



# Something for all

Creating inclusive play spaces



Association for  
Children with a  
Disability

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# 1. Executive summary

Play is universal and children with disability love to play.

Play spaces hold a special place in the hearts of many children with disability and their families. Well-designed play spaces are places where children and families enjoy ordinary opportunities. Parents can watch the joy on their children's faces and see them laugh and smile alongside others. They are places where everyone can belong.

Children with disability are very diverse and there is no perfectly inclusive playground.

Variety in playgrounds across every local community is what gives children with disability the right space for them to play.

Over the past six months ACD has consulted with more than 130 children and families of children with disability from across Victoria. They reflected the diversity in disability, and despite their differences, key messages came through in creating inclusive play spaces:

- A variety of playgrounds
- Natural setting - lots of trees and green space
- The importance of fences and gates
- Smooth wide paths and ground covering
- Lots of swings, particularly swing seats with back support
- Things at different heights - high and low climbing and slide options
- Hand rails going up steps and ramps leading to play features
- More water and sand play
- Wheelchair accessible equipment
- Quiet areas where children can see what is happening but take a break
- Seating and shade
- Accessible parking and toilets

“Wibberly wobberly bridges and spinny things like roundabouts make me happy.”

**Rosita 7 years**  
(Autism ADHD Anxiety)

“It's so important for our kids to have these normal life experiences and is so important for the whole family's mental health to be able to get out and play somewhere, as well as for the physical health of our kids who typically get less opportunities to move their bodies, take risks, and have new experiences.” **Parent**

## 2. About ACD

ACD is the advocacy service for children with disability and their families in Victoria.

We are a not-for-profit organisation led by and for families of children with disability.

Our vision is an inclusive community where children with disability and their families thrive.

For more than 40 years we have supported families across Victoria raising children from birth to 18 with any disability.

We help families gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence to advocate for their children.

Our work means we hear directly from thousands of families every year. We amplify their voices and experiences through systemic advocacy to improve the lives of children with disability.

## 3. About children with disability

One in 10 Australian children has a developmental delay or disability.

We know from the Ausplay Survey 2020, that children with disability have less opportunity for social interaction and inclusion.

- 81% of parents of those aged 0 to 6 want their children with disability to have more opportunities for social and community activities
- Only 33% of children aged five to 14 are involved in out-of-school activities, and only 49% have friends with whom they spend time. This compares with 76% of children without disability who participate in after school sports and recreation

*(Annual Ausplay Survey and Young People in the NDIS Report, June 2020)*

Understanding the many and varied ways different disabilities impact children, and what can help them play, goes a long way to making a play space inclusive.

Whether it's autism, physical disability or developmental delay, disability looks different for every child. The ways disability can impact play include:

- Wandering away. 50% of autistic children wander. Families report wandering is one of the most stressful autism characteristics to manage
- Having difficulty understanding or communicating with other children
- Experiencing sensory overload e.g. too much light, noise, or movement
- Seeking out enjoyable activities such as swinging or spinning well into adolescence and adulthood
- Being unsteady on their feet and tripping easily
- Needing back support to sit
- Using a walker or wheelchair
- Having difficulty working out where to go or difficulty seeing steps
- Requiring accessible toileting facilities close by

## 4. Overview of consultation

ACD heard from more than 130 children and families of children with disability as part of our consultation on inclusive play spaces.

The information came from our Inclusive Play Spaces Survey and our online platform for children [What do you think?](#)

Several of our volunteer Community Champion volunteers produced videos of what play spaces worked for their children and which ones didn't.

ACD also brings decades of conversations with families, and our experience of finding play spaces that work for our own children.

The families we heard from reflect the diversity of the Victorian community:

- 21% of families identified as culturally or linguistically diverse
- 27% lived in regional Victoria
- 2% of families identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

Most of the families had children aged between 7 and 14:

- 31% aged 0 to 6
- 52% aged 7 to 14
- 17% aged 15+

There was a diversity of disability represented: autism, intellectual disability, physical disability, Deaf/hard of hearing and low vision.

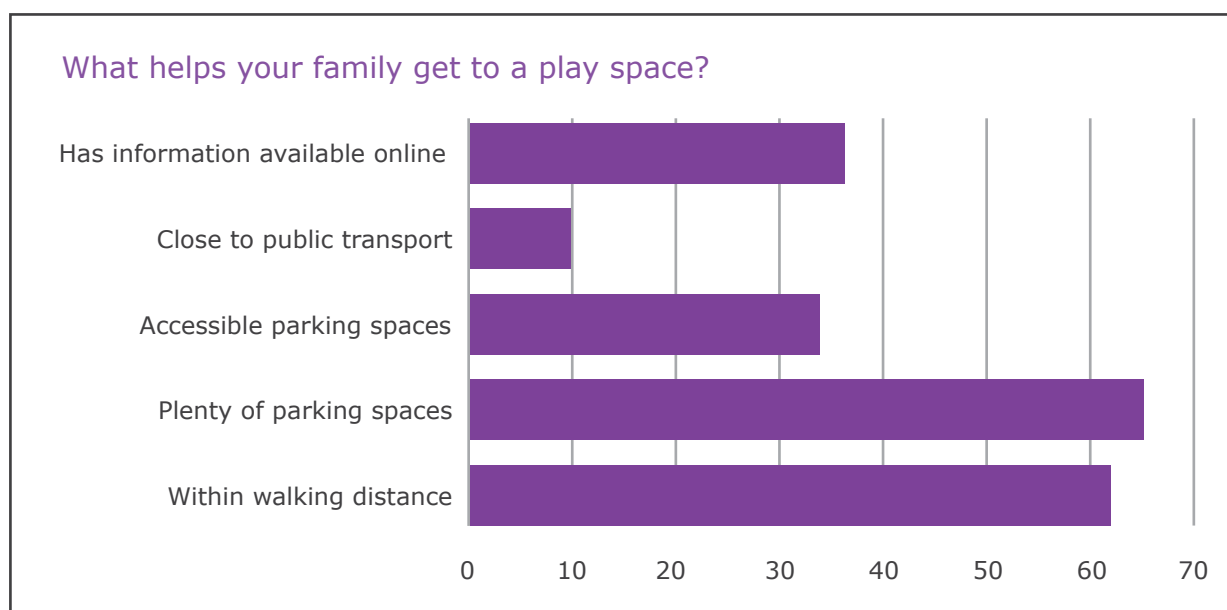
To give children the opportunity to have their say, we created an online platform called [What do you think?](#)

It includes accessibility features like being able to listen to the question or watch it in Auslan and being able to respond through writing, voice recording and photos.

10 children told us what they like about playgrounds and what could be different. They ranged in age from 5 to 18 and had disabilities including autism, ADHD, intellectual disability and wheelchair users.

Children talked about their favourite equipment and wanting to play with others.

## 5. Practical steps to help families get to playgrounds



### Within walking distance

Play spaces within walking distance are important to families for a variety of reasons.

It's essential that children get to play with children from their own neighbourhood, as it increases opportunities to build friendships through play. Ask any parent of a child with disability and they will tell you how important it is to help their children make and keep friendships. Play spaces can help friendships happen. It's much easier for a parent to arrange a quick play opportunity if it is close to home. When a family has to drive out of their local neighbourhood to find a suitable and accessible play space, they are leaving behind familiar faces.

Transporting a child with a disability usually involves a lot of preparation - much more than for children without disabilities. So, it's much more convenient if families can access a park nearby, without having to pack for a half day excursion. Parents may need to pack equipment such as wheelchairs or walkers, other special equipment, and preparation for meals or snacks.

Families with children with disability may also have less time to take their children to a park due to therapy and medical appointments, issues of fatigue and behavioural considerations. Again, fitting in time at the playground is much easier close to home.

### Accessible parking

It's interesting to note that it wasn't just parents of children with physical disability who rated accessible parking as a high priority. Availability of parking spaces is considered an essential element in helping families get to a play space, and they avoid playgrounds where there is limited parking. Many children with disability have relatively low awareness of danger, can wander or are less able to see hazards such as moving cars. Therefore, safe access to the play space from the car park is essential.

## Good footpaths from the car park to the play space

Several families specifically commented on the need for a sealed hard path from the car park to the playground.

When supervising multiple children and juggling strollers, wheelchairs or walkers, pathways to and from car parks need to be sealed and free of bark chips or gravel.

## Information available online

Parents often like to be fully informed about a destination before setting out with their children. A visit to a play space is no exception. Online information can be very helpful. Before starting to prepare, families often check to see whether equipment and facilities are likely to meet their child's needs. This reduces the chances of a brief, frustrating and unenjoyable visit.

Some families we spoke to also suggested online social stories to help prepare their child for a successful visit.

## Curb cut effect

The curb cut effect is when you design for disability, you make things better for everyone in the process.

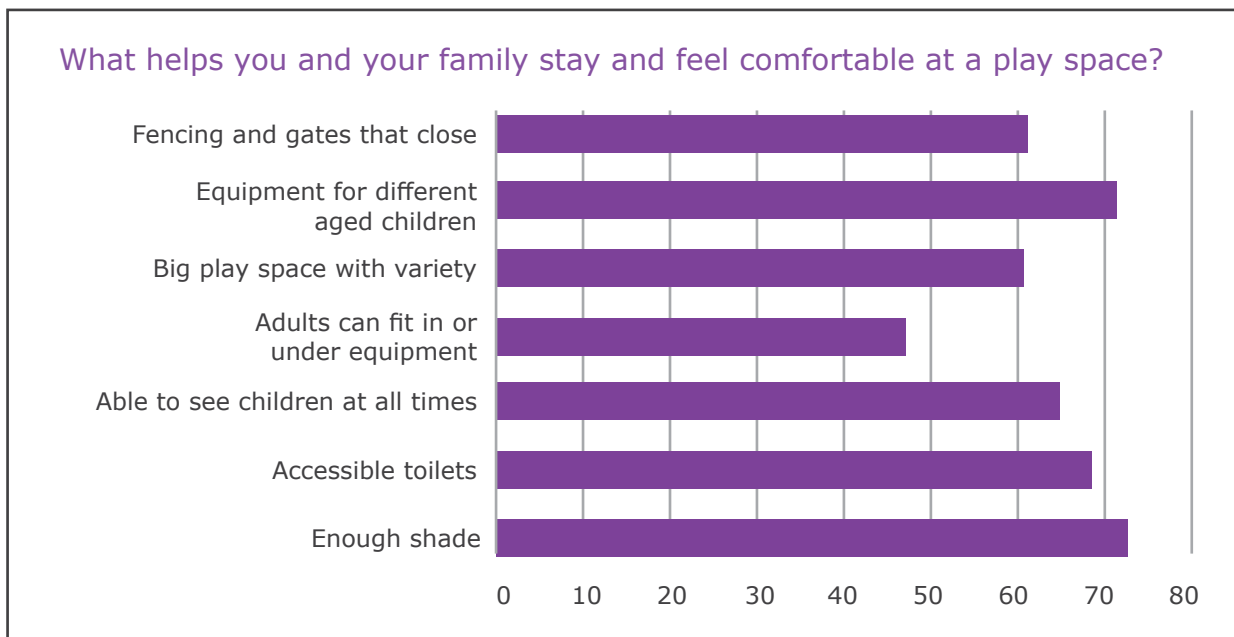
The curb cut effect is named after curb cuts on footpaths which came about from the advocacy of wheelchair users. But they also make it easier for people pushing strollers, The elderly with walkers, children riding bikes, and those rolling a bag behind them.

They are now a standard part of our infrastructure.

Planning for the access and inclusion of children with disability also makes play spaces more inclusive for:

- Adults with disability who are parents
- Those with twins or double strollers
- Grandparents who are taking their grandchildren to the park

## 6. Safe and comfortable playgrounds



### Fences and gates

A majority of families highlighted the importance of fences and gates in their responses. Defined and fenced play areas give parents peace of mind that their children can stay in the one area and play safely. A number of respondents said that they don't take their children to playgrounds which are unfenced, have gaps under fences, or gates that don't close correctly.

Others stated that defined and fenced play areas helped their children to stay longer on equipment and therefore increased their chances of interacting with other children.

Approximately 50% of autistic children are prone to wandering. This can make a trip to the playground very stressful, especially for families with multiple children.

### Able to see children at all times

Having line of sight is also important for families with children with disability. It means they can watch their child without hovering and go to help them when needed.

Many children with disability need extra assistance to use equipment, and to navigate social situations, such as whose turn it is next. Having line of sight means families can respond.

Seating in lots of different spots enables families to sit while providing active supervision.

“ ... good visibility, and plenty of seating ... means we can watch him play from a distance giving him more independence, and without exhausting us ... ”



### Adults being able to fit in or under equipment

Families highlighted that this is another important aspect of them being able to physically support their child to use equipment. It also enables them to get close enough to help their child build social interactions.

### Diversity of equipment and space

There are many reasons why families look for a diversity of equipment and space in playgrounds they enjoy.

Children with disability often have fewer opportunities for play. They have fewer friends and playdates, and participate in fewer sport and recreation activities such as dance or soccer.

This means families often visit playgrounds with their children, who may range in age from babyhood to teenagers. With such diverse ages and stages, families want playgrounds that offer something for everyone.

Children who don't participate in other activities often find comfort in a favourite and familiar play space. It's a safe place to visit and enjoy.

Some children find the social aspects of playgrounds daunting. Their play is not sustained through social games, such as hide and seek, but through a large range of equipment to try out. For these children, a variety of equipment is needed to encourage participation and concentration.

Play spaces are excellent places to practice and develop skills. They provide an environment where the purpose of the activity is immediately obvious. Instructions are rarely required.

Many children use playground equipment to help self-regulate. Spending time in sand, water, climbing, swinging or spinning can be deeply relaxing. Some continue to do so into their teen years and beyond.

“ Age diverse and ability diverse play equipment in the same space so that both (my) children can play and be challenged. ”

### Big play spaces that aren't too crowded

The majority of families said they preferred bigger playgrounds. However, they reported that many of the newer hero playgrounds with interesting equipment, are very popular and can be overcrowded.

When there is only one large playground in a housing estate or local area it can get crowded and can negatively impact children with disability and their play opportunities.

Spectator or onlooker behaviour is one of the early stages of play development. A busy, noisy playground has the potential to be overwhelming for children with disability.

Many children with sensory or developmental issues benefit from quiet areas where they can sit and watch other children as they play. They enjoy watching others, but don't enjoy being in the thick of it. Often this is to distance themselves from sensations they may find unpleasant, such as loud or high-pitched voices.

Spacious, uncrowded environments with quiet observation points which have seating can be highly beneficial.

Overcrowding can also lead to competition for the most attractive equipment. Many children with disability find negotiating who goes next very challenging. And families end up avoiding these playgrounds.

Local communities are far more likely to meet the diverse needs of the children in their neighbourhood if there are multiple playgrounds within walking distance from homes. Playgrounds need to offer choice, rather than a one type fits all design.

☞ Enough space between pieces of play equipment so that my child doesn't get overwhelmed by too many people. ☞

☞ I like swings. ☞

**Callen 18 years**  
(Autism, Intellectual disability)

### Trees and natural environment

We know the mental health benefits from being out in nature. Trees and plants have a calming effect. Research shows this is particularly true for autistic children.

A number of families said they preferred natural environments, play spaces surrounded by trees and green space, and those that incorporate natural features.

☞ (My son loves it when there are) trees to climb ... big basket swings, natural areas to collect seeds/leaves etc. ☞

☞ Practical things like toilets and shade. ☞

To stay comfortably at a play space, families need access to clean, well-designed toilet facilities.

Many mentioned the need for accessible toilets.

Children with disability can take longer to become toilet trained. Many can't tell when they need to go to the toilet until the last minute. So toilets nearby are essential.

Some children depend on continence wear and will require an adjustable adult size change table so they can be changed as needed, without having to lie on the floor.

A number of parents mentioned the necessity for clean toilets and this should be the bare minimum standard.

However, to adequately support children with additional needs and their families, Changing Places facilities <https://changingplaces.org.au> should be available at all major playgrounds. These are specially designed safe, clean and user friendly. They include height adjustable change tables which are suitable for both children and adults, a hoist, a centrally located toilet, a privacy screen, and extra wide automatic doors for easy access by wheelchair users.

Families also mentioned the need for adequate shade. Many parents find it challenging to ensure their child wears enough sunscreen and keeps SunSmart clothing on. Playgrounds with shade trees or shade sails help keep all children protected from the sun.

The provision of shade is also beneficial for children with low vision as well as autistic children, who may have light sensitivity.

☞ Toilets are a must! ☞

## 7. Encouraging inclusive play

It's important to understand what encourages inclusive play, as well as what can be a barrier against it.

### Physical accessibility

Unsurprisingly, families want play spaces that increase their children's ease of access.

No inclusive play is possible unless children can be in the same space.

There are a number of barriers that get in the way of free movement and enjoyable interaction.

Physical accessibility is not about removing every potential hazard in a play area. Children enjoy challenges.

It's not about making everything solid, smooth edged and boring.

It's about avoiding features that put children with disability at a disadvantage and negatively impact a child's confidence.

### Smooth flat paths and ground covering

Smooth paths and ground covering are essential for being able to get to and around playgrounds.

Flat surfaces are also very helpful for children who are unsteady on their feet and for those using walking devices and wheelchairs.

Flat surfaces are particularly important at the bottom of slides so children can get off safely and balance themselves.

Tan bark, gravel footpaths, or having all the equipment set in sand can make playgrounds completely inaccessible.

☞ It's all tan bark (rough & horrible to crawl on) AND why didn't they put a flat path ALL THE WAY around for wheelchair kids, crawlers, gait trainers/walkers? ☞

## Ramps and hand rails

Ramps to give children access to equipment so they can enjoy a play feature are essential. Some children who are wheelchair users can use slides if supported by an adult, but they can only get to the top of a slide by ramp.

Hero equipment that focuses on imaginative play like boats, trains or air traffic control towers needs to be accessible by ramp.

Ensuring all steps have hand rails on both sides (not just climbing walls or nets) makes equipment accessible to many more children.

Making sure equipment, paths, and bridges are wide enough for children to pass each other.

“ (We need) ... ramps for accessing the equipment as well as steps, handrails on both sides of ramps/bridges/walkways etc. ”

“ When the playgrounds only have ropes to get up onto equipment, they are too hard for my child who needs hand rails. ”

## Visual support

Using colour and contrast on surfaces to indicate different play areas and steps can make all the difference to children with low vision.

Using colour to highlight paths and the no-go zone around swings gives them confidence.

Yellow anti-slip tape on steps can be the difference between being able to play or not.

## Playing with others

Children with disability being physically present is just the start.

Children need to be able to play alongside each other, to interact with each other.

Play spaces are uniquely social venues where children and families have the opportunity to connect and feel like they are part of the playground community.

The type of equipment and how it is set up can create opportunities for enjoyable, comfortable interactions. Creating opportunities for side-by-side play is critical. Without these, children with disability and their families are left on the sidelines, isolated and segregated.

To help children play and interact with others, they need to be as independent of their parents as possible. Parents can unintentionally hinder social interaction.

Some families find communication boards at playgrounds increase connections between children.

Families also know that to play independently, their children need to feel safe. This is more likely when they can easily see their parents from different parts of the playground, have plenty of space, get around easily, and feel comfortable and supported when swinging or sliding.

“Children need things they can manage themselves e.g. those roundabouts that are flush with the ground that kids can push around themselves, trampoline mats set into the ground, climbing nets that start low.”

“Seeing my friend Lexi makes me feel happy.”

**Audra 5 years** (Autism)

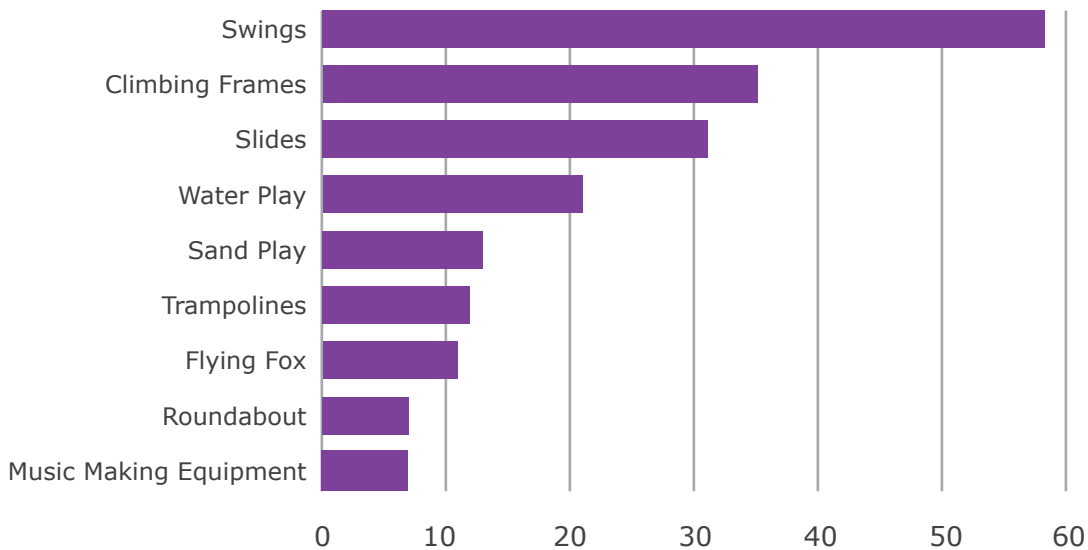
“I feel happy if friends play with me.”

**William 7 years**  
(Autism, ADHD, Anxiety)

“Providing two of the same play activity side by side e.g. two swings, two spring seesaws, or large enough that more than one child can be on the equipment at once.”

## 8. Accessible and inclusive equipment

What play equipment or other play features help your children enjoy a play space?



## Most popular equipment

Children's play choices are universal.

With or without disability, children are drawn to swings, slides and climbing equipment.

Families told us that the next most popular play equipment was water play, then sand play.

Many parents of children with autism mentioned water and sand, and also equipment that made sounds.

## Swings

Swings are incredibly popular but the biggest frustration is that there are not enough of them.

It's essential that there are a variety of swings. One size definitely does not suit all.

Many children with disability have issues with balance and stability. They need swings with back support that hold them in safely, so they can enjoy the swinging motion while still feeling confident they are securely seated. Multiple swing options should be placed next to each other.



Swings with additional supports should not be located away from others. Swings provide a wonderful opportunity for shared enjoyment in the exciting motion of the swing. Those moments are lost when swings with back support are misguidedly placed on isolated islands away from the majority of other children.

A highly popular swing is the circular webbed or 'spider swing'.

Many families commented on how well designed this was, as it was big enough for both children and adults.

The shape enables children who are unable to support themselves in a seated position to lie down and still enjoy the swing motion and feel safely nested inside.

Flying foxes also need to have seats that can support children to sit. Having two flying foxes next to each other is another great opportunity for interaction.

 Our NEW local park has only 2 swings - neither has a high back & neither are the big round style. 

## Liberty Swings

There are mixed feelings from families about Liberty Swings.

When properly maintained, they are great for children who need to remain in their wheelchairs.

However, the locked gate frequently becomes a problem with keys unavailable or locks broken.

Also, the fencing associated with the design creates a real 'us and them' situation, with children who use it being well and truly segregated from others.

## Climbing structures

Many children were reported to really enjoy climbing structures. But it's important to have a variety of structures with varying degrees of difficulty. It's especially important to have structures that are low to the ground. These allow children with poorer gross motor skills to master the art of climbing at a safe height, and where their parents can easily assist.

## Slides and tubes

Slides were also highly popular, especially when they were side by side, allowing children to share the experience of sliding together and providing opportunities for extra fun with slide races.

Families want to see a variety of sizes, including those that are wide enough to hold an adult so they can support their child.

Some children feel safer using a slide that isn't too high. Others enjoyed high slides.

Families were frustrated with the design of some of the higher slides. Often, they don't have enough room on the stairs or the platform for the child and adult to be together in case the child wants to try the higher slides but still needs some assistance.

Clear lines of sight to the top of the slide are important, so that parents can keep an eye on children negotiating who goes next.

The simple addition of handrails for steps makes slides more accessible, rather than embedding the slide into a hill or only having a climbing net to get to the top.

It's also important to have a spacious and flat landing area at the bottom of a slide to give children who are less steady on their feet the space to stabilize themselves once standing again.

Some parents find tube slides problematic, but some children enjoy the tunnel effect. Adults can't fit in them or see their children if they stop inside them, which makes it harder to assist if there is conflict between children.

☞☞ (I prefer when equipment) is parallel i.e. 4 slides side by side, so they can race, side by side going down and interact. ☞☞

☞☞ My favourite playground has a big slide. ☞☞  
**Larry 12 years**  
(Acquired Brain Injury, Low vision)

## Sand and water play

Sand and water play are a draw card for many children. They find them deeply calming and an opportunity to play alongside others.

☞☞ Water play always seems to bring kids together or create calm for a child on their own. ☞☞

Having sand and water play both at ground level and at child-size table height means more children can enjoy the experience.

Sand and water play tables have the additional advantage of keeping children looking ahead and at each other, instead of towards the ground. This increases the chances for social interaction.

### Hero items

Families enjoyed themed playgrounds with key items that stimulate imaginative play. Examples include trains, pirate ships, fire trucks, dragonflies, air traffic control towers, and shops.

These are an attraction and become memorable places for children.

It's essential these features are easily accessible, with ramps AND steps with hand rails.



### Roundabouts

Families who have children with physical disability recommended increasing the number of stepless roundabouts.

They are enjoyed by children who are mobile, as well as those that use wheelchairs, and provide a dynamic play environment for all children to play together.

The best ones are those that have a seat for children who need to feel balanced and stable, as well as space for a wheelchair.

### Trampolines

In-ground trampolines were mentioned by parents of children with varied disabilities. Children with autism and sensory sensitivities find jumping and swinging are effective for self-regulation. Parents comment on how much calmer children are if they've been allowed to bounce.

In-ground trampolines also work well for children in wheelchairs. They frequently enjoy the gentle bouncing that a carer can create by holding on to the wheelchair handles and pressing downwards.

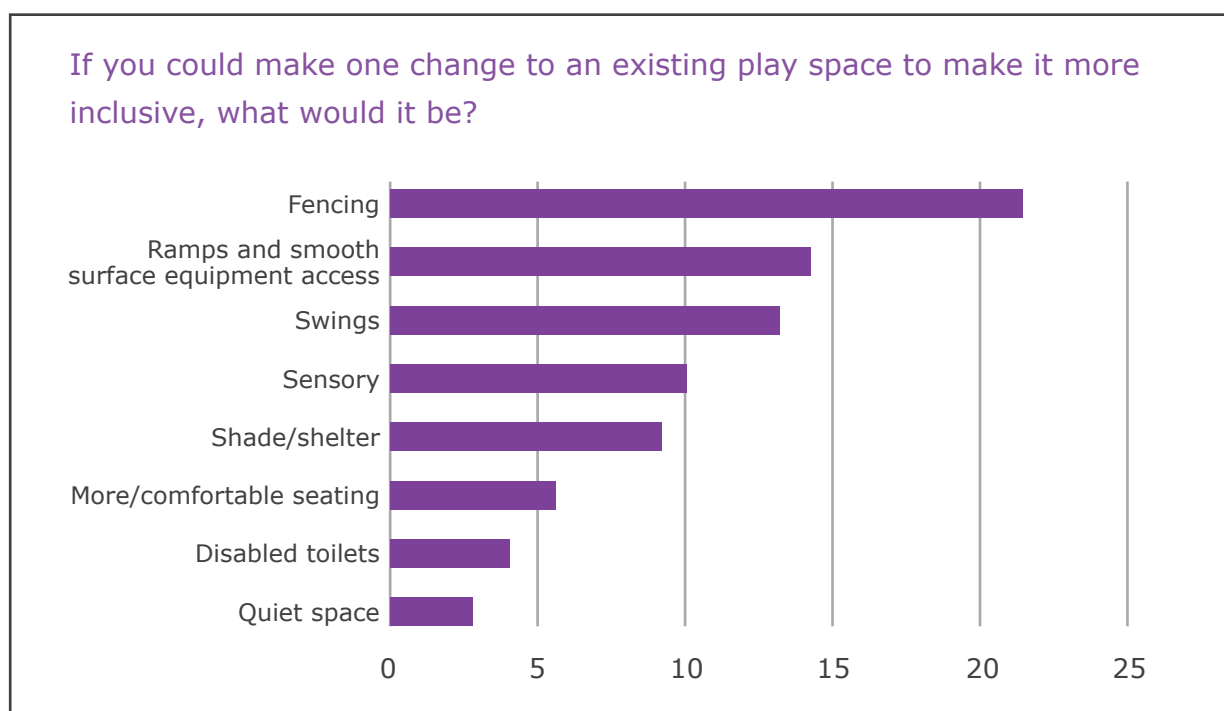
An in-ground trampoline can be made accessible for more mobile children by adding a handle or bar to hold on to, as well as defining the perimeter with yellow tape.

“(My child loves it) ... when there are fun sensory features such as trampoline, music maker equipment, water play etc.”

“... a variety of play equipment that she can play without me hovering.”



## 9. Improving existing playgrounds



### 1. Fences

Suitable fencing with no gaps and safe gates was the most common request to a change in existing playgrounds.

Up to 50% of autistic children can wander or run off. This is highly distressing for families and means they avoid taking their children out to play.

A number of parents said how stressful it felt without fences or barriers.

### 2. Smooth paths and ramps

Families repeatedly raised concerns about how poorly playgrounds catered for children with physical disability.

More ramps and decent pathways are needed.

### 3. More swings with back support

A frequent request was simply to add more accessible swings. Especially the addition of nest swings and swings with back support and harnesses.

### 4. Shade and more seating

Shade and seating were the other commonly requested additions.

When families make the effort to get their children to a park, they want everyone to stay cool and comfortable, so children can extend their play time.

“ There are nowhere near enough fenced playgrounds in communities. ”

## 10. Summary of what to consider

### Something for all

- A diversity of playgrounds, not just one large one that gets overcrowded

### Safety

- ✓ Fences and gates
- Lots of seating and clear lines of sight so families can see if children need help interacting with others
- Adult-accessible equipment so adults can help interaction with other children
- Equipment spaced out with clear space between where play features start and finish

### Accessible

- Smooth wide paths and ground covering
- Handrails up steps
- Ramps to play features

### Inclusive

- Lots of swings and flying fox seats with back support
- Slides that are big enough for adults to go down with their child and slides next to each other
- Sand and water play
- A quiet spot where children can see what is happening but take a break
- Nature, trees and shade
- Accessible parking and toilets



When my autistic kids were young, so many other places of enjoyment were not accessible to us. Playgrounds became one of the last places we could go and enjoy. They have been a life saver for me, but some modifications could make more of them even better.

