

A DAY FOR PLAY



AUTHORSHIP:

Storying the inclusive playground experiences of families of disabled and nondisabled children.

Carolyn Millar, MA^a; Allison Bihari, BSc^b; Jennifer Leo, PhD^a; Ronald Buliung, PhD^b; Timothy Ross, PhD^{c,d,e}; Celina H. Shirazipour, PhD^{f,g}; Amy Latimer-Cheung, PhD^h; Kelly P. Arbour-Nicitopoulos, PhDⁱ

^a Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada Department of Medicine, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, USA

^b Department of Medicine, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

^b Department of Geography, Geomatics and Environment, University of Toronto Mississauga, Mississauga, Canada

^c Bloorview Research Institute, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, Toronto, Canada

^d Department of Geography & Planning, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

^e Rehabilitation Sciences Institute, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

^f David Geffen School of Medicine, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, USA

^g School of Medicine, University of California Irvine, Irvine, USA

^h School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

ⁱ Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

***CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:**

Kelly P. Arbour-Nicitopoulos, PhD
Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education
University of Toronto
55 Harbord Street
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 2W6
Email: kelly.arbour@utoronto.ca
Phone: +1-289-380-1836

ILLUSTRATION & GRAPHIC DESIGN

Christina Picton
Amped Design & Creative
Email: info@ampeddesigncreative.com

Within the creative nonfiction, pseudonyms are used for names and places to maintain the anonymity of participants. Verbatim quotations from participant interviews are denoted by italic formatting in the text; with square brackets indicating an altered word or name necessary for the plot of the story or anonymity.

PART ONE: A DAY FOR PLAY



Looking out her kitchen window on a sunny Saturday, Sarah feels a minute of calm in a busy morning.

"A perfect day to go to the playground," she thinks.

Turning her attention back to the house, Sarah starts her mental to-do list of things to pack and prepare to get the kids out the door, into the van, and over to the playground. Snacks, water bottles, hats, sunscreen — the usual for a day out in the sun. But also the iPad for TouchChat (and reminds herself to check the charge).

Her younger child, Everett, is excited about going to the playground. It's definitely one of their favourite things to do together! Her older child, Jay, is also easy to motivate, and transitions well from watching TV to getting ready for the playground.

Sarah wishes she had planned ahead so she could have let her friend know they would be heading to the playground. They've met there before but she knows the work that goes into their trip — her friend's daughter uses a power chair and needs hands-on support to use the playground. It would be too short notice now.

"If it's going to be nice like this again next weekend, we'll make a plan earlier," she thinks.



"Okay both of you," Sarah calls to her kids, "bathroom breaks before we go! Remember how far that bathroom is from the playground."

When they are ready to leave, the kids squeeze past her to get to the van and Sarah notices Jay's height.

"He's growing so fast!" she thinks. *"When he's too tall for playgrounds like the one on our street, the inclusive one might be the only one that still fits."*

Sarah starts to hurry them into the van as Everett chases a grasshopper through the front yard.

"There will be grasshoppers there too!" she calls, "We have to get a move on so we get a parking spot!"

Jay is growing impatient while waiting to leave, so Sarah redirects his attention to the iPad for the car ride. Everett finally hops in the van, and they're off to the park.



On the weekend, the city traffic is lighter, but Sarah knows the playground will still be busy. A sunny Saturday is sure to be popular with lots of families in the city. A quieter time might be better for Jay, but with their schedules, weekday routines, and the time it takes to get to the playground, weekends are often the only times that work.

As they pull up, Sarah's prediction is confirmed: it is busy!

"I knew there would be people here, but I didn't think there would be this many...all right, where are we going to park?" She scans the lot for any spot that won't leave them too close to the street traffic and is at least somewhat close to the entrance. She finds a spot, a bit tight and not perfect, but will do for today.

"Everett, when you get out of the van, wait for me and Jay to get ready," she says.

Everett is excited and ready to sprint down the trail to join all the

kids on the playground. Sarah helps Jay out of the van, offering him her hand to take as he jumps out, then she grabs their bags, double checking that they have everything.

"Alright, you two — let's go!" Everett rushes down the path towards the happy noise of the playground and the crowd of kids. Jay is clearly excited for the playground, but is more hesitant because it is so busy. He is a less confident runner than Everett, and so walks towards the playground with his mom.

Sarah glances at her watch, calculating about an hour-long visit should satisfy both kids. At other playgrounds, Jay, and sometimes Everett, will lose interest sooner, but with a wide variety of equipment for Jay, and lots of kids for Everett to play with, she thinks at least an hour will be a good amount of time. Sarah takes a deep breath of the summer air as she walks.

"It's going to be a good day," she thinks.



Meanwhile, that same Saturday morning, Mark is also looking out the window noticing the sunny weather.

"Sam, would you like to go to the playground today?" he asks his son, Sam, who is sitting at the kitchen table. "If you hurry up and finish your breakfast, we can go before Mom gets home from work."

Sam looks up from his cereal and asks, "Can we bike there?"

"It's too far to bike this time," Mark says, still feeling a bit sore from a long bike ride yesterday.

"I was thinking we would go visit that playground we went to last week, would you like that?" Mark replies. Mark thinks: *[the playground] is a little bit further away from our neighborhood but I quite enjoy it because it is low. [That is] the majority of the structures are low off the ground and it is safe for [Sam].*

"Yes! The kid's playground!" exclaims Sam as he starts to hurriedly eat his cereal. Sam had named this playground the "kid's playground" because the last time they were there, there were lots of kids to play with.

Sam's older sister, Mary, who is lying on the couch watching cartoons perks up and eagerly states, "I want to go to the park too!"

"All done!" announces Sam as he starts to get down from his chair.

"Okay, okay." Mark says with a chuckle at his children's eagerness to go to the park, "Go get your shoes on and meet me at the door."

"Water!" Mark thinks as he opens the fridge to grab some water bottles for the park.

As everyone gets into the car to head to the park, Mark can feel how eager his kids are to start playing on the playground. Five minutes into the drive, Sam asks his dad, "How much longer until we're at the playground?"

"About 15 more minutes," replies Mark.

"Okay," Sam sighs. Sam spends the rest of the drive looking out the window thinking about how much fun he is going to have at the playground and how many new friends he is going to meet!

As Mark pulls into the parking lot by the playground, he thinks to himself, "Wow. It is very busy here today." He searches for a spot, but the lot is full. Then he sees an empty parking spot up the street.

"Okay. We're here!" Mark tells his kids as he parks.

"Yay!" exclaim Sam and Mary in unison as they unbuckle their seat belts.

Once Mark, Sam and Mary are out of the car, Mark grabs the water bottles from the car trunk and reaches for his kids' hands so that they can cross the road. After crossing the road, Sam turns to his dad and excitedly asks, "Dad! Look there's the playground! Can we run?"

"Go ahead," Mark replies. Sam and Mary sprint along the trail towards the playground. Mark walks behind his kids and chuckles to himself as he realizes it has become a competition between them as to who can get to the playground first.





PART TWO: EXPLORING THE INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND

Sarah juggles her bag and makes her way onto the busy playground with Everett and Jay. The playground's large ramps provide enough space for her to easily join them, and room for Jay to move without feeling like he might get bumped. Everett runs ahead of Sarah and Jay, going down the nearby slides before scrambling back up to join them on the walkways. Then, Jay takes the lead, steering them towards the sensory panels of music and optical illusions. The three make a cheerful song with the notes on the music board. This is what keeps them coming back to the inclusive playground, the chance to play all together.

When Everett's interest in the music starts to wane, he looks around for a new challenge. Climbing and jumping are thrilling, but he wants to stick with his brother and the slides are exciting for both of them. Everett loves that about this playground.

"[When] I go to the playgrounds that I want to go to [Jay] can't interact," thinks Everett, *"And then when we go to the ones that [he] wants to go to, it is like what can I do? [I] get bored. Like there is really nothing for me to do, nothing that I would like to do. And then when we go here, it is just like whoa, it's everything that me and [Jay] want to do, so maybe we could do that together."*

"Jay, let's do the SLIDES!" exclaims Everett. Jay chooses the twisting slide, and they climb the steps towards it. Sarah holds the iPad and watches the boys; together they navigate the small gathering of kids taking turns.

Glancing at the rest of the playground she sees children playing together and alone, co-playing with parents and playing independently, and a child making her own way around the playground using a wheelchair.

"This playground has so much potential," Sarah thinks. *"It feels like we can go here and be like any other family. It doesn't feel like we are faced with barrier after barrier. It is freedom for all of us."*

After a few turns at the slides, Jay returns for his iPad.

"Break," he says.

"Okay" says Sarah. "Everett, I'm going to find a bench to watch and Jay feels like a break. Are you good?"



"Yeah, Mom!" replies Everett.

Sarah and Jay head over to an open bench and Sarah rests her bag down.

"Water, Jay?"

"Yes, water," says Jay with Touchchat. After a sip, Jay uses the Touchchat again, "Play. Music".

"Okay," says Sarah, "Should I come?"

"No, no" says Jay using the iPad.

"Okay, I'll be here. Stay where I can see you."

From the bench, Sarah enjoys a view of the playground. She can see both boys at play, and while a fence would help her feel more at ease, the open sight lines let her feel comfortable giving the boys some time on their own. Jay heads toward the musical instruments. Sarah notices that this area is less busy—most of the kids are up on the playground structure, so Jay will be able to play on his own. Sarah keeps an eye on Jay and the other kids at the instruments. If Jay feels

crowded he may wander off or become frustrated. Sarah stays ready to jump in, to help Jay, and to intervene if other kids and parents do not understand Jay's communication or behaviour.

Parents around Sarah relax with a coffee or chat with each other, but Sarah's focus stays on Jay. At the instruments section of the playground, Jay rubs and taps the drums before moving to the chimes to tap and touch them to hear the notes. The instruments have mallets to use but Jay prefers to use his hands so he can hear the music and feel the vibrations. The chimes are his favourite instrument, and he makes each one sound before starting over. Other children play nearby, and Jay slowly shifts around the instruments to maintain a comfortable space.

Meanwhile, Everett is drawn to a group on the merry-go-round structure. "Hi, can I play?" Everett asks.

"Sure!" says one of the boys in the group. "You have to help push first."

Everett joins in, running around the merry-go-round with the other kids. In the group, a game emerges of pushing in different directions,

faster and slower, until one of the kids from the group shouts out, "Let's do the swings!"

Everett and some of the kids from the merry-go-round take off for the swings.

"Hold on," says Everett, "Let me get my brother for the swings!" Everett meets up with Jay at the instruments. "Jay, come on, we're going to the swings!" Jay and Everett both love the swings—it's one of their favorite things to do together at the playground. The brothers head towards the group at the swings, a popular spot on the playground on this busy weekend!

"Hey guys," says Everett, "this is my brother Jay."

"Hi!" They all sing-song together. The group excitedly hatches a plan, talking over one another.

"Which swing should we do?"

"Let's try and get the big one!"

"Who's going to push? It's heavy!"

"I'll get my mom!" says Everett. "She can help push! My brother and I do this one all the time."

He takes off toward Sarah's bench to recruit her into pushing the swings. The one they want to try is a double swing where the two seats face each other; it's called a friendship swing and it is larger and heavier than the other swings too. As they wait for the friendship swing, Jay drifts towards the edge of the group to feel less crowded and turns his attention to his iPad as he waits for a turn.

As the group of friends chat and wait for Everett and Sarah, a dad notices them gathered near the friendship swing that his kids are using. The kids on the swing are still laughing excitedly as he slows his pushing to help bring the swing to a standstill.

"Okay guys, you've been on here a while. Let's give the other kids a turn!" The two kids hop down off the swings to make way for Jay and his group.

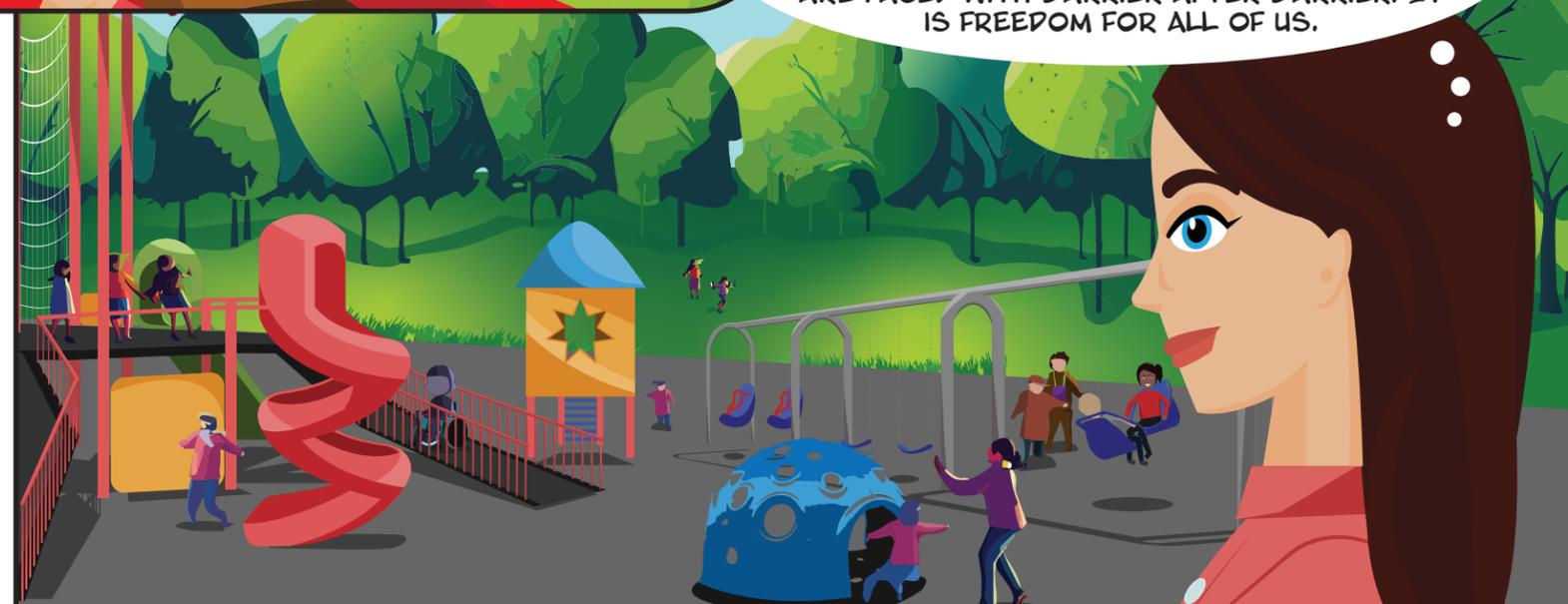
"Mom! Come to the swings!" calls Everett.

"What's up?" says Sarah, "Everything okay?"

"Come push us!"

Sarah follows Everett over to the swings and feels a pang of concern as she sees a dad and a child with Jay. Jay's body language is signaling that he wants space.

THIS PLAYGROUND HAS SO MUCH POTENTIAL, IT FEELS LIKE WE CAN GO HERE AND BE LIKE ANY OTHER FAMILY. IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE WE ARE FACED WITH BARRIER AFTER BARRIER. IT IS FREEDOM FOR ALL OF US.





HURRY UP,
SAM! COME
CATCH ME!

When Sam and Mary reach the edge of the playground, Sam turns to wave to his dad, who is still on the trail making his way to the playground. Mark waves back to Sam and smiles reassuringly as if to signal to his kids that it is okay for them to start playing. With the signal from their dad, Sam and Mary take off, eager to get playing.

Once reaching the playground, Mark finds a bench to watch his kids play. As he sits down, he thinks: *I feel that sometimes if I go to the park I really sweat – not sweat, but I can't just sit and hang out. [At this playground] I kind of ignore [the kids] and let [them] do [their] own thing unless [they] need help getting off something. Even that doesn't happen much and [they are] pretty good on [their] own.*

Mark looks around the playground and he thinks, *"I would love it if there was a fence."* But luckily, the playground is so large and open that he can watch Mary and Sam as they play.

Meanwhile, Sam and Mary have already run around the entire 15,000 square foot playground once, surveying the equipment before they decide what they want to try first.

"Mary! Let's go down the roller slide!" Sam shouts at his sister as he sprints up the ramps past the other kids playing on the music boards. With the double wide ramps, Sam can run past kids without having to slow down and wait for them to move out of his way.

"Okay!" exclaims Mary as she tries to run faster to catch up to Sam who is waiting in line at the roller slide. Once Mary joins Sam they wait for the two kids in front of them to go down the roller. Sam turns to Mary impatiently and says, "My turn first! Push me!" Sam sits down on the slide, while Mary leans down to give him a push. Sam starts to go faster and faster while he is going down the slide

I love this slide because it is super fast! It also makes funny noises when you go down and [you] feel like a sausage, Sam thinks. At the bottom of the slide, Sam quickly gets out of the way to make room for Mary to go down. Mary quickly goes down the slide, jumps off, and starts sprinting toward the climbing tower of the playground when Sam grabs her hand and says, "Let's go again!" pulling her back to the roller slide.

"No! That slide is for little kids. I'm going to go to the climbing tower with the big kids." Mary runs toward the climbing tower in the middle of the playground. The climbing tower is Mary's favorite piece of equipment. She thinks that the climbing tower was challenging, fun and cool when you are getting very high.

"I'm not a little kid! I can climb the tower too!" says Sam as he runs to catch up with Mary.

Although Sam is eager to prove to Mary that he is not a "little" kid, he also likes following Mary around the playground because he feels that when [his sister [is] having fun it [makes his] experience [on the playground] more fun!

When Sam reaches the climbing tower, he stops and nervously looks up at the big structure. Mary starts to quickly climb up the tower like a spider on a web. Once Mary reaches the midway point, she stops to yell down "Hurry up, Sam! Come catch me!"

Sam is still looking at the tower, feeling intimidated at how big it is. Eager to play with his sister and not wanting her to see how nervous he is, Sam takes a deep breath in and starts to climb up the tower. As Sam reaches for the rope on the second level, he loses his grip and falls to the ground.

Luckily, the surface is so soft that Sam barely feels his fall and can quickly get up without anyone noticing his fall. Now even more determined to prove that he can climb the tower, he tries again. Sam steps bravely onto the first rope and starts to make his way up the tower to his sister, who is at the top, talking with some other kids. Sam starts to develop a rhythm as he climbs up the tower toward Mary.

When Sam reaches the top of the tower, he takes a second to look down at all the other kids playing.

"They look just like ants from up here," Sam thinks and giggles. He quickly searches the edge of the playground to find his dad in the crowd. When Sam spots his dad on a bench talking to another parent, he waves so that his dad sees that he has reached the top; Mark waves back with a grin.

"Good job, Sam!" Mary calls out to Sam.

Sam takes a moment at the top of the tower still feeling proud at his accomplishment. He likes the view from the top! He can see all the other kids playing and having fun. He notices that there are a lot of kids at the swings.

"Mary! Let's go to the swings next." Sam says.

"You go, Sam. I'm going to play tag with my new friends," Mary starts to make her way down the climbing tower with her new friends to join the game of tag that is happening in the open space next to the playground. Sam loved that he got to play with his older sister at the playground, but he really wanted to play on the swings. He decides to play tag with Mary after the swings.

Sam climbs back down the tower carefully trying to follow the same path that got him to the top. Once down, Sam sprints over to his dad because he remembers that the swings are too hard to push alone.

"Dad, can you come push me on the swing?" he asks.

"Of course. I'll meet you over there," replies Mark as he gets to his feet. Before meeting Sam at the swings, Mark quickly looks for Mary, who has started a game of tag with her new friends from the tower. As Mark reaches the swings, Sam has already joined another child on the friendship swing.

"There's my Dad! He'll push us!" Sam tells the other kid.

Mark tells them to hold onto the handles as he starts to push them faster and faster. The kids laugh in excitement at the thrill of the swing. After a while, Mark notices that a line has started to form for the swing.

"Okay kids, you've been on here a while. Let's give someone else a turn!" Mark said with relief as he was starting to get tired of pushing the swing. The swing starts to slow down until Sam and his swing-mate can get out Sam steps off the swing and looks at the group of kids waiting to get onto the friendship swing.

He notices Jay who is on an iPad. Sam walks over to him and says, "Hey! I have an iPad too! What game are you playing?" Jay glances at Sam and then turns back to his iPad. Sam moves closer to Jay to try and look over his shoulder to see what game he is playing. Jay takes a step back, away from Sam.



HEY, I HAVE AN IPAD
TOO! WHAT GAME ARE
YOU PLAYING?



THIS IS JAY, HE USES AN IPAD OR TOUCHCHAT TO COMMUNICATE.



Mark turns to Sarah and says, "I like the fact that [this playground] is inclusive. I like the fact that it is open to all sorts of kids. Growing up, there were no playgrounds like this that were accessible for kids... You had steep ladders or steps and that was it."

"Yeah, the equipment is really wonderful," says Sarah. "There's so many options but there's only so much you can do once you have a physically inclusive place, that is step one. But that still doesn't teach kids how to play... It's the social and emotional environment that needs to be set in collaboration with the physical environment to make it inclusive."

"Can I ask Jay a question to see how his iPad works?" Sam asks Sarah.

"Yeah, you can ask Jay a question, and he can decide if he'd like to answer."

"Okay!" Sam replies as he turns to Jay. "What is your favorite thing at this playground?" Sam moves to where he can view the front of the iPad Jay is holding, while also being mindful that he isn't too close to Jay. Jay looks at Sam and back down to his iPad where he presses a button in the app.

"Swings," he replies.

"Hey! Me too! I love this swing! I call it the friendship swing because I always make friends on it."

"We love this swing!" Everett chimes in, "Yeah, because lots of other playgrounds don't have that so then we have to like, sit in separate swings, or like back-to-back and then we can't see each. But when [Jay] saw me, [he] just started laughing."

"Mom," Everett calls for Sarah's attention at the friendship swing, "it's Jay's turn first on the swing with Bradley." Bradley, one of Everett's new playground friends, is already in the swing and waves to Sarah. "I'll help push too!" says Everett.

"Jay, come on over," says Sarah, "I'll help you get in, pass me your iPad, great! And now a big step in." Jay comes to the swing and gets ready to climb in.

"The swing is the best," thinks Jay. "It can be scary when it gets going fast, but that's exciting too! And when I can swing with Everett or a friend, it's funny to see their faces while we go!"

Mark notices Sarah having difficulty trying to balance the swing, while at the same time helping Jay step into it.

"Can I help hold the swing still for you?" Mark asks.

"That would be great, thanks," Sarah says as Mark takes a few steps towards the edge of the

swing to hold the swing still for Sarah and Jay. Sarah holds her arm out for Jay to grab to get into the swing. Jay gets settled and Sarah passes back his TouchChat.

"Really, thanks," says Sarah to Mark, "Sometimes I have to flag [someone] down to come and help [us] get on the swing."

"No problem. Happy to help," Mark replies.

"Dad! Sam! Come play tag with me and my new friend!" Mary yells, as she runs over to her dad and brother.

"Mary! This is my new friend, Jay," Sam says, pointing to Jay on the swing.

"Hi Jay!" Mary replies. "Come on, Dad and Sam, the game is about to start!" She grabs their hands and pulls them in the direction of the field.

"That's our cue", Mark chuckles. Then he says to Sarah, "It was nice to meet you."

"Bye Jay! See you next time!" Sam yells to Jay while he runs off. They make their way to the field where they start to play tag with Mary and her new friends.

PART THREE: TWO FAMILIES

Sam, can you come over here for a second? Mark says, as he notices Jay move away from Sam. Before Sam acknowledges his dad, he takes another step toward Jay to see what game he's playing. Jay once again takes a step away from Sam. "Sam." Mark says sternly as he continues to direct Sam away from Jay. Sam walks over to meet his dad at the edge of the swings.

"Come on, Mom! Come push us!" Everett calls over his shoulder to Sarah as he hurries back to Jay and his playground friends.

"Yep, I'm coming Everett," says Sarah as she scans the group of kids, looking for Jay. When she spots him again, she sees that a dad has ushered kids away from him, leaving Jay on the fringes of the group at the swings. As Sarah comes up to Mark and the group of kids, she thinks: "Here we go again- sometimes I get tired of taking advantage of these teachable moments. I don't go to the playground to be a teacher, I go to the playground just like any other parent."

But, Jay loves the swing, Everett's excited, and it's their turn. "That is an ongoing challenge with integration," thinks Sarah, "it really is... some days I ignore it and some days I go over and have conversations because I feel like [it], some days I don't care, but other days I am just like- would you back off?"

"Guys, my mom's here!" Everett says to his new playground friends and they move around the double seated friendship swing, deciding who is up first.

"Jay," calls Sarah, "come join us for swings!" Jay heads back toward the group and Sam skips back over.

"Why does he have an iPad at the park?" Sam asks Sarah, "Is he playing games? Is he shy?"

"Sam, give them space." says Mark. "Sorry." Mark directs his apology towards Sarah.

"Hi," says Sarah to both of them. "This is Jay, and he uses his iPad as a TouchChat to communicate, or talk, to people. And he does like to play with other kids, he can just get overwhelmed sometimes."

Kids can be easier to explain to than adults, Sarah has found.

"Younger children tend to be curious," she thinks, "like oh, why does that person have that, or what is on their legs, or why are they in a wheelchair but it is just an innocent curiosity. The parents, who are older, often feel uncomfortable because they don't want to offend the parent of the child. Oh, don't ask those questions."

"It's kind of like that big picture board over there," Sarah explains, pointing to the picture exchange communication board installed at the edge of the playground, "where kids can point to pictures of things on the playground and to different words to say what they're thinking."

Mark and Sam look over at the picture board.

Sam exclaims, "Wow! This [playground] is made for everybody."

Mark looks over to the double wide ramps on the playground and remembers an interaction that occurred a few weekends ago. Mark had invited a neighborhood dad and his son to come to this playground with them, and while their kids were playing the dad had said to him, that the thing I like most about [this playground] is the access for special needs to be able to access it easily. That is my favourite part of [the playground]. At the time, not understanding the accessible playground design Mark had asked, "Is there a specific part for [a] child with disability?". The other dad had pointed out that the ramps were extra wide so that a wheelchair could fit and some other ways the playground was accessible. Mark remembers coming out of this interaction thinking that it is important for all kids to be able to interact, I think because then they don't feel out of place. They feel that there is something there for everyone and not just for some people.



BYE JAY!
SEE YOU NEXT
TIME!

