



ONE PARK, MANY NEEDS

Equitable, flexible, simple and intuitive. These are some of the principals that playground designers adhere to today in creating inclusive, natural play spaces. The new playground encourages play between children of nearly all ages and capabilities, including those with special needs. Adult caregivers are considered, too. Whether in the city, a suburban municipal park or at a school, the playground has radically changed in just a couple of decades.

"We wanted to make sure that the new playground was available to everybody in the community," says John Curran, Director of Parks and Recreation in Tinley Park, Illinois, who oversaw the opening of the Staff Sargent Michael J. Sutter Playground in a large, suburban park.

Since it opened in September 2014, this playground has enabled children with various special needs to play.

One regular includes a father who brings his disabled adult daughter to swing. "It was the first time she had been in a swing for over 10 years," says Curran, "because she'd outgrown all of the others. ...now there's a swing large enough for her."

Topography is also important for accessibility and play.

"We use slopes as walkways to get from one grade to another," says Hana Ishikawa, Design Director at Site Design Group, describing a park the firm created in Chicago. "And each step of the way, there's equipment that is fully accessible, including a zip line that children in wheelchairs, or with other disabilities, can use."

Playground designers recognize that the play needs of children are often common, regardless of physical ability or age. While space is provided for active free play, at some point most children want a space where they can hide, talk with friends or play quietly, out of sight of parents or other kids. For children in the autism spectrum, enclosed and quiet spaces are therapeutic. In Chicago, both the Near North Montessori School, an urban elementary school, and the Grow and Play Park at the Garfield Park Conservatory utilize a Willow Hut. These are live willow trees that are woven into huts and tunnels.

"It's an area where kids can separate themselves or with small groups and get the feeling of being enclosed in some way," says Audrey Aronowsky, Director of Programs and Interpretation at the Conservatory.

The new playgrounds are safer – causing fewer injuries than more traditional equipment – but offer wider access and accommodate a variety of skill levels.

"Kids are encouraged to be so creative about the games they play," says Audrey Perrott, Executive Director of Near North Montessori School. "Whereas when you have a playground with certain prescribed equipment and it calls for the kids to play with it in a certain way, they are going to push the limits. And sometimes that equipment gets in the way of just running around."

The new playground is one that encourages and rewards free play, imagination and inclusion. The benefits are more than just physical. Running, jumping and climbing is natural and healthful for children, but so is fostering creativity and developing a sense of community with peers with physical or developmental limitations. The life skills learned will be used off the playground as well, as children navigate school and the world beyond it.