

Pathways to Play: Choosing Community Recreation Programs



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Introduction

Taking part in community recreation activities is great for kids! These activities and experiences boost confidence, increase physical activity, and enhance play and social interactions. Research has shown that for children with developmental disabilities, recreation also improves physical health, motor skills, and self-esteem, while fostering social connections and supporting long-term well-being (Johnson, 2009).

There are many community programs and activities to choose from. Deciding on the best activities for your child and family can take time and access to the right information. People from different communities have said that having more and easier access to information about local activities and programs would make it easier to get involved.

This guide is designed to help you make informed choices about leisure and recreation activities for your child and family. It will help you:

1. Learn about different programs, activities, and accessibility options to support your child's participation and success.
2. Get familiar with terminology and features that can help you identify programs that are a good fit.
3. Find resources in your community that can help your child and family get involved.

This guide is best for families with children and youth from preschool age through 18 years old. It does not cover finding professional therapeutic services, childcare, or respite care (like occupational therapy, AAC programs, or afterschool care). We will use identity-first language (e.g., "autistic children" rather than "children with autism"), as this is preferred by many autistic advocates. However, we recognize that preferences vary, and we encourage everyone to respect individual choices when addressing others.

Types of Programs

Specialized or Adaptive Programs

Some programs are designed and structured for children with disabilities or individuals who are neurodivergent. The program and services are tailored to support a wide range of individual needs and disabilities. Accessibility options and supports, such as access to adaptive equipment (e.g., adaptive bicycles, art equipment) and trained staff and volunteers (e.g., sighted guides) are standard features.

Words and examples that describe these programs may include:

- a. Specialized Recreation programs (through parks and recreation; Special Olympics, parks and recreation programs)
- b. Adaptive recreation programs: adaptive horseback riding, wheelchair basketball, adaptive yoga
- c. Adaptive arts programs

Unified or Inclusive Programs

Some programs are designed for children with and without disabilities to participate together. This means that children with and without disabilities participate on the same team or that peer to peer support is provided. Accessibility options and support, such as trained staff and volunteers, may be available as standard offerings. Adaptive equipment may be available.

Words that describe and examples of these programs and definitions are:

- a. Unified: In Unified team sports, teams are typically created to have similar ages and abilities, but not separated based on intellectual disabilities or neurodivergence diagnoses.
- b. Integrated: Refers to a recreational activity or program where individuals with all abilities are welcome, with modifications or supports provided as needed to ensure everyone participates.

Accessible Features in Community Programs

Many community programs have features and supports that help make their programs more welcoming and inclusive for children with a wide range of abilities. There may be a menu of universal access options, flexible expectations, designated events or changes in programs tailored to specific needs (e.g., autism friendly hours; ASL performances); or accessibility options and support may be available by request. Trained staff and volunteers may be available.

Terms to look for include:

- Sensory friendly events
- Autism-friendly events
- Relaxed events or activities

Some examples of features for these programs or events might include:

- Times or events where admission is reduced and there are less people.
- Designated quiet rooms or quiet zones to take a break.
- Flexibility to enter/exit an event as needed.
- Flexibility to move around or talk.
- Free admission for aides or personal attendants.

There are many other features that may be offered. What these features look like in each setting can vary. It may be helpful to talk to someone from these programs or check the website to understand more about what is offered and whether it will be helpful to your child and family.

Accessible Features in Other Community Settings

You can also look for accessibility or universally designed features in public and private community organizations and spaces. These features may help make it easier for children and families to attend together and participate in activities and around the community. Accessibility options and support may be available by request; or there may be a menu of universal access options. Trained staff and volunteers may be available.

Some things to look for are:

- Universally designed playgrounds (surfaces that are safe and even for wheelchair mobility; roll-on merry go rounds, adaptive swings).
- Parks with wheelchair accessibility
- “Sunflower passes” for people invisible disabilities
- Family changing rooms or restrooms

Here are some more key terms that may be used to describe what is offered or features.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social narratives/venue guide: Short stories with pictures and scripts that explain the setting and social situations in a clear and structured way. They can help children with ASD understand the setting expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adaptive Equipment: Tools or devices designed to assist individuals with specific needs. For children with ASD, this could include communication devices, fidget tools, or specialized seating that supports their learning and comfort.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff Training: Staff has undergone ASD or disability-specific training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sensory Backpacks: Sensory backpacks are bags filled with items designed to help children manage their sensory needs. They may include noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, and other calming tools that can help a child self-regulate in overwhelming situations.

Additional links to resource searching: [https://](https://www.accessibleplayground.net/united-states/washington/)

www.accessibleplayground.net/united-states/washington/ [https://](https://hdsunflower.com/)

hdsunflower.com/

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-friendly-designation>

Sources:

Johnson, C. C. (2009). The Benefits of Physical Activity for Youth With Developmental Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 23(3), 157-167.

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