

Play and Chat: Creating Communication Accessible Parks and Play Spaces

Sarita Slater

Sarah Mitchell, Nicola Hamilton, Leigha Dark, Jacqueline Steele and Naomi Rezzani

Short Abstract

Although public awareness of the importance of inclusive play areas is increasing, there has been limited research or focus on design for communication access in recreational spaces. People with communication disabilities may face challenges communicating during play that limit their participation.

“Communication access is when everyone can get their message across and understand what is said to them” (Solarsh & Johnson, 2017).

Scope has drawn on research findings and best practice principles from the field of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to develop a suite of communication tools designed for parks and play spaces. In addition to larger, fixed communication boards, a range of products have been developed that can be flexibly integrated into the play environment to maximise opportunities for communication.

Scope has successfully partnered with councils, schools, and landscape developers to install these resources in play spaces across Victoria and interstate. This paper will report on the development process and preliminary feedback and outcomes for individuals and their communities. Consumer input will continue to inform evaluation activities and ongoing refinement of communication tool design.

Parks and playgrounds, and the outdoor environment generally, represent a new area for addressing communication access and inclusion, and require innovative solutions. Increasing availability of accessible communication tools in Australian play spaces will promote visibility and understanding of AAC options in the community. Scope’s Park and Playground Resources Package aims to provide users of these spaces with enhanced opportunities to express and receive messages during play, in a way that works for them.

Long Abstract

Play supports the development of language, social-emotional, physical, and cognitive skills (James et al., 2022). However, people with disabilities often encounter barriers in accessing community spaces such as parks and playgrounds, and may face challenges communicating during play, limiting their participation (Therrien, Barton-Hulse, & Wong, 2022). While communication aids have been identified as an important component of inclusive playgrounds (Brown et al., 2021), limited research is

available exploring what these tools should look like in practice. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when communication tools are included in play areas, they are often large, fixed boards placed on the physical periphery of the space, thus not immediately available to support communication within interactions.

Scope has produced a Park and Playground Resources Package designed to promote inclusion and participation for people with communication access requirements.

“Communication access occurs when people are respectful and responsive to individuals with communication difficulties, and when strategies and resources are used to support successful communication” (Solarsh & Johnson, 2017). “Communication access is when everyone can get their message across and understand what is said to them” (Solarsh & Johnson, 2017).

The tools within this package have been developed based on research findings and best practice principles from the field of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

Alongside larger, fixed communication boards, Scope has designed a range of products that can be flexibly integrated into the play environment to maximise opportunities for communication. This includes communication displays of various sizes and materials that can be portable, affixed to play equipment or natural structures, or installed on rotatable poles. The focus is on integration into the built and natural environments within each space.

This resource package has been developed for use across a variety of public spaces for community members of all ages. Scope has successfully partnered with councils, schools, and landscape developers to design and install communication resources in parks and play spaces across Victoria and interstate. This paper will report on the development process and preliminary feedback and outcomes for individuals and their communities. It will also discuss the progress of a planned trial of these resources in a play-based therapy group with children who use AAC and their caregivers. The aim of these sessions is to collaborate with individuals with communication access requirements and their families to evaluate the design of the resources consistent with end user needs and preferences. Feedback and suggestions for ongoing improvement will be presented along with next steps of development for the Park and Playground Resources package.

Parks and play spaces, and the outdoor environment generally, represent a new area for addressing communication access and inclusion, and require innovative communication solutions. Scope aims to design tools tailored to these settings that can support participation for a new generation of people who use AAC. Users of these spaces will have increased opportunities to express and receive messages during play in a way that works for them, allowing them to share feelings and information, propose ideas, resolve conflicts, and negotiate and problem solve. Increasing availability of accessible communication tools in Australian play spaces will promote visibility and understanding of AAC options in the community. This will mean that park and play spaces are more accessible and enjoyable for all people, facilitating social connections and relationship building.

References:

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