

Able to Play: Mobilizing Communities for Children of All Abilities

Framing the Issue



W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION
FROM VISION TO INNOVATIVE IMPACT

SEMINAR SERIES



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A Call to Action

Equality on the Playground

Playgrounds have become a commonplace public facility. Like the children who play on them, they are found in every city, town, and neighborhood throughout this country. As ordinary as a playground is in a community, it is exceptional to find a playground that is barrier-free, built so that all children, with and without disabilities, can engage in productive play.

Approximately 10 percent of children in the United States have a disability that prevents them from using or enjoying most public playgrounds with their peers and siblings. This exclusion affects children with disabilities, their siblings, and their families. Further, it affects all other children as they assign status to one another during play – those who contribute during play are expected to be contributors throughout life. This perception is established during childhood and is very difficult to alter as a youth or adult. The consequences of some children being excluded from public playgrounds has the effect of excluding them from the work of children, which sets the stage for how we interact as adults in society.

Communities are more empowered to make a difference than are state or federal authorities. It's the quality of life for all in their community that hangs in the balance. If equality and the celebration of diversity are American values, then a critically important place to demonstrate those values for our children is a barrier-free playground.



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An Agenda for Change

Rallying Communities Around Equal Play

The community representatives participating in the Able to Play Seminar will have a formative experience empowering them to return to their cities and neighborhoods with the conceptual framework and tools to play leadership roles in mobilizing people and groups to accomplish joint goals. The example of Able to Play focuses a lens on just one statewide grassroots effort – creating “boundless” play opportunities for children of all abilities to play side by side. Invitees will include individuals from communities that have already expressed an interest in creating equal play opportunities in their own locales. But the seminar has larger goals beyond creating more such playgrounds.

The first of these is to use the Able to Play example as a way of raising awareness of the social injustice too often faced by people with

disabilities, both children and adults. The first day of the seminar focuses on the example of providing opportunities for children of all abilities to play and learn together. It includes a site visit to a nearby Able to Play project at a local elementary school. The day also includes a panel moderated by John Hockenberry, a celebrated NPR, NBC, and ABC journalist, and advocate for people with disabilities, who will guide the conversation around the issue of the importance of play in children’s lives and the implications of such opportunities as children of all abilities develop together.

The second day of the seminar includes a morning workshop led by a national expert, providing a framework for participants to become leaders and catalysts for change. Following the workshop, five breakout panels will provide technical assistance focused on community mobilization.

The goal is to use the Able to Play example as a means of increasing awareness of the social injustice often faced by people who have disabilities, both children and adults.



The Issue

Children with Disabilities Are Excluded from Play

Play activities are physical, but they are also quite intellectual and social.

When children with disabilities are prevented from engaging in play activities that their peers without disabilities have access to, they become further disadvantaged. Experts in pediatrics and early childhood education agree that, through play, all children develop language skills, decisionmaking abilities, social strategies, and physical, sensory, and cognitive strengths.¹ With the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), children with disabilities have gained the right to play with their typically able peers. This is a meaningful step in the right direction – but having the right to play and having real opportunities to engage in cognitively appropriate play in public playgrounds is still an emerging phenomenon.

Dr. Maria Montessori, founder of the Montessori Method of education, observed:

“A child is not a stranger, one simply to be observed from the outside. Rather, childhood constitutes the most important element in an adult’s life, for it is in his early years that a man is made. The well-being of the adult is intimately connected with the kind of life that he had when he was a child. Our mistakes fall upon our children and make an indelible impression on them. We shall die, but our children will suffer the consequences of our errors. Whatever affects a child affects humanity, for it is in the delicate and secret recesses of his soul that a man’s education is accomplished.”²

It is the observation of professionals across disciplines that all children learn best in an atmosphere that allows them to be independent and self-directed – engaged – in their exploration of play environments. Children who are cognitively capable of engaged play need more from a playground than just the removal of architectural barriers. Play is more about the

things children do together in their imaginations and only partly about the organization of the physical space and playground equipment. For the children who have reached the level of operational thinking necessary for the high degree of imaginative play common among school-age children, a playground is a structural skeleton to support their interactive games. These play activities are physical, but they are more intellectual and social in the true dynamic of what is happening. An observation of children at play supports the need for children with disabilities to be allowed places for interaction in the center of all play activities.

The importance of play for children of all abilities is an issue whose time has come. Parents and grandparents, educators, people in the parks and recreation field, disability advocates, playground industry representatives, municipal officials, civic groups and others are increasingly interested in learning how they can create barrier-free play environments. More and more parents and educators realize that, while a typical playground may be built with consideration of the ADA, a truly barrier-free play environment reaches even higher, delivering on the promise of equal play opportunities. Additionally, people are becoming aware that ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG), issued in 2000, which define the legal standard for accessibility in playgrounds, do not address the needs of children with sensory disabilities (such as vision or hearing impairments) or developmental disabilities (such as autism or Down syndrome).

If children engage in the stimulating environment of a barrier-free playground, they are able to experience sensory, motor, social, and cognitive skills in varying degrees of difficulty. The opportunity to gain these experiences in an unstructured way allows a child to progress with learning at his or her own pace and move to the next most important thing he or she needs to learn. Each area of the playground should reinforce specific play behaviors while increasing the rigor and challenge as a child progresses from one stage of development to the next. When children of all abilities can play together, they experience more similarities than differences. In many cases the differences fade into the background and become unimportant – a true demonstration of equality.

¹ Children’s Institute for Learning and Development, “Play Is Essential for Brain Development,” (April 2001).

² Dr. Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, Fides Publishers, Inc., New York (1966).

The Opportunity



Mobilizing Communities to Expand Play Opportunities for Children of All Abilities

Children with disabilities across America are being denied real opportunities to engage in cognitively appropriate play in public playgrounds. How children play today sets the stage for how they interact as adults in society, yet the status quo in playgrounds is inadequate. Therefore, communities should challenge cultural stereotypes and existing playground standards that exclude children with disabilities from public play spaces and mobilize to create barrier-free, developmentally advantageous playgrounds where children of all abilities can have the best opportunities for healthy development.

When a great new barrier-free playground opens, it usually attracts families from a wide radius. Parents visiting from afar begin to wonder why a playground of this quality is not part of their own communities.

Throughout its history, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has worked to support the education and development of young people. As part of this work, the Foundation has sought to even the playing field for children with special needs. During the 1930s, the Ann J. Kellogg School brought to life W.K. Kellogg's vision for connecting children with disabilities to mainstream education. The school was among the first in the United States to teach disabled and non-disabled students in the same classroom, promoting equal opportunity for all. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation also recognized early on the importance of play in children's lives, pioneering camping programs across the country. In recent years, Foundation projects have shown that community-driven solutions are among the most successful approaches for expanding opportunities for children's healthy development and learning. By aligning and mobilizing community systems, we can increase learning outcomes for vulnerable youth. The Foundation recognizes that all children need meaningful play to develop their language, motor, and social skills. By engaging special needs children and their families, communities can mobilize, combine energies, and focus resources to address these needs.

Recognizing the existing state of affairs is a place to begin to make a change. Many of the playgrounds that are currently in service were installed in the mid-1980s, when the first composite playground structures were introduced and became very popular. These structures are now aging – many are in such a state of disrepair that they are no longer safe or serviceable. The

requirements of the ADAAG make it necessary for communities that are replacing playgrounds to build the new one in compliance with the ADAAG Final Rule. However, most communities see these “additional” requirements as onerous and typically comply with only the minimum requirements related to safety and accessibility. Communities may not be aware that there is an advantage to be gained by providing their community with a truly barrier-free playground.

There is a progression of advocacy that many communities have experienced with the introduction of barrier-free playgrounds. Initially, community officials strive to provide playgrounds that meet the requirements imposed by ADA regulation and the current national standard of care.³

Once a community sees how barrier-free playgrounds provide meaningful play opportunities for all children, the community normally sees great benefit for both children with disabilities and children without disabilities. Through the experience of engaged play episodes, all children are learning the skills necessary to succeed in life. The experience of one barrier-free playground establishes the community desire for all of the community play facilities to be of the caliber that welcomes every child to play – a place where diversity is celebrated and equality is demonstrated.

Furthermore, when a great new playground opens, it usually attracts families from a wide radius. This public facility is open for all to use – yet parents soon wonder why a public playground like the barrier-free playground is not part of the public facilities in their own community, near their home. The success of this model of advocacy is directly tied to desire and influence. Community members are motivated to develop superior public facilities in their community – like those visited and enjoyed in neighboring communities.

The desire of a single dedicated individual citizen to have playgrounds for all children to play together can make a difference. Often, an individual citizen takes the position that a barrier-free playground is a community need to be acted upon by local policymakers and is supported by parents and educators. One of the most remarkable observations, when children are seen playing in a barrier-free playground, is that the differences between children vanish. Visiting adults comment that they can't see the children with disabilities. Well, of course not; they are playing!

Promising Approaches

Barrier-Free Play Environments Planned Around Children's Predictable Play Behaviors Result in Substantive Improvement in Children's Development

Children with disabilities who are cognitively capable of engaged play need more from a play environment than simply the removal of architectural barriers. All children learn best in environments that allow them to be independent and self-directed – engaged – in life, in school, and in their play. When children with disabilities are prevented from engaging in such productive play episodes, they become further disadvantaged. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation looked for promising approaches to this issue and found that the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds® has developed a new approach to playground design that contains three aspects (see Exhibit 1):

- selecting playground components that are developmentally appropriate,
- using best practices, creating a play environment that is barrier-free, and
- configuring the components to support children's predictable play behaviors.

Although each of the following examples of barrier-free playgrounds include all three of the design aspects shown in Exhibit 1, each story is shared in the context of highlighting just one of the aspects.

Boundless Playground at High Point, Washtenaw Intermediate School District, Ann Arbor, Michigan

The Washtenaw Intermediate School District (WISD) campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan, encompasses five year-round educational programs that include students ranging in age from infant to age 25. Two key populations are at Honey Creek Community School, a public school academy for grades K–8, and High Point School for children with developmental disabilities, housed in the same building. WISD representatives are proud of their learning community's emphasis on inclusion, describing how students of all abilities are reading buddies, share lunch tables, and work together in the campus greenhouse.

However, the WISD group wrote in their playground project plan, "Being together stops at the playground door... The current play area falls short of meeting the developmental and play needs of the High Point Building's diverse community." Ann Arbor's Boundless Playground at High Point, scheduled for completion in summer 2005, not only will open the playground door but will include developmentally appropriate play components. The new playground will provide significant opportunities for independent, self-directed play – both for students with disabilities and students without disabilities.

Exhibit 1: Developmental Advantage on the Playground



*Excerpted from the
National Center for Boundless Playgrounds
Basic Training Workshop*

³ ASTM F1487, "Standard Consumer Safety Performance Specification for Playground Equipment for Public Use," as published by the American Society for Testing and Materials, West Conshohocken, PA, and the current U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's "Handbook for Public Playground Safety," Publication #325.

Testing results showed that the rate of developmental growth for students with disabilities at the school more than doubled since the previous testing period.

“Our Children’s Place” Boundless Playground, Newington, Connecticut

When Bob Stanley, now retired, was park director of the Newington, Connecticut, Parks & Recreation Department, he initially thought that a barrier-free playground including features for children with disabilities would be less than exciting for children without disabilities. But he felt differently after meeting with four local women – mothers of children with and without disabilities – from a community group that recognized the need for a barrier-free playground in the Newington community. The members of this community group had been influenced by a universally accessible playground they had visited in a nearby town that provided real play opportunities for all children. They felt it was important, within their own town, for children to have the same kind of opportunities to play with peers and siblings of all abilities.

After meeting with the four women, Bob Stanley came to understand what they wanted to accomplish and was convinced it would improve the lives of children of all abilities in Newington. A site was selected in the town’s central park, and fund raising began. When the playground opened in 2001, children throughout the community endorsed it as the area’s “best playground.” Mary Udice, one of the four women who originally met with Bob Stanley, said, “We, the moms [of children with disabilities], have experienced the divide between our children and those of typical abilities. Now Our Children’s Place Boundless Playground has made that barrier evaporate.” Today, children in Newington have the life-enhancing experience of playing with children of all abilities.

“I Can Fly” Boundless Playground, William S. Baer School, Baltimore, Maryland

As part of a statewide initiative to expand play opportunities for children of all abilities in Maryland, Baltimore’s William S. Baer School was one of the first inclusive schools to have a barrier-free playground. The school is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities: an indoor zero-entry pool, a sensory garden with a horticulture program, and a one-hole golf course. The staff is dedicated and stable. The programs offered to the 300 children with moderate to severe disabilities who attend Baer School are current with best practices and reflect the staff’s determination to incorporate the very best in this inner-city school.

The school’s barrier-free playground, with play equipment configured to support children’s predictable play behaviors, provided an unexpected benefit after it opened in 2001. School administrators witnessed dramatic improvement in the children’s testing scores. Learning Accomplishment Profile testing results showed that the rate of developmental growth for students with disabilities at the school more than doubled over the previous testing period. Principal Shari Huene-Johnson said, “Our new Boundless Playground is the only possible explanation of this enormous growth.” These results have held for three consecutive years of testing.

As these examples demonstrate, the three aspects of children’s play environments translate to truly meaningful play opportunities for children of all abilities. Selecting developmentally appropriate play components results in expanding opportunities for independent, self-directed play. Designing the play environment to be barrier-free enables children with disabilities to play side by side with typically able children, with everyone in the middle of fun. And configuring play components to support children’s predictable play behaviors means that each area of the playground will reinforce specific play behaviors so a child can progress from one stage of development to the next.

Together, all three aspects lead to developmental advantage on the playground, enabling children to develop essential skills for life, progress with learning at their own pace, and then have available the next most important thing they need to learn.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation Commitment

After Able to Play

The Foundation believes that people with disabilities continue to face barriers that prevent them from being assimilated into society, barriers that particularly inhibit the young from developing to their full potential. The importance of play is undeniable as a foundation for learning and academic success, and excluding children with disabilities from opportunities to develop alongside typically able peers is a social injustice that can and should be addressed. The Foundation will continue to serve as a catalyst for community change, building awareness of disparities and providing new opportunities for youth with disabilities to lead lives of preparation, participation, and acceptance through access.

Participants in the seminar will become stronger advocates of universal access for people with disabilities in their communities. Through broadcast media coverage of the seminar, a broader reach of awareness will extend across Michigan, tapping audiences far larger than just the seminar attendees. Through ongoing relationships with key legislative leaders, the Foundation hopes the issue of equal access for children with disabilities will spark consideration at the state policy level.

The communities throughout Michigan that mobilized to build Able to Play opportunities for young people also are serving as a catalyst, as other communities continue to inquire and learn about ways they can advance access for children with disabilities in their communities. Schools that serve both disabled and typically able children are planning playgrounds that more effectively meet the needs of all children. In addition, the Foundation will share its lessons learned with other states that are already making commitments to follow Michigan's lead in building universally accessible, learning-enriched playgrounds in their communities.



The Kellogg Foundation believes that excluding disabled children from play opportunities inhibits their potential and is a form of injustice that should be addressed.

Expected Seminar Outcomes

Growing the Seeds of Able to Play

Able to Play is a continuation of Mr. Kellogg's belief that all children, regardless of status or ability, should be afforded equal opportunity for success. It's therefore appropriate that this 75th Anniversary Seminar in 2005 will turn the spotlight on Able to Play projects. The Able to Play seminar is not a concluding event – it is both a continuation and a new beginning. While a portion of the seminar will celebrate success in up to 20 Michigan communities, the seminar's larger theme of community mobilization provides impetus to move forward on what remains to be done to raise awareness of the importance of play for all children, and the actions that must be taken to provide children with disabilities full access.



The seminar's larger goal is to mobilize communities toward the work that lies ahead: raising awareness of the importance of play for all children, and taking action to provide full access to children with disabilities.

The seminar's focus on engaging, energizing, and mobilizing communities will have broader implications in communities statewide and around the nation. Several participants in Able to Play have said that the effort made them realize what their community could accomplish by working together. This is the sense of empowerment that the seminar plans to instill in participants.

On the policy front, the Able to Play seminar panel on the first day will include respected state senators, to begin the long and difficult process of building legislative awareness of the need for community playgrounds that surpass the minimum requirements of ADA. Also included among seminar participants will be leaders of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which oversees the construction of playgrounds in parks throughout the state. This involvement will begin a process of education that promises to support community efforts most likely to produce more immediate action in localities across Michigan.

It is at the community level, however, that this seminar holds most promise for creating engaged and empowered advocates for people with disabilities who will work to build universally accessible playgrounds in additional locales around the state and nation. Invitees will include those communities that applied for but did not

receive Able to Play grants, and will also include several communities that have expressed interest in building such playgrounds when success in nearby communities made them aware of the possibilities. Taken together, these individuals and groups constitute a promising core group of committed advocates for universally accessible and enriched play for children of all abilities. They can go far toward helping the Foundation realize its goal of ultimately having a majority of Michigan children no more than an hour's drive from such a facility.

