

# USING COMMUNITY VOICES TO MAKE INCLUSIVE PLAY POSSIBLE

*Part of the 2023 Play Everyone's Way campaign*



## INTRODUCTION

According to a [2018 poll](#) by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), as many as nearly 9 in 10 Americans feel strongly that all playgrounds should offer inclusive options – yet, many communities and schools are behind when it comes to ensuring children and parents of all abilities can play together equally.

“Play, while it cannot change the external realities of children's lives, can be a vehicle for children to explore and enjoy their differences and similarities and to create, even for a brief time, a more just world where everyone is an equal and valued participant.”

**Patricia G. Ramsey**

Additionally, 57 percent of parents mistakenly believe that playgrounds are required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to include elements designed for children with Down syndrome, sensory disorders, and visual and hearing impairments. However, accessibility does not equal inclusivity. According to ADA, an accessible playground is one that allows children with different abilities to access equipment, including:

- An accessible path from the building or parking lot to the edge of the play area
- An accessible path from the edge of the play area to the equipment
- Surfacing that complies with ASTM 1951 (Determination of Accessibility of Surface Systems Under and Around Playground Equipment).
- Once a child is on the play area, they must be able to access the play equipment by either a transfer station or a ramp.

It's more important than ever before that communities recognize the importance of taking playgrounds from being accessible to being inclusive. When one local Ohio mother realized there were limited options for her daughter to play, she took matters into her own hands.

## THE CHALLENGE: A LOCAL LESSON

For Anna, a mother of three living in an Ohio suburb, inclusivity advocacy has always been top priority.

In fact, she created a career out of it – promoting the importance of inclusive spaces through her own platforms so that people like her daughter, age 12, who uses a wheelchair, can be more independent.

It wasn't until her daughter was in grade school that she began to realize that despite being required to meet ADA requirements for accessibility, not all playgrounds allow for children to interact and engage with others. Instead, many of the playgrounds in Anna's community, while "accessible" by law, were not truly inclusive, stifling her daughter's independence and the independence of other classmates with disabilities like autism or hearing impairment.

There were two main playgrounds in the community: a school playground and a city playground. The school's playground had a black flat top area for running and basketball, a play structure that was set in mulch in a dipped-out pit, and no ramps or accessibility for someone in a wheelchair. The playground was technically ADA compliant, but it lacked elements, like a separate, quiet area with interactive games, or a flat, smooth surface, that would allow children with sensory disorders, hearing impairments, or other disabilities, to play together comfortably.

After Anna and other parents in the community spoke up about these issues, the school added an accessible swing and a xylophone play structure off to the side – with a curb around it. A ramp was added and mulch was removed to allow for easier access to the playground. However, while certainly more accessible, the playground was still not inclusive.



**“Now, our kids could get close to the playground to watch their friends have fun,” said Anna when asked about the updates to the school's playground.**



In the same vein, the city playground was small with rubber mulch – with a curb around the entire space, limiting access for parents, children and caregivers who use wheelchairs or other similar devices. As proof of its poor setup, the playground was almost always empty, even on weekends.

Anna and other local parents seized the opportunity to make positive change to their local city playground to create a space where families of all backgrounds and abilities could play together – and they were determined to get a better outcome than they did with the school playground.



## THE SOLUTION

Anna and the other moms decided to go to city council and petition to update the city playground so there would be an inclusive spot for their kids to enjoy. Anna and the group made sure to include people who would be most impacted by a new playground. In fact, one of the mothers involved had a disability and wanted to be able to enjoy the playground with her kids and was a large voice and proponent for updating the city playground.

As they went to city council, they found their experience to be very different from the school district experience. To start, the city council members were incredibly open and conversational. The city council was eager to talk to mothers and their children, asking questions about their playground preferences. When the mothers and children responded indicating that they didn't like to go to playgrounds, the council members immediately recognized the importance of building a more inclusive playground.

### The Process:

The council members and local mothers brainstormed ideas and the children were able to point to their playground preferences, sharing pain points from other playgrounds they had experienced in the past. Then, the group presented a plan and worked with a playground manufacturer to make their vision come to life. Physical disabilities were the main point of the updated playground, with a focus on the playground surface and easy maneuvering around the play area. There was also a sensory processing area, which focused on children with sensory issues.

### Fundraising:

Fundraising was a major part of the success of this playground update. A local representative went to bat for the project, and the community received a state grant to support it. Parents and caregivers fundraised and received donations through community outreach – lending this project to land around a half of a million dollars in budget. The city also invested more in the area around the playground – a parking lot was added next to the space and beautiful landscaping was put in to create a holistic play area where families can come to play, connect, learn, and relax.

The playground opened in August 2022 and took around a year to complete from start to finish. Local businesses surrounding the playground were thrilled – more people and families in the community were stopping in as they came to the playground, building more support for local businesses as well.

## THE RESULTS

Overall, the city playground update project was a success due to the openness and willingness of the community and council members to build something that was inclusive to all. The playground continues to be packed with families and children of all abilities, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. The main difference between the school district playground project and the city playground project is that the city council members followed the children's lead and listened to the needs and wants of those who would be enjoying the benefits of the playground.

Including the community was another huge factor in the success of the project. Bringing the voices of moms, parents, and children in the community to the table so they could be heard, and impact real change was crucial.