



National Group Offers Guidelines for Accessible Playgrounds

by Deborah Leuchovius

Parents and child development professionals know that play is about more than just having fun. It provides opportunities for children to make friends and to practice physical and social skills; it also contributes to several areas of a child's development. Parents of children with physical disabilities also know that inaccessible playgrounds pose significant barriers to both inclusion and their children's development.

When Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, it was clear that its access requirements applied to the playgrounds of state or local governments, such as those in schools and parks, and to privately owned playgrounds in child care, recreation, or retail centers. What is unclear, however, is just what it meant for a playground to be accessible. The ADA's architectural guidelines did not address the unique features of play structures and playgrounds. Communities that have tried to construct accessible playgrounds since the passage of the ADA have done so without clear guidelines. New guidelines, however, are on the horizon.

A 17-member national committee of the U.S. Access Board (also known as the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board) representing people with disabilities, schools, parks, designers, and safety standard organizations began meeting in February 1996 to develop accessibility guidelines for play facilities. October 18, 2000, the Board issued final guidelines. "Play areas are designed to allow interaction among children. We wanted to ensure that children with disabilities, too, were given this opportunity," committee chair John N. McGovern of the National Recreation and Park Association told the Access Board.

Access Board accessibility specialist Peggy Greenwell commented that designers now need to rethink the way they design playgrounds. "If access is added as an afterthought, it can be costly," she said. On the other hand, an approach that integrates access into the design of the structure from the beginning will be not only less costly, it can improve access for all users. "We wanted this guideline to foster innovation and creativity and leave room for new ideas and new ways of doing things," McGovern noted.

Greenwell also noted that the majority of people who contacted the Access Board regarding the development of playground access standards were parents. She emphasized that the board encouraged parents and took comments from parents very seriously.

Areas of Controversy

The most controversial issues with which the committee had to deal involved access to elevated areas and surfacing: Are transfer systems an adequate way to provide access to elevated areas? (A transfer system is typically a series of large steps that a child crawls up or "bumps up" backwards from a seated position. It may also be a platform on which a child transfers from his or her wheelchair onto the play structure.) Also to be considered: What kind of surface meets "stable, firm, and slip resistant" requirements of the ADA, meets resiliency requirements for safety standards, is affordable, and can be easily maintained.

"Accessibility, safety, and cost often conflict," McGovern acknowledged. "We all made compromises to ensure safe access at a fair cost. But I also think every one of us came away from the table fully supporting what we ended up with."

Ground-level Play Activities

The committee recommended that at least one of each type of ground-level activity be accessible. This means that space would be provided next to a play component to allow room to maneuver and children leave assistive devices behind to use the activity. The committee considered any activity that begins and ends on the ground level as a “ground level play component.” This would include such things as a freestanding slide, sand diggers, whirls, and rockers.

Access to Elevated Play Structures

“Elevated play components” are part of a composite play structure and are accessed above or below grade. The committee recommended that at least half of a playground’s elevated play components be accessible by a ramp or transfer system (see chart).

Number of elevated components provided throughout the play area	Minimum % to be accessible and accessed by transfer system or ramp	Minimum % required to be accessible and accessed by ramp	Total
1-19	50%	None	50%
20+	25%	25%	50%

In addition, the number of accessible ground-level activities would have to equal 50 percent or more of the total number of elevated components. If there is ramp access to all elevated play components, no additional ground level activities would be required.

Best Available Guidance—But Not Yet the Law

Although the Department of Justice has not yet incorporated these guidelines into its accessibility standards (as of spring 2008), the current ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) for Play Areas remain the best guidance for organizations planning to build new accessible playgrounds or renovate existing playgrounds so they are accessible. Following these guidelines will help schools, parks, and playground designers ensure that newly constructed and altered play areas meet the requirements of the ADA and are readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities. The Department of Justice must adopt the guidelines as standards, however, for them to be enforceable under the ADA.

Single copies of the ADA Accessibility Guidelines may be obtained at no cost by calling the Access Board’s automated publications order line at 202-272-5434, by pressing 2 on the telephone keypad, then 1, and requesting publication S-39 (Play Areas Final Rule). Persons using a TTY should call 202-272-5449. Please record a name, address, telephone number and request publication S-39. Persons who want a copy in an alternate format should specify the type of format (cassette tape, Braille, large print, or ASCII disk). The guidelines are also available on the Board’s Internet site at access-board.gov. Also available on this site are frequently asked questions, a summary of the accessibility guidelines for play areas, and an online course that can be a resource for parents and teachers as well as designers and operators who want to learn about the Access Board’s accessibility guidelines for play areas.

Filing Complaints

Individuals who have complaints about inaccessible playgrounds can receive information on how to file complaints with the U.S. Department of Justice by calling 800-514-0301 (voice) or 800-514-0383 (TTY) or the Minnesota Human Rights Department at 612-296-5663. For other information, such as how to advocate for accessible playgrounds, Minnesota residents can contact PACER Center at 952-838-9000 or 800-537-2237 or the State Council on Disability at 612-297-2920 or 800-945-8913.

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