

# Bridges to including disabled children in play and childcare provision

## Introduction

A bridge is defined as:

‘a structure that is built over a river, road or railway to allow people and vehicles to cross from one side to the other.’

(The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary)

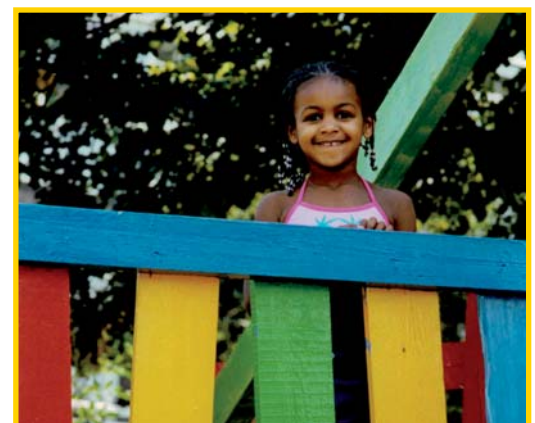
Bridges connect people and places. They may take only brief moments to cross, or a seeming eternity. Some people cross them without a second thought; for others they may cause great fear and concern.

Bridges rarely just appear. They have to be planned and carefully built. When the ground is properly prepared on both sides, you end up with a structure that provides safe passage over obstacles or barriers – with much improved access for everyone.

Research carried out through the **Kids Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP)** networks has demonstrated that inclusion can best be promoted where there is a person in place who can act as a link or a ‘bridge’ between a disabled child, their family, and the play or childcare setting. The bridging role is identified as one of the key elements in the **Kids Inclusion Framework** for local authorities to address in promoting and supporting inclusive settings. To download the Framework, go to: [www.kids.org.uk/ndd/publications](http://www.kids.org.uk/ndd/publications).



With reference to some examples of inclusive practice gathered via the Kids PIP Regional Network Meetings, this Briefing Paper examines aspects of the bridging role in promoting inclusion, and offers some ‘Top Tips for Good Bridge Building’.



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# The Bridging Role in Practice

## What

The **Kids Inclusion Framework for Local Authorities** defines the bridging role as: 'People who are 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 primary aim of the bridging role is to enable disabled children and young people to gain access to local play and leisure opportunities of their choice. In the process, bridging workers boost the confidence of the child, family and the setting. Other vital aspects of the role are: information sharing, networking, training, supporting and advising – working both with the child/family, as well as with the relevant professionals and agencies involved.

## Where

Bridges may be built in a range of places – between statutory and voluntary agencies, between local authority departments, between health and social services, and between policy makers in both mainstream and disabled children's services. Certain aspects of a bridging role may appear in several places. If a local authority is to develop inclusion wholeheartedly, bridging work must also take place at a strategic level.

## Who

The bridging role can be located within a range of different jobs, e.g. a dedicated bridging worker, inclusion worker/adviser/co-ordinator and across different teams, e.g. early years, children's services, extended schools services, social services, health or a voluntary agency. The bridging role can be held by an individual working directly with disabled children, young people and their families, or by one or more people working at a strategic level liaising with agencies.

**'In Leeds the bridging role is provided by Inclusion Support Workers funded through the Leeds Sure Start Partnership employed by Leeds Play Network. The role of these workers is to increase the number of settings providing inclusive play services. We provide Out Of School Clubs/Playschemes and other childcare professionals working with school-aged children with advice, support and training on the inclusion of disabled children. We hold regular inclusion information forums and invite in support services. We can signpost groups to specialist training, support agencies and support the application for Leeds Inclusion Support Scheme Funding. We represent play, playworkers and disabled children strategically at city-wide meetings.'**

**(Leeds Play Network)**

## Why

Legally we know that offering disabled children and young people a 'less favourable service on the grounds of their impairment' is unacceptable under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. But promoting inclusion is not just about fulfilling a legal requirement. It's about ensuring that all children and young people have the fundamental human right to play and be included in their local communities.

The aim of the bridging role is to break down the disabling barriers which restrict disabled children and young people's access to everyday play and leisure opportunities. For example:

- Mainstream settings may or may not be that keen on inclusion. They may be wary about including disabled children due to a lack of experience and/or fear of the unknown.

- A family and their disabled child may or may not be that keen on inclusion. If they've only attended specialist provision in the past, they may be nervous about whether the mainstream setting will be able to respond effectively to their child and accommodate their requirements.

## How

Having sufficient time to make a difference and good communication skills are essential to the success of bridging roles. A dedicated bridging worker needs to spend time with both the child/family, and the setting, to gain their trust and build their relationship with each other.

Overall, the role focuses on three main areas:

### 1. Good practice

- Supporting the setting to recognise and develop their existing good practice as the basis for welcoming any child (e.g. the bridging worker visits for initial discussion, offers appropriate disability awareness/inclusion training).
- Supporting the child/family see how good the setting is at what it already does (e.g. the bridging worker accompanies the family to visit the setting).

### 2. Particular requirements

- Supporting the child/family in explaining the child's particular requirements for accessing a play setting (e.g. the bridging worker visits the child/family at home as well as at school).
- Supporting the setting and child/family to work together and identify how best to meet those requirements at the outset (e.g. the bridging worker is there with the child/family and staff for introductions and on site for early session/s).



**'I met with the child, spoke with his teachers and we wrote up some suggested behaviour strategies. I helped to identify an Out of School Club and discussed his requirements with them and how they could best meet these. He then attended the club. Initially, he was closely monitored but slowly the club worked wonders for him and now he loves it. It's his reward system for maintaining boundaries and he has not been excluded since. His parents have said: "it's made such a difference to all our lives."'**

**(Inclusion Co-ordinator, Children's Disability Services, Torbay)**

### 3. Identifying additional resources

- Supporting the setting and the child/family to recognise that between them they have all the resources required – with a positive 'can do' attitude they very often do.
- Supporting the setting and the child/family when they identify that they *don't* have all of the resources required. Occasionally they may not – and will need signposting or advice on issues such as lifting, medical interventions, recruitment of additional staff, loan/purchase of equipment, sign language or inclusion training.

**'A child was placed in a mainstream after school club, up against a range of attitudinal barriers from: 'We can't take your child', to: 'Ok but we need a Personal Assistant (PA)', to: 'We don't have anyone to work on a Monday with your child'. Eventually we proposed a member of staff who was appointed to work on Mondays until the club was able to make a permanent appointment. The result? Happy parents/assisted setting/happy child = Inclusion in progress.'**

**(Inclusive Play Co-ordinator, Devon Children and Young People's Services)**

# Top Tips for Good Bridge Building

The following points emerged out of discussions at the PIP Regional Network meetings as the top tips for good bridge building:

## 1. Pro-active and child-led

The bridging role requires someone to be pro-active; changing people's expectations by informing settings and families what the service can do for them. By making direct contact with disabled children and their families, the service can overturn the traditional expectations that there may just be one or two 'special' places for disabled children to go. Children can choose which local setting/activity they'd like to attend and the bridging service can follow the child's choice and support the people who work there to welcome that child. This becomes a child-led, and not a service-led model.

**'Part of the inclusion process was to second a Local Authority Officer from the Leisure Service to become the Inclusion Play Co-ordinator, who was placed within the Early Years Inclusion Team. The role has been developed to empower disabled children and young people and their parents/carers to freely choose play schemes within their local community; also, to up-skill and build the confidence of providers delivering services to disabled children and young people and their families.'**

(Bury Early Years)

## 2. Ensure an appropriate job description and person specification

### A shared responsibility

Every job description should make it clear that all employees are required to work inclusively and comply with equalities legislation – in theory and in practice.

### A clear job purpose

The bridging role is very different from the 'one to one helper' role. The aim is to ensure that the setting and the family are working together confidently, gradually withdraw the support and move on. The aim is not to impose an extra adult to 'look after' a child.

### Skills and qualities

- Understanding of inclusive play and experience of working with disabled children.
- Ability to empower parents and children in a child centred and play centred way.
- Effective communicator, facilitator and co-ordinator. Ability to delegate.
- Creative in obtaining resources, developing links and networks, ability to signpost effectively.
- Ability to interact diplomatically, liaise strategically and be approachable at all levels, e.g. with parents, providers, children, both individually and in groups.
- Patient and persistent mediator and advocate.
- Determined and persistent with a positive 'can do' attitude – Not taking 'No' for an answer.

**'I have developed and manage a local inclusive play network. I can provide additional assistance, training, equipment and transport (where required). I liaise with outside agencies – giving them no excuse to say 'No'! There is no such thing as a complete barrier. There is always a way around issues – you just have to have a positive attitude. I plan to push inclusion to the forefront of policy and strategy at senior officer level.'**

**(Access and Inclusion Officer, Manchester Sure Start)**

## Top Tips continued

### 3. Audit of services

- Know what services are available for disabled and non-disabled children and young people in your local authority or region.
- Maintain a current and accurate 'directory' for effective signposting (include statutory, voluntary, segregated, separate, inclusive and mainstream support services, play and leisure opportunities).

### 4. Build personal links

- Get to know the service quality and the key contacts of those in your directory.
- Take time to really get to know the children, parents/carers, providers, agencies and organisations.

**'I attend the young person's school for a period of time, so that I can learn about them – their interests, their likes and dislikes – so that we can start to build a trusting relationship. This makes it easier for the young person to attend the club, as they have a friendly face to introduce and support them at the outset.'**

**(‘Stepping Stones’ Project Playworker, Cardiff County Council)**

### 5. Have an inclusive ethos in your service

- Develop a principled statement of how your service plans to do things inclusively – i.e. a policy for inclusive play. Kids has developed a briefing, **Planning for Inclusion** which can be downloaded from the Kids website.
- Identify, agree and work within inclusive underpinning values and principles.
- Look at the language you use and ensure that it reflects the social model of disability. The terms 'disabled children' and non-disabled children' are recommended.



- Be clear what the service and workers stand for (mission/vision, purpose and what you are all aiming to achieve).
- Develop an action plan to start the inclusion process, with specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-scaled outcomes – not just outputs.

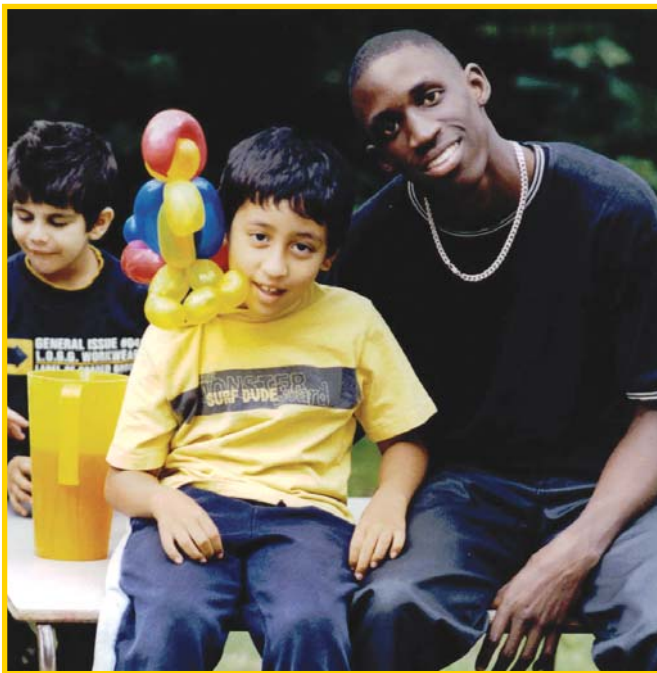
### 6. Monitor, review and evaluate

- Remember: it takes time to build trust and respectful relationships.
- Take one task at a time.
- Monitor what is happening at present in a variety of ways and from different perspectives.
- Assess whether or not there is a requirement to change policy or practice if monitoring shows a mismatch between provision and expectations.
- Identify what could be improved upon and why.
- Work with service users and providers to agree how improvements could be made.
- Make the necessary changes to ensure your service is effective.
- Record and monitor action to be taken to improve practice and/or policy, with specific timescales.

## Conclusion

The bridging role (or service) can be a key factor in establishing truly inclusive play and childcare settings. Disabled children and their families are empowered to make choices and take part in local play opportunities, whilst the settings become more confident in their ability to include disabled children.

The aim is to provide lasting change in policy and practice so that in time the bridging role becomes obsolete. Settings will routinely anticipate the requirements of disabled children, and disabled and non-disabled children will play together as a matter of course. For the moment, though, bridging workers are crucial in providing safe passage across the obstacles of apprehension inherent in both settings and families.



## Kids Resources

- **It doesn't just happen – inclusive management for inclusive play** (Philip Douch – 2nd Edition 2006)

The second edition of this publication has been extensively revised and includes new case studies, and up to date appendices on guidance and legislation.

- **Pick & Mix – a selection of inclusive games and activities** (Di Murray – 2nd Edition 2006)

Kids has also brought out the second edition of this popular book designed to offer playworkers a selection of inclusive games and activities that all children can enjoy.

For further details email:

[publications.ndd@kids.org.uk](mailto:publications.ndd@kids.org.uk)

### Briefings

- Planning for Inclusion: Making your Play Strategy Inclusive (2006)
- Changing Practice – Changing Lives: The impact of the Playwork Inclusion Project (2006)
- Kids Framework for Local Authorities (2004)
- All of Us – Inclusion Checklist for Settings (2004)

All of the Briefings can be downloaded from:

[www.kids.org.uk/ndd/publications](http://www.kids.org.uk/ndd/publications)



**Kids** is a national charity working with disabled children, young people and their families. **Kids** offers a wide range of services including play and leisure projects through five regional centres, and provides training, publications and advice nationally to promote inclusive play and leisure through its National Development Division.

For further information go to: [www.kids.org.uk](http://www.kids.org.uk)

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