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PROJECT REPORT

Are playgrounds really for everyone? Families' experiences at the Clareview District Park- Inclusive Playground



Photo credit: Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The information contained in this report is from a research project carried out by researchers from the University of Alberta. The aim of the project was to explore disabled¹ children and their family members' experiences of inclusion at the Clareview District Park-Inclusive Playground.

Children cherish playgrounds as spaces to play, gather with other kids, and be social (Moore, 1986; Moore & Lynch, 2015; Prellwitz & Skär, 2007; Ripat & Becker, 2012). Playgrounds are also spaces where families can spend time together and feel a sense of belonging (Jeanes & Magee, 2012).

Disabled children experience frequent exclusion from playgrounds due to physical inaccessibility, mistreatment, and negative attitudes toward disability (Boyd & Goodwin, 2019; Boyd & Leo, 2020; Prellwitz & Skär, 2016; Yantzi et al., 2010). To address the exclusion that disabled children experience on playgrounds, inclusive playground initiatives have become increasingly common, promising accessibility, fun, and belonging for kids and families (Kodjebacheva, 2008; Lynch et al., 2020; Moore & Lynch, 2015).

Little is known about disabled children and their family members' experiences visiting inclusive playground spaces (Wenger et al., 2020). This research project aimed to contribute to filling this gap in knowledge and generate insights to inform the development of inclusive play spaces.

(1) I have chosen to use this language to emphasize the ways in which children's experiences are *disabled* by interactions with inaccessible architecture, discriminatory policies, and ableist attitudes (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014; Spencer, Peers, & Eales, 2020). My language choice is further underpinned by the view of disability as culturally constructed, not merely a diagnostic category (Goodley, 2017).

LIVE ACTIVE STRATEGY

The Live Active Strategy (2016–2026) is a collaborative initiative for active living, active recreation, and sport in Edmonton. This research is connected to the advancement of several goals contained in the strategy's implementation plan:

Implementation goal

Research Outcome

Promote opportunities for all Edmontonians to live active and celebrate Edmontonians who do. (goal S2)

By sharing the stories of disabled children and their families, we celebrate their unique ways of navigating and engaging in recreation, physical activity, leisure, and play, while gaining new insights into how to make such fields more accessible and welcoming for all.

Advance Edmonton specific research related to active living, active recreation, and sport. (goal S3)

This research was carried out with Edmonton families, and aimed to understand their experiences of inclusion at a playground that is labelled as inclusive.

Advance accessibility for all Edmontonians to engage in physical activity in a range of inviting safe spaces, recreation and sport infrastructure, parks and green spaces, active transportation systems, work places, and more. (goal E1)

The findings derived from this research have important implications for advancing the accessibility of public playgrounds in Edmonton, such as key considerations related to inclusive playground design.

LIVE ACTIVE STRATEGY

Implementation goal

Research Outcome

Advance a barrier free active recreation and sport system. (goal O1)

The findings derived from this research have important implications for the advancement of barrier free recreation, such as key considerations related to inclusive playground design.

Advance quality active living, active recreation, and sport experiences for all Edmontonians, especially for all children from birth to twelve years of age. (goal O3)

This research focused primarily on families with children age 4-9 years, and has implications for active living and active recreation.

[Click here for more information about the City of Edmonton's Live Active Strategy.](#)

[Click here to view the City of Edmonton's Live Active Implementation Plan](#)

RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this research was to explore disabled children and their families' experiences of inclusion at a playground that was designed to be inclusive. A qualitative, collective case study was conducted (Merriam, 2014; Stake, 1995).



Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited with the support of various groups within Edmonton including family and disability support groups, sport organizations, and other recreation and leisure organizations. The names of the organizations and groups have not been included in order to maintain the anonymity of the families. Six families, 19 people in total, agreed to participate in the research.



Data Generation

Each family participated in the research in their own unique way that suited the child's preferences, the family's preferences, family availability, and weather. Data was generated from June 2022 to January 2023. Families engaged in interviews, go-along interviews at the playground, child-directed video footage, and observations.



Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to analyze the data. The data from each case (family) was analyzed individually, prior to searching for connections across the cases.

KEY FINDINGS



Photo credit: Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities

The findings of this research will be presented in 3 overarching themes:

1. Increased participation and choice
2. Opportunities for connection and connectedness
3. Moments of exclusion

"It feels more inviting, more...
It feels more like a hug."-
Mom 1

INCREASED PARTICIPATION AND CHOICE

The families' previous experiences at playgrounds involved limited opportunities for participation. In particular, many of the disabled children in the study explained that there was not much for them to do at other playgrounds. The design at the Clareview Inclusive Playground enabled kids and their family members to engage in meaningful activities. The playground offers a wide variety of novel equipment, which meant disabled children in the study experienced choice in activities. The parents experienced choice in terms of their role; the playground is designed in a way that made parents feel that their child was safe and did not have to be so closely supervised. Parents could choose to sit back and relax, offer support, and play with and alongside their children.

Spacious, open layout

Many of the families commented on the open layout of the playground, and the space between pieces of equipment as a significant contributor to overall participation. The layout afforded more space to navigate and maneuver around the playground and also added comfort for kids who might feel uncomfortable being too close to others.

"This one, you come in, you're like, 'wow, there's so much to do'. It's so open. Yeah, rather than the other ones. I'm like, oh my, you're gonna hurt yourself. It's so tight, like cramped and unsafe." - Mom 1

Rubber surface

The rubber surface was credited by all of the families as a positive component of the playground design. The rubber flooring contributed to participation, feelings of safety, ease in moving around the playground, and reducing frustration (that is often associated with sand and woodchips).

"The play structure is nice, rubber floor, that's awesome... sand, or mulch, or like all that, it's so tricky... Like but rubber floors. So nice, and going. It's easy for everybody."- Mom 4

Novel equipment

The variety of novel equipment offered at this playground meant that there was something for every family member. Disabled children and their siblings had opportunities to make choices and experience challenge.

"I think it's very good. And it gets them to a lot of different things, which is great. Kids always like to change." - Dad 2

"And also because I love it. Because I can do parkour." - Sister 1

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION & CONNECTEDNESS

The families' visits to the Clareview Inclusive playground offered opportunities for connection, between family members, and with other people in the space. The intention of the playground design held great significance for families; many participants felt that it had been designed with disabled children in mind, which is not a feeling that they had experienced at other playgrounds. This playground was also a place where siblings could play together or alongside one another. Certain pieces of equipment were noted as fostering togetherness.

A place to gather with others

The families felt that this playground was designed for a wide variety of people, which made it a suitable space for gathering with others.

Dad 5: "And then other times we've had planned playdates with other people. We've gone there, and actually one of her birthdays, we did there."

Child 5: "Yeah, that was, one of my birthdays, that we did."

Dad 5: "Yeah. Because it was a playground where she could play with multiple people."

"I think maybe I would describe it to you as, it's very like, inclusive for kids that have disabilities, wheelchairs, there's a lot of climbing structures, there's even that twirly thing, that twirls and you could sit on the benches in it. And a wheelchair can just park inside. Because there's a big open space." - Child 6

Both our kids can play

This playground offered an opportunity for siblings in each of the families to play and have fun. The kids could choose to play together, or spend time doing things separately. Finding a playground that was accessible and enjoyable to both of their children was noted as significantly important to parents.

"They were just able to do things together. Which is nice. Like, I have to do a lot of work to find activities that I can actually take both kids to. So if you're like a single parent, and you have a child, that might have some delays, or maybe extra barriers then like, I think it's often the siblings end up having more conflict, because one's waiting for the other one, to do a different kind of activity, as opposed to them both being able to go to the same place, and enjoy that space or right, be set up so that it's an experience that's enjoyable for both." - Mom 2

Equipment fosters togetherness

The families enjoyed that the playground contained elements that fostered opportunities to connect with others. Some examples included the sway-fun, the wee-saw, and the friendship swing.

"My observation would be that there are some design elements of this playground that foster a little bit of... that foster a little bit of, you know, that connectedness." - Mom 3

Interviewer: "Which swing is your favorite over there? Do you like the bucket swing? Or the seat, or the the two persons swing?"

Child 3: "Two person swing!"

MOMENTS OF EXCLUSION

The families, and in particular, the disabled children that were part of the study, experienced moments of exclusion during their time at the playground. Despite a commitment to accessible and inclusive design, the children still experienced moments of feeling left out, forgotten, and unseen.

Fast pace of play

Parent reports and researcher observations indicated that despite 'inclusive' playground design, the rhythm(s) of the space and the pace of play often left disabled children feeling excluded.

"So like, you could see the two big girls go across, right. And then she kind of wants to do the traverse as well. But by the time she's kind of getting started, they're gone. Right?... That is one thing we experience at the playground, is the kids are already on to the next thing before she even gets started. So yeah. I don't know if there's a design fix for that, probably not." - Mom 3

Design shapes who belongs where

The playground design shaped participant perceptions of who belonged where in the space. For example, a few participants felt that the bucket seat swing was for 'babies'. In addition, researcher observations revealed that certain areas of the playground were not accessible to a family whose child uses a wheelchair.

"That's why they're baby swings, because babies don't know how to pump." - Brother 2

Researcher observation: The cozy dome supposedly provides a space for children to take a break. However, it is so small, that I am doubtful most wheelchairs could fit through the opening. And I think that is an example of an element where it was designed, perhaps, for Autistic kids for example, and there is an assumption that those kids also don't use mobility devices. So, it is an example of the playground being designed with this idea that kids' abilities exist in distinct and neat categories. (October 23, 2022)

Maintenance Matters

Playground maintenance also shaped families' experiences at the Clareview Inclusive Playground. For example, visiting during the winter months was tricky for some families (and impossible for one family), because the snow had not been cleared.

Child 5: "Somewhere that's hard to get to?"

Interviewer: "Yeah."

Child 5: "Well, everywhere right now."

Interviewer: "Everywhere right now?"

Child 5: "Because of the snow."

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US ABOUT INCLUSION AT PLAYGROUNDS?

Thoughtful design matters...but it is only one piece of the puzzle

Inclusion at playgrounds hinges on a space that is designed with a wide variety of people in mind. When a space is not designed with the intention of being accessible, opportunities for inclusion are non-existent. The families in this study felt that the design of the playground is the foundation for an experience of inclusion, but there are other factors that shape that experience such as the culture and rhythm of the space, the maintenance of the space, and the attitudes of others.

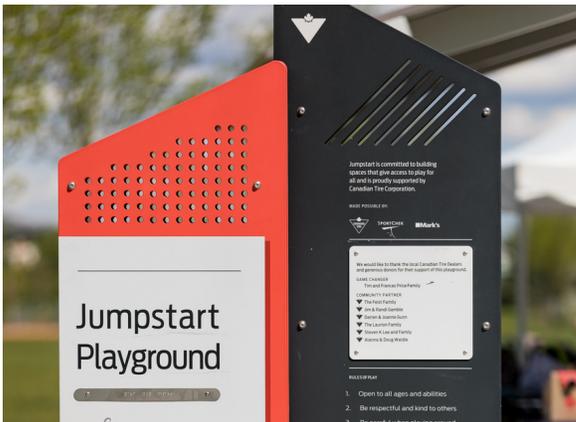


Photo credit: Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities

Belonging is a crucial component of inclusion

Belonging can be defined as an emotional feeling of being 'at home'; feeling safe; a connection to a group or place (Cobigo et al., 2012; Le Boutillier & Croucher, 2010). Thinking deeply about inclusion at playgrounds requires us to look beyond the physical design of the space, and consider belonging.



Photo credit: Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities

Inclusion is about more than proximity to, or play with, non-disabled kids

Both kids and parents discussed feeling happy even when they were playing alone, or with other disabled children. Inclusion, for these families, was about having opportunities to make choices, connect with others, and engage in activities that were meaningful to the child or them as a family.



Photo credit: Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities

There are many processes and practices that go into designing an inclusive playground and/or programming that will be offered in that space. The questions below have been informed by the families' perspectives, and are supported by previous literature (i.e., [Ross et al., 2022](#)). These considerations may support inclusive playground designers, programmers, and other decision-makers, in their efforts to promote inclusive play in their communities.

Equipment & design considerations

- Have children and families been asked to share their perspectives on prospective designs?
- Does the playground include equipment that fosters connectedness? If so, who can access those pieces of equipment?
- Does the playground have a smooth, firm surface that is suitable for the navigation and movement of mobility devices? (i.e., wheelchairs, strollers, walkers, wagons, etc.)
- Does the playground offer double wide ramps? Do the double wide ramps reach all sections of any raised portion of the playground structure?

Playground programming considerations

- Have children and families been asked to share their perspectives to inform program development?
- Has the experience of belonging been emphasized in program development?
- Has the program been designed with a wide variety of abilities in mind?
- Is the program designed to support choice?

Considerations for maintenance & other amenities

- Does the playground have an accessible washroom next to it?
- Is there adequate accessible parking, in close proximity to the playground?
- Is there appropriate infrastructure in place to provide diligent and timely snow removal during winter months?

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