

Playing Outdoors? Disabled children's views of play pathfinder and playbuilder play spaces

An overview of KIDS research



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Introduction to Playing Outdoors?

In December 2008 the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) launched England's first ever Play Strategy (2008), which promoted the significance of all children having more and better places to play. A key commitment of the Play Strategy was to invest £235 million in the improvement and development of play spaces. Thirty local authorities were awarded play pathfinder status, and were given approximately £2 million capital funding to develop 28 play spaces and one adventure playground in their area. All other local authorities were awarded playbuilder status and were given approximately £1 million capital funding to develop 22 play spaces.

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'I like playing with my mates so that I'm safe.'

Play England, as a government delivery partner, was contracted by DCSF to support local authorities developing new outdoor play areas. Play England commissioned KIDS to provide advice and guidance to local authorities on mainstreaming inclusive play. Consequently this research involved the valuable support of Play England.

Research by the Audit Commission in 2003 identified a national shortage of play provision for disabled children. Therefore it is important that play pathfinder and playbuilder authorities identify and address the challenges that disabled children and their families face accessing and being included in outdoor play. This research aimed to explore disabled children's and their parents' and carers' views of new play spaces.

For more in-depth information about the research and to read the full report, please contact: ndd@kids.org.uk or visit the KIDS website: www.kids.org.uk.

The research

Sixty-six children aged 8- to 16-years-old from five different local authorities across England participated in this research. The children took part in preliminary focus groups using a creative approach to explore how, where and with who they play. This session was followed up by taking the children to visit three new play pathfinder/playbuilder spaces within their local authority to find out their views about the sites. Cameras, video recorders, voice recorders and observations were used to collect the children's opinions about the play areas.

The parents and carers of each of the participating children were sent self-completion questionnaires about their experiences of accessing outdoor play in their community. In total, 43 of the 66 parents/carers returned the questionnaires.

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Creative and playful engagement

Findings

Children and parents generally provided positive feedback about play pathfinder/playbuilder play spaces. However, children's perceptions of the play spaces varied substantially between individual spaces, with some unanimously being regarded as 'good' and 'fun', whereas others were unanimously regarded by the children as 'bad' and 'not fun' for all children.

There appears to be a link between the level of satisfaction that parents/carers have with play spaces and their child's level of support requirements. Parents/carers of children with higher levels of support requirements seem to be less satisfied with play spaces.

Over half of parents/carers reported that their child accesses outdoor play spaces once a month or less. The reasons given for this include a lack of accessible routes to and around play spaces, play equipment, transport and parking, toilets and information about appropriate play opportunities.

Although the feedback about the new play spaces is generally positive, there were some clear issues that emerged which inhibited all children from being included.

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All children must have access to fun play experiences

1. Accessible play spaces

One significant barrier excluding disabled children is access into and around play spaces. Basic oversights such as a lack of drop kerbs or design features such as steps, means that some disabled children cannot even get into the play areas.

Researcher: 'What do you think of the play area?'
Child: 'Rubbish!'
Researcher: 'Why is that?'
Child: 'I couldn't get off the pavement.'



I want to get in!

From the 15 play areas visited, only three were easy for all children to get into. The others had access problems, such as lack of drop kerbs, difficulty with parking, or limited signage to find the play area. Some of the children, predominantly wheelchair users and children with mobility impairments, were unable to access any play opportunities, or sometimes even the site itself, as the play areas were not able to meet their requirements. Additionally, groups who had members with physical impairments seemed to be less satisfied with the play spaces they visited than other groups. Often, children with no physical impairments did not like a play space because their friends who are wheelchair users could not play with them.

- Child: 'They (wheelchair users) can't get in here.
 Child: 'If you are in a wheelchair you will get a hurt bottom.' (Referring to steps descending into play space.)
 Child: 'Disabled children can't get in here.'

From this, it is possible to propose that developing inaccessible play spaces excludes not only children with specific impairments, but their peers and siblings who will not go to play spaces where their sibling/friend is excluded.

Most of the play areas visited had a path of some sorts. It was suggested that having wide accessible paths with hard surfacing that are flat (and ideally stand out visually) are important for many people to be able to navigate their way around the area easily and safely. However, many of the paths the children came across were only a route through or partially into a play area. This scenario affected not only wheelchair users and those with other mobility impairments but also children with sensory impairments and children who did not like getting dirty from the natural surfacing.

Child: 'There is no path around all of the playground so you can tip over in your wheelchair.'

Child: 'Hard to get here. Some people in wheelchairs wouldn't be able to get in here would they...because it's very rough terrain. Logs, stumps and trees.'

Child: 'What you would do is put a path between pieces of equipment and do it in three different ways, no four actually, and that way you could get to everything.'

In three of the play areas, the incline of the path also made navigation tricky. Children who had electric wheelchairs needed support to ascend steep hills, which was demanding for support staff.

2. Accessible play opportunities

The majority of children were able to access at least one piece of equipment within the play areas. The most popular were swings (all varieties), zip wires and equipment that spun around. When children visited the play areas they generally approached the traditional equipment such as swings and slides, before exploring any natural and creative features, such as willow tunnels, mounds and boulders. However, this observation is unsurprising due to most children only being accustomed to playing with such equipment.

It is clear from observations that wheelchair users and children who preferred sensory play were unable to access any equipment within play spaces across all five local authorities. Exceptions to this were a site with an accessible roundabout and two sites with some simple sensory experiences such as musical play opportunities, sand and carved wood. It is



Children like exploring sensory features

important to recognise that not all disabled children are wheelchair users, and it is unrealistic and inappropriate to only install wheelchair accessible equipment in all play areas. Doing so would not meet the play requirements of all children. However, there are estimated to be 70,000 children in England who are wheelchair users (Social Policy Research Unit, York University, 1995) and so it is imperative that these children have access to outdoor play opportunities.

Another observation supported by some children's comments, was that they wanted to explore equipment that would usually be deemed as 'age inappropriate'. Although some equipment is intended by manufacturers to be played with by younger children, it is more appealing to some older children due to their own abilities or confidence in their own skills. It seems that equipment should be viewed as appropriate for children at certain stages of development rather than for children of specific ages (as all children develop at different rates and have different abilities).

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Age appropriateness?

Some children suggested ways in which they would like to see play equipment made more inclusive. Suggestions included a seesaw with a supportive seat, a zip wire seat which would allow more than one person to go on it (or allow a child more support when seated) and more attractive and inclusive wheelchair accessible swings.

The initial focus groups highlighted the need for sensory play opportunities in play spaces. One play area had a glockenspiel and reflective metal structures and another had a carved wooden feature. However, the rest of the sites lacked any loose parts that children could explore, and had limited opportunities for sensory play. Some children suggested that extending sensory play would improve the play spaces.

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|-------------|---|
| Researcher: | 'What would make this play space better?' |
| Child: | 'A sand pit.' |
| Child: | 'A swimming pool.' |
| Child: | 'Sound toy.' |
| Child: | 'A really big water fountain.' |

Having opportunities for all children to socialise with their peers is a crucial element of play (Lester, S. and Russell, W. 2008). This study has shown that most play spaces visited did have opportunities for most children to play with their peers. This feature of play spaces needs to be maintained and built on in future developments.

3. Levels of challenge

It was observed that the level of challenge sought by the children varied immensely. Many children (regardless of their level of mobility) were very fearful of heights and equipment that moved quickly. These children sometimes required adult encouragement, reassurance and/or support. Children's fears or lack of confidence could be due to a lack of experience in playing outdoors, a lack of awareness about the extent of their own abilities and skills or due to their specific impairments.

Child: 'I don't like having my feet off the floor... I'm scared of heights.. I might fall and bump my head.'

Equally, there were also some children who were very physically able and wanted to participate in deep play.¹ However, there were not always such opportunities within play spaces, which consequently affected these children's satisfaction levels. Similarly, some wheelchair users stated that they wanted opportunities to appropriately challenge their skills, but had virtually no chances to play in any way, let alone experience height, speed and other appropriate risks.

4. Adult support

This research has found that providing support for children and families is a crucial element for some children to be able to access outdoor play. For example, some children require adult support to ensure they are safe, whilst others cannot always be appropriately and safely supported by one person.

Support may also be required for families where parents/carers have various impairments too. It was also noticed whilst visiting the play areas, that adult support was required for almost all children to access nature and creative play opportunities, and also to encourage some children who lacked confidence to access any play experiences.

Parent: 'If my husband has work commitments I cannot always manage on my own (lots of lifting and pushing).'



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Children require different levels of challenge in play spaces

¹ Hughes describes deep play as "Play which allows the child to encounter risky or even life threatening experiences, to develop survival skills and conquer fear" (Hughes, B. 2004)

5. Safety

Feeling safe was mentioned by both parents and children as a crucial feature of an inclusive play space. Specific safety fears included vandalism of play spaces, litter, stabbing incidents and gangs of older children hanging around. When the children visited the play areas only minimal vandalism and litter was seen and no gangs of older children were spotted. However, children from all eight groups cited that these were reasons why they had not visited play spaces. Regardless of how valid they are, these fears need to be acknowledged and tackled by local authorities to regain communities' and children's confidence in accessing outdoor play. The children noticed that four out of the 15 play spaces felt very isolated in terms of their location. These locations had secluded entrances and little or no community oversight. The children commented about how this affected their feelings of safety within the spaces:

Child: 'It's in the middle of nowhere. You could get stabbed'
Child: 'If someone fell down the steps there would be no one there to help them.'

One child described how knowing adults were in close proximity made him feel safer.

Child: 'There's loads of houses around here. So if you get hurt you can run out.'

It is unsurprising to note that children appear to be fearful in playing in more adventurous ways too. Play experts have long argued that children have become 'risk averse' (Gill, 2007) due to over-protective attitudes. Therefore it could be argued that, as a result, many children lack the experience and the confidence to test their skills and abilities and to take risks in controlled environments such as play spaces. These fears can be more prominent for disabled children, who are frequently over-protected even more than their non-disabled peers. (John, A. and Wheway, R. 2004).

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All children need opportunities to take risks in safe environments

6. Information

The parental questionnaire highlighted that a lack of information about appropriate outdoor play provision prevented over half of parents and carers from accessing play spaces. Most parents appear to get information about play opportunities by word of mouth or through their child's school. It is unclear whether this is the preferred method or whether parents/carers do not know about services such as their local Families Information Service (FIS) or specialist directories.

Recommendations

The former government's play funding has provided more and higher quality play opportunities for all children to access. However, this research has highlighted some challenges in ensuring all disabled children are included within this.

It is hoped that these findings will draw attention to the importance of inclusivity throughout the development and sustainability of play spaces, and emphasise that certain steps need to be taken to ensure that this happens. This research recommends the following:

1. Local authorities should develop all play spaces as inclusively as possible within budget restraints, which include some good opportunities (and choices) for wheelchair users to access outdoor play experiences across the local authority area. Map local play spaces, highlighting the accessibility of sites, play opportunities for wheelchair users and existence of toilets and changing places.
2. Disabled children and their families should be involved throughout the development process of play spaces to ensure that they meet the requirements of all children and carers as well as providing high play value for all children.
3. Equipment and play opportunities should be exciting and fun for all children with various levels of challenge offered too. The use of equipment that can be used in different ways by children at different stages of development and with differing levels of ability are recommended.



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Everyone playing together

4. Assessments of site accessibility should be conducted from the point of view of all users including disabled children and their families. Involve children in this process.
5. Solutions to design issues should be proposed and developed through partnerships between agencies such as highways, parks and planning.
6. Revenue funding should be sought to support children and families who have higher levels of support requirements. Local authority play strategies must recognise this, and make appropriate links with other funding streams and departments (such as short breaks services) to develop the best and most appropriate inclusive play services.

7. Multi agency working is required across local authority departments (and with Primary Care Trusts and with the voluntary sector) to share knowledge, expertise and resources.

8. Examine on an individual basis the requirement for fencing around play spaces. Further case studies are needed to propose alternative solutions to fencing that meet users requirements e.g. use of natural barriers to stop children running off.



Flexible equipment for all to use

9. All adults and staff supporting children should have disability equality training which allows them to support all children to access play experiences of their own choice and to realise their aspirations, whilst meeting each child's individual requirements.
10. Increase the awareness of play opportunities to all parents/carers including information about supervision available and the accessibility of sites and equipment. Effective means to provide this information should be sought (Families Information Services, Disabled Children Teams, schools etc), with awareness given to the need for information in different formats (pictorial, Braille, large font etc).
11. Information about play spaces should be available to parents/carers living outside of the local authority as families are likely to visit play spaces in more than one authority. Examples such as the Black Country play website (www.playspace.tv) are a good way of approaching this issue.

12. Tackling children's and adults' perceptions about safety must involve a collaborative approach involving community safety teams, the police and also the local and national media.
13. Effective means of tackling bullying of disabled children should be sought through the promotion of play spaces as inclusive from the beginning of the development process. Providing supervisory staff, volunteers and qualified playworkers such as play rangers, helps to tackle any bullying and to also role model positive social relationships (Beuderman, 2010).

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Outdoor Play Campaign (DCSF)

For further details go to: www.dcsf.gov.uk/campaigns/outdoor_play/index.cfm?i_sit_id=5&i_pag_id=2

Change4Life (Dept. of Health)

One element of the Change4Life programme is Play4Life. Go to: www.nhs.uk/Change4Life

Childhood and nature: a survey on changing relationships with nature across generations (Natural England 2009)

www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/Childhood%20and%20Nature%20Survey_tcm6-10515.pdf See also: *A sense of freedom – the experiences of disabled people in the natural environment* (Natural England).

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