The benefits of inclusive play

Individual children and their peers, children's settings and their communities, and ultimately wider society all share the benefits of inclusive play. This chapter will look at:

- the benefits of inclusive play;
- the particular value of play to children with disabilities, children experiencing difficulties or children 'on the margins';
- short activities and exercises that staff can use in order to expand their shared understanding and knowledge of inclusive play;
- ways in which consulting children and encouraging them to express their views can be an integral part of the setting;
- how the benefits of inclusive play ripple through the community of the setting.

The benefits of inclusive play

Play itself has crucial and wide-ranging benefits to children and the people around them. This section assumes that children experiencing good quality play experiences and interesting and stimulating environments throughout their childhood will gain many benefits to their well-being, happiness and development.

This section looks in particular at the benefits of 'inclusive play' and what is gained through shared experiences of play perhaps with some support.

Children

Through experience of inclusive play in which they feel included and supported, children gain many benefits including:
THE VALUE OF INCLUSIVE PLAY

- A truer understanding of the world: that there are similarities and differences between people;
- The development of attitudes such as tolerance, appreciation of difference, acceptance of perspectives and perceptions other than their own;
- A richer play environment which includes different language and methods of communication, a wider range and use of play materials;
- A positive sense of self, self-esteem and positive reinforcement of their sense of identity;
- Experiences linked to curricular goals, in particular in the realms of social and emotional development, language development, knowledge and understanding of the world and citizenship;
- The ability to exercise their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children’s settings

Through experiencing and supporting inclusive play, benefits gained by settings include:

- Adults and children enjoying spending time together.
- Positive relationships between children and adults in which adults show respect for the culture of children’s play and in which individuals are welcomed and valued.
- Inclusive staff teams in which staff members’ own life experiences, skills, languages and cultures are valued and seen as a positive resource on which the whole setting can draw.
- Reflective practitioners with deeper understanding of children’s needs and the expectation that their practice should develop in order to meet the changing needs of the children.
- Practitioners with a range of skills and abilities such as varying communication skills and methods and the ability to scaffold play between children (see Chapter 4 for more details).
- A medium or ‘vehicle’ for delivering the curriculum which is appropriate to all the children in the setting.
- Meeting expected standards, for example principles of play in the early years (QCA, 2000: 25), and for meeting the diverse needs of children (QCA, 2000: 17), national care standards, legal requirements of non-discrimination.
The community of the setting

The community of the setting includes parents and others who have contact such as volunteers and people surrounding the setting either in the local area or through connections such as the local church, mosque or temple. Benefits gained include the following.

- Children’s relationships and friendships continue outside the setting.
- Connections between children at play foster connections between parents and families through play at each other’s homes and encounters in community play spaces.
- Opportunities arise for communication, building relationships and gaining a greater sense of connectedness and understanding.
- Greater openness to, and appreciation of, diversity emerges. Encounters between people of different backgrounds and circumstances or needs are based on familiarity.
- More fun and happy shared memories for all involved.

Wider society

- Greater social cohesion.
- Contributing towards aims of a fairer society in which people all have a part to play.
- More people able to actively participate in their communities in different ways.
- Meeting its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- A foundation for the future to be different.

The particular value of play to children with disabilities, children experiencing difficulties or children ‘on the margins’

When considering inclusive play we often start by thinking about children who are identified as needing help because of impairment or additional support needs. However, when looking at and then developing our provision for play, it often becomes noticeable that there are children who flit around on the margins and are never really engaged in play or play with others. These children often gain enormously from improvements within the environment and opportunities for play, and when sensitive support is made available. The message from inclusive play is that it makes it better for everyone.

Play is crucial to children’s experience of a setting. Whether or not the staff are pleasant, the buildings adequate, the programme varied, if the time spent at play with peers is unsatisfactory then that sets the tone for their whole view of the setting. Whether play is the primary objective of the setting or a way of working, access to play is crucial from the child’s point of view. The work of hospital play specialists illustrates this well in that good medical treatment isn’t enough for children to feel positive about their spells in hospital and that children’s opportunities for play will aid their adjustment, coping and recovery.
THE VALUE OF INCLUSIVE PLAY

Equally, play colours children’s whole experience of inclusion. Child-mediated play (particularly outdoor play, playtime, free play with low levels of adult intervention) is especially important. These are the opportunities for children to have a place among peers and take part in the particular culture of play for that place. Children’s play culture can have its own language, fads and phases, values, even its own history and geography. Acceptance by peers is significant in the development of a child’s sense of self and personal identity and access to that is more genuinely through play than through adult-planned activities. (We can all remember from our own childhoods how quickly children can see through well-intentioned social engineering by adults.) In play children may have to ‘take on the world’ – learn about relationships, how they work and are mediated – including through teasing, falling out, making up, loyalty, quarrels, shifts in groups, jealousy and so on. These are real experiences that all children have to tackle and learn about.

When discussing inclusion with children, it becomes clear that for them it centres around friendship. Friendships developed through specific attempts to provide for inclusive play are often carried over into other parts of their lives. So a friendship developed at playtime or in a playscheme has the possibility of developing into play in the children’s local community or homes. These are the types of experiences that are stifled before they even have a chance to develop, when children are not able to access local play provision.

Play provokes wide-ranging language and communication and through inclusive play children will hear flexible use of language by peers including slang, word play and hilarious rude words. There is enormous motivation to use language in play and flexible use of non-verbal communication can often be more readily exchanged in the context of play. Play also offers opportunities for behaviour and traits to be appreciated in a way they might not be elsewhere – taking daring risks, making rude noises, mimicry, silliness, jokes, or telling unbelievable tales.

People and peers are a particular source of motivation, inspiration, curiosity, stimulation, and combinations of people create endlessly varied possibilities. Many children with disabilities have few areas in their lives in which they feel able to exercise real choice and control. It may be because of change or disruption in their lives, because they spend a great deal of time having treatments or therapy, or simply because they have to rely on adults to get them around. Play can be a process through which they can regain a sense of control or work through difficult or challenging experiences. That is why play environments which have elements that can manipulated, and that can cope with processes of creation and destruction, are of great importance to children. (See Chapter 3 for more on play environments.)

Risk and challenge are integral parts of the play experience and it has been said that children with disabilities have an equal if not greater need for opportunities to take risks, since they may be denied the freedom of choice enjoyed by their non-disabled peers (Play Safety Forum, 2002). Children need opportunities in their play to learn to judge their own capacities and extend them, explore limits and to experience excitement, nervousness, courage, daring, thrills (and real spills).

Ultimately it is the nature of play that there is no right or wrong. It is therefore an arena in which children with additional support needs can be themselves, making their own meaning, gaining their own satisfaction from play in their own way and at their own pace – like everyone in an inclusive play setting will be doing.
This presents a particular challenge to adults who find it very difficult to gauge the level and type of support to provide without intruding and therefore disrupting the very dynamic they hope to support. It is this particular challenge that is a central issue in providing for inclusive play and we look at it in more detail in Chapter 4.

**Short activities and exercises that staff can use in order to expand their shared understanding and knowledge of inclusive play**

Even in experienced and established teams practitioners need to invigorate and refresh their ideas from time to time: the dynamics of play change with different groups of children, adults, seasons, and spaces and places to play. Practitioners with distinct professional roles may want to consider to what extent the benefits to be gained from inclusive play are within their area of concern and therefore how they see their role, with others, in providing for or supporting inclusive play (see Figure 2.1).

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 2.1** People, roles and benefits of inclusive play.
These quick exercises are always useful.

- Swap roles: a teacher could take the place of a playground supervisor for the day; a playworker from the after school club could come into the nursery class; an occupational therapist could make playground observations. It is easy to fall into set expectations of children and ourselves. Swapping roles can give insight into children’s needs, abilities and personalities in a different environment, allowing them to surprise us.

- Make a change in the environment and watch what happens. Are new possibilities opened up? Does it influence patterns of play or groupings of children? There are numerous ways to do this quickly.
  - Set up the usual equipment in different places.
  - Don’t put out any equipment at all.
  - Throw a parachute over the branch of a tree.
  - Play some music from the windows.
  - Hang billows of ribbons from a doorframe.
  - Make a trail round the space with chalk, stones or shiny paper.
  - Make a stage with tables.
  - Leave out a pile of big cardboard boxes.

- Observations: spend a bit of time quietly in the play space observing the children at play as unobtrusively as possible. You could look out for different types of play, groupings of children, interactions, preferred places, preferred play materials, use of the whole space.

- Check out your observations with the children at an appropriate moment that doesn’t disrupt their play. Make it positive: ‘I noticed you all doing something really interesting when you were in that corner … can you tell me about it?’ Children are often really keen to talk about their play provided you are genuinely interested and listening, and not seeking to intervene, direct or judge.

- Encourage other members of the team to observe play at the same or different times. Compare your observations. It is interesting how differently adults can interpret the same play situation having seen it from different angles or with different levels of involvement.

- You cannot be invisible in a play space so you may find children are curious to find out what you are up to. One useful strategy is to involve them in what you are doing. Ask them to go off and survey their friends for you on what they are doing. A little notepad and pencil in their pocket will give them a role.
Consulting children and encouraging them to express their views as an integral part of the setting

Listening to and consulting with children, acting on their recommendations, following up on the views that children have expressed and involving them in the ongoing processes are important in all children’s settings. It may be useful to think about a culture of participation as an ongoing dialogue between all members of the community of the setting.

A culture of participation is important to the development of inclusive play in our settings. Inclusion is an ongoing process, and in inclusive play we need to make sure we are continually acting on our observations and responding to the individual needs within groupings of children.

Each child’s experience is unique. For children with disabilities or additional support needs, their perception of the world and experience of it may not be like our own and we cannot act on assumptions or on assumed models of ages and stages.

We will now go on to consider the Why? Who? When? Where? How? and What? of encouraging participation (see Figure 2.2).

Why?

Consulting children and encouraging them to express their views can be an integral part of the setting and is important to the development of inclusive play opportunities.

■ Children have the right under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to express their views and for those views to be taken into account.

■ It allows us to understand the experiences of children from their points of view, and to find out more about their suggestions, solutions and perceptions.
Inclusion is an ongoing process of listening to and respecting all children.

The child knows more about his or her own experience of play than an adult can.

It means we are more likely to get it right.

Who can be part of this ongoing dialogue?

All children can be enabled to contribute at a level and in a way which is appropriate to them (see below for more suggestions). The assumption should be that every child has a right to take part and express their views.

---

**Fig. 2.2**

A culture of participation supports inclusive play.

- Inclusion is an ongoing process of listening to and respecting all children.
- The child knows more about his or her own experience of play than an adult can.
- It means we are more likely to get it right.

**Playworker:** What is the best thing to do in this playground?

**Child:** Splash in the puddles!

*(Overheard in a children’s consultation)*

**Who can be part of this ongoing dialogue?**

- All children can be enabled to contribute at a level and in a way which is appropriate to them (see below for more suggestions). The assumption should be that every child has a right to take part and express their views.
The participation of some children may depend to a degree on support from adults. This can include permission to participate, help with attending, support with communication or care needs. Adults closely involved with supporting the participation of children (through communication, for example) should be sure not to influence the child’s views or present their own views as the child’s.

Inclusive play is more likely to take place in inclusive settings, so the views of adults with different roles should also be taken into account and valued.

When?
- A participative culture allows plentiful and ongoing opportunities for children to express their views. Adults will be ready to hear what children have to say (in whichever way, verbal or non-verbal, they say it).
- Children, like all of us, need time to mull things over and form views. It can be very helpful to plan for repeat visits or consultations so that children have time to think about the issue and what they would like to say.
- Capturing children’s views often does not happen immediately. After introducing a topic children may talk about it on another occasion or talk to someone else about it (another child or adult).
- Gaining the co-operation of other people can really help. If, for instance, parents or other practitioners know that we are actively seeking children’s views, they can help to record and feed back what children tell them (bearing in mind issues of confidentiality).
- Prior information given to the children about the subject, purpose and format of the consultation will help them to prepare.

Where?
Consulting children can take place in areas in which they already spend time and are comfortable. Although it can be great to have a consultation event in a special venue, there are also real benefits to consulting with children in their own space.

- If the consultation is about the play environment, do it there! It makes it all less abstract.
- In some settings, the classroom for example, children might feel that they are expected to behave or answer in a certain way.
- It can also be useful to spend time talking with children at an event such as a picnic, during an outing or a day at the beach, when the atmosphere is informal and there is plenty of time.
- The setting for talking to children should be conducive to feeling comfortable, safe and relaxed.
- The sensory environment is very important, so thought should be given beforehand to acoustics, vision, accessibility, minimizing background noise and distractions.
How?

There are a number of areas which should be considered when thinking about making a more meaningful and self-sustaining culture of participation including: communication, ethics, ways of working and practical considerations.

Communication

- Language should be appropriate to the ages, abilities and backgrounds of the particular children involved.
- Communication is not just about the spoken or written word but can involve creative methods and visual language – art, drama, music, movement. Body language, expressions and other non-verbal communication can be strong indicators of children's feelings and wishes.
- Some children use specific communication aids and systems with which the practitioner should be familiar. The child may prefer to have support from someone who is already familiar with his or her way of communicating – a sibling or carer, for example.
- Interpreters (including sign language interpreters) or bilingual support staff can be involved if children don’t feel comfortable using English, remembering that they may be happy to use English in everyday situations but not be comfortable with it in a more formal situation.
- Preparing visual aids such as charts, photos and displays can aid communication considerably.
- Learning to listen to children is both an important skill and a mindset. Practise being alert to the messages children give through their behaviour, body language, their art.
Ethics – respecting children’s right to participate

The ethics of children’s participation is a developing area. Some issues to consider are:

- The recognition of children as competent and entitled to participate.
- Confidentiality and dealing with sensitive situations and child protection issues.
- Giving feedback to children and informing them of how their views will influence decisions.
- Genuine opportunities for children to express their feelings and opinions, taking into account their unique viewpoints and modes of expression.
- Allowing children choice throughout the process including: choice of how to be involved, of how to express themselves, of how the process might be undertaken; choice regarding where and when to participate; the opportunity to withdraw or change their minds.
- Creating a context where equal interaction can take place.
- A willingness to listen to and learn from children.

Ways of working

- Creatively (being prepared to look for and experiment with new ways of involving children).
- Flexibly (being prepared to adapt and adjust to the environment, the situation and the children’s needs and interests).
- Valuing, and therefore giving time to, listening, reflection and discussion.
- Embedding children’s participation in practice, ethos and policies.
- Creating clear frameworks for processes of participation (practitioners, managers, service providers and decision-makers all have roles in creating this).

What?

We have suggested that a participative culture comes from a respectful, ongoing dialogue between children and adults. It is about relationships and, at its core, about listening in all the forms that listening can take.

UNICEF (1989) suggests that:

The Convention (on the Rights of the Child) envisages a change in relationship between adults and children. Parents, teachers, caregivers and others interacting with children are seen no longer as mere providers, protectors or advocates, but also as negotiators and facilitators. Adults are therefore expected to create spaces and promote processes designed to enable and empower children to express views, to be consulted and to influence decisions.
There are many ways to find out more about children’s own experience of play and play environments. Observation of children’s play is important (informed by knowledge of the children themselves, of play and of children’s needs). Other suggestions include:

- Chatting to the children and asking about their likes, dislikes and preferences. Informal chatting is often very fruitful and shouldn’t be overlooked as a method of consultation.

- Actively building up the children’s experience of expressing themselves through creative opportunities in the setting. Always have art materials freely available for the children to use. Visit galleries, exhibitions, theatres, watch street theatre, hold workshops, stage mini-performances – all of these will help the children to build up their language of expression.

- Interviews. Develop a set of questions and interview the children or ask the children to interview each other. Using a dictaphone lends an air of authenticity to being a reporter and means the child doesn’t have to be able to write replies down. A schedule of questions can be drawn up with visual prompts as well as text.

- Make a large map of the play environment and use a series of stickers to indicate areas such as: my favourite place to play, places I don’t like, places I can’t reach, my favourite place alone, my favourite place with friends. Give the children a set of stickers and after explaining their meaning ask them to stick them on the large map. This gives an instant visual map which you can then go on to explore more closely with children.

- Walk around the site with individual children as they complete their map. This allows more discussion about the children’s preferences and their reasons for them, as you go along.

- Spending time with children in their special place allows you to explore their preferences more deeply, for example by trying to understand the sensory experiences that the child gains. These might be the sound of the wind, the flickering of light through moving leaves, the sensation of being in a little enclosed space. The children might share with you otherwise overlooked details that make the space special to them, such as a hollow in a branch, a gap in a hedge to peek through.

- Another variation is to give children a set of large symbols which they actually place around the play environment to indicate favourite places, likes/dislikes.

- The story of playtime: what playtime is like for me. Ask children for their play and play experiences as though they were telling a story. ‘I went out to play and …’

**Practical considerations**

Practical considerations will also make a big difference to children’s ability to participate in some events or activities. Areas to consider include: reimbursing the cost of travel expenses, organizing transport, whether there are constraints on the child’s time, obtaining consent and ensuring that sufficient levels of support are provided.
There is a lot of information available from various organizations, websites and resources that will help to give background information and advice on all the areas covered here, for example methods of communication, participation and design for inclusion (see Useful information for some starting points).

**The benefits of inclusive play ripple through the community of the setting**

Once inclusive play starts to happen and people experience it working (even in small steps) it gathers momentum. People who are unsure start to see it working and recognize the benefits, which then gives motivation to keep going. Inclusive play helps all members of the setting to feel valued themselves.

Inclusive play helps families of children, who previously may have felt left out or excluded, to feel part of the setting, bringing with them their experiences, culture and knowledge. Equally, developing inclusive play can bring in these attributes from children and adults who are already part of the setting but have never previously had a chance to contribute them.

Being left out of play can be one of the first signs of a child having difficulty. Children can become increasingly isolated over time despite other attempts to include them. When play is seen as a central way in which we ensure all children feel a valued part of the setting (since it is so important to them) then it supports the feeling of connectedness in the setting.

The ethos (the disposition or character) of a setting gains much from inclusive play. Most importantly, shared experiences which are authentic, memorable and happy contribute to a shared identity which each member of the community of the setting takes with them.

**SUMMARY**

- Children's experience both of inclusion and of play are unique and each child holds considerable knowledge and range of experience.
- Participation and inclusion cannot be separated – inclusion is absolutely integral to any attempt to foster participative cultures based on children's rights.
- The benefits of inclusive play are wide and long-lasting both in different and in common ways among members of the community of the setting.

**Further reading**
