

# Making Your Playground Accessible

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. Every early childhood program should be developing a plan to acquire equipment, ground surfaces, and accessories to make their outdoor play spaces physically and playfully accessible for children with disabilities. Here are some tips to improve accessibility for children with disabilities. Today—before the children go outside again—there are many easy, inexpensive, and important ways you can make your play space more accessible.

**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.
- Work together to find creative solutions.



**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.

- Lighten up on the "indoor toys only" rule. If you have found a perfect toy that the child especially enjoys, take it outdoors.
- Check with the child's family about taking adaptive equipment outdoors, but most items are durable enough for outdoor use.

**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!
- 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.

**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.

- Be Creative! 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.

Continue on page 2 →

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## A Parent's 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.

## RESOURCES

- **Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning** <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>
- **Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards** <http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/wmels-about.php>
- **Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices** <http://www.dec-spced.org/recommendedpractices>

## TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

- **The Registry Training Calendar** <https://www.the-registry.org>
- **WI Early Care Association (WECA) Training Calendar** <http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/>
- **MECA Special Needs Support Program (SNSP)** <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/meca/specialneeds>

This document was modified for use by the State of Wisconsin from the **I Don't Have an Accessible Playground—Or Do I tip sheet created by Montana Child Care plus+**, <http://www.ccplus.org/Products.html>.

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