

# INCLUSIVE PLAY



**"Enabling all children to play, and to play together, is about a benefit to the whole community. It is not about overcoming legal hurdles or making expensive provision for a small section of the community. If any child is prevented from playing then it diminishes the play experience of all"**

(John and Wheway, 2004).

We know from research, experience and history that all children benefit from playing. All children are morally and legally entitled to play within their own community whatever their culture, impairment, gender, language, background, behaviour or need.

Inclusive play means that all children and young people have equal access to good quality local play provision. This means that they can play with others or alone as they wish in a rich environment that supports their play needs and gives them access to a wide range of play opportunities.

Play is defined in the Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy as freely chosen and personally directed; the vast majority of children play in this way, a very few may need our support to be able to make choices and access play opportunities.

A staffed inclusive play setting - anything from a holiday playscheme in a local park, to an all year round adventure playground - provides a much wider range of play and social opportunities, and a far richer experience for both disabled and non-disabled children than does a fixed equipment playground or segregated provision.



## Barriers

There is now a legal framework that promotes inclusive play provision, still, in many areas a lack of accessible play environments, and more significantly, attitudes that disable children from playing and socialising within their own community, prevent them from exercising their right to play.

### ATTITUDES

Some people hold the view that children who are disabled are unable to take part in the same activity as everyone else in their community because of their impairments (this is called the medical model of disability). Arguments are made that disabled children need specialist help, separate provision, specialist equipment, that playworkers need special training, that special access may need to be arranged. There is sometimes the belief that disabled children need different treatment and different opportunities to non-disabled children. Very often there is a focus on children's care needs rather than their need to play. This all inhibits disabled children from taking part.

Many disabled people say that the most common reason that prevents them taking part in the same activity as everyone else in their community is:

- Other people's attitudes: the lack of imagination or aspiration in others that can prevent disabled people from achievement;
- The lack of provision made for them as individuals with individual preferences and needs.

### ACCESS

For those disabled children who have mobility difficulties, transport, and the physical environment may provide a challenge to their inclusion. Some children also have specific needs ( e.g. nursing or medication) that may not be met in some environments.

### COMMUNICATION

Language and communication may prove a barrier to some children being included in play provision.

### INFORMATION

Many families of disabled children struggle to know what is available to them in their local community - they may not be aware that local inclusive play provision exists. Information may not be provided in an accessible format or in their language.

### RISK

Some parents and carers, and some play providers tend to be both physically and emotionally protective. Disabled children's lives are often more controlled by adults than those of non-disabled children.

### POVERTY

More than half the families of disabled children in the UK experience poverty and resulting social exclusion. (Every Disabled Child Matters, 2007)

## Making it Real - Breaking Down the Barriers

The most important factor in making inclusive play provision a reality is a positive and non-disabling attitude. A "we will make this work," imaginative and creative approach is much more helpful to disabled children than one that dwells on barriers and problems.

"Social barriers such as fear, embarrassment or discriminatory attitudes also need to be tackled so that an accessible play space is also an inclusive one in which disabled children and their families feel welcome." (Dunn, Moore and Murray, 2003).

### PLAYWORKERS

Staffed play settings employ qualified playworkers. Playworkers are trained professionals who know how to recognise both the verbal and non-verbal cues that children use to show how, what and where they want to play. Playworkers familiarise themselves with the character, capabilities and communication preferences of all the children in the setting. Playworkers take a flexible approach; they interpret children's needs and adapt a situation or environment in order to extend their play and their range of experiences.

Playworkers include all children as part of their role within a setting, but they recognise that some children prefer to play alone from time to time, or all the time. They are guided by the Playwork Principles, which provide the ethos that underpins good practice.

It is important that the whole team believes in and supports the inclusion and participation of disabled children. In quality staffed inclusive play provision, playworkers have undertaken training and professional qualifications and professional development that supports inclusive play. They regularly monitor and evaluate their effectiveness in meeting the play needs of all the

children. As part of good practice, playworkers share knowledge and skills.

Some playworkers have received additional training so that they may be better able to meet the needs of disabled children. Their post may be specifically funded to work with a particular child. However, it is good practice that all playworkers work with disabled children whether they have received specialist training or not, and work as part of a team. In most play settings there is no reason why disabled children should not be included. No distinction should be made other than a recognition that the level of staffing should reflect the wider range of support required from playworkers. In this case there is no need to make any distinction between any of the playworkers employed, regardless of the funding stream that might be used to fund respective posts.

While playworkers are specialists in facilitating children's play, they may not have all the skills necessary to support the physical, emotional, medical or communication needs of a particular child. There are times when it is appropriate that play providers work in partnership with other agencies so that all children can be included. It is appropriate to seek alternative funding that is designated to meet medical or care needs. It is important that funding designated to support children's play is used specifically for play; children's right and entitlement to play is often subsumed by adult agendas and funding is often misused or diluted to meet other needs.

Separate funding can provide for those children who may require additional support – where it is not available play providers and playworkers take a realistic, positive approach to meeting children's additional needs.

## **FAMILIES**

Families of disabled children may not know of the possibilities for play provision available to them in their local community - very often they assume that their children will be precluded from such provision. Therefore it is necessary to take a proactive approach and to make a greater effort to contact families to provide appropriate information and to communicate the benefits of inclusive play.

Many families of disabled children are accustomed to battling to secure appropriate services – as play providers we need to put them at their ease. Families are more confident where they know a play provider has previous experience of successfully including and meeting the needs of disabled children. They may need to "test the water" to be reassured by making their own audit of the staff and setting, and to talk to other families whose children are already using the play setting. Most importantly, they need to feel welcome and that their child's inclusion in the setting is viewed positively. As play providers we need to show a positive, flexible, sensitive approach.

Disabled children are more likely than non-disabled children to have been deprived of messy play. Some families of disabled children are anxious that they remain clean - they are used to prejudice and they worry about appearances, specifically about getting muddy, dirty or covered in paint. As play providers we are supported by the Playwork Principles and offer appropriate play opportunities and experiences. But we must also be sensitive to families and explain that the benefits of playing with paint, water, and mud, outweigh the risks.

Play provision is for children, to meet their play needs. Although the effect of a child taking part in staffed local play provision may be that parents and carers are afforded respite from their responsibilities, the primary purpose of play provision is to provide a rich and stimulating environment where children have opportunities to play that they may not experience elsewhere.

## **PLACES**

A rich play environment provides a wide range of sensory experiences, access to other children, and opportunities to extend capabilities and explore possibilities. It may not be possible to adapt every environment so that a child with any impairment is provided for, or so that every child has access to every play opportunity available within the setting. All children are individuals with different interests and different capacities. However, good practice occurs where every reasonable effort has been made to meet children's play needs and to support children's choices and participation either by adapting the environment or the approach.

Children tell us that the place where they prefer to play is outdoors. We need to support them in accessing outdoor environments or we need to compensate for the lack of outdoor space by recreating some aspects of outdoor play inside. The outdoors can provide sensory experiences, access to the elements (earth, air, fire and water) and the weather, a broader range of possibilities and more opportunities for exploration than an indoor environment.

Expensive specialised equipment or adaptation of access is rarely necessary - disabled children have individual needs. So it is important that when we welcome a new child, we not only find out what their needs might be, but that we make an audit of our play setting with their needs in mind, and take a realistic and reasonable "can do" approach.

Also good practice is when we think of all the possibilities in advance. So for example, in an adventure playground setting where staff are working with children designing a new structure they want to build, they might think about how to accommodate a wide range of needs. Thinking ahead is much easier than adapting.

If choosing a location for play provision we need to bear in mind that some buildings will already have disabled access. The Disability Discrimination Act makes requirements for access so it is worth checking out if it applies.



## LANGUAGE AND RESPECT

People are sensitive about how they are referred to and portrayed. The use of language is very important to disabled people. The disability rights movement prefers the use of the terms “disabled” and “non-disabled” to “special needs” or “able-bodied”. The National Childminding Association has developed guidance and the National Service Framework gives definitions of different needs that disabled people might have. (National Childminding Association, 2005 and National Service Framework, 2004).

Some children’s preferred language is British Sign Language, PECS or Makaton. It is essential that children can communicate in their preferred language within a play setting.

## CONSULTATION

Many children struggle to articulate what they want. Their ideas tend to be limited to what they know and have already experienced. By offering all children a broad range of experiences that are stimulating and challenging to them both as individuals and as part of a group of peers, we can open up the possibilities so they are better able to make choices and develop interests and aptitudes on their own terms.

## The National Legal and Policy Context

The Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy (2002) states:

Every child is entitled to respect for their own unique combination of qualities and capabilities;

The perceptions of the child, their views and opinions should always be respected for each child is connected to, and a bearer of, a wider culture;

The child’s free choice of their own play is a critical factor in enriching their learning and contributing to their well being and development.

## Inclusive play is a legal requirement:

**The Children Act 1989** says “A primary aim should be to promote access for all children and young people to the same range of services.”

**The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995** says that service providers are required to make “reasonable adjustments” to “policy, practice and procedures”, and later (since October 2004) physical adjustments to allow access to play settings. The Disability Discrimination Act (2005) places a duty on all public bodies and local authorities to promote disability equality.

**The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act 2001** extends DDA requirements to cover any provision for children that takes place on school premises.

**The Children Act 2004** sets out five outcomes which all services for children should work towards: to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. Play is integral to the 'enjoy and achieve' outcome.

**The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services** (2004) sets standards for the well-being and health of children in Wales.

It says: “It is not only disabled children’s impairments which determine their quality of life, but also negative attitudes and a disabling environment, for example, unequal access to education, communication, employment, leisure activities, housing and health care. Disabled children and young people have equity of access to education, communication, employment, leisure activities, housing and health care.”

## Conclusion

The number of children living with impairments is higher than ever before and growing, because medical advances have led to improved survival rates.

As the national organisation for children's play we believe that every child deserves the opportunity to: be stimulated; laugh, cry, feel proud, sad, calm, angry, excited and many more emotions; be among other children and part of something bigger than themselves; get muddy; and take a risk.

As play providers, if we are to turn policies and legal requirements into workable reality, we require open-mindedness, honesty, determination, hard work and creativity. Every child in Wales is entitled to quality play experiences and it is our role to ensure that no child is excluded.

**One day Wales will be a place where we recognise and provide for every child's play needs.**

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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity largely funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. Find out more at <http://www.playwales.org.uk>

## Further Reading and Resources

Children's Commissioner's Office in Wales adopted play as one of its themes for 2007 and is focussing attention on inclusive play. Find out more at <http://www.childcom.org.uk>

Children's Play Information Service (2006) Inclusive Play Factsheet

Douch, P (2006) The Busker's Guide to Inclusion. Eastleigh: Common Threads

Children and Families Directorate, Welsh Assembly Government (2004) *National Service Framework for Children in Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/home.cfm?OrgID=441>

Contact a Family (2002) *Everybody Here? Play and leisure for disabled children and young people*. London: Contact a Family. <http://www.cafamily.org.uk/leisure.pdf>

Department for Education and Skills and Disability Rights Commission (2006) *Implementing the DDA in Schools and Early Years Settings*. London: DfES

Douch, P (2006) *It Doesn't Just happen – Inclusive Management for Inclusive Play*. London: Kids.

Ward, F, Elliott, C and Day, C (2004) *I Want to Play Too*. London: Barnardos.

Dunn, K, Moore, M and Murrar, P (2003) *Developing Accessible Play Space. A good practice guide*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

John, A and Whewar, R (2004) *Can Play, Will Play: disabled children and access to outdoor playgrounds*. London: National Playing Fields Association.

Kids (2004) *All of Us - inclusion checklist for settings*. London: Kids <http://www.kids.org.uk>

Kids (2006) *Planning for Inclusion - making your play strategy inclusive*. London: Kids <http://www.kids.org.uk>

Lenahan, C, Morrison, J and Stanley, J (2004) *The Dignity of Risk: A practical handbook for professionals working with disabled children and their families*. London: National Children's Bureau

The Playwork Principles can be found at <http://www.playwales.org.uk>

Welsh Assembly Government (2002) *Play Policy* and (2006) *Play Policy Implementation Plan* <http://www.learning.wales.gov.uk/pdfs/play-policy-implementation-plan-e.pdf>

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