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AS THE ADA TURNS 34 THIS MONTH, PENNSYLVANIA COMMUNITIES ARE BUILDING UNIVERSAL DESIGN INTO THEIR NEW PLAY SPACES



Parents Can Now Find Accessible Playgrounds on The Pennsylvania Recreation & Park Society's Park Finder App

STATE COLLEGE, PA – (July 24, 2024) – Within hours of cutting the ribbon for the new playground at Warminster Community Park in Bucks County, PA, in May, the community's Facebook page lit up with posts by parents grateful for the communication board. The board, an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ACC) tool using pictures and symbols to assist

with non-verbal communication, suggested by a local speech pathologist, created a way for their nonverbal children to access the playground and play with other children.

Historically, inclusivity on the playground catered only to physical access for children with orthopedic disabilities, leaving out a vast number of children. Warminster's new playground is emblematic of the evolution of inclusive play and greater recognition of neurodiversity.

As America celebrates the 34th anniversary of the groundbreaking Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) this month, playgrounds like this one go far beyond the basic requirements of the ADA by building in Universal Design.

[Universal Design](#) means planning and building playgrounds that serve every child's needs in one place, while creating multiple opportunities for interaction between children with and without disabilities.

The CDC ranks Americans with disabilities as the largest minority group in the country. About 1:6 children in the United States have one or more developmental disabilities.

"Parks and Recreation professionals are at the forefront of bringing Universal Design to playgrounds, informed by their level of interaction with children with differing abilities through the myriad programs they run in communities," said Dan Hendey, CPRE, CPSI, Senior Education Manager, Pennsylvania Recreation & Park Society.

"Our team has experience with children with a wide range of disabilities through our camp," said Jessica Fox, director of Warminster's Parks & Recreation Department. "With this insight, we already knew the old inclusion model of just wheelchair ramps wouldn't serve the vast needs of all of the children in our community. Our new playground was intentionally designed to create interaction while also providing spaces for children to retreat as needed, based on their individual needs.

It shows children what they have in common and allows them to have fun together instead of focusing on their differences. The result is definitely not a stand in line and go down the slide playground."

According to [Landscape Structures](#), when playgrounds are built with everyone in mind, it sends a message to the community that everyone is meant to be there, that everyone matters and everyone is meant to play.

Children with disabilities can have different needs for their play, such as more or less sensory input; however, playground play is critical for all children's cognitive and physical development, supporting socialization, creativity and community building.

About two hours due west of Warminster, near Harrisburg, PA, Upper Allen Township Parks & Recreation just became the first public park system in Pennsylvania to earn designation as a [Certified Autism Center](#) (CAC). This designation relates to staff training and the department's commitment to providing accessible spaces that encourage inclusivity. Every member of the township's parks and recreation department has been trained through this certification.

"We now have the ability to identify if someone is on the spectrum, which helps us understand their behavior and how to approach them in the best way," says Upper Allen Township Parks Director Chad Krebs. "When we recently closed one of our playgrounds, we had to think about how to support a boy with autism who swung there every day. We decided to leave his swing up until the new playground opened, so he wouldn't lose that important part of his daily routine."

The township recently opened an interactive sensory garden behind one of its flagship playgrounds, [Winding Hill Park North](#). The natural area, envisioned as a reprieve from potential overload on the playground, features five sections, one catered to each sense. Lush with more than 600 plants, it includes fruit trees and bushes in the taste area, tall grasses that crackle in the wind and bird feeders and houses for sound, and both prickly and soft, fuzzy plants for touch. Its benches face away from other people to offer lessened stimulation, while the entire area sits in the sightline of parents on the playground for security.

"With the sensory garden and every new project, inclusivity is the first thing we think about when we start out," says Krebs. "We look at the project from every angle to determine whether it's accessible to all."

Parents in Pennsylvania can now find accessible playgrounds more easily using [PRPS's Park Finder](#) app. The app lets people search for a playground or park by location and a list of 70+ attributes. Just last week, Accessible Playground was added to the search function.

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