

Challenges in designing natural playgrounds for everyone

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Introduction

“There is a need for greater understanding of the processes that shape the accessibility of natural play spaces and the multiple experiences of people within natural play spaces”

(Trudeau, 2024, p. 3)

Research has shown that natural play spaces, with integrated natural elements such as trees, plants, rocks, and water, offer numerous benefits for children and communities. These spaces are designed to attract diverse users and offer a wide range of play opportunities that go beyond physical play, promoting inclusivity.

However, these spaces are often less accessible to marginalized communities and children with disabilities.

In this brief, we present key findings from a study that investigated natural playgrounds in Calgary, Canada, focusing on access, equity, and inclusivity. The researchers conducted walking/playing and online interviews with 51 participants, including children, caregivers, playground designers, and municipal workers.

The study focused on exploring barriers and challenges in the development and usage of natural play spaces.

These findings are relevant for urban, park, city, and playground planners and architects, particularly those involved in the design and development of public spaces. It may also be relevant for those involved in decision-making processes related to urban development and public spaces that promote equity and inclusivity.



Key results

The study found several challenges in ensuring equitable development and accessible usage of these types of play spaces:

Diversity of Users and Usage:

Natural playgrounds serve as 'integrational spaces', attracting not only children but also caregivers, adolescents, and adults. Although most participants reported positive experiences with shared playground usage, issues like vandalism and conflicting use patterns were also mentioned.



Physical Access Issues:

There are challenges in ensuring equitable development and accessible use for marginalized communities and individuals with disabilities. Physical accessibility is a major concern as ground surface materials (e.g., loose rocks and sand) and playground layout can be barriers for those with disabilities.



Economic Barriers:

High costs for the development and maintenance of natural playgrounds and reliance on community funding can limit the creation of such spaces.



Community Funding and Volunteer Work:

The study highlights that community funding, grants, and volunteer work, often performed by stay-at-home parents with specific skills, are essential in creating and supporting natural play spaces.




Key take home messages

Consider different needs and contexts: The study suggests that there is a need for careful consideration of different needs and contexts to create more inclusive and accessible natural playgrounds.

Support: It is suggested that municipal and non-profit support, maintenance funding, and participatory planning with diverse members of the community are crucial for equitable playground development.

Focus on the balance between risky play versus physical accessibility: The study recommends a balance between different playground features to accommodate different needs.



“There is a tension between the concept of play and the concept of accessibility, and you know, the question gets asked—is there a universal solution? And I don’t think there is because you’re going to have fully abled children who want overhead monkey bars and who want extreme climbing, who want this and want that, which is opposed to a differently abled child who can’t climb or who can’t see or, you know, whatever that disability may be. So, the solution is not simply again smoothing out the edges of the playground so that more people can access it, but it’s how can you offer experiences to a wider range of audiences in a way that doesn’t exclude any of those audiences”

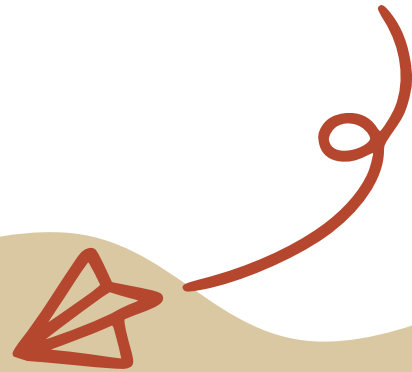
(Natural playground designer, In Trudeau, 2024, p. 14)



This brief is based on

Trudeau, M. (2024). Accessibility and equity issues within natural playground usage and development. *Leisure*, 1–24.

Sharing research



At the World Playground Research Institute, we are dedicated to sharing valuable insights from research studies and reviews through concise and accessible publications called Briefs.

Briefs provide summaries of key research findings and their implications, serving as valuable resources for policy and decision-makers.

All briefs focus on topics related to the development and design of playground as well as the impact of playgrounds on children's physical activity, mental and social health and motor skills.

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