

# Including

## Disabled Children in Play Provision

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### Introduction

All children need and have a right to play. Play is vital for children's health, wellbeing and happiness – particularly for children facing barriers like discrimination and exclusion.

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The beauty of play is that every child can play in their own way, at their own pace, following their needs, wishes, instincts and imagination. Through play children explore and learn about the world around them.

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Play can involve a wide range of different experiences including social, physical, sensory and creative. Play can be loud and boisterous, or quiet and introspective. It can take place in natural or manufactured environments. Children can play on their own, or in groups, independently or with a parent or carer.

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Good play provision will make everyone – children and adults of all ages – feel welcome and comfortable in the space, with a wide range of opportunities and experiences for all abilities.

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Playgrounds and play spaces have huge potential to provide important opportunities for disabled children to be included in their communities, breaking down barriers and building relationships. This brings benefits for non-disabled children too, as they learn through their interactions and engagement with disabled friends and peers.



Sadly, in the UK, many disabled children, disabled parents, and their families are still excluded from local play spaces. Barriers include lack of accessibility, poor understanding of disabled children's needs and wishes, negative public attitudes and a limited range of play opportunities.

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We believe that everyone can help disabled children and their families feel welcome and included in their local play spaces. Those involved in designing and managing play spaces have a key role to play in leading change, in partnership with disabled children, their families and the local community.

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**A positive, solution-focused attitude is essential to include disabled children – listening and engaging with families, prioritising the needs and wishes of disabled children, making adaptations to increase accessibility and remove barriers, changing public attitudes, creating a welcoming space and maximising the range of play opportunities offered by the equipment and the environment as a whole.**

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## Background and context

This Statement aims to support those involved in play spaces, playgrounds and adventure playgrounds in the UK in making these facilities more accessible and inclusive. It is written for local authorities, voluntary organisations, housing associations and schools, amongst other play providers – including private providers (e.g. pubs, holiday parks, camp sites, service stations, theme parks, zoos).

The statement is from the Children’s Play Policy Forum (CPPF) and the UK Play Safety Forum (PSF)<sup>1</sup>, two UK national bodies committed to enhancing quality play opportunities for all children. Both advocate for all children to experience a range of play opportunities, with their work underpinned by children’s right to participate in decisions that impact on their lives and on their right to play.

These rights are protected under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>2</sup>, and the United Nations Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)<sup>3</sup> as well as a broad range of national legislation across the UK.

Appendix 1 shares three case study examples.

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## Why this Statement is needed

To uphold the right and need of every child to play, **the creation of accessible and inclusive play spaces is essential**. To date as a society, we have failed in producing enough accessible and inclusive places for children to play within a reasonable distance of their home.

Disability and equality legislation highlight the duty to make reasonable adjustments<sup>4</sup> to ensure that disabled people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage. In play spaces, this should lead to adjustments that enable disabled children and their families to enjoy facilities that work well for them. However, the adjustments that have been made have resulted in little difference for many disabled children.

When deciding if adjustments to a facility or design feature are reasonable, it is crucial to consider how effective it will be in providing for all needs. Research<sup>5</sup> and engagement with children and their families has identified common failings in the design of play spaces which lead to unnecessary exclusion. Despite innovation and funding, there remain identifiable patterns in play space design which create exclusion. This is often exacerbated by the inappropriate interchangeable use of the terms “accessible” and “inclusive”.

Families with disabled members highlight significant barriers, particularly: a lack of choices (especially for children who need to remain seated in their buggy or wheelchair); a lack of appropriate toilet facilities; and negative societal attitudes. The impact of these barriers was revealed in one survey<sup>6</sup> of over 400 families of disabled children, which found that over half were unable to play as often as they would like, while almost half needed a ‘Changing Places’ toilet<sup>7</sup> to facilitate their use of the play facilities.

Good design considers the individual needs of children, play value, and different types of play<sup>8</sup>, offers all children opportunities for risk-taking and challenge, and takes a balanced approach to risk<sup>9</sup>. It also responds to the unique characteristics of individual sites and community needs.

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**Play Value** describes the value an environment, object or piece of equipment brings to children’s experience of play. A space rich in play value creates opportunities for a variety of physical, social and sensory play experiences. Something will have high play value if children are able to play with it in many different ways, integrate it into their play or use it to expand on their own ideas and actions.

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Play spaces differ in size; from small local facilities to large sites with a range of amenities such as toilets, parking and refreshment opportunities. It is also recognised that there are fixed and limited capital and revenue budgets for the provision of children’s play facilities. Therefore, for a range of providers, the strategic provision of truly inclusive play spaces at well-chosen destination sites is likely to be a key feature of a reasonable response to legislation.

The European standard BS EN 1176 provides an agreed set of safety standards for playground equipment, regardless of children’s ability. Currently there are no alternate standards for inclusive play spaces.



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## Definition of Accessible and Inclusive Play Spaces

The UK Play Safety Forum and Children's Play Policy Forum recommend the following definitions when using the terms "accessible" and "inclusive" in the context of play space.

**An Accessible Play Space is a space which is barrier-free, allows users access to move around the space and offers participation opportunities for a range of differing abilities. Not every child of every ability will be able to actively use everything within an accessible play space.**

**An Inclusive Play Space provides a barrier-free environment, with supporting infrastructure, which meets the wide and varying play needs of every child. Disabled children and non-disabled children will enjoy high levels of participation opportunities, equally rich in play value.**

Inclusive play spaces have the following characteristics:

- The aims of the facility are clearly stated.
- Parents/carers and children have the opportunity to understand layout, play equipment, overall space and facilities before arrival.
- Designers and providers engage with local transport providers to review accessible transport links.
- Inclusive play equipment is located across the entire scope of the play space and is not confined to a designated or segregated area.
- Known barriers to participation are addressed.

This Position Statement is based on the social model of disability which identifies that disability is a result of the barriers faced by people with a range of varying needs – which may be physical, sensory, learning, or medical considerations. It is not

the individual's needs that create the disability but the way in which society responds to those needs<sup>10</sup>. The term "disabled children" is used to mean children who are disabled by their environment.

This Position Statement highlights the distinction between "accessible" and "inclusive" play spaces. It acknowledges that, although all play spaces should be accessible, not all play spaces can or will be inclusive. The terms "accessible" and "inclusive" should therefore not be used interchangeably. Confusion around this terminology contributes to a lack of appropriate provision.

## Key Statement Messages

1. A positive and solution-focused attitude is critical to creating inclusive play space design, based on understanding and prioritising the needs of disabled children and making adaptations to include them.

Those responsible for designing and managing play spaces can make a big difference by championing the importance of including disabled children in play spaces, working in partnership with disabled children, their families and the local community.

2. Children and their families want play spaces which include the range of features and facilities they need.

Children and their families can feel let down when play spaces that are referred to as "inclusive" lack the facilities and design features that would make the environment work well for them.

Small adaptations can make a big difference<sup>11</sup>.

3. Play spaces should offer a balance of high to low challenge opportunities and a good mix of play features.

Play opportunities offering a wide range of play experiences, challenge, variety, and choice are essential for disabled children and families. However, this does not mean that all play features need to be accessible to all children.

Providers need to make value judgements about how to create spaces that work well for all, while meeting children's varied levels of ability and appetite for risk and challenge.

4. All children deserve to be able to enjoy play spaces that work well for them and their families within a reasonable distance of their home.

Play providers and operators need to take a strategic approach to planning accessible and inclusive spaces.

5. All play spaces should be developed through community participation, co-design and co-production.

Plans for provision should always be co-produced with local children and adults. Engaging with children and families will help to ensure there is a broad range of play opportunities for different levels of ability. Further innovation and co-production between stakeholders is necessary to develop more equipment and features that offer inclusive play opportunities for all children. This should include play space providers and operators, play equipment manufacturers, play space designers and families.

Local councils and community groups that work with disabled children will be able to provide important data and broker links with local stakeholders.

## References

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The Children's Play Policy Forum: A collective voice for children's play [www.childrensplaypolicyforum.org.uk](http://www.childrensplaypolicyforum.org.uk)  
Play Safety Forum [www.playsafetyforum.org.uk](http://www.playsafetyforum.org.uk)  
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