Envisioning Inclusion: Creating a Design Plan for Inclusive Playgrounds for Buddy Break
Shelley Fleming OTD/S
Belmont University School of Occupational Therapy

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to design, create a playground for children with disabilities with a focus on accessibility and occupational therapy. The playground was designed to be inclusive, allowing all children, regardless of their ability level, to participate in play. The design included elements that cater to the needs of children with various disabilities, ensuring that they could enjoy the playground just as much as their typically developing peers.

Sensory Play

It is essential to include sensory play components for a variety of reasons. First, a child explores and learns about their environment using their senses. They also learn about their body and how it moves and works through sensory play. Some children, however, may have deficits related to receiving and interpreting this sensory information. These deficits may result in the child not engaging in social play. Inclusion playgrounds provide a variety of rich, sensory experiences to appeal to all children, including those with visual and hearing deficits, and they would offer children an opportunity to engage in sensory experiences at their own pace.

Imaginative Play

Imaginative play, which is also commonly referred to as pretend play, fosters creativity and a variety of other skills. It allows the child to be removed from reality, be spontaneous, and to direct their own unique play experience. It also helps children develop social interaction skills. It is important to note that it is essential for children who have cochlear implants or hearing aids.

Activity plans can contribute to a playground theme and promote imaginative play scenarios. Children can pretend to play "house" and "store" with the panels pictured here. 

Why should an OT be involved in designing a playground?

Occupational Therapists (OTs) understand the importance of play and the benefits of promoting the use of appropriate play activities for all children. They are also knowledgeable about the skills needed for children to participate in play activities. This knowledge helps them to modify and adapt activities and environments to meet the needs of the child. OTs can help create opportunities for the "just right" challenge. A "just right" challenge is one that pushes the child to learn something new, but is not so difficult that the child cannot experience success.

How can they help with playground design?

Occupational therapists can lend their expertise and perspective through a consultative process. For example, there are a variety of sensory play opportunities possible for a playground and an occupational therapist can help determine which ones are most appropriate for the population of children that are served by your facility. Playground manufacturer catalogs can be overwhelming and adapt activities and environments to meet the needs of the child. Occupational therapists understand accessibility requirements and how to identify products that incorporate universal design.

Accessible vs. Inclusive Playgrounds

Accessible playgrounds are places that provide space for children to play, while inclusive playgrounds are places that provide opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in play.

Applying the 7 Principles of Universal Design to Playgrounds

1. Equitable use
2. Flexibility in use
3. Simple & intuitive use
4. Perceptible information
5. Tolerance for error
6. Low physical effort
7. Size and space for approach and use

The Design Plan

A manual was created as a resource for facilities, especially churches that host the Buddy Break program, on how to acquire an inclusive playground. The manual was organized into the following sections:

I. Physical Access
   - Inclusive Play
   - Sensory Play

II. Imaginative Play

In unison these elements create an opportunity for inclusive play. Physical access involves how an individual gets to and experiences the playground. It includes routes and ramps to, from, and on the playground and the accessibility of the equipment. The specifications set forth in the guidelines for the construction of playgrounds are inclusive of children with disabilities. The specifications for physical play are as follows:

Physical Access

- Accessible surface
- Ramps
- Surfacing
- Sensory Play

Imaginative Play

- Store
- Imagination

References