

# Inclusive Play

## Introduction

'It is difficult for children to grow up emotionally stable if they are denied space and freedom to take and overcome risks, and if they are denied the opportunity to make friends with others of their own age'. (Lady Allen of Hurtwood, the founder of HAPA – now a part of the charity Kids)

Inclusive play is primarily about all children and young people having equal access to - and equal participation in - local play, childcare and leisure opportunities. And whilst this fact sheet focuses mainly on including disabled children in play, it is important to remember that the principles of inclusion apply to children of all abilities, ethnic backgrounds and ages. For brevity, when referring to children, this should be taken to include children and young people.

Inclusive play is not just about inclusion. 'Equally important is the provision of high quality **play** opportunities to children regardless of their needs and abilities. While children won't always be able to participate in *all* available activities, an inclusive project should offer all children a real choice of play activities.' (Ludvigsen, Creegan and Mills 2005)

A widely accepted definition of play is that 'play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child' (National Playing Fields Association, Children's Play Council and Playlink 2000). Play is central to the physical and social development of all children.

Through play children learn how to negotiate, take risks and overcome obstacles. Most importantly, it is through play that children develop friendships and a sense of belonging to a peer group. This is particularly important for disabled children as they are frequently marginalised and/or overprotected.

Lack of accessible play environments, as well as poverty, discriminating attitudes, the rise in traffic and parents' increasing fear for their children's safety, have all curtailed the child's right to play and socialise freely. Disabled children are denied this right and freedom far more than their non-disabled peers. There is more control from the adult world in general - and a natural tendency for parents to want to protect their children from physical risk and negative attitudes. In addition, despite the move towards inclusion in education, many disabled children are still segregated into

special schools which take them away from their families and communities. This increases their sense of isolation and ability to make friends in their local areas.

It is estimated that there are some 770,000 disabled children living in the UK. (Prime Ministers Strategy Unit, 2005). 'Many barriers to play, leisure and making friends are put in the way of disabled children. Mainstream play and leisure are failing to meet the needs of disabled children, and as a result they are denied the activities that many of us take for granted. For young children, play is part of learning and development. For older disabled young people the availability of leisure activities is crucial' (Langerman and Worrall, 2005). Research also shows that families with disabled children are more likely to live in poverty and experience social exclusion, and that this exclusion becomes all the more apparent as disabled young people grow up and want to take part in the same sort of activities as their non-disabled peers. Of particular importance are those activities which promote friendships and offer opportunities to take part in leisure activities (Murray, 2002) (Contact a Family, 2002).

## 1. The Right to Play

Every child is entitled to rest and play and to have the chance to join in a wide range of activities including cultural and artistic activities". Article 31 of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

The right to play is a fundamental human right. All children - including disabled children - have the right to

play and be a part of their local communities. Inclusion is now promoted by law and government policy, as outlined below.

**i. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA)** sets out the basic legal duties in promoting equality for disabled people. Part 3 of the DDA requires service providers (including play settings) to make 'reasonable adjustments' to 'policy, practice and procedures' and, since October 2004, has included an obligation to make permanent, physical adjustments to allow access to indoor and outdoor 'leisure centres, adventure playgrounds, play areas in parks and playgroups.' The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act 2001 (SENDA) amended the DDA 1995, introducing new Part 4 which extended DDA duties to cover education and associated services including playtime, leisure activities and after school clubs runs on school premises.

Since April 2005 the revised Act (DDA 2005) has widened the definition of disability and imposed a new duty on all public bodies and local authorities to promote disability equality. Certain public bodies will be required to produce Disability Equality Schemes, which reflect local consultation and include three year action plans to improve equality of opportunity. This duty comes into force in December 2006. Practical guidance is available from the Disability Rights Commission.

**ii The Children Act 1989** states that: 'A primary aim should be to promote access for all children and young people to the same range of services.'

### iii. The Children Act 2004

provides the legal framework for the programme of reform 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) which sets out five outcomes which all services should work towards. These are: to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. Lobbying by the play sector ensured that recreation was included under the 'enjoy and achieve' outcome, and that play was integral to this. Achievement of these aims has to demonstrate improvement of services for all children and young people – including disabled children. For further guidance on how ECM relates to disabled children refer to the ECM website (Every Child Matters).

Each local authority now has to produce a Children and Young People's Plan, and those wishing to access the Lottery play money will also need to draw up a play strategy. (Children's Play Council, 2006) (Kids, 2006).

**iv The Government's Ten Year Childcare Strategy**, Choice for Parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare, also promotes inclusion in the wider context of children's centres and extended schools: 'It is particularly important that all children's centres and extended schools provide services which are accessible to disabled children and their families. Therefore local authorities should ensure that all planning for children's centres and extended schools includes measures to make these services fully inclusive.' (HM Government, 2004).

**v. The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services** (2004) set benchmarks for the well being and health of the nation's children. Standard 8 (on disabled children) states that: 'Disabled children and young people receive co-ordinated, high quality child and family centred services which are based on assessed needs, which promote social inclusion and, where possible, which enable them and their families to live ordinary lives.' (Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills, 2004).

## 2. The barriers to play

Despite the range of legislation and guidance supporting the child's right to play and to be included, disabled children still face many barriers, both social and environmental. Environmental barriers that exclude children with impairments, such as uneven surfaces and narrow gates, can easily be changed. Social barriers such as fear, embarrassment or discriminatory attitudes also need to be tackled so that an accessible play space is also an inclusive one in which disabled children and their families feel welcome' (Dunn, Moore and Murray, 2003). Barriers might include some or all of the following:

**Access:** Physical access may present a barrier for children who use wheelchairs or who have mobility difficulties. Accessible transport is another barrier. Communication and language barriers also prevent many disabled children from joining in. Research found that a 'lack of

appropriate support (such as transport, personal assistance and support to facilitate and/or interpret communication) was a key barrier for young disabled people wanting to access inclusive leisure' (Contact a Family, 2002).

**Information and outreach:**

Parents of disabled children may not know about particular projects, or information may not have been produced in accessible formats and minority languages. The Audit Commission found that 'It is often a struggle for families to find out what is available, as information is fragmented' (Audit Commission, 2003).

**Funding:** Better Play identified funding as a key barrier - particularly funding for additional transport and staff. 'There is still a national shortage of both inclusive and specialist play and leisure provision with many initiatives subject to short term or insecure funding' (Audit Commission, 2003).

**Attitudes:** Research demonstrates that attitudes are the biggest barrier to inclusion. The Kids Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP) found that staff may be wary about including disabled children due to a lack of experience and/or fear of the unknown. The attitudes of other children and the fears of parents can also be a barrier: 'The main difficulty we encountered at the beginning of the project was parents and carers anxiety. We found that parents were concerned we wouldn't be able to cope' (Ludvigsen, Creegan and Mills 2005).

### 3. Overcoming Barriers

'Inclusive provision is open and accessible to all, and takes positive steps in removing disabling barriers (both physical and social), so that disabled and non disabled children can participate.' (Alison John, Disability Equality Trainer)

Those wishing to develop inclusive play need to have an understanding of the social model of disability. The above definition used by Kids, and adopted by Better Play, is rooted in the social model of disability which asserts that disabled children (and people) are disabled by the attitudes, actions and omissions of society in failing to include them in their natural environment: 'impairment is what we have, disability is what we experience' (John and Wheway, 2004).

Thus, for provision to be fully inclusive, it must identify the barriers to inclusion, look at what steps can be taken to overcome them, and ensure that the diverse needs of all children are considered. For play providers this means examining their policies, premises, staff and programme of activities, and ensuring that no one is excluded. An in depth knowledge of specific impairments is not essential to the development of good inclusive play provision – 'the key requirement is a willingness to seek out and remove disabling barriers. Removing environmental barriers helps make play spaces accessible, whilst social barriers have to be dealt with to make them inclusive' (Dunn, Moore and Murray, 2003).

Most of the research on inclusive play supports this, demonstrating that inclusion works best when providers have a real commitment to inclusion. 'Inclusion happens where people believe in it - where they really want it to happen. It becomes successful when people truly work together for everyone's benefit' (Douch, 2005). This sentiment is echoed in a report by Ofsted which asserts that the attitude of the provider is fundamental. 'When the provider is positive, welcoming and displays a 'can-do' approach, barriers to inclusion can be overcome' (Ofsted, 2005).

The Kids Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP) project further demonstrated that whilst attitudes are the biggest barrier – training is the key to overcoming these barriers. When staff training focuses on exploring attitudes to disability, inclusion becomes easier. Practically, many settings report that it is not so difficult to include disabled children once they develop a positive attitude and work in partnership with parents and colleagues. 'In a recent follow-up survey of the impact of the PIP training on participants' practice, every respondent reported that they had made changes to develop inclusion since taking part, with 65 per cent reporting increases in the number of disabled children attending.' One participant commented: 'We make mistakes, assess and evaluate and move on. It's the willingness to try and learn that is important – but that comes after training' (Kids, 2006).

#### 4. Inclusion in practice

'Inclusive play is not about meeting 'special needs'; it's about meeting *all* children's and young people's need to play, wherever they choose and in a variety of different ways' (Douch, 2006)

A number of examples of good quality inclusive play have been developed around the country – both in the statutory and voluntary sectors, and there is a range of different approaches to developing inclusion. In some cases local authorities have taken the lead, by appointing inclusion officers to work with children, parents and providers to overcome barriers to the involvement of disabled children in play and leisure. In others, projects are being managed and run by the voluntary sector. Kids, for example, runs seven playgrounds, as well as promoting inclusive play through training and advice via the PIP project. It has also set up a Young People's Inclusion Network to empower disabled young to participate fully in youth and leisure activities.

In some of the most successful examples of inclusive play, partnerships have been developed across a range of agencies and sectors. The Catalyst Project in St. Helen's (a voluntary community based service that received funding from the Better Play Programme) attributes its success to good partnership working. 'The service has developed excellent partnerships with St Helen's Social Services, St Helen's Play Section and the local sports centres who support the work by providing workers with specific skills (Ludvigsen, 2005).

Bury Early Years and Childcare Development Partnership also maintains that 'without working in partnership, and without the training and support, we would not have been able to offer such a wide range of play opportunities. The Play Inclusion Co-ordinator worked closely with other departments within the local authority to empower both the children and young people and their parents and carers to choose their community playschemes. The Children's Information Service, Children's Disability Team, Area Social Work Teams and Youth Teams all played a vital role in making this happen.' (Douch, 2006). For further examples and case studies on inclusive play, refer to the publications in the list of references – in particular (Ludvigsen, Creegan and Mills 2005), (Contact a Family, 2002) and (Douch, 2006). Contact a Family, which works with families with disabled children, has also set up a database of local play and leisure groups.

According to research carried out to inform the development of the PIP project: 'It is often assumed that where 'best practice' is identified there can be an expectation that 'special' insights are to be unearthed. However, the best practice we came across does the very opposite. It celebrates the ordinary, the unassuming and the modesty of settings and relationships which include disabled children – all children as routine and as a matter of working practice' (Dunn, Moore and Murray 2003). In other words by looking at best practice in including disabled children, we simply identify the kind of good practices which should be informing our work with everyone.

The same research found that the key components for successful inclusion included careful planning, hard work and the provision of high quality and varied play opportunities. Other factors include the development of an inclusive play policy, a committed leader and a motivated team who believe in the rights of all children to access the service and be involved in the development of that service.

## 5. Action points for inclusion

Listed below are some action points for those new to inclusion. For more in depth guidance aimed at settings and local authorities, refer to the **All of Us – Inclusion Checklist for Settings** and the **Kids Inclusion Framework for Local Authorities**. (Kids, 2004a and b).

### **An inclusive ethos – underpinning values and principles**

- Working inclusively with all children and all adults and developing respectful relationships is a key issue - as is working in partnership with staff, children and parents.
- Inclusion is something that has to be actively supported and promoted. It needs a clear vision, policies and procedures to support that vision, and a process (Kids, 2004a). Greenwich EYDCP adopted the following statement in their inclusion strategy: 'Inclusion is an active process and is more than adding a child to a setting; it requires adaptation on the part of that setting to truly include that child's particular needs'.

- Use of language is important. The terms disabled children, and non-disabled children are preferred by the disability movement over 'special needs' or able bodied. The National Childminding Association has developed good guidance on this (National Childminding Association, 2005).

- Inclusion can only happen if it is undertaken in partnership with the full range of agencies, groups and individuals with an interest in inclusive play. These might include EYDCPs or children's trusts, special schools, disability groups and national and voluntary organisations.

### **Staffing**

- Good quality playwork practice is inclusive practice. Staff need to be recruited on the basis that they will actively include disabled children. They need have access to appropriate training. Kids offers a range of inclusive play courses for workers from entry level volunteers to managers of settings. Training in British Sign Language and/or Makaton may also be required

- Staff are required under Ofsted registration to be qualified and they need to have play qualifications: the National Occupational Standards for Playwork, developed by the play sector under SkillsActive, now cover inclusive practice.

- Staff are the most important resource in facilitating inclusion and time is needed to allow for regular discussions and de-briefings - inclusion is a work in progress. At Interplay, 'it's not just the children who are fully included – the staff

are too. It has taken a while but now they're not just seen as support workers for the children, they are part of the team. All of the staff have had disability awareness training and they feel confident about working with the children who attend the sessions.' (Ward, Elliott and Day 2004).

- Whilst some disabled children will undoubtedly need extra support – it is not always necessary to have a 'one to one worker' – as this tends to reinforce the belief that the child is the problem. If an additional member of staff is required, that person may be better employed with a more generic role (Kids, 2004b).

- Evidence from the PIP project shows that inclusion can best be promoted where there are 'People in place who have both an understanding of inclusion and experience with disabled children, who can act as bridges between potentially inclusive settings and segregated services or families with a disabled child.' The 'bridging role' is one of the key elements identified in the Kids Inclusion Framework for Local Authorities, and is also the subject of a new briefing produced by Kids.

### **Consultation and communication.**

- There is a need for a child centred approach and to find out practical information about each child. How does s/he communicate? What are her/his likes and dislikes? How can games be adapted to ensure s/he can join in? Check with individual children (and their parents) what assistance they might require.

- Ask individual children for ideas of things they enjoy doing, and ensure proactive working at all levels to include and consult with children and young people. Fun4 Kidz runs five out of school centres on the outskirts of Liverpool, and excels in consulting with children. 'Each club has a children's group meeting each month where issues, concerns and ideas for activities are fed through to the board of Directors' (Dunn, Moore and Murray 2003). 'Making Connections' (Murray, 2004) is a useful reference on methods of consultation with disabled children and young people.

### **The play environment**

- Whilst a play environment cannot be designed or adapted to allow for every need or impairment but it needs to try and provide as much variety as possible - in terms of access, challenge and sensory stimulation. Adaptations to the environment, equipment and activities may be needed to enable full participation.
- Carry out an access audit, and check what is required under the DDA. Ensure that children can move around the play space freely, and that toilets are accessible. Check that play equipment is accessible to all children – both indoors and outdoors.
- Ensure that notices are clear and visible, and that signs are colour coded and in Braille. Different scents or pictures can be used to differentiate between areas of the play setting.
- Care must be taken to ensure that the play environment is safe.

However, it is also important to remember that risk is an essential part of play. Disabled children in particular need an element of risk and challenge in their lives to enable them to develop and learn new skills. Guidance should also be provided on issues around intimate care, lifting, safety, risk and insurance. (Council for Disabled Children, 2004).

- Start with small, practical steps. Some things can be changed or improved immediately, other adaptations may need long term planning. Specialised equipment is not always necessary (John and Wheway, 2004).

### **Activities**

- Disabled children and young people will, on the whole, enjoy the same kind of activities as their non-disabled peers. A range of choices should be made available with the aim of making much as possible available to everyone.
- Discuss with children and staff how best to include children in activities; not all children will be able to take part in all activities – be flexible and creative.
- As well as planned activities, there needs to be time for 'free play'. Children should not be compelled to join in if they don't want to. They should always be free to choose their activities. 'Pick & Mix' (Murray, 2004) is a useful guide on inclusive games and activities.

## Policy and funding

- Inclusion must be embedded in local and national play strategies, as well as strategic partnerships. But inclusion also needs to be a specific standard in its own right within national standards and inspections frameworks for play, childcare and leisure (Ludvigsen, 2005).
- Funding for inclusion is usually focused on staffing, equipment, training and transport. However, it is not always necessary to seek funding for extra staff 'to support disabled children' but rather to enhance the experiences of all those attending. Evidence also shows that funding for training is a particularly effective way of changing attitudes and thereby promoting inclusion.
- Many providers worry that creating inclusive and accessible services will be too difficult and too expensive. Practical guidance on making reasonable adjustments and accessibility planning is given in 'Implementing the Disability Discrimination Act in Schools and Early Years Settings' (DfES, 2006).
- Many inclusive play and childcare projects have to rely on short term funding for what are effectively long term needs. The mainstreaming of funding would show both providers and parents that inclusive provision is a right – as required by the DDA and outlined in the 10 Year Childcare Strategy.

## Conclusion

"I go to the club where I can play basketball but I use it more as a chance to see my mates and talk to

the other young people that go. I've made lots of friends and the club has given me the chance to try load of new thing and do the stuff I like doing" (young person) (Ward, Elliott and Day 2004).

"Because the club's local, Joe knows some of the local kids now so he can go out and play with them" (parent) (Ward, Elliott and Day 2004).

"Although we still have a lot of hard work to do, I am proud to say that we have now successfully included lots of disabled children in our clubs" (Play Setting Manager) (Ofsted, 2005).

There are wide-ranging benefits to developing inclusive play services – both for the children and families who use the services, as well as for the staff, the settings and the wider community. 'Enabling all children to play, and to play together, is about a benefit to the whole community. It is not about overcoming legal hurdles or making expensive provision for a small section of the community. If any child is prevented from playing then it diminishes the play experience of all' (John and Wheway, 2004).

The inclusion of disabled children should be placed at the heart of all playwork and childcare developments. 'We need inclusion to become a key element in practice, in policy, in strategy, in quality assurance, in training and in funding' (Kids, 2005). But inclusive play must also be seen in the wider context of including disabled children in society as a whole – in education, sports, leisure, culture, families and communities. This is essential if disabled children are to participate fully in ordinary

everyday life, play and learn alongside their peers and develop into healthy well balanced adults. It is up to all of us to ensure that this right becomes a reality.

## References and resources

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[www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

Every Child Matters – information on how ECM relates to disabled children and to download the following documents:

- Improving the life chances of disabled children
  - National Service Framework for Children
  - Ten Year Strategy for Childcare
- [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)

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### **Written by Rachel Scott (Kids) July 2006**

Many of the key messages in this factsheet are drawn from the findings of the Kids Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP), as well as from the evaluation of Better Play (Round 3) which focused on inclusive play. The PIP project was set up in 2001, with funding from the DfES, to increase the number of disabled children in play and childcare settings through training, regional development, advice and support. Better Play (a partnership between Barnardo's and the Children's Play Council) was a grant programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Kids was also involved in the management group of Better Play, and was subsequently funded to set up the Better Play Inclusion Network to provide ongoing support to those groups which received Better Play Funding.

The Children's Play Information Service produces factsheets and student reading lists on a variety of play topics, and can also provide customised reading lists in response to individual requests.

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