require long-range planning. Hopefully, every early childhood program is developing a plan to acquire equipment, ground surfaces, and accessories to make their outdoor play spaces physically and playfully accessible for children with disabilities—but what about right now? Today—before the children go outside again—there are many easy, inexpensive, and important ways you can make your play space more accessible.

BREAK THE “RULES” - Bring inside things outside! For some children with significant developmental delays, it is difficult to identify play experiences that they can participate in outdoors. Use what you have learned about the child over the winter (when you have spent more time indoors) and lighten up on the “indoor toys only” rule. If you have found a perfect seating arrangement or a toy that the especially enjoys, take it outdoors. You may want to check with the child’s family about taking adaptive equipment outdoors, but most items are durable enough for outdoor use. Whether it is a mobile suspended from a tree, an adapted seating device placed in the sand box, or a favorite squeaky toy—use your indoor resources to boost the accessible play value of your outdoor space.

WORK TOGETHER - Show other team members your outdoor play space and the equipment/toys you have available. Ask the child’s parents, therapists, health care specialists, and teachers for ideas. Physical therapists may surprise you with the number of ideas they have for adapting a swing seat! One speech therapist recommended placing large colorful pictures outdoors to encourage a child to use new words. Imagine how playful the play yard looked with colorful drawings stapled to the wooden privacy fence! Work together to find creative solutions.

EXPAND THE PLAY CHOICES - Outdoor play is a natural time to encourage large muscle development and letting off steam, but some children with limited mobility cannot participate in typical outdoor activities. Expand play choices to include problem-solving, communication, sensory play, and small muscle activities. Add a “sand box” that can be filled with different sensory materials—a different texture of sand, bark, or maybe straw! Or add a dramatic play area with props for taking a car trip—steering wheels attached to the fence, old suitcases, and hats; a day at the beach—beach towels, sunglasses, beach balls, and empty sunscreen bottles; or perhaps a circus—simple costumes, “high wire” balance beam, hula hoops, and a tree stump for the ringmaster to stand on. Expanding outdoor play space to include activities that encourage development in a number of skill areas lets you take maximum advantage of the warm weather and offers a better chance to address the needs of children with limited mobility.

LEND A HAND - Even though a child may have motor limitations, it is still very important that he or she have opportunities to experience large muscle play activities. This happens when you facilitate or simulate these activities for the child. When children are unable to climb the steps to the slide, think of a way they may still have the experience of going down the slide (possibly with help)—carry them up the steps or simply put them on the slide part way up. While you may not be able to help every child experience every activity all the time, you can take a minute or two to recreate for a child with a disability one of the play experiences enjoyed by other children. One teacher spent a few minutes almost every day helping a child “climb” using the overhead bar. By the end of the summer, they were both surprised to notice that he had significantly increased his upper body strength!

While you are wishing for an adaptive swing or making plans to install a wheelchair accessible playground surface, look closely at the children currently in your program. Are there simple, quick ways you can make the play space accessible to them now? You may not come up with the best solution or the only solution, but anything you do to make your play yard physically and playfully accessible today can make a huge difference to a young child today.

Parent Story

I am writing this note because Marty, my child care provider, said I ought to let other parents know about what I have learned from child care. I am the mother of a two-year-old, and we have been going to Marty's child care program for about three months. I say "we" because it has been hard for me to leave Britt at child care, and Marty and I have been sharing expertise about Britt in ways I never imagined. I taught Marty about positioning Britt correctly, and Marty's teaching me about letting her participate in activities just like the other kids. When I showed Marty how Britt plays while lying on her side, she showed me how much fun (new play experiences) Britt could have lying on her side in the sandbox! We just put a cloth under her face and push the sand up behind her back to keep her from rolling over. And when I complained about the sand in her hair, Marty gently pointed out that children learn by experience and showed me that the other two-year-old in her care had sand in his hair after playing in the sandbox, too.

Because of Britt's limited motor skills, I never thought of taking her to a playground. Now I know there's a lot to learn outside that she can't learn inside. When I go get Britt and see her enjoy playing outside, I am always amazed at how much fun she seems to be having. It took a while to get used to her coming home with dirty clothes, sand in her hair, and smudge little hands (and feet), but Marty is helping me realize how important it is for kids with disabilities to have these experiences. I'd rather she be having fun and be right in the middle of things—even if she is a mess at the end of the day.

Last night, my neighbor shared her frustration because her little girl was coming home from preschool every day with dirt and grass stains on her clothes. I almost sounded like Marty as I explained how all those little smudges meant her daughter was learning and probably having a wonderful time—just like Britt. My daughter may have a disability, but it does not stop her from playing indoors or outdoors, and her child care provider knows just how to help make it happen.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: I'm worried that adapting our playground will be expensive. Any ideas about how to pay for it?

ANSWER: It's true that surfacing and new play equipment can be expensive; however, some important changes cost very little. To make your playground more accessible, focus energy on things that can significantly improve play opportunities for young children in your program. It's okay to imagine a fabulous play yard, but before you begin major fundraising efforts, you'll want to be clear about what is needed and who will benefit.

Carefully look at the equipment, physical design, and play experiences that are currently available. What is needed to make this space more playable? Once you have identified a list of changes that you want to make, you are in an excellent position to begin asking for help.

Start by approaching parents and other professionals who work with children in your program. The following pointers may help you reach your goals:

Talk specifics. Instead of saying "will you help us adapt our playground," try something more specific like "Joey can't sit in the swing seats we have now, but I think he would really like to swing. Do you have any ideas?"

Make sure there is a clear benefit. Almost any changes will make your play yard look more appealing, but the true

benefit should be stated in terms of the children. Not everyone will clearly understand why you need to have a special handle on a shovel. Part of getting people interested in helping you is getting them to understand what these changes mean to a particular child.

Do a little research. If you can find a picture, materials, or an example of the exact piece of equipment you want, you stand a better chance of getting the help you need.

Remember that you do not always need money—sometimes you need a few hours of labor or the parts and pieces to make the adaptation. Here is where your colleagues can help. Talk to speech therapists, psychologists, motor therapists, and special educators—they have access to catalogs and resources you might need.

To put it another way, fundraising is only one of many options. More than money, you need a few good ideas and a lot of people's energy to turn your outdoor play space into a more playful space for all children.

