

# Our play – our choice:

## a KIDS consultation with disabled children

### Mainstreaming inclusive play Good practice briefing No: 3



## Introduction

'Children and young people of all ages - like adults - should be able to 'go shopping' for their play. They need variety and choice. The essence of play provision must be to give children the freedom to choose.' Lady Allen of Hurtwood in *Planning for Play* 1968 (Founder of Kidsactive - now part of KIDS).

This good practice briefing outlines the findings of a play consultation carried out by KIDS in early 2009 with disabled children, and includes signposts to useful organisations and resources on participation and inclusion. It was compiled as part of KIDS' Support and Challenge contract with Play England funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). This briefing complements the new Play England/Participation Works briefing, *How to involve 8 to 13 year-olds in designing and developing play spaces*, but with a specific focus on consulting with disabled children.

## All children have a voice

Like all children, disabled children have a right to have their voices heard. According to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 'all children have a right to express their views on matters that affect them.' And of all the matters that affect them, having access to high quality play opportunities is one of the most fundamental in ensuring a happy, healthy childhood.

In the UK there is also a raft of legislation and government policy that advocates the participation of disabled children and young people in the design and delivery of services. The Children Act of 1989 (updated in 2004) and the Disability Equality Duty (2005) are important landmarks; as are the more recently introduced policy documents, *Aiming High for Disabled Children* (2007) and the national *Play Strategy* (2008).

The *Play Strategy* asserts that play areas must be: 'accessible for all local children and young people, including disabled children', and that 'all children and young people should be able to take an active role in the design and development of local play spaces.' Ensuring play spaces are accessible to both disabled and non-disabled children is also one of the key principles for designing successful play spaces highlighted in the *Design for Play* guidance published by the DCSF and Play England. KIDS' *Inclusion by Design* further demonstrates how to create accessible play and childcare environments by working closely with disabled children and their families.

Children in general – and disabled children in particular – are often assumed to be dependent and vulnerable rather than competent to make choices and actively participate in decision making. Deaf children and children with communication impairments, autistic spectrum disorders or complex health requirements are among the most isolated and least likely to be consulted.

But all disabled children – even those with the most complex impairments – are able to communicate their views. They may not be able to communicate verbally but they will be able to get their views across in other ways whether it is through picture symbols or sign language, or by communicating via an advocate, ally or personal assistant (PA). There are many useful resources on how to include disabled children with communication impairments listed on the back page.

At KIDS, we firmly believe that seeking the views and the participation of disabled children, young people and their families in the design of play spaces is central to the process of ensuring those play spaces will be more inclusive as well as more attractive and fun. Disabled children, young people and their families want to express their views about the places they play and should be involved at every stage of the design cycle from planning new play spaces to reviewing existing provision. Invite disabled children and their families to advise you by contacting mainstream and special schools, local authority children's services, voluntary organisations and parent groups.

Play is children's culture and it is vital that all children are enabled to have their say on where, how and what they want to play – as well as who they want to play with.

### The KIDS play consultation

The play consultation was undertaken by Sam Hancock from KIDS with two groups of disabled children in the South West and the West Midlands. Sam writes:

'As a number of the children we were working with were unable to communicate verbally, we used art as a medium for expression. In this way the children were able to express themselves in whatever art form worked most effectively for them.'

The groups created their ideal play spaces from a range of materials including modelling clay, drawing materials and other 'junk' materials like cork tops and straws. We were clear that the children and young people should find the experience fun and not feel pressured into getting involved if they didn't want to. We also took care not to influence or direct the participants' ideas – however unrealistic they might be.



We used similar methods with both groups, but it is important to remember that like all children, disabled children have a wide range of different requirements and there are many ways of engaging with disabled children. This consultation is just one example. The key issue is building relationships with the children, finding out how they communicate and what support is required in order for them to participate.

We began by examining examples of existing local play provision and elements that make up a play environment – both good and bad.

This enabled the children to think more creatively about what they might want (or not want) in their play spaces. They looked at natural elements such as trees, grass and water and examined access routes to the play space, and accessibility of play equipment.'

**Natural elements** were very prevalent in many of the designed spaces – many of the children chose grass as the basis for their space and a significant number also added an element of water to it, whether this be for indirect play (such as a lake for fishing or a pond with ducks) or direct play opportunities such as swimming pools, water jets or stepping stones.

**Colour** also played a big part in much of what the children designed. Whatever the materials, the majority of children chose bright and contrasting colours rather than one block colour or a mixture of dim or pale colours.



This is Will and he thought that his outdoor play space should have grass. Will's play space has trees and a slide. Will also said he loves bouncing on his trampoline in his back garden.

**Equipment** made up a large part of the outdoor space design – especially trampolines and other 'bouncy' play equipment. Slides of all shapes and sizes were also popular.

And whilst KIDS would recommend that outdoor play space is much more than 'equipment', it is clear nonetheless that many children enjoy play structures and a wide range of equipment. For further information on this refer to both the Play England and the KIDS guidance on design.



Billy had lots of ideas about what his perfect outdoor play space would look like. He decided to build a complete 'park' which consisted of grass, water and different types of equipment to play on. Billy also wanted an outdoor space where people could eat, and colourful benches where parents would be able to sit and watch their children, as well as a pool for dolphins to play in.

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One of the children we consulted – a wheelchair user – wanted equipment that she could access using her wheelchair, such as swings, bridges and roundabouts. These were things that she had previously been able to use and had really enjoyed.



This is Thomas's roundabout – it has seats on it!

This is Beth – she is designing her park with the help of Sam and her mum. Beth designed the shape of her play space and wanted lots of grass.



Beth had lots of things that she could play on in her 'park' which included a roundabout, a swing and bridge that wheelchair users could access, plus a large bouncy area – indicated on the picture above by all the yellow and green tape. Beth also wanted a large pond in her park full of ducks.

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'This is a slide with a rock climbing wall, with a house to go inside where you can play games and a spa...my park would have a place where you could go and eat and somewhere you could go inside and play computer games and watch all of the channels if you wanted.' Jake

Some of the boys focused on large pieces of equipment that incorporated a number of different play elements and pieces, such as slides, swings, things to climb and bounce on and water.



Sandford made this brightly coloured aeroplane meant for climbing on. Sandford had the idea of putting fixtures in it, so you could take it apart and move it around the park more easily.

'This is a climbing frame. You bounce on a trampoline into a dark tunnel and at the end a ladder to another trampoline to the climbing frame!' Sam





## Recommendations for consulting with disabled children

- Work in partnership with parents and carers to make sure events and consultations are held at venues and times that are easy to access. Be proactive in targeting local community and disability groups and check a multi-faith calendar before organising any important events to ensure no avoidable clashes with religious events.
- Check that posters, signs, pictures, activities and resources reflect the diversity of the local population, and promote positive images of disabled children and adults. Use positive language and take care not to reinforce stereotypes or tokenism.
- All children are different and communicate in different ways – ask disabled children and their families what support they need in order to participate and work around their requirements. Establish who wants to be involved and make sure you have the intention of both listening and providing feedback to show that all contributions matter.
- Multi-media resources such as video and digital cameras are a good way of capturing what is happening. Photos, drawing and junk modelling can also be used.
- Make it clear that everyone's first language is considered of equal value (including British Sign Language and electronic communication) and that materials can be provided in different community languages and alternative formats (for example, Braille and picture symbols).
- It is important not to have any assumptions about abilities and opinions before you start. Take time to engage with disabled children and build up relationships so they feel welcome, safe and accepted. Use the expertise of disability groups and participation workers. Effective participation is not about the occasional symbolic event – but requires time, attention, resources and training.
- Be creative and fun – formal meetings can be dull for adults and are not a good way to engage children and young people. A relaxed open environment allows children and young people to feel comfortable enough to take part.
- Finally, no hidden agendas – adults must be prevented from taking over. They are there to enable not to direct.



Maya wanted a red heart shaped park with lots of things to play on, like swings, a seesaw, hopscotch and stepping stones.

Maya also wanted a swimming pool and a pet's corner.

## KIDS - working with disabled children and young people

**KIDS National Development Department (NDD)** promotes inclusion across the play, childcare and youth sectors through training, publications and partnership working. KIDS is working with Play England to provide advice and guidance to play pathfinders and playbuilders on promoting accessible design and inclusive play and is running a telephone advice line open Monday to Friday from 10.30am to 12noon and 2.00pm to 3.30pm. Please call 020 7359 3073 or email: [pip@kids.org.uk](mailto:pip@kids.org.uk).

KIDS runs the **Playwork Inclusion Project (PIP)** and is a partner in the **Look Listen Change** consortium (hosted by NCB) offering the **Youth4U – Young Inspectors** programme advice and guidance, and providing support to local authorities on how to actively promote the programme to young disabled people and facilitate their meaningful participation.

## Useful resources and websites

**How to involve 8 to 13-year-olds in designing and developing play spaces**  
A new briefing produced by Play England and Participation Works. See also '**How to involve children & young people with communication impairments in decision making.**' [www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)

**Design for Play: A guide to creating successful play spaces** (A. Shackell, N. Butler, P. Doyle and D. Ball, 2008)  
Can be downloaded from the Play England website: [www.playengland.org.uk/resources](http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources)

**Inclusion by Design – a guide to creating accessible play environments** (2008)  
Can be ordered from the KIDS website.

### Top Tips for Participation: what disabled young people want

This poster (which can be downloaded) is part of the **Making Ourselves Heard** project which promotes the voices of young disabled people run by the Council for Disabled Children. See also **Participation from the Start: Disabled Children using Children's Centres** another CDC project. [www.ncb.org.uk/cdc](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cdc)

**The National Charter of Rights for Disabled Children and Young People** is a unique handbook written by disabled children and young from the **Include Me TOO** group. [www.includemetoo.com](http://www.includemetoo.com)

**Every Disabled Child Matters (EDCM)** has produced an 'Inclusion Charter' and has a range of briefings on local engagement. [www.edcm.org.uk](http://www.edcm.org.uk)

**Nothing Special: Including young disabled people in youth & leisure services** (2009)  
This multi-media toolkit is a mixture of text and online guidance and is designed to help play, youth and leisure organisations incorporate inclusive principles and practice into all aspects of their work. For further information go to: [www.kids.org.uk/publications](http://www.kids.org.uk/publications)

**If you would like a copy of this briefing in large print or an alternative format, please contact the PIP Team.**



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