We know what you may be thinking: playgrounds...in November? But, one of the important things to remember about education and government officials is that they plan ahead; and, right now, they are planning for spring, when playgrounds get spruced up to receive kids returning to outdoor play after indoor winter activities. Even if you live in a place that’s warm year-round, you’ll want to make requests and suggestions before budgets are finalized in the first few months of the New Year. Bottom line: Don’t wait to let budget decision makers know that you want your child to have a place on the playground too!

It’s easy to understand that fun is one of the key ingredients to any playground activity. Spend five minutes at your local park on a sunny day and you’ll inevitably overhear the happy sounds of kids at play.

But what you may not realize is that play systems—including slides, tunnels, activity panels and more—encourage a lot more than just fun: there’s learning at work in playground play, as well as the opportunity to include children of all abilities in this social pastime.

“Indoor learning can be taken outdoors,” explains Learning Spaces/Playground consulting expert, Lisa Moore. “Playground products and designs should promote rich opportunities for children with physical, cognitive, social-emotional, communicative and sensory disabilities to play alongside their peers so that the playground is fun for everyone.”
Even though kids may not realize it at the time, they are learning a lot about themselves, about life and about how to get along with others when they play together outside. “Playgrounds are fun for children and they offer unique opportunities for them to make their own choices through self-directed play,” Lisa says.

Many play systems have been designed to provide social and physical inclusion for children of all abilities, helping them feel empowered in seven ways: to be fair, included, smart, independent, safe, active and comfortable. In fact, Lisa and her employer PlayCore—a designer and manufacturer of playground, fitness and related outdoor play products, in partnership with Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities—developed an approach to play system design that incorporates those seven principles. That means that kids who play on many play systems receive multiple developmental and creative benefits when they play, including:

And that’s just to name a few!

While sliding and climbing on play structures is a great way to build motor skills, implementing some inclusive and creative stations into play zones can help with social learning too. For instance, ask playground officials to install a paint station—a clear, unbreakable and washable window that’s ideal for painting with water soluble paints from a seated or standing position. Because children can paint simultaneously on either side of the window, they often find themselves working together to design elaborate, visually stimulating creations. Push for ground-level musical instruments designed for playgrounds, which allow groups of kids to make happy musical noise in unison. A theater station or panel is great for putting on plays or acting out short stories before friends and family. Not only do these activities spark creativity the way Lisa says they were designed to, but they also offer kids who use wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment the opportunity to participate without strain.

Some play system manufacturers have taken the many physical, developmental and social needs of children into consideration when designing their equipment; so you’ll want to encourage officials to
shop the market for key features. For instance, since many children take medication that prevents them from spending time in direct sunlight, fun stations with two, four and six panels often include canopies or visors, which can help keep the sun off of exposed skin. Ramps allow for children using wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment to get to elevated areas on play structures. Benches and swings provide great opportunities for shy children to observe the playground before joining in group activities, or for kids who need a little break from social intercourse to find time out. Because playground play is truly an inclusive experience meant to promote learning, development and fun for every child, you want your local playground to offer as many of these features as possible.

Aesthetic considerations have made play structures the right fit for many different childhood environments: from camps, to daycare centers, to churches, to schools and more.

“A variety of design choices, including stimulating color palettes and more nature based color themes are available to meet the unique needs and interests of the users,” Lisa explains. In other words, a natural palette works well for woody environments, while a playful palette, featuring primary colors, might suit a schoolyard or an urban environment. Tell your park or school officials that a variety of styles are on the market, suitable for every environment. Ask them to consider installing a new piece of equipment each or every other year, at a pace that suits their budgets.

And remember: Don’t wait! Budgets are being structured to include new playground amenities — or not — now.

Lisa has spent her career working with children of all abilities and their families as a Speech and Language Pathologist and the Director of Education and Outreach at an inclusive early childhood center. She is an EdD candidate with a research focus on outdoor play and learning. Lisa is currently Vice President of Strategic Services at PlayCore, a leading designer and manufacturer of playground, fitness and related outdoor play products. She invites you to learn more about inclusive playgrounds at www.inclusiveplaygrounds.org.

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