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Canadian Disability Participation Project

The CDPP is an alliance of university, public, private and government sector partners working together to enhance community participation among Canadians experiencing disabilities. The research team for this project has expertise in childhood disability, physical activity, and programming for children and youth with disabilities.



Developing evidence informed strategies to foster quality participation on playgrounds

Why playgrounds?

Play is recognized as an international fundamental human right of all children, including children with disabilities¹. Playgrounds are often one of the first community spaces where children from different families have the opportunity to play together. However, children with disabilities oftentimes have unequal access and opportunities to engage in playground play²⁻⁷, resulting in fewer opportunities for physical, mental, social, and emotional developmental and growth through playground play³.

Historically, the responsibility of facilitating disability inclusion has been placed on the caregivers of children with disabilities. However, we ALL have a role to play in educating ourselves and children we provide care for (as a caregiver or a programmer) about disability inclusion and promoting inclusion in play. A great starting point involves focusing on education and awareness on playgrounds.

What makes a playground inclusive?

Inclusive playgrounds provide all children with equitable opportunities to access and meaningfully participate in play². They are designed to ensure the physical structures within the playground along with the playground's social and surrounding environment, meet the needs of all individuals⁸.

Inclusive playgrounds are especially important for families of children with disabilities. They may be a first step towards increased disability awareness and advocacy for accessible spaces of all abilities within the community.

Quality participation and playgrounds

Quality participation is achieved when children with disabilities view their involvement in play as satisfying and enjoyable, and experience outcomes that they consider important⁹.

Existing conceptualizations of quality participation and supporting tools have focused on sport and exercise programming. However, playgrounds are unique physical activity settings because there is no 'prescribed way to play'. Therefore, finding ways to support quality participation specific to playgrounds is important for the inclusion of children with disabilities within their local community.

Strategies to foster quality participation on playgrounds

The research team engaged in a multi-step process to develop evidence informed strategies to foster quality participation on playgrounds.



Step 1 - Identifying strategies

To identify strategies to foster quality participation on playgrounds, the research team deductively analyzed 54 interview transcripts from a large inclusive playgrounds study. Evans et al.'s (2018) six building blocks to support quality participation were used to inform the analysis⁹. These building blocks include autonomy, belongingness, challenge, engagement, mastery, and meaning. Three researchers coded the transcripts and generated potential themes based on the building blocks. The themes were then grouped into broader quality participation building block-strategy ideas that were further refined into **25 strategies** using an iterative process.

A sample strategy for **Mastery** includes:

- Provide opportunities for skill development.
 - Example: Attempting to find playgrounds that have opportunities for your child to have options for play and skill development, (e.g., a playground with lots of social interaction opportunities and sensory play components).

Step 2 - Research user consensus

Next, the research team aimed to obtain consensus from nine programmers (educators and recreation staff) and eight caregivers on the evidence-based strategies through online surveys. The programmer survey aimed to identify which of the 25 identified strategies best reflect specific building blocks. The caregiver survey required caregivers of children with disabilities to rate the likelihood of using each of the 25 identified strategies when on playgrounds with their child.

Table 1. Strategies for fostering quality participation on playgrounds

<i>Building Block Strategy</i>	Description
<i>Autonomy</i>	Having independence, choice and control
Control	Having opportunities for children to feel in control
Choices	Offer choices so that children can choose their level of play
<i>Belongingness</i>	Feeling a part of a group, included, accepted, and/or respected by others
Connections	Encourage children to create personal connections with others
Awareness and education	Integrating awareness of and education on accessibility and inclusion within the playground
Togetherness	Encourage children to play together, regardless of abilities
Something for everyone	Have equipment and activities for every child to be engaged
Teamwork	Promote teamwork on and around the playground
Accessible Play	Provide accessibility to support safe play on the playground
<i>Challenge</i>	Feeling appropriately tested
Different skill levels	Offer a range of activities for different skill levels
Progression	Allow for individual progression
Problem solving	Include aspects of problem solving on the playground
<i>Engagement</i>	Feeling focused, in-the-moment, and absorbed; experiencing flow
Imaginative play	Include opportunities for imaginative play on the playground
Variety	Offer a variety of play opportunities to engage different interests and needs
Levels of play	Allow for different levels of engagement with others
Exploration	Allow for exploration on the playground
<i>Mastery</i>	Experiencing achievement, competence; having a sense of accomplishment
Skill development	Provide opportunities for skill development and refinement of old skills
Positive reinforcement	Provide positive reinforcement when playing on or around the playground
Safety	Ensuring safe use of play structures and spaces
<i>Meaning</i>	Contributing toward obtaining a personal or socially meaningful goal; feeling a sense of responsibility to others
Goal-setting	Promote goal-setting for play while on the playground
Leadership	Promote leadership on and around the playground

Note. ***Building blocks*** are left-justified, written in orange, bold and italic font. Strategies are centred, written in regular, black font.

Two versions of a final resource were developed.

1. The Quality Participation on Playgrounds Blueprint - *Programmer Version*
2. The Quality Participation on Playgrounds Blueprint - *Caregiver Version*

In Summary

Overall, **25 strategies and two Blueprints** for fostering quality participation on playgrounds were developed as result of this mixed-methods research. The strategies and corresponding examples can assist programmers and caregivers in offering opportunities for quality participation in play for children, particularly children with disabilities on playgrounds.



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