



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Playgrounds for All by Susan Agrawal

It breaks my heart every time I see a child in a wheelchair sitting on the side of a playground wanting to participate but unable to do so because the playground is not accessible. After all, almost all children love to swing and play, and we should make equal access to play a priority for our kids.



Current Laws Governing Playgrounds

The Americans with Disabilities Act gives broad outlines of what makes a recreation area accessible, and these regulations were further defined in the *Federal Register* of July 23, 2004, amended August 5, 2005. A section on play spaces provides detailed information on making playground structures and facilities accessible. You may read these regulations, found in sections 240 and 1008, at <http://www.access-board.gov/ada-aba/final.cfm>

You will most likely be very surprised at these guidelines. First of all, they only apply to new playgrounds or playgrounds with new additions, so there is no federal requirement that playgrounds built before these dates be made fully accessible. Secondly, the definition of “accessibility” will probably surprise most of us. For example, each playground must have at least one ground-level accessible play structure, and approximately one ground-level item for every three elevated play components. And just what is a ground-level play structure? It could be a regular sling swing or stand-alone slide, complete with steps, neither of which is likely to be truly accessible to most children with disabilities.

Reading further will likely anger you even more. A playground set is considered accessible if it includes a Transfer Platform. This platform is designed to be at a fixed height that would allow a child in a wheelchair to stand up and then exit her wheelchair, transferring to the platform and then climbing up the stairs to play on the play structure. In my experience, a large percentage of children in wheelchairs cannot get up and then climb stairs to play. After all, that's why they use wheelchairs! Even if a child uses a wheelchair for endurance reasons, getting out to climb up stairs is likely going to be difficult.

A ramp is only required when there are over 20 elevated play components in the playground. The only other reference to a ramp is a non-enforceable advisory section, which states, “Ramps are preferred over transfer systems since not all children who use wheelchairs or other mobility devices may be able to use, or may choose not to use, transfer systems.” Completely true, so why isn't a ramp required for all play sets?

You will also not find any information on including an adapted swing seat that can be used by children who have difficulty sitting up or need a restraining harness for behavioral reasons. The majority of regulations that are included in these documents are common sense items, such as making paths 60 inches wide and using ground surfaces that are wheelchair-friendly.

I think almost all of us would agree that these regulations do not even come close to creating an accessible playground. About all they accomplish is getting a wheelchair into the playground, still leaving the child using it on the sidelines.

A Truly Accessible Playground

A truly accessible playground looks a whole lot different. It includes a ramp to the elevated play structures, and is designed so that a wheelchair can easily move around between elevated play components. It includes many hands-on sensory and play activity panels that can be accessed by pulling a wheelchair under or along the side of them. It includes signage and activities for children who are visually impaired or hearing impaired. Most importantly, it includes swings with back support, preferably hung at a recline and with a harness to allow almost all children to use them. It includes quiet areas

for children with sensory or behavioral issues, and integrates all the play areas so children with and without disabilities may play together.

A non-profit organization, Boundless Playgrounds, has developed more than 180 playgrounds in 31 states that meet these requirements, which can be found at <http://www.boundlessplaygrounds.org/playgrounds/find/index.php>. This organization also awards grants to help groups build new boundless playgrounds, and can provide general information on how you can bring a playground of this type to your neighborhood.

Another great resource is Accessible Playgrounds, which includes more comprehensive listings of playgrounds around the United States and Canada [<http://www.accessibleplayground.net/>]. This site is a little difficult to navigate, but if you click on the navigation panel at the very top, you will be able to obtain a list by state of playgrounds. Make sure to click on both the state and city listings, as they are separate pages.

Encouraging Accessible Playgrounds

Perhaps the most important thing you can do as a parent is to encourage the inclusion of accessible play elements into playground design. If a new playground is being built, share your expertise, including why the ADA standards simply are not acceptable for your child. Changes in the plan, often at no increased cost, can make a much more accessible play space for all.

In addition, it is not very expensive for an existing playground to replace one of its current swings with an accessible swing. Don't be afraid to ask! Note that many so-called accessible swings just have a back support without a permanent harness and are not suitable for many children with disabilities. For example, our local park includes a fully upright high-back swing without a permanent harness, and not one of the four children with cerebral palsy in the neighborhood can use it. A suitable swing should include a permanent harness and be reclined slightly. For just a few hundred dollars, a truly accessible swing can be retrofitted so all children can enjoy swinging.

Finally, make sure your legislators are aware that the ADA regulations do not create accessible playgrounds. More often than not, they still leave children with disabilities on the sidelines, unable to play.