Framework and Toolkit for Inclusive Playgrounds in Maryland

Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

Maryland
DEPARTMENT OF DISABILITIES

This document is a partnership of the **Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council** (Council) and the **Maryland Department of Disabilities** (MDOD). The document was written by **Stephanie Dolamore** (Council), **Kirsten Robb-McGrath** (MDOD), and **Bong Delrosario** (MDOD) with input from **Rachel London** (Council), **Chris Rogers** (Council), **Lisa Belcastro** (MDOD), and **Cait Gardiner** (consultant).

Special Thanks to Our Advisory Board Members:

Josh Basile, Jack H Olender & Associates and Determined2Heal Foundation, Inc.

Rob Dyke, Patapsco Valley State Park, Maryland Park Service

Deborah Herr Cornwell, Caroline County Department of Planning & Codes

Tiffany Joseph, Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

Carrie Lhotsky, Maryland Department of Natural Resources

Mirian Ofonedu, Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities, Kennedy Krieger Institute

Susan Potts, Howard County Parks & Recreation

Rosa Rivera-Lily, Parents' Place of Maryland

Gregory Snyder, The Arc Central Chesapeake Region

Lakeysha Vaughn, Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development

Chanelle Wimbish, Friends of Patapsco Valley State Park

This document includes photos from Blandair Regional Park in Howard County and Pinecliff Park in Frederick County. Thank you to local park staff for their support and to the community members who are featured in the images.

Sincere thanks to Bill Botten and Shannon Nazzal for reviewing early drafts of this report.

Photography by Jennifer Bishop; Creative Direction & Document Design by Laura LeBrun Hatcher

PLAY GROUNDS FOR ALL!

Maryland needs more playgrounds where all children and their families can play.

Most playgrounds are built for a limited type of play. Many playgrounds in Maryland are not fully inclusive because they often leave out people with disabilities who may play in different ways. This means a lot of playgrounds exclude people. Those people miss out on the opportunity to develop social skills, like trying new things in a safe place or building independence.

We need to make playgrounds welcoming and usable for everyone. This is called an inclusive playground. Inclusive playgrounds are outdoor play spaces that can be used by everyone because they are designed to meet needs of different people. They encourage people to come together to play and they make people feel good when they are there. This is important because inclusive playgrounds provide many benefits for everyone.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires playgrounds to be accessible.[1] But accessible is not the same as inclusive. The ADA only provides a minimum level of access. It often does not focus on inclusion. Many playgrounds that are ADA accessible still limit or isolate people with disabilities to one small section of the playground.

The goal of this document is to help change that. This framework is designed to create more access to inclusive playgrounds for all Marylanders. A framework is a document that explains the important parts of an idea. This document explains the important parts of inclusive playgrounds. If we use this framework to create more inclusive playgrounds, we will create a more inclusive Maryland.

This framework provides an overview of what inclusive playgrounds are and what the benefits are. Following the framework are toolkits to promote inclusion at Maryland's playgrounds. We hope readers use this document as a starting point for making inclusive play spaces in their communities where everyone can learn and play together.

How did you develop this document?

This framework was developed by collecting information online and from people in Maryland.

We collected information from many places to write this document. We did interviews with community-based organizations in Maryland and visited playgrounds in Maryland to make observations (primary data collection). We also read documents online about research on playgrounds (secondary data collection). When it is important, we include references in this document to websites where you can learn more information.

What are inclusive playgrounds?

Inclusive playgrounds welcome everyone to participate.

Playgrounds in Maryland should be fully inclusive for all. That means everyone can learn and play together. Inclusive playgrounds include an outdoor playground and all the nearby areas, like parking and bathrooms. Inclusive playgrounds want all members of the community feel like they belong. Fully inclusive playgrounds are those that are physically, socially, and emotionally welcoming.[2]

Inclusive playgrounds have four important characteristics:

1. They can be used by everyone (**accessible**);
2. They meet needs of different people (**adaptive**);
3. They encourage people to come together to play and learn (**welcoming**); and
4. They make people feel good when they are there (**promote feelings of emotional well-being**).

There is a difference between inclusive playgrounds and accessible playgrounds.[3] Accessible playgrounds are designed to meet the minimum standards of the requirements in the law. This means that everyone can access some part of the playground without a challenge. But accessibility does not mean that everyone can use the playground meaningfully. Inclusive playgrounds welcome any individual so they feel like they belong on all parts of the playground. Inclusion goes beyond accessibility because everyone can enjoy all parts of the playground without a challenge.

Here are some examples of the difference between an **accessible** playground and an **inclusive** playground.

Example 1

A playground with pathways to and around the equipment that can be used by someone in a wheelchair is an **accessible** playground. But changes in ground type create a barrier that makes enjoying all parts of the playground not possible. For example, when the ground at a playground changes from concrete to mulch, the areas with mulch cannot be accessed by a person in a wheelchair.

An **inclusive** playground provides accessible ground material throughout the playground and reduces surface changes for a person in a wheelchair.

Example 2

A playground with adaptive swings and non-adaptive swings is an **accessible** playground. Adaptive swings are swings with a high back and harness that can support people with physical disabilities. They can also be swings that can support a person in a wheelchair. But if the adaptive swings are separated from other swings, this creates a barrier to enjoying all parts of the playground.

An **inclusive** playground would not separate the adaptive swings. Instead, an inclusive playground would have many types of adaptive and nonadaptive equipment located together. This allows everyone to feel welcome so they can play and learn together.

Example 3

Inclusive playgrounds consider the needs of children and adults. When the needs of both children and adults are met, they are more likely to enjoy their time at the playground.

For example, adults need places that are comfortable and accessible when visiting a playground. One of the easiest ways to do this is by making sure there is plenty of adult seating, with tables available in the shade. This allows adults to enjoy the playground while kids are also enjoying playtime. Playgrounds can also offer equipment designed for all ages, encouraging all members of the community to play.

Inclusive playgrounds focus on creating opportunities for everyone to play together. This is different from other types of playgrounds.

For example, children and adults with and without disabilities need comfortable and accessible spaces when visiting a playground. These spaces should create opportunities to learn and play together. One way to do this is by offering equipment designed for all ages. This encourages all members of the community to play together. Another example would be to make sure there is plenty of seating around the playground for adults with and without disabilities.

Some playgrounds create **exclusion**, **where some people can use the playground and some people cannot**. For example, if a playground does not have accessible sidewalks and does not have accessible equipment, some people with disabilities cannot go there to play. Everyone is not able to access the playground.

There are also playgrounds that create **segregation**, **where certain parts of the playground are accessible, but not the main part of the playground**. This happens if a playground has areas that have different things. For example, if there is one space for a large play structure that is not accessible and another space for a smaller play structure with accessible equipment. The equipment for people with disabilities is separated from the main playground. Everyone is not able to play together.

There are also playgrounds that promote **integration**. **That means everyone is in the same playground, but not everything is accessible**. For example, if a playground has ramps that lead to the play structures but the play structures have a climbing wall and stairs to reach the slide. Everyone can access the play structures, but not everyone can access all parts of the play structures. Everyone is not able to play equally.

Playgrounds that promote inclusion are designed for everyone to play together. Inclusive playgrounds can be used by everyone because they meet needs of different people. Inclusive playgrounds are welcoming and they make people feel good when they are there. Everyone is able to play and learn together.

What are the benefits of inclusive playgrounds in Maryland?

Everyone, both people with and without disabilities, benefit from the positive impact of inclusive playgrounds.

For people with disabilities, inclusive playgrounds mean better access to spaces for play, recreation, and exercise. Many people with disabilities have other health challenges[4] and exercise less often than people without disabilities.[5] People with disabilities also experience more negative feelings and stress.[6] Inclusive playgrounds provide the opportunity for people with disabilities to increase their exercise and play with others. Play develops social skills in three major areas—it allows for opportunities of independence, trying new things in a safe place, and interacting with others. These are important skills that help in all areas of life.

For people without disabilities, inclusive playgrounds mean the opportunity to be part of a stronger community. One of the key benefits of inclusive playgrounds are opportunities to interact with others. The more community members of all ages and abilities interact and build relationships, the stronger the community becomes. The National Recreation and Parks Association explains that inclusive playgrounds can "bring people together and celebrate the diversity of communities in which they live."[7]

The number of children and adults with disabilities in Maryland can be found in statewide data. About 1 in 10 children in public schools have a disability. And, about 1 in 5 Marylanders have a disability.[8]

Where are inclusive playgrounds located in Maryland?

There is not yet a resource where you can find all the inclusive playgrounds in Maryland on one list.

Finding inclusive playgrounds in Maryland is hard. There is not yet one website or organization that tracks all the inclusive playgrounds. There are several organizations that have websites with some information. These websites might list accessible parks, but not information about what makes the playgrounds accessible. The kinds of access available varies from park to park. For example, one park might have wheelchair accessible equipment on the playground and another park might have a universal changing table in the bathroom near the playground. A universal changing table is one where the personal care needs of both children and adults can be met. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources lists all the accessible playgrounds but only for state parks. Other websites list inclusive parks in a small geographic area. The website Let Kids Play! includes a list of accessible and inclusive playgrounds, but the list for Maryland is incomplete.

We reviewed the available information. **We found that inclusive playgrounds are not spread around Maryland in equal amounts.** Counties in Central and Northern Maryland have more inclusive playgrounds than those in Southern, Western, and Eastern Maryland. This means that areas with more people living close together (urban area) have more inclusive playgrounds than areas with people living farther apart (rural area).

Many inclusive playgrounds are located within state parks. People with disabilities and their families may face barriers accessing these locations. People may assume they have to pay the entrance fee. They may not be aware of the Universal Disability Pass that lets them get into state parks for free.[11] In addition, some people with disabilities use public transportation to get to places in their communities. Many state parks cannot be accessed by public transportation. For people with disabilities and their families who use public transportation, they cannot enjoy these state parks and playgrounds.

Our goal is to see more inclusive playgrounds in Maryland. Everyone deserves to feel welcome so they can play and learn together. It is important for Maryland to invest in (use money for) inclusive playgrounds equally across all of Maryland.

PLAY GROUNDS
FOR
ALL!
Inclusive Playground Features:
❶ Rubberized Ground Cover
❷ Wheelchair Accessible, Multi-Play Equipment to Encourage Inclusion
❸ Roller Slides and ❹ Ramps Instead of Stairs
❺ Energizing Areas for Active Engagement and ❻ Calm Spaces for Rest
❼ Accessible Bathrooms with Universal (Adult) Changing Equipment
❽ Enclosures that Blend with the Environment and ❾ Easy to Understand Signs

Getting Started:

Toolkit for Inclusive Playgrounds in Maryland

PLAY GROUNDS FOR ALL!

Everyone deserves a chance to play. Use this toolkit to expand inclusive playgrounds in your community.

This part of the document is the toolkit. A toolkit is a document that explains the important steps to reach a goal. This toolkit offers information on how to create inclusive playgrounds or to improve existing playgrounds to be more inclusive.

The toolkit has six sections. Each section starts with a definition of the topic. Then the section explains why the topic is important. Finally, the section provides links to additional resources.

- **Create a Committee and Build Collaboration** page 11
- **Assess Your Resources** page 13
- **Funding** page 14
- **Universal Design** page 15
- **Freedom of Choice** page 17
- **Safety** page 18

Create a Committee and Build Collaboration

What is it?

Collaboration is when people work together to achieve a common goal. When more than one person collaborates on a formal project the group is called a workgroup. Sometimes this workgroup is called a committee. The committee is the group of people who lead the project. For a playground to be inclusive (welcoming), leaders and other members in the area must collaborate (work together). This allows everyone to play a role in making things better for everyone. Inclusive playgrounds create opportunities for collaboration before, during, and after construction of a play space. Collaboration is not when leaders tell other people what to do. Collaboration requires leaders to make sure everyone has a fair opportunity to be involved and supported in the planning or activities of a project.

Why does it matter?

Playgrounds do not work without a community. When designing a playground, leaders should ask community members to be involved. Leaders should use many different ways to ask people to be involved such as phone, emails, and in-person meetings. Leaders should give people more than one chance to get involved. Also, leaders should plan for ways to reach people who communicate using a language other than English. This might mean using spoken language translators or American Sign Language interpreters.

Create a Committee and Build Collaboration *continued*

People who are not usually included in playgrounds should be specifically included in planning for inclusive playgrounds. For example, people with disabilities are the best people to share about their barriers at playgrounds and should be included in the process. The American Society for Landscape Architects explains that when designing a playground, including and supporting people of all abilities is important.[11]

Everyone brings their own experience and understanding. A committee with many different perspectives is important when designing inclusive playgrounds to make sure everyone can learn and play together. When the committee has a diverse group of people who are equally supported to participate, the planning and design of the playground can reflect the diverse committee. Collaboration with many people also helps to stop the idea that inclusive playgrounds are only for children with disabilities.

For example, consider how playgrounds can be designed to promote inclusion or not. Many playgrounds have ramps but they also have equipment with stairs or climbing units that stop people with disabilities from being able use all parts of the playground. An inclusive playground should have ramps that lead to an element a person with a disability can play with. This could be a sensory board, a slide, or a communication board.

TO LEARN MORE:

Forming a Viable Project Committee and Holding Successful Meetings by Iowa State University

How to Create An Inclusive Playground Design by Inclusive Playgrounds

Designing Parks with Community-Based Planning by Parks for All Californians

Community Engagement Resource Guide by the National Recreation & Parks Association

Inclusive Healthy Spaces by the National Recreation & Parks Association

Assess Your Resources

What is it?

Resources are the things you have access to for a project. For example, some of the resources needed to build an inclusive playground include money, time, and a committee. When you want to start a new inclusive playground, or update an existing playground to be more inclusive, you will need to assess the resources you have to make it happen. Sometimes this is called doing a needs assessment. A needs assessment looks at the resources as well as what people say they need in a new playground.

Why does it matter?

Assessing resources is an important part of the planning process. During the assessment, you will learn a lot of important information that will help you make decisions. For example, how much money you have for a project impacts how big or small your playground design will be. And what the community wants and needs will help you decide how to spend the project money you have available. If people in your community say they only want slides in the new playground, you may have to prioritize money for inclusive slides over other inclusive play equipment.

TO LEARN MORE:

Assessing Community Needs and Resources by The Community Toolbox

Funding

What is it?

Funding is a word used to describe the money or other resources available to achieve a particular goal. For example, if you want to build a new playground, you will need funding. Funding can be money, but it can also be people who give their time or skills to support a project.

Why does it matter?

Playgrounds cost money to create, maintain, and update. Without funding, a playground cannot be created or stay in good condition. One obstacle to creating inclusive playgrounds is the cost. But there are many ways to find money for projects. Money for playgrounds can come from the government, businesses, community organizations, or individuals. Support for playgrounds can also come from people, like volunteers who build a playground for free instead of charging money.

TO LEARN MORE:

Funding Tool by PlayCore

Request for Grant Information page by Landscape Structures

Community Parks & Playgrounds Program Grant Proposal Process by Maryland Department of Natural Resources

KABOOM! Grants by KABOOM

Fundraising by KABOOM

Playground Grants Guide by Little Tykes

Grant Opportunities for Playgrounds by Play & Park Structures

Universal Design

What is it?

Universal design[12] is the process of creating something to be as functional as possible for as many people as possible. Universal design can be used for things, places, or programs. It is an idea that can be applied to many areas of design.

Why does it matter?

The goal of universal design for a playground is to create maximum usability. This means the most use by the most people. Universal design provides benefits to everyone who uses a space. When a playground uses universal design, the playground creates safety and enjoyment for the most people possible. This matters because people with disabilities can not always enjoy playgrounds and universal design helps create more inclusive playgrounds.

TO LEARN MORE:

Principles of Universal Design (with graphics) by North Carolina State University Center for Universal Design

Universal Design by the American Society of Landscape Architects

Inclusive Play Design Guide by Accessible Playgrounds

Designing for Inclusive Play: Applying the Principles of Universal Design to the Playground by National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability

7 Principles of Inclusive Playground Design by PlayCore

There are seven principles of Universal Design[13] and each is an important part of inclusive playgrounds. The seven principles are explained below as they relate to playgrounds.

1. **EQUITABLE USE:** The playground is useful. The playground appeals to people with diverse abilities. *For example, the play structure has ramps or slopes instead of stairs.*

2. **FLEXIBILITY IN USE:** The playground supports a wide range of preferences and abilities. *For example, swings at various heights and styles in the same area of a playground.*

3. **SIMPLE AND INTUITIVE USE:** The playground is easy to understand by everyone. The playground does not require certain knowledge or concentration levels to understand it. *For example, universal symbols used on park signs instead of only written words.*

4. **PERCEPTIBLE INFORMATION:** The playground communicates information effectively in different conditions. Information can be seen and used when the playground is crowed or empty. Communication also meets the needs of people with different sensory abilities. *For example, textured warning strips on slides to indicate the slide is coming to an end.*

5. **TOLERANCE FOR ERROR:** The playground is safe and tries to reduce accidents. *For example, swings are not too close to other parts of the playground so people do not get kicked by accident.*

6. **LOW PHYSICAL EFFORT:** The playground can be used by everyone without getting tired. *For example, the material on the ground allows everyone to move around without a lot of effort.*

7. **SIZE AND SPACE FOR APPROACH AND USE:** The size of the playground and the space around parts of the playground allows everyone to play. *For example, an activity board should be within reach of a standing or sitting person.*

Freedom of Choice

What is it?

When an inclusive playground is welcoming, it means that all children and adults can make decisions for themselves about what they want to do. This is called freedom of choice. For example, all children should be able to decide for themselves if they want to play on the slide or use a swing. Freedom of choice also includes the ability to choose where you want to play and who you want to play with.

TO LEARN MORE:

The Right to Make Choices: International Laws and Decision-Making by People with Disabilities by the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network

Leveling the Playing Field by Dr. Mary Ann Devine in Disability Studies Quarterly

Transformational Impact: Designing Public Spaces to Promote Intergenerational Play & Recreation by PlayCore

Why does it matter?

Freedom of choice is a human right. People with disabilities are entitled to the same freedom of choice as people without disabilities. But throughout history, and still today, people with disabilities have been prevented from making decisions about what they need and want. Playgrounds that are accessible do not always allow freedom of choice. For example, sometimes a playground has many different slides. But if only one slide is accessible to people with disabilities, they have no choice about which slide to play on. Playgrounds that are inclusive always include freedom of choice so everyone has the choice about where and how to play.

Safety

What is it?

Inclusive playgrounds emphasize the importance of safety for everyone. Safety includes the physical body and the emotions of people. Inclusive playgrounds are designed so that people with and without disabilities feel comfortable and stay healthy while playing.

Why does it matter?

Many of the safety guidelines for playgrounds do not meet the standards for inclusion. For example, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission lists many types of materials that can be used for the ground, such as gravel, sand, or mulch. These materials meet safety guidelines for the general population, but they are not always safe for people with disabilities. They can also exclude some people with disabilities because they may not be easy to navigate for someone who uses a wheelchair or has other mobility challenges.

Another example are slides. The static electricity buildup on traditional slides can interfere with hearing aids. This can cause sudden, unexpected loss of hearing. Instead of traditional slides, a roller slide can be used. The individual tubes on roller slides prevent static electricity from building up. They also provide additional sensory stimulation that can be especially beneficial to children with disabilities that impact their senses like autism, cerebral palsy, or other conditions.

TO LEARN MORE:

Inclusive Playgrounds vs. Accessible Playgrounds by Playworld

Chapter 10: Play Areas by the U.S. Access Board

The Daily Dozen: A 12-point Playground Safety Checklist by the Nation Recreation and Park Association

Surfacing the Accessible Playground: 7 Things Every Playground Owner Should Know About the Accessibility of Their Playground Surfaces by the U.S. Access Board

ADA Checklists by the U.S. Access Board

REFERENCES:

1. U.S. Access Board. A Summary of Accessibility Guidelines for Play Areas.

2. MRC. The Ultimate Guide to Inclusive Playgrounds.

3. National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability. Discover Inclusive Playgrounds.

4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults with Disabilities.

5. Gregory Heath and David Levine. Physical Activity and Public Health among People with Disabilities: Research Gaps and Recommendations.

6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Mental Health of People with Disabilities.

7. National Recreation and Parks Association. Parks and Recreation Inclusion Report.

8. Data about people with disabilities includes information about adults and information about children. Adults are people over 18 years old and children are people under 21 years old. The number of adults with disabilities is about 1 in 5 Marylanders. This is the data for adults who are not in institutions (for example, prison or the army). The number of children with disabilities is about 1 in 10 in public schools. This data is limited, which means it is the best estimate we have. The real numbers of people with disabilities may be higher.

9. Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Public Lands - Accessible Playgrounds.

10. Let Kids Play. Maryland Accessible Playground Directory.

11. Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Universal Disability Pass: Questions and Answers.

12. American Society of Landscape Architects. Universal Design.

13. The UD Project. What is Universal Design?

14. North Carolina State. Center for Universal Design.