



Accessibility and Your playground

A profile of facilities taking action.

By Anne-Marie Spencer

Mindy Wilson and her best friend Kami, both 9, rock back and forth together on a spring rocker in their local playground. Gales of laughter emit from the girls as Mindy points to the large play structure across the park and shrieks, "Hey look, the tic tac toe game is open. Go hold it for us, I'll be right up." Kami runs across the playground and up to the top deck of the play unit to the game panel. Mindy follows close behind, sliding out of the race-car spring rocker to her wheelchair, which she maneuvers expertly up the ramp, to join her friend in their favorite game. Because of a renewed focus on accessibility, scenes like this are becoming more common in playgrounds across America.

Play is an important part of a child's life, no matter what their abilities. Play enables children to develop skills in reasoning, creative expression and sensory perception. Socialized play, incor-

porating special-needs children with their able-bodied peers, serves to further the benefits of play, allowing children to discover their peers, and learn the similarities and differences that make them unique. Through play, children are constantly learning and exploring who they are, while developing physical attributes important to their overall health and wellness.

Although the Americans with Disabilities act was passed in 1990, it wasn't until 1996 that the Access Board (www.access-board.gov) created the Play Areas Regulatory Negotiation Committee to issue guidelines that specifically addressed public play areas and equipment. According to these guidelines, play structures must make provisions so that a percentage of the components that comprise the structure are accessible by ramp, ground or transfer. There are specific guidelines for the number of accessible play events for each play structure, depending on the size and child capacity of

the unit. When designing a play structure, the number of elevated and ground level play activities are counted to determine the accessibility requirements. All structures require that at least 50 percent of the elevated play activities are accessible by transfer or ramp. Larger play structures with 20 or more elevated play activities require at least 25 percent be directly accessible by ramp, with a remaining percentage accessible by transfer to equal 50 percent total.

When designing a playground, incorporating accessibility into the design should begin early in the process, with consideration given to layout, circulation and component selection. A mix of ground-level opportunities should be integrated with elevated opportunities accessible by a ramp or transfer platform. Special attention should be given to make sure that the activities designed for accessibility provide easy access and use for wheelchairs. The accessible events should

also be fun, and encourage interaction between children of all abilities. Although the rules and guidelines of accessibility can seem confusing, your local playground manufacturer or architectural consultant can be an expert source of information and design ability. Some manufacturers offer a breakdown of the ADA components for each play structure in their catalog, with all of the requirements already included in predesigned units. If you choose to build a custom structure, company representatives can do the estimations for you. Let them offer their expertise in designing a playground to meet your budget, the needs of the community and ADA guidelines, while making sure the playground will be enjoyable for children.

Surfacing and Access

Particular attention should be given to the type of surfacing used. Too often, playgrounds are designed with the best intentions and layout, only to be made nearly inaccessible through use of inappropriate surfacing. Impact attenuation, although crucial, is only one part of the equation. There are many types of surfacing that provide impact attenuation when applied in a sufficiently thick layer, but not all of them—including pea gravel and sand—provide for the maneuverability of wheelchairs. Accessible materials include rubber tiles, poured-in-place surfaces and engineered wood fiber. Particular attention needs to be given to including these types of surfacing in the access routes of the play area.

There are also specific guidelines to be followed regarding the access routes to and from the playground. A ground-level accessible route connects play components within the play area, in addition to creating an unobstructed path to the play area itself. Without proper access, the playground becomes inaccessible by lack of a clear access route. This route should include access paths of at least 60 inches minimum clear width at a 1:16 maximum slope,

which enables two wheelchairs to pass each other, or to change direction on the path. At ground level, objects may not protrude into the 60-inch wide space of an accessible route up to or below the height of 80 inches (measured above the accessible route surface). The 80-inch clearance applies only to the 60-inch accessible route, and isn't required for the entire play area. The 80-inch vertical clearance applies to ground-level routes only, and not elevated routes. This allows features like protective roofs and sun shelters to be present. There are exceptions in certain circumstances for existing trees or equipment, as well as for play areas that are less than 1,000

square feet. Be sure to ask your playground company for more information to aid you in the layout and access paths to your playground or recreation area.

Following are profiles of three communities that recognized the importance of integrated play, and the steps they took to make it happen on their playgrounds.

Kamper Park, Hattiesburg, Miss.

In the city of Hattiesburg, an amazing transformation has taken place in Kamper Park. One of the city's major recreation areas, Kamper is home to the city zoo, and a fun place for fami-

Encouraging Play for ALL

Here are some factors to keep in mind when designing accessible playgrounds.

- ▲ Be sure that the overall playground plan offers opportunities for integration, not just access. Try to incorporate ramps as well as transfer access to the design.
- ▲ Make sure that your surfacing meets Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines. Choose accessible surfacing, such as rubber tiles or engineered wood fiber, rather than pea gravel or sand, which are nearly impossible for a wheelchair to traverse.
- ▲ Mixed-use events can be added; for example, adding an accessible swing seat to a bay of swings to allow access to and from a wheelchair, and allowing all children the opportunity for integrated play.
- ▲ If space allows, incorporate free-standing accessible events like slides, elevated sandboxes and spring riders to add play value and offer additional play areas.
- ▲ Use the expertise of playground manufacturers who are experienced in the guidelines. They can help you create a great play environment that meets your budget and community needs.
- ▲ Remember that accessible playgrounds are only as good as the access paths that lead to them. Be sure to follow the access guidelines when integrating design of the play area and surrounding paths.
- ▲ Check into grant opportunities that might be available in your area for building and updating playgrounds to meet ADA requirements.

There are several ways to get more information. Copies of the complete play area accessibility guidelines can be obtained from the US Access Board, 1331 F Street NW, Suite 1000, Washington DC 20004-1111. The board's Web site is www.access-board.gov. The National Center on Accessibility offers technical assistance to recreation providers, as well as a helpful frequently-asked-questions section and newsletter. See www.ncaonline.org.

lies to gather year-round, with places for picnics and play. On a beautiful fall day in 2002, the community turned out for the grand opening of Adam's Place, a completely accessible, ramped play structure located in the park. The playground is named for Adam McPhail, who is largely responsible for the park's existence. When Adam used to go to the playground at Kamper, his role was largely limited to passive observation, because he was unable to climb the ladders, stairs and other access climbers from his wheelchair. The play area utilized a sand surfacing, the result being that Adam couldn't even enter the play area, because his wheelchair would get stuck. That's when Adam's grandmother decided she would try to do something about it.

She took her concerns to the city council, and asked that a more accessible playground be installed so that Adam and other children in wheelchairs could have a place to play alongside able-bodied children. The project caught the eye of the Leaders for a New Century, an initiative of the Area Development Partnership designed to identify and nurture emerging leaders in the greater Hattiesburg area. On the basis of leadership qualities, community interest and involvement, personal accomplishments, and the ability and willingness to assume expanded community responsibility, a committee selects 20 participants each year for the 8-month course. The program is an opportunity for emerging leaders to capture a deeper understanding of the area's strengths and critical needs. Each year, the Leaders class chooses several community service projects designed to enhance the greater Hattiesburg area; when they heard Adam's story, the choice was easy.

Through fundraising, community support and volunteer efforts, the committee raised the funds needed to install the accessible playground. They solicited donations through community bulletins and a Web site, which also helped to keep the community in-

formed about the progress of the project. In August 2002, volunteers gathered on a typically sweltering summer weekend to erect the playground. The project attracted an eclectic labor force, including a team of Adam's surgeons, the Leaders group, representatives of the playground manufacturer as well as local fire and police officers. Forrest County Planner Jay Estes, a member of the Leaders committee, commented, "It's great to see how this project has brought the community together in such a tremendous effort." Estes continued, "Even Adam's grandparents are here with their air-cooled motor home, in case someone needs to get out of the heat!" Adam and his family also brought food and beverages to the installation crew, offering encouragement and support to the team.

A grand opening in September featured Adam cutting a ceremonial ribbon, then traversing the entire unit in his wheelchair, releasing a series of balloons tied along the route. The playground opened to excited cheers from local children.

The mammoth structure is totally accessible from end to end, with play activities branching from nine decks, ranging in elevation from one to six feet. Ten ramps, which serve as connections between the decks, allow total access to more than 30 play activities in a 60' x 80' area. Because of the extensive use of ramps, all of the levels and decks are accessible by wheelchair, without the need for transfer or assistance. Through community outreach, initiative and fundraising, Hattiesburg rose to the challenge and met their goal to provide a play place for Adam, and children of all abilities, to share the benefits of play.

**Siskin Children's Institute,
Chattanooga, Tenn.**

The Siskin Children's Institute's mission is to improve the quality of life for special-needs children in the community. When the institute moved into its newly renovated facility in 2001, the



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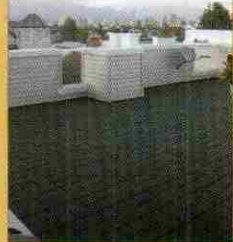
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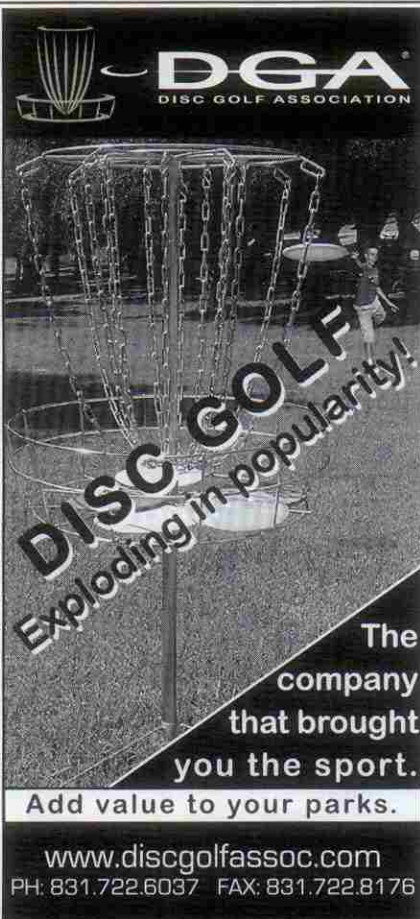
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board of directors decided that an exceptionally accessible playground would be an integral part of supporting their mission, and made the commitment to implement the use of play in the education and therapy of children with special needs.

That spring, Siskin formed a pioneering relationship with GameTime, a manufacturer of playground equipment. The resulting playground, built at the institute, is not only universally accessible, but will serve as a model of accessibility for other playgrounds around the world. The manufacturer collaborated on the project with Siskin, park and recreation community leaders in Chattanooga, and Boundless Playgrounds, a national, nonprofit organization that works with communities throughout the country to facilitate universally accessible playgrounds. The partnership brought a well-rounded knowledge base to the project, ensuring that the playground would benefit children of all ages, be developmentally appropriate as well as accessible, and open the world of play to children of all physical abilities. The playground would also be used as a testing facility for newly developed ADA-accessible components for years to come.

The playground opened in September 2001, just in time for the new school year. Siskin's teachers and therapists immediately began to incorporate the play space in therapy sessions, and interactive play sessions among the school's special-needs and able-bodied children. The new playground allows all of Siskin's children to interact with their peers—sliding, swinging and playing independent of adult intervention—in a way that wasn't possible before the playground's construction. They're able to use their imagination, interact in games and develop relationships with other children. The feeling of wind on their faces as they swing, the thrill of a turn down the slide and the other sensations they experience on the play equipment wouldn't be

possible without the introduction of this innovative playground. This opportunity to play without the assistance or intervention of adults is one that's unique to many of the children's time on the playground. The benefits they reap from this independence is one that carries forward as they develop into adults. One only needs to see the huge smiles, and the look of pride and accomplishment on the children's faces, to know the project is a huge success, and a landmark project.

Besides the accessible equipment, nature elements were included for children to interact with. The garden plantings located around the play area give the children sensory opportunities, allowing them to feel the dirt, smell the flowers and touch the variety of textures used in the plantings. The tri-level sand and water table encourages them to mold and imprint the sand, as well as use the waterways to learn about dams and water flow. The multicolored poured-in-place surfacing, combined with areas of grass and engineered wood fiber, offer a variety of bright colors and textures, while facilitating total accessibility. There are also two accessible diggers, which encourage the development of hand/eye coordination as children use them to pick up and move sand into piles and shapes.

The brightly colored playground, located in the heart of downtown Chattanooga, is a benefit to the entire downtown community. One downtown professional, whose office window overlooks the playground, says, "The play area brightens up the city." She adds, "I often watch the kids while having lunch. It warms my heart, has a relaxing effect and makes it easier to face a tough afternoon at work!" The multiple areas that make up the playground are designated with colorful poured-in-place surfacing, grass and attractive landscaping, which add to the festive colors of the equipment itself.

Other communities and organiza-

tions can look to this playground as a model to encourage the creation of more therapeutic playgrounds and allow children all over the world to benefit from a similar play environment.

Apison, Tenn.

When Apison planned its new elementary school, there was, unfortunately, one thing that wouldn't fit in the budget—a playground. When nearby McKee Bakery, of Little Debbie Snacks fame, offered funding assistance, the school invited a commercial playground manufacturer to meet with them for design assistance. During the initial meetings, the principal, Mary Walker, mentioned that the school would have a growing enrollment of children with special needs over the years, so they wanted to make sure that their playground was accessible, not just to meet guidelines, but to ensure that there would be a fun variety of components that the children would be able to use. The staff recognized that there's a difference between offering accessibility and offering integration, and wanted to make sure that the accessible components they chose gave their special needs children the opportunity to play and interact with their able-bodied classmates.

When planning the initial layout, the manufacturer designed a multi-ramped unit, with decks spaced along the ramps that allowed space for wheelchairs to turn. The decks incorporated activity panels that were designed to facilitate wheelchairs. The panels were installed at a height that encouraged use by able-bodied and wheelchair-bound children. Adequate space under the components allowed room for a child's legs in a seated position. Additional activity panels, including one that teaches Braille and sign language, were incorporated to give the children learning opportunities while at play.

The overall layout also incorporated a freestanding slide, with an accessible

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approach shaped like a dragon, which instantly delighted the children. The slide, as well as the many components in the main play structure, allow special-needs children to play alongside peers, which is one of the most important factors to consider when planning your accessible playground. It's important that all children are integrated in play, and if a component is merely accessible, but not a vital part of the whole play environment, the purpose and importance of accessibility is missed.

The play events are surrounded by a deep-packed cushion of engineered wood fiber, which is held in place by colorful curbs, outlining and designating the play area. Wheelchair access to the area is provided by two wheelchair accessible ramps incorporated into the curb surround. A fence surrounds the overall play area, protecting it from passing traffic.

The school's PTA took a leadership role in completing the playground. They arranged for a community installation, and recruited parents and community members to help. A local developer loaned heavy equipment, and even donated a worker to operate the machinery. Area restaurants brought food and beverages to feed the crew. The playground manufacturer sent volunteers and additional tools to help in the construction. Walker notes, "We are so lucky to have parents and community participants to help organize this effort. We couldn't have done it without them." Apison's organization and planning foresight resulted in this exceptional playground, which also offers a place for kids residing in surrounding developments to play when school isn't in session.

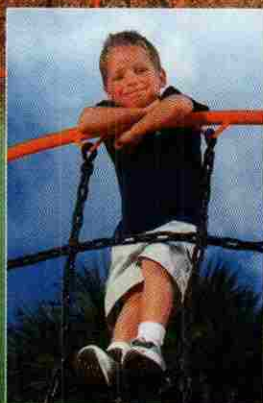
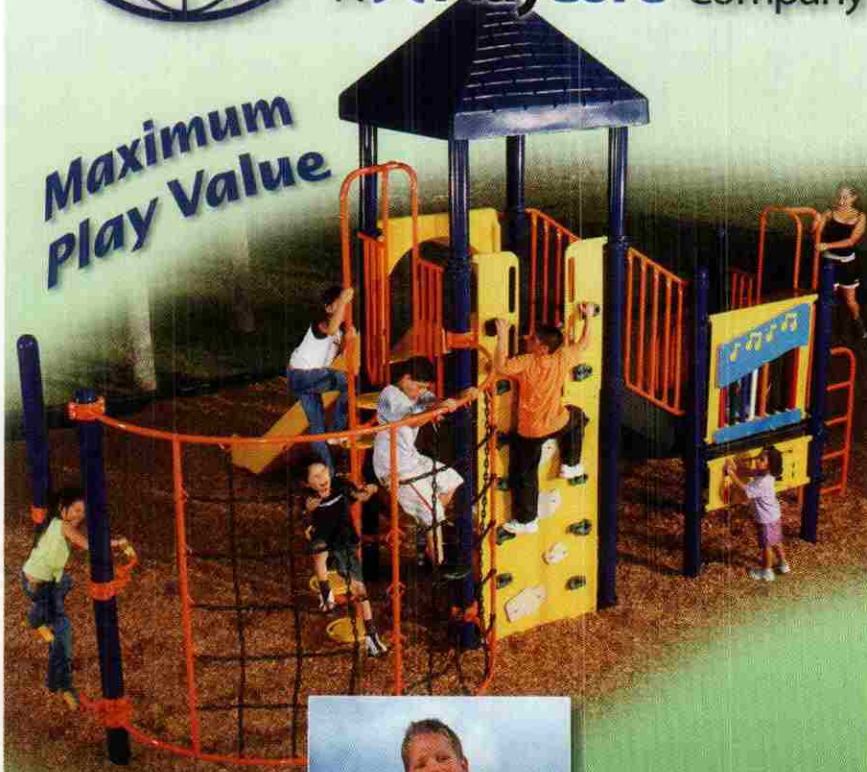
Anne-Marie Spencer is marketing communications manager for GameTime, in Fort Payne, Ala. For information on grants or to obtain copies of accessible playground plans, contact her at aspencer@gametime.com or 256-997-5430.



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