



# Enabling Environments

***“The saddest words are “you can’t”  
when you know that you can”***

Disabled young person  
The dignity of risk, Council for Disabled Children, 2004

# Planning for the future

- Early years settings have become more accustomed and skilled at meeting the needs of a much wider range of children with mild to complex needs
- However, outdoor play remains an exclusion zone for many disabled children especially those with complex needs
- During this session we will explore the benefits of outdoor play for all children, examine why disabled children are often excluded from outdoor play areas, discuss how to make outdoor inclusive and design a low cost inclusive outdoor play environment.

## Every one benefits

Giving children access to play freely outdoors is very important for all children – why?

- fosters creativity
- supports exploration
- encourages positive behaviour
- builds confidence and self esteem
- develops motor skills and personal strength
- instigates communication and social interaction
- develops recall and problem solving skills
- generates feelings of happiness and well being.

(and not just for the children)

## ...but did you know that....

*“...children are disappearing from the outdoors at a rate that would make the top of any conservationist’s list of endangered species if they were any other member of the animal kingdom...” (Tim Gill ,2005).*

•“...  
*“Children spend less time playing in natural places, such as woodlands, countryside and heaths than they did in previous generations. Less than 10% play in such places compared to 40% of adults when they were young” (Natural England, 2009)*

## Including the excluded

Research shows that disabled children are even less likely to access outdoor activities than other children\* yet inclusion is not a just a right but a legislative and regulatory requirement.

Despite this many disabled children are still being excluded from outdoor activities because of fears relating to health and safety, lack of funding and inaccessibility.

Are these reasons valid?

## Fear – health and safety

“Disabled children may get hurt if they play outside”

### Fact



Photo: Bill Pugliano/Getty Images

*“Children with disabilities have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers.”*

(The Play Safety Forum, 2002)

Evidence shows that most parents of disabled children would rather their children encounter reasonable risk in play than be excluded.\*

## Fear – lack of funding

“Without funding we cannot make outdoor area inclusive”

### Fact

Making an outdoor area inclusive does not have to be costly. With careful planning, creative thinking, a little physical application and a ‘can do’ attitude - changes can be made.

Expensive ‘specialist’ equipment may not always be necessary and may even be loaned - check with the child’s therapist or parent.

If the equipment is important for the child’s comfort/posture and safety then find out if it can be used outside and if the therapist can arrange for a loan for the setting.



## Fear - accessibility

“Why do disabled children need access outside when all they need is inside?”

## Fact

Everything that is ‘needed’ may be inside but everything that the child wants maybe outside – friendship, freedom and most importantly fun!

Lack of access is rarely about lack of physical access and more related to attitudinal barriers.





# Activity 1

## Activity

- Split into three groups
- Each group to pick a case study card
- Discuss your given case study with your group and answer the question shown below
- Feedback to the main group – summarising your case study and your answer to the question.

## Question

1. What could the setting have done to address this issue and ensure that the child was given an opportunity to be included in outdoor activities?

## Case study 1 - Alfie

- 4year old Alfie attends his local pre-school. His cheerful chat and cool motorised wheelchair make him very popular.
- Alfie has Spinal Muscular Atrophy(SMA) which affects mainly the muscle strength in his lower body . Alfie spends some of his time in his wheelchair and the rest of the time combat crawling.
- Alfie loves racing cars with his friends. The setting has a ramp out to the garden and a rubberised tarmac track around the outside of the play area. Alfie is able to access some of the play area easily in his wheelchair. However, when his friends go up the grassy slope to race their cars Alfie is told by staff that he has to stay on the track and watch because the hill is too dangerous for him to access.

## Case study 2 - Seema

- 3year old Seema has been attending her local nursery for a few months. She has settled in very well and has made new friends.
- Seema has a condition called ptosis (pronounced tosis) which makes the muscles in her eyelids droop, causing Seema to appear 'tired' looking. Seema's sight is not affected by the ptosis but she does tilt her head in different directions at times to improve her field of vision.
- During the holidays Seema's friends attend a play scheme in the nursery. When Seema's mother asked the nursery if Seema could attend as well but she was told that there was insufficient staff available to watch over Seema to keep her safe in the outdoor area.

## Case study 3 - Kevin

- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  year old Kevin has been attending his local early years setting since he was a baby. A year ago Kevin was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum.
- The setting operates a free flow play system where children move around the play environment freely – everyone that is apart from Kevin because his mother refuses to let him go outside because he always runs towards doors and gates and tries to escape. She fears that because Kevin has no perception of safety he will climb over the fence and get lost.
- The staff in the setting have been working with his key worker and have managed to modify Kevin's behaviour so he no longer 'bolts' when he goes outside. However, his mother still refuses to let him go outside so Kevin instead stays inside on his own with his key person.

# How did you get on?

- Which case study did your group discuss?
- Did your group decide how to overcome the issue?
- Can the other groups offer suggestions for overcoming the issue?



# Points to consider when planning an inclusive outdoor environment

- Is the outside play environment accessible for all disabled users?
- How is the current area used – including used/under used areas
- What manmade and natural resources are available?
- Are there hazards and barriers and how can these be overcome?
- Where is the sun positioned in the day and where are the shady areas?
- Is the play area flat or undulating – can it be reshaped?
- Does the area encourage use of the five senses and allow children to experience the elements eg rain and wind?
- Are there places to go over/under, hide, run ,roll, climb, jump or just ‘be’?
- Is equipment provided at different heights and positions to accommodate the needs of ‘cruising’ children and those with rollators?
- Is the area designed to maximise safety but support active experimentation and risk-taking ?

## Activity 2

In your 'team' discuss, agree and start to plan an inclusive outdoor area for a pre-school.

- The play area is 8m(26ft) x 12m(40ft) all laid to turf.
- There are two small trees at the back and a metre high fence all the way around the area with a small gate leading up to a short pathway to the back of the pre-school. The front of the area has full sun all day.
- You have been provided with paper which represents the entire enclosed play area. Using the paper and pens provided formulate a draft plan (take into account the 6 areas of learning).
- You are able to choose 25 resources from the 'recycle bin' to help shape your play area. Clearly mark the areas, show what is included and distinguish how each is made inclusive to a wide range of disabled children.

## Show and tell

How did you get on with the draft plan ?

What went well?

What was difficult?

# Changing from being a reactivist to being a proactivist

- Do not wait for a child with a specific impairment to start in your setting start planning now for a wide range of needs eg physical, learning and sensory impairments
- As well as doing risk assessments and access audits learn to assess the environment constantly with your own senses- eg how would this area function for a child/adult with a hearing impairment?
- Use this skill to notice new as well as existing barriers for disabled children and adults.

- **Research**
- <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/inclusion-disabled-children-primary-school-playgrounds>
- **Design**
- [www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/pubs/design-for-play.pdf](http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/pubs/design-for-play.pdf)
- **Resource**
- <http://becomingdomestic.co.uk/2007/04/03/how-to-build-a-living-willow-dome-playhouse-for-under-40/>
- **Views of disabled children**
- [http://www.kids.org.uk/files/104838/FileName/PlayinOutdoorsResearch21710\\_lr.pdf](http://www.kids.org.uk/files/104838/FileName/PlayinOutdoorsResearch21710_lr.pdf)
- **Information sheet**
- <http://www.playwales.org.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=233&page=67&skin=0>



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