

# Who belongs in the playground?

After achieving accessibility, we need to lean into true inclusivity in a big way, experts say

**What is a truly inclusive playground – and how do we go about making one? – Caroline van Rijckevorsel, researcher for Jönköping University, says that we’ve finally started to think of inclusivity as something more than simply clearing obstacles from one’s path.**

“With playgrounds, it used to be that once you built a wheelchair ramp to get to a tower, for instance, then that’s all you needed to do. It took a while to realise that if there’s nothing to do at the tower, the whole exercise is pretty pointless,” says van Rijckevorsel who is currently writing her PhD on assistive technology – and did her Master’s on inclusive playground.

According to more modern perspectives, accessibility is only a part of inclusivity. While accessibility is structural (making sure the path is clear and there are tools available), inclusivity is cultural and very much about how you feel. True inclusivity seeks to create a welcoming environment where everyone feels they can participate.

“Inclusivity is about belonging,” van Rijckevorsel sums up.

## **Prime playground collection promotes equal play**

Van Rijckevorsel worked with the playground manufacturer Lappset, bringing her insights into the creation of the new Prime collection. Prime is the first Lappset collection to feature inclusivity ratings which offer information about the inclusivity and accessibility factors of the product. The ratings address a broad range of issues from mobility, vision, hearing and speech to intellectual abilities and motor coordination.

Van Rijckevorsel says she enjoyed the rather hands-on design experience:

“We had a great team and prototypes readily available to experiment with,” she looks back at her six-week internship period.

As it turns out, the issue of inclusivity is a personal one for van Rijckevorsel. Her little brother’s scoliosis got so bad that he needed a corset as a medical brace – and was banned from all forms of play at school for a time.

“It was just heartbreaking to see that,” van Rijckevorsel says.

## **Always room for improvement**

However, van Rijckevorsel is optimistic that more inclusive playgrounds will, indeed, take root – even though it’s far from an easy process.

“It will take time to see what works and what doesn’t, and to make adjustments accordingly,” she says, pointing out that mental and psychosocial issues need to be addressed – increasingly – in the design, as well.

“No playground will ever be 100% perfect, but there’s still so much we can do.”

### **Go for maximum!**

Lappset also enlisted the help of the Finnish Paralympic Committee in the making of their newest product line. **Jukka Parviainen**, facilities and accessibility specialist at the Finnish Paralympic Committee, says that as the nature of play is boundless, us grownups should do what we can to make sure that all kids get to enjoy it.

“In Finland, legislation sets the minimum requirement for accessible sites, but companies can do better than that,” he says, encouraging the playground makers to set their aims high.

“For example, a wider step or plateau in a play structure is something most kids won’t even notice – but it’s vital for those who simply need it to be able participate at all.”

Similarly, kids with vision issues benefit from stronger colour contrasts at the playground and children facing cognitive challenges can be helped with signs.

“There are many things that can be done to support these kids – without dimming the fun of anyone else,” says Parviainen.

### **Keep everybody in the loop**

A wheelchair user himself, Parviainen knows the pitfalls of various environments well. He points out that inclusivity at the playground goes, in fact, beyond the needs of the children.

“I’m in a wheelchair, but my four-year-old son is not. But if I can’t go to a certain playground, that means that he won’t either,” Parviainen gives an example.

According to Parviainen, Lappset is doing stellar work with Prime, trying to take everybody’s needs into consideration in earnest.

“Lappset clearly has a ‘design for all’ mindset,” Parviainen credits the company.

### **Beyond the surface**

Parviainen feels that inclusivity design ideology must run deep to make a real difference: last minute add-ons rarely do more than frustrate kids with disability.

“It’s not about adding some features because you have to – it’s about creating a concept of play that provides meaningful, fun activity for everybody.”

At the same time, Parviainen acknowledges that no playground can be “all things for all people”.

“Still, there are always improvements that can be made.”

### **Wanted: Play without limits**

Jukka Parviainen is long-time member of the national wheelchair rugby team and a popular inclusivity speaker at corporate events. He believes that all playground manufacturers should take a step back and really consider, is there a way to facilitate play that is as limitless as the imagination of the children themselves?

“Many features and tools are already available to us. Bringing them together in creative combinations is the next step,” he says.

Parviainen is convinced that, in many ways, playgrounds “set the tone” for a lifetime of activity and movement.

“Physical education starts at the playgrounds and they should be equal and accessible for everyone from day one.”

**Lappset Group** has been dedicated to promoting play and movement for over 55 years. Lappset designs and manufactures innovative, inspiring, and inclusive playground and exercise equipment, theme parks, and park and street furniture. The family business from Rovaniemi, Lapland, employs 400 experts in different fields in seven different countries. With production in Finland, Estonia and the Netherlands, the company’s distribution network extends to more than 60 countries.

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