Inclusive play and disability
‘Enabling all children to play, and to play together, is about a benefit to the whole community. It is not about overcoming legal hurdles or making expensive provision for a small section of the community. If any child is prevented from playing then it diminishes the play experience of all.’

(John and Wheway, 2004)

We know from research, experience and history that all children benefit from playing. All children are morally and legally entitled to play within their own community whatever their culture, impairment, gender, language, background, behaviour or need. Inclusive play means that all children and young people have equal access to good quality local play provision. This means that they can play with others or alone as they wish in a rich environment that supports their play needs and gives them access to a wide range of play opportunities.

Play is defined in the Welsh Government Play Policy as freely chosen and personally directed. The vast majority of children play in this way, a very few may need our support to be able to make choices and access play opportunities.

A staffed inclusive play setting - anything from a holiday playscheme in a local park, to an all week, all year round adventure playground – provides a much wider range of play and social opportunities, and a far richer experience for both disabled and non-disabled children than does a fixed equipment playground or segregated provision.

ATTITUDES

Some people hold the view that children who are disabled are unable to take part in the same activity as everyone else in their community because of their impairments (this is called the medical model of disability). Arguments are made that disabled children need specialist help, separate provision, specialist equipment, that playworkers need special training, that special access may need to be arranged.

There is sometimes the belief that disabled children need different treatment and different opportunities to non-disabled children. This all inhibits disabled children from taking part. Very often there is a focus on children’s care needs rather than their need to play.

Many disabled people say that the most common reason that prevents them taking part in the same activity as everyone else in their community is:

- Other people’s attitudes: the lack of imagination or aspiration in others that can prevent disabled people from achievement;
- The lack of provision made for them as individuals with individual preferences and needs.

ACCESS

For those disabled children who have mobility difficulties, transport, and the physical environment may provide a challenge to their inclusion. Some children also have specific needs (e.g. nursing or medication) that may not be met in some environments.

Barriers

There is now a legal framework that promotes inclusive play provision. Still, in many areas a lack of accessible play environments, and more significantly, attitudes that disable children from playing and socialising within their own community, prevent them from exercising their right to play.
COMMUNICATION
Language and communication may prove a barrier to some children being included in play provision.

INFORMATION
Many families of disabled children struggle to know what is available to them in their local community - they may not be aware that local inclusive play provision exists. Information may not be provided in an accessible format or in their language.

RISK
Some parents and carers, and some play providers tend to be both physically and emotionally protective. Disabled children’s lives are often more controlled by adults than those of non-disabled children.

POVERTY
More than half the families of disabled children in the UK experience poverty and the resulting social exclusion. (Every Disabled Child Matters, 2007)

Making it Real - Breaking Down the Barriers
The most important factor in making inclusive play provision a reality is a positive and nondisabling attitude. A ‘we will make this work,’ imaginative and creative approach is much more helpful to disabled children than one that dwells on barriers and problems.

‘Social barriers such as fear, embarrassment or discriminatory attitudes also need to be tackled so that an accessible play space is also an inclusive one in which disabled children and their families feel welcome.’ (Dunn, Moore and Murray, 2003).

PLAYWORKERS
Staffed play settings employ qualified playworkers. Playworkers are trained professionals who know how to recognise both the verbal and non-verbal cues that children use to show how, what and where they want to play. They should familiarise themselves with the character, capabilities and communication preferences of all the children in the setting.

They should be flexible; they interpret children’s needs and adapt a situation or environment in order to extend their play and their range of experiences.

Playworkers include all children as part of their role within a setting. They are guided by the Playwork Principles, which provide the ethos that underpins good practice.

It is important that the whole team believes in and supports the inclusion and participation of disabled children. In quality staffed inclusive play provision, playworkers have undertaken training and professional qualifications and professional development that supports inclusive play. They regularly monitor and evaluate their effectiveness in meeting the play needs of all the children. As part of good practice, playworkers share knowledge and skills.

Some playworkers have received additional training so that they may be better able to meet the needs of disabled children. Their post may be specifically funded to work with a particular child. However, it is good practice that all playworkers, work with disabled children whether they have received specialist training or not, and work as part of a team. In most play settings there is no reason why disabled children should not be included. No distinction should be made other than a recognition that the level of staffing should reflect the wider range of support required from playworkers.

In this case there is no need to make any distinction between any of the playworkers employed, regardless of the funding stream that might be used to fund respective posts.

While playworkers are specialists in facilitating children’s play, they may not have all the skills necessary to support the physical, emotional, medical or communication needs of a particular child. So that all children can be included, there are times when it is appropriate that play providers work in partnership with other agencies and in particular, seek access to funding that is designated to meet needs other than their play needs, for example, their
medical needs. It is important that funding that is designated to support children's play is used specifically for that purpose, as funding for other needs should be available from other sources.

**FAMILIES**
Families of disabled children may not know of the possibilities for play provision available to them in their local community - very often they assume that their children will be precluded from such provision. Therefore it is necessary to take a proactive approach and to make a greater effort to contact families to provide appropriate information and to communicate the benefits of inclusive play.

Many families of disabled children are accustomed to battling to secure appropriate services – as play providers we need to put them at their ease. Families are more confident where they know a play provider has previous experience of successfully including and meeting the needs of disabled children. They may need to ‘test the water’ to be reassured by making their own audit of the staff and setting, and to talk to other families whose children are already using the play setting. Most importantly, they need to feel welcome and that their child’s inclusion in the setting is viewed positively. As play providers we need to show a positive, flexible, sensitive approach.

Disabled children are more likely than nondisabled children to have been deprived of messy play. Some families of disabled children are anxious that they remain clean - they are used to prejudice and they worry about appearances, specifically about getting muddy, dirty or covered in paint. As play providers we are supported by the Playwork Principles and offer appropriate play opportunities and experiences. But we must also be sensitive to families and explain that the benefits of playing with paint, water, and mud, outweigh the risks.

Play provision is for children, to meet their play needs. Although the effect of a child taking part in staffed local play provision may be that parents and carers are afforded respite from their responsibilities, the primary purpose of play provision is to provide a rich and stimulating environment where children have opportunities to play that they may not experience elsewhere.

**PLACES**
A rich play environment provides a wide range of sensory experiences, access to other children, and opportunities to extend capabilities and explore possibilities. It may not be possible to adapt every environment so that a child with any impairment is provided for, or so that every child has access to every play opportunity available within the setting. All children are individuals with different interests and different capacities. However, good practice occurs where every reasonable effort has been made to meet children’s play needs and to support children’s choices and participation either by adapting the environment or the approach.

Children tell us that the place where they prefer to play is outdoors. We need to support them in accessing outdoor environments or we need to compensate for the lack of outdoor space by recreating some aspects of outdoor play inside. The outdoors can provide sensory experiences, access to the elements (earth, air, fire and water) and the weather, a broader range of possibilities and more opportunities for exploration than an indoor environment.

Expensive specialised equipment or adaptation of access is rarely necessary - disabled children have individual needs. So it is important that when we welcome a new child, we not only find out what their needs might be, but that we make an audit of our play setting with their needs in mind, and take a realistic and reasonable ‘can do’ approach.

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Also good practice is when we think of all the possibilities in advance. So for example, in an adventure play setting where staff are working with children designing a new structure they want to build, they might think about how to accommodate a wide range of needs. Thinking ahead is much easier than adapting.

If choosing a location for play provision we need to bear in mind that some buildings will already have disabled access. The Disability Discrimination Act makes requirements for access so it is worth checking out if it applies.

**LANGUAGE AND RESPECT**

People are sensitive about how they are referred to and portrayed. The use of language is very important to disabled people. The disability rights movement prefers the use of the terms ‘disabled’ and ‘non-disabled’ to ‘special needs’ or ‘able-bodied’. The National Childminding Association has developed guidance and the National Service Framework gives definitions of different needs that disabled people might have. (National Childminding Association, 2005 and National Service Framework, 2004).

Some children's preferred language is British Sign Language, PECS or Makaton. It is essential that children can communicate in their preferred language within a play setting.

**CONSULTATION**

Many children struggle to articulate what they want. Their ideas tend to be limited to what they know and have already experienced. By offering all children a broad range of experiences that are stimulating and challenging to them both as individuals and as part of a group of peers, we can open up the possibilities so they are better able to make choices and develop interests and aptitudes on their own terms.

The National Legal and Policy Context


- Every child is entitled to respect for their own unique combination of qualities and capabilities;
- The perceptions of the child, their views and opinions should always be respected for each child is connected to, and a bearer of, a wider culture;
- The child’s free choice of their own play is a critical factor in enriching their learning and contributing to their well being and development.

Inclusive play is a legal requirement:

The Children Act 1989 says ‘A primary aim should be to promote access for all children and young people to the same range of services.’

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 says that service providers are required to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ‘policy, practice and procedures’, and later (since October 2004) physical adjustments to allow access to play settings. The Disability Discrimination Act (2005) places a duty on all public bodies and local authorities to promote disability equality.

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act 2001 extends DDA requirements to cover any provision for children that takes place on school premises.

The Children Act 2004 sets out five outcomes which all services for children should work towards: to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing. Play is integral to the ‘enjoy and achieve’ outcome.

It says: 'It is not only disabled children’s impairments which determine their quality of life, but also negative attitudes and a disabling environment, for example, unequal access to education, communication, employment, leisure activities, housing and health care. Disabled children and young people have equity of access to education, communication, employment, leisure activities, housing and health care.'

**Conclusion**

The number of children living with impairments is higher than ever before and growing, because medical advances have led to improved survival rates.

As the national organisation for children’s play we believe that every child deserves the opportunity to: be stimulated; laugh, cry, feel proud, sad, calm, angry, excited and many more emotions; be among other children and part of something bigger than themselves; get muddy; and take a risk.

As play providers, if we are to turn policies and legal requirements into workable reality, we require open-mindedness, honesty, determination, hard work and creativity. Every child in Wales is entitled to quality play experiences and it is our role and a child’s right to ensure that no child is excluded.

**Further reading and resources**

- The Children’s Commissioner’s Office in Wales adopted play as one of its themes for 2007 and is focusing attention on inclusive play. [www.childcom.org.uk](http://www.childcom.org.uk)
- **Children’s Play Information Service (2006) Inclusive Play Factsheet**
- The Playwork Principles can be found at: [www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples](http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples)
Play Wales is the national organisation for children’s play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children’s right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.

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