

CHILD CARE

plus +

SPRING 1994

A Resource for Integrated Child Care Providers

Vol. 4, No. 3

+ I don't have an accessible playground--or do I?

Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has focused much attention on accessibility. We are learning a lot 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.

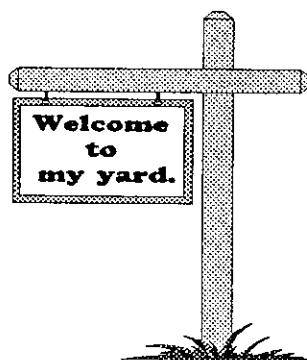
BREAK THE RULES Bring inside things outside! For some children with significant developmental delays, it is difficult to identify play experiences that the child can participate in outdoors. Use what you have learned about the child over the winter (when you have spent more time indoors) and lighten up on the "indoor toys only" rule. If you have found a perfect seating arrangement or a toy that the child 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 sandbox, 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 the 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 "sandbox" that can be filled with different sensory materials (a different texture of sand, bark, or maybe hay!). 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 ("high wire" balance beam, simple costumes, hula hoops, and a tree stump for the ringmaster). 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 movement.



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 a little 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 the 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. +

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+ FROM THE SOURCE: All Children's Parks

Let's take the kids for a day in the park: sun, shade, grass, every child laughing and playing, splashing and digging, climbing and swinging. Let me repeat that . . . every child is engaged in those wonderful "day in the park" activities.

Children in wheelchairs? **YES!** Children who are blind? **YES!** Children with disabilities that we have never even **seen** in the park? **YES!!!** You see, you have come to an "All Children's Park," designed specifically to include children of every shape and size, various abilities and challenges, many interests and motivations. Accessible playground surfaces, transition ramps between equipment pieces, adapted swings, wide slides, and attached accessories (such as steering wheels, hand-controlled sand diggers, and mirrors) vastly expand opportunities for children of differing abilities to play and be involved.

Across the country, communities are looking carefully at their city parks and play areas and realizing that, while these areas are wonderful for the children who play there, many children with differing abilities are on the outside looking in, able only to watch but not participate. Based on the belief that all children learn through active participation, and that most of this active learning comes in the form of play, All Children's Parks allow children with disabilities to be active participants rather than passive observers, included rather than excluded.

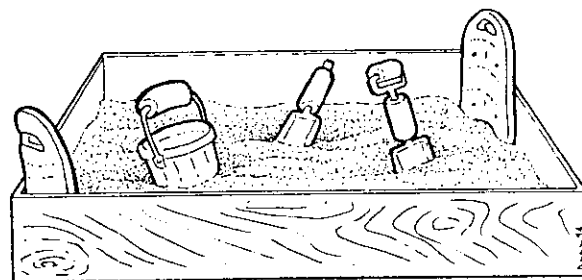
Parents, city planners and builders, therapists, and other professionals are building All Children's Parks to allow all children to experience the joy of play and discovery and to promote an environment that creates an early awareness of individual differences and fosters appreciation of the uniqueness and potential of all people. +

+ MAKING IT WORK: All Children's Sandbox

Here are a couple of easy and inexpensive ways to make your sandbox accessible (and playful) for young children.

First, install a gardener's kneeling pad in each corner of the sandbox. These pads cost \$1.00 to \$2.00 and can be attached with screws directly into the corners of most sandboxes. The padding provides comfortable support for a child who needs help sitting and also balances the child who needs trunk support in order to use both hands to play in the sand. A piece of dense foam (the foam a sleeping bag pad is made from) cut to shape may be used if a kneeling pad is unavailable.

Second, take a few of the tools children use in the sandbox and build up the handles using foam pipe insulation. This cylinder-shaped piece of foam is designed to fit snugly around pipes to keep them from freezing; it is typically sold in three foot lengths (enough to do several sandbox shovels!). Cut the foam to fit the size of the handle of the shovels, scoops, or bucket handles, and attach by winding tape completely around



the entire handle. This added little bit of padding helps many children hold the toys more securely and also helps them develop and strengthen their grasp. +

+ NOTES FROM HOME:

It's a dirty job, but . . .

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 very 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 laying on her side, she showed me how much fun (and new play experiences) Britt could have laying 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 just 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 smudgy 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 called to share her frustration because her little girl was coming home from preschool every day "dirty." 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. +

+ SPOTLIGHT: You-And Your Play Yard

Whether you have a small backyard or a big play area full of high-tech equipment, you can check out the "playability" of your outdoor play space and plan beneficial changes for children with disabilities by using this plan.

Check out the playability. First, take a walk outside; make a list of the play experiences that are possible using the equipment and materials that you currently have available. Your list should include 5-10 play activities children perform each day. Don't forget to include play activities that have been created by the children. In one program, children used a portion of the yard as a raceway, pretending to be race cars. They did not use any equipment, but this activity evolved into a regular game.

Choose a child. Second, choose a child in your program who has a disability. With this child's interests and abilities in mind, analyze how many outdoor activities are currently accessible for this particular child. Remember, accessibility means that the child is **able to participate** in the activity in ways that use his or her skills appropriately.

Make a plan. Third, using the tricycles below, copy an activity from your list into the large front wheel. The two rear wheels are for you to describe two ways you could adapt the activity to make it more accessible for the child you picked. The first one is filled in as an example.

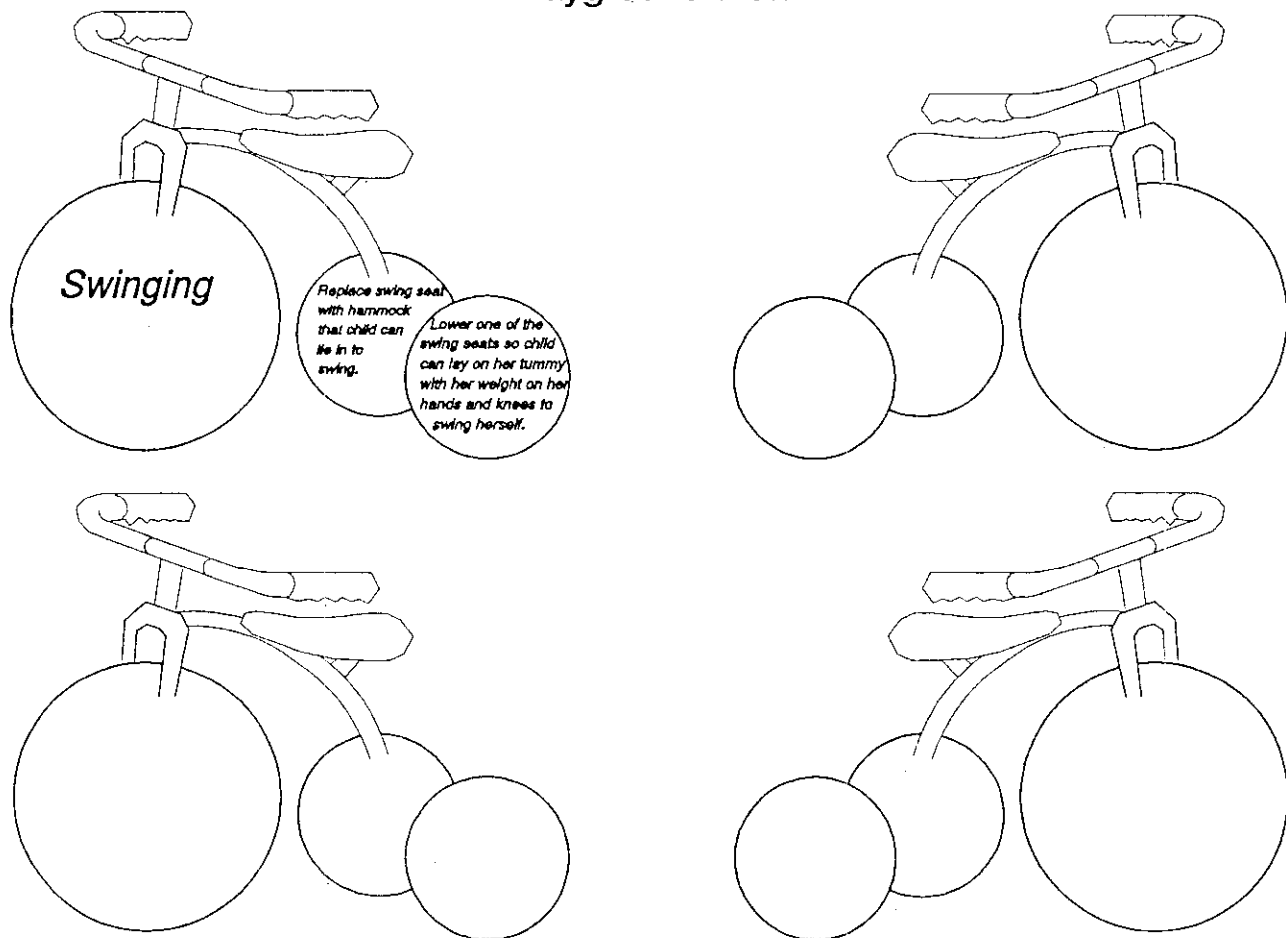
Brainstorm possible adaptations. This plan gives you a chance to brainstorm all the different ways a child can fully participate in your play space. Be as outlandish (and as playful) as you can. Your goal is to recreate for a child with a disability some of the play experiences other children in your program spontaneously enjoy.

Some adaptations may be relatively minor--adjusting the height of a tricycle seat or lowering a swing. Others may require that you (or another adult) assist--physically guiding the child up the steps of the slide or helping the child climb into the wagon. A few adaptations may require considerable changes--rebuilding your sandbox so that the child can get to it independently or acquiring more specialized equipment than you currently have available. A few activities may not be readily adaptable.

As you fill in tricycles (feel free to make additional copies), remember that outdoor play is a vital part of growing up. Even if a child has a disability, the movement, fresh air, laughter, creativity, and high-spirited nature of outdoor play is an important benefit of child care. Use your creativity and that of other team members working with you to create an outdoor play space that responds to the differing ability levels of the children in your program.+

This page is an excerpt from *The Playground Plan* (Gordon, 1994). To order the full version (due out 11/94), contact *Child Care plus+*.

Playground Plan



+ WHAT DO I DO WHEN . . .

QUESTION: *I'm worried that adapting our playground will be expensive. Any ideas on paying for it?*

ANSWER: It's true that some physical adaptations (surfacing and new equipment) are expensive; however, some important changes cost little. To make your playground more accessible, focus energy on things that significantly improve play opportunities for young children with disabilities. 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 succeed:

Talk specifics. Instead of saying "will you help us adapt our playground," try something more specific like "Joe 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 folks 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 soliciting 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 the speech therapists, psychologists, motor therapists, and special educators--they have access to catalogs and resources you 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.+

(If you have a question about children with disabilities in child care settings, please send your question to CHILD CARE plus+.)

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Backyards and Butterflies (1993) by Doreen Greenstein is a beautifully illustrated book of ways to include children with disabilities in outdoor activities. Includes accessible gardening, adapting outdoor furniture and tricycles, making a walker/wagon, and safety on swings and slides. To order single copies, send \$9.95 plus \$1.50 postage and handling to NYS Rural Health and Safety Council, 324 Riley-Robb Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-5701. To arrange discounts on large orders, call (607) 255-0150 (voice) or (607) 255-1143 (TTY).+

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to enhance the integration of children with disabilities in child care settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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For subscription information, call 1-800-235-4122 or write:

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