

# Toolkit for building an inclusive community playground



CHRISTOPHER & DANA  
REEVE FOUNDATION

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***Dear Friends,***

Thank you for your interest in inclusive playgrounds. Since 1999, the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation has funded more than \$22 million through our Quality of Life Grants Program to support nearly 3,000 nonprofit projects across the United States and internationally. These grants fund a wide array of initiatives to help individuals living with paralysis and their families actively enjoy life, overcome barriers to independence, and strengthen their community of loved ones, friends and neighbors. We call this the ABCs of Quality of Life: Actively Achieving, Bridging Barriers, and Caring and Coping.

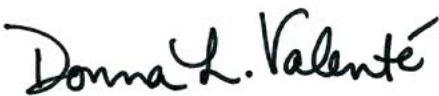
The Quality of Life Grants Program typically receives more than 600 grant requests annually, and we use a tiered review process to help evaluate and select the grants awarded. Despite the wide reach of the program, the available dollars for funding are finite, and we are only able to fund about a third of the proposals submitted.

We receive many requests to support accessible playgrounds, which are considered Actively Achieving projects because they foster active, inclusive interaction of children of all abilities in their communities. Inclusive playgrounds are very expensive, and take considerable time, thought and expertise to be done right. Playgrounds should be hubs of community activity, bringing children together to play side-by-side with their siblings and friends, and providing a safe place for families to socialize.

Inclusive playgrounds typically are created by individuals who understand the importance of play and the critical need to provide an accessible, inclusive and safe environment for all. These community advocates unite to raise funds and awareness to build and maintain inclusive playgrounds.

The Reeve Foundation created the Toolkit for Building an Inclusive Community Playground to provide community advocates with resources and tips that will broaden the understanding of the requirements of inclusive playgrounds and provide suggestions to facilitate fundraising efforts. We hope that it will foster the development of more inclusive playgrounds so that no child has to watch from the sidelines as other children play. Playtime is for everyone.

Thank you and warm wishes,



**Donna L. Valente**

*Director, Quality of Life Grants*





## WHAT IS AN INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND?

An inclusive playground equally challenges and accommodates the needs of all children, both able-bodied individuals and those with a physical or mental condition that limits their abilities. Unlike an accessible playground which is designed to provide easy entry, travel and movement to and through the equipment, an inclusive playground provides access and encourages and enables children to interact with one another.

*“The core of an inclusive playground is to create social interaction. Everyone is a child first, we are all just differently abled. We want to create a stimulating, engaging and safe place for kids of all abilities to interact.” – Tiffany Harris, founder and CEO of Shane’s Inspiration, an organization that designs and develops inclusive playgrounds*

### **Changing the game: History of inclusive playgrounds**

Advancement in thought and inclusivity has led to remarkable innovations in playground design. Decades ago, adaptive playgrounds were mostly found as part of a designated institution, where children with disabilities would play segregated from the general public. As understanding and perceptions began to change, the first public facility designed to engage children both with and without disabilities was built in Corona, New York. Dedicated in 1984, the Playground for All Children in Flushing Meadows Corona Park featured ramped play equipment, ground level play features, accessible swings, and wheelchair-accessible tables and drinking fountains. The park served as an important prototype for similar facilities elsewhere. Although hundreds of adaptive playgrounds have been built since 1984, we still have a long way to go toward ensuring all children have a safe and inclusive place to play.

## WHY ARE INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUNDS IMPORTANT?

Through this toolkit, we hope to inspire advocates from across the country to be catalysts for change in their community through building better access to play. The Reeve Foundation has funded and supported many initiatives to build inclusive playgrounds, but we need individuals to take up the cause as well and push to include inclusive facilities within their communities.



Nearly **8%** of children under the age of 15 in the U.S. are living with a disability<sup>†</sup>

The number of children under age 18 in the U.S. has grown from 47.3 million in 1950 to **73.6 million** in 2014<sup>\*</sup>



Nearly **28.9%** of American families (about 2 in 7 families) have least one member with a disability<sup>§</sup>



**2.8 million** school-aged children live with a disability in the U.S.<sup>‡</sup>

## Reason #1: Fulfilling a need

All children have the right to enjoy playtime with peers. While new developments and designs continue to enhance inclusive opportunities at playgrounds around the world, these resources are limited to those with nearby access. Many communities do not have a local inclusive playground, and the children living with disabilities in those communities often feel a strong sense of isolation. Despite best efforts, accessible elements cannot be simply integrated or retrofitted into existing facilities. Consideration for the accessibility of the entire area, including parking and paths, must be addressed from the beginning for the space to be truly inclusive.

Like many noble pursuits, change takes place over time, one community at a time. Thoughtful and mindful design must be used to evaluate the entire experience to ensure inclusivity for all. Remember, inclusive playgrounds do not just benefit kids living with disabilities. Parents and grandparents living with disabilities can also enjoy the accessibility to enjoy family time together.

\* *ChildStats.gov* (2014) [www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables/pop1.asp](http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables/pop1.asp)

† United States Census Bureau (2012) [www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html)

‡ United States Census Bureau (2011) [www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acsbr10-12.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acsbr10-12.pdf)

§ United States Census Bureau (2005) [www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-23.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-23.pdf)

***“Play is the highest form of research.” – Albert Einstein***

*Integrated play helps develop fine and gross motor skills, receptive communication skills, cerebral functions, physical strength, coordination and balance, and social skills, including independence and self-esteem.*



## **Reason #2: Importance of play**

Integrating into the community is one of the hardest hurdles of life with a disability. There is often a strong feeling of isolation and the ability to socialize is so important, especially for kids. Smiles and laughter should be a hallmark of every childhood. That is why active, outdoor play with other kids offers tremendous benefits for everyone.

**Physical benefits** – Swinging, climbing and sliding provide much needed movement and exercise that is essential to maintaining health and wellness.

**Social benefits** – Inclusive play helps to create a sense of belonging and breaks down social barriers by providing a safe and engaging environment for children of all abilities to interact and learn.

**Emotional benefits** – Parents and caregivers can enjoy quality time to interact with their children and other adults while children build friendships through learning to cooperate and communicate with others.

**Mental benefits** – Exploring tactile and sensory activities encourages mental development and understanding while free play inspires questioning and spurs imagination.

***“Happiness is about satisfaction, and satisfaction comes from giving rather than keeping. It comes from thinking more about others than oneself.” – Dana Reeve***

*“The impact on our community from building the first accessible public play park in Wyoming has been immense. Certainly, the children and adults in our region and the tourists who visit each year will benefit greatly from this project. More importantly though is the greater awareness within our community of the need to reach out to all persons to provide safe and reliable recreation activities. It is so easy to categorize people and to place them in neat boxes.*

*The successful completion of this project has built a strong awareness within our region of the needs of people to work and play together without barriers. The Reeve Foundation’s grant helped us leverage community and governmental awareness and dollars to make this project a reality.” – Bruce B. Eldredge, Coordinator, Cody Rotary Play Park Project, Cody, Wyoming*

*“This is about ALL children embracing their right to be unashamedly themselves, without being judged by their abilities.” – Janice M, parent of child with special needs, Sherman Oaks, California*

*“The playground at BDS has allowed Ellie to maneuver around an entire play structure while being able to interact with typical peers. She is no longer sitting on the sidelines while others enjoy their recess. She has been given the opportunity to play in a safe and fun environment!” – Kim H, parent of child with special needs, Hendersonville, North Carolina*

*In a time when technology consumes much of our lives, communities need an all access playground where parents can put down their phones, children put away devices and interact with their peers of all abilities, learning and practicing important life-long social skills. At an all access playground, children of all abilities are accepted and their parents can watch them having fun just being children. It is so great to see the playground always crowded!! We knew it would be a popular place!! – Patty, parent of child with special needs, Morristown, New Jersey*



### **Reason #3: Build community pride**

The benefits of an inclusive playground reach far beyond the happiness and growth of local children. When children of all abilities experience the value of play, it can bring a community together in remarkable and enduring ways. There is an outpouring of energy and enthusiasm that becomes contagious and can lead to additional efforts to enhance accessibility and inclusive initiatives. Working together creates an intangible sense of pride and connects people with different backgrounds and capabilities to a common cause.

*Created in 1973, the U.S. Access Board is an independent federal agency that promotes equality for people with disabilities and has become a leading source of information on accessible design and the development of accessibility guidelines and standards. Learn more at [access-board.gov](https://www.access-board.gov)*

### **Reason #4: Limits of the Americans with Disabilities Act**

In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. Since then, newly built or renovated playgrounds have been designed to remove the physical barriers that exclude people with disabilities. Sections 240 and 1008 of the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design provide the scope and technical requirements for play areas which must be designed, constructed, and altered for children ages two and over. Accessible ground and elevated play components, accessible routes, ramps and transfer systems, and accessible ground surfaces must be provided ([ADA.gov](https://www.ada.gov)).



Although these standards provide a critical baseline to remove barriers, physical access is only one piece of the puzzle. To effect change and encourage participation, playgrounds must also promote interaction. Too often “accessible” playgrounds sit dormant because the play structures are uninspiring. An “inclusive” playground needs to be stimulating and engaging to be equally challenging for typically developing children and those with special needs. Both informal interactive playgroups and organized educational programs greatly enhance a playground’s use and enjoyment for all.

## WHAT DOES AN INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND LOOK LIKE?

An inclusive playground should be a safe and positive environment for children of all ages and abilities to enjoy a balance of play experiences. There are many design considerations for building an inclusive and interesting space.

### **Sensory Play**

**Tactile** - various surface patterns and interactive panels offer sensory stimulation and promote dexterity

**Auditory** - melodic instruments and striking noise-makers encourage exploration of tones and sound composition

**Visual** - bright colors and games with lights can build hand/eye coordination and spatial awareness



## **Physical Play**

**Swinging** – back-and-forth motion stimulates the nervous system and provides soothing rhythmic movement

**Spinning** – rotating structures require interactive play and help build depth perception and balance

**Sliding** – rolling and sliding provide tactile stimulation and build upper body strength

## **Imaginative Play**

**Group play structures** – encourage social interaction, cooperation and teamwork to share in the fun

**Quiet spaces** – limit stimulation and offer an opportunity to relax and create an individual adventure

## **Comfort and Access**

**Surface materials** – follow accessibility guidelines and standards for mobility devices

**Climate protection** – consider UV ray sun shades and structure colors and materials as individuals with spinal cord injuries are particularly susceptible to overheating



*Multiple slides with bouncy landing pads, a talk tube radio, gangway and much more offer unlimited sensory, physical and imaginative play at Shane's Inspiration Griffith Park, Los Angeles' first inclusive park.*

## Shane's Inspiration Griffith Park, Los Angeles, CA



“The core of what we are doing is to create social interaction. Everyone is a child first, we are all just differently abled,” said Tiffany Harris, founder and CEO of Shane’s Inspiration, an organization that partners with global communities to design and develop inclusive playgrounds and social programming. “We create a stimulating, engaging and safe place for kids of all abilities to interact.”

Founded in honor of Shane Alexander Williams who was born with spinal muscular atrophy and passed away two weeks later, Shane’s Inspiration built their first playground in Los Angeles’ Griffith Park in 2000. Since then, the organization has built 63 inclusive playgrounds throughout the world, including eight international playgrounds in Mexico, Israel, Canada, Ecuador and Russia, with another 75 in development.





*Rollerslides offer tactile stimulation*

Over the years, Shane's Inspiration has received a number of Reeve Foundation Quality of Life grants to help support several of its programs. Most recent grants help support Together We Are Able, a social inclusion education program for grade-school students. The program includes an awareness workshop to dispel misperceptions about disabilities and an interactive field trip that pairs students with and without disabilities. Learn more at [Shanesinspiration.org](http://Shanesinspiration.org)

## WHERE TO START: PLANNING BASICS

### **Project Management**

- Create a planning committee with enough members to delegate responsibilities
- Enlist the help of a landscape architect and other experts from related fields
- Establish defined project roles with a designated leader for volunteers, construction, fundraising and public relations
- Remain focused on the project mission and timeline

### **Community Organizing**

- Hold public meetings to educate the community about the need to create safe, accessible play spaces
- Use inspirational videos and images to share the benefits and scope of the project
- Ask for community input to identify potential site locations and barrier-free play components
- Keep the public updated on the project status and any changes

### **Volunteer Recruitment**

- Reach out to community partners, parks and recreation departments, school districts, and parent-teacher associations for volunteers and support

- Set up a number of strategy and support teams with a diversity of people
- Consider establishing a junior Advisory Board to gain feedback from community youths

## **Fundraising**

- Create a structured fundraising plan with transparency and regular status reports
- Partner with local government and investigate the possibility of local funding and land use
- Solicit in-kind marketing and media support from a local advertising or marketing agency
- Engage community organizations to help fundraise: scouts, school groups, houses of worship, civic groups (Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, Rotary, Chambers of Commerce, etc.)
- Raise enough money to cover long-term maintenance and site upkeep



### **Envision your playground: What are your long-term objectives?**

Think about the age of the children, activity preferences, space considerations, capacity requirements, budget limitations and additional amenities (like benches and shade). Are there unique historical characteristics, a color scheme or theme you'd like to incorporate? Brainstorm different play component options and seek community feedback to narrow down the best choices and get more people involved.

### **Assess your site: What is the best way to utilize the space?**

Consider ideal play components, play needs, natural topography, vegetation, parking, restrooms and walking paths. The Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) recommends separate areas for ages 6 to 23 months, 2- to 5-year-olds and school-age children.

### **Design your play area: What will your playground look like?**

Collaborate with a designer to develop a 2D or 3D drawing based on your vision and site details. Work with key professionals such as a landscape architect and certified playground safety inspector and consider future phases to enhance your playground down the road. Be sure to focus on children's play needs, not their disability.

### **Build consensus and raise funds: How will you move the project forward?**

Gaining "buy-in" from parents, voters and other stakeholders can be challenging without a well-crafted plan. Reach out to community partners, parks and recreation departments, school districts, parent-teacher associations and others for guidance and support. There are a number of options to fundraise for or finance the project.

### **Plan for delivery and installation: How will you manage the set up?**

Be sure your site is prepared when the playground equipment arrives. Build community spirit and pride by gathering local volunteers to help with the installation. Be sure the process is supervised by a professional installer and in compliance with industry safety guidelines.



## **Enjoy and maintain your new playground: What is the plan for long-term use?**

Celebrate your new playground with a grand opening party to welcome visitors and thank all those involved in the process. Establish a set of playground rules to ensure safety and be sure to set an inspection and maintenance schedule.

### ***Five Tips to Help Ensure Grant Writing Success***

- 1** ***Do your homework** – research and write to the grant requirements of each prospective funder*
- 2** ***Present a logical narrative** – outline your proposal before you begin writing*
- 3** ***Demonstrate clear understanding of what you are doing** – write confidently and concisely*
- 4** ***Answer each question asked** – and include budget details and visuals*
- 5** ***Edit your proposal in its entirety** – and ask several different people to review*

Funding your playground shouldn't be an obstacle to its development. There are a variety of resources available to help you secure the funds you need to make your dream inclusive playground a reality.

### **Fundraising**

From walk-a-thons to community yard sales, there are an abundance of fundraising options available today. Keep in mind that many people would rather give a direct monetary donation to an exciting new playground than purchase unwanted things where only a portion of the money raised is put toward the goal. Hosting a few well-thought-out and well-executed fundraisers can be much more effective than constantly asking for money. Strong local support builds civic pride, strengthens neighborhood bonds, and creates momentum for a successful inclusive playground to be the hub of the community.

### **Grants**

Proper planning and tools make securing grant funds easier. There are many resources available to help streamline the process for finding and submitting federal, state and private foundation grants. Many corporations like Lowe's, Aetna Foundation, Hasbro and Walmart also offer grants for park and playground projects.

### **Purchasing contracts**

Expedite and simplify the buying process using nationwide government-procurement services that establish a competitive, public bidding process compliant with your state bidding statutes. To take advantage of this easy-to-use, no-cost service, complete a short registration process through HGACBuy, The Cooperative Purchasing Network (TCPN) or the National Cooperative Purchasing Alliance (NCPA).

### **Leasing**

With lease-purchase options, you can build your playground today and fund it over time. There are a large number of commercial finance products and services available nationwide.



***As of 2017, 97 accessible playgrounds totaling \$638,214 have been funded by the Reeve Foundation Quality of Life Grants Program***



*Pictured above is a Sway Fun Glider, a popular glider with room for two wheelchairs plus two large benches for other passengers.*

## REEVE FOUNDATION QUALITY OF LIFE GRANTS PROGRAM

Soon after her husband Christopher Reeve became paralyzed, Dana Reeve learned how families dealing with paralysis and other disabilities are challenged every day by barriers that keep them from fully participating in and enjoying their communities. She created the Quality of Life Grants Program to support innovative programs and initiatives that enable individuals living with mobility challenges and their families to live more independently and engage more fully in their communities. Since 1999, the Reeve Foundation has awarded Quality of Life grants to organizations throughout all 50 States.

To learn more about the Quality of Life Grants Program and the application process, please visit [christopherreeve.org/get-support/grants-for-non-profits](http://christopherreeve.org/get-support/grants-for-non-profits)



## PLAYGROUND RESOURCE GUIDE

### **Accessible playground locations**

Accessible playground directory - [shanesinspiration.org/playgrounds](http://shanesinspiration.org/playgrounds)

National Public Radio's Playgrounds for Everyone - [playgroundsforeveryone.com](http://playgroundsforeveryone.com)

### **Fundraising project ideas and resources**

Fund Monkey - [fundmonkey.com](http://fundmonkey.com)

### **Grant writing tips**

Federal grant tip sheets - [nih.gov](http://nih.gov)

KaBOOM! Toolkit - [kaboom.org](http://kaboom.org)

The Balance, grant writing articles by Joanne Fritz - [thebalance.com](http://thebalance.com)

The Foundation Center - [grantspace.org](http://grantspace.org)

The School Funding Center - [schoolfundingcenter.info](http://schoolfundingcenter.info)

## **Grant sources**

Captain Planet Foundation - [captainplanetfoundation.org/grants](http://captainplanetfoundation.org/grants)

Grants Alert - [grantsalert.com](http://grantsalert.com)

Grant Wrangler - [grantwrangler.com](http://grantwrangler.com)

KaBOOM! - [kaboom.org](http://kaboom.org)

Lowe's - [newsroom.lowes.com/apply-for-a-grant](http://newsroom.lowes.com/apply-for-a-grant)

Playworld - [playworld.com/budgeting](http://playworld.com/budgeting)

## **Equipment vendors**

Burke Company - [bciburke.com](http://bciburke.com)

GameTime - [gametime.com](http://gametime.com)

Landscape Structures - [playsi.com](http://playsi.com)

Play & Park Structures - [playandpark.com](http://playandpark.com)

Playground Grass by Forever Lawn - [playgroundgrass.com](http://playgroundgrass.com)

## **Other resources**

American Society of Landscape Architects - [asla.org](http://asla.org)

National Recreation and Park Association - [nrpa.org](http://nrpa.org)





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**We're here to help.**

Learn more today! [QOL@ChristopherReeve.org](mailto:QOL@ChristopherReeve.org)



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