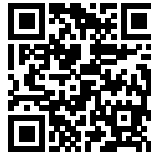




FRIENDSHIP PARK: AN ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND MODEL

Posted on January 2, 2019 by martabuges



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Beit Issie Shapiro's award winning Friendship Park, Israel's first inclusive playground, provides children with and without disabilities with the opportunity to play together, while creating a more inclusive society. The unique model has been scaled up and replicated across Israel in more than 30 municipalities, as well as internationally.

The Problem

Play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development. Children with disabilities deserve equal opportunities to take part in the same leisure and recreational activities enjoyed by all children, and to do so within their community, in an inclusive environment.

Israel was lacking in accessible public play spaces that would allow children with disabilities and their families, the opportunity to enjoy leisure activities. In addition, negative attitudes prevented families from taking their children with disabilities to regular playgrounds.

The Solution

Spurred by a request of families of children with disabilities for a place of leisure where they can enjoy time together, Beit Issie Shapiro (BIS) developed Friendship Park, Israel's first accessible and inclusive playground. The playground, located in the main municipal park of the City of Ra'anana, is a place where children with different ability levels can learn to play together, while raising awareness and creating a more inclusive society.

The playground was developed involving all relevant stakeholders in the community, including persons with disabilities, who accompanied all development stages, to ensure that all perspectives and needs were addressed.

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Innovation

The uniqueness of Friendship Park, and the key to its success, is the integration of physical accessibility, together with structured social accessibility. Because inclusion doesn't happen naturally, it is crucial to not only have accessible equipment but also social programs that facilitate positive interaction, enabling children to play together.

With this in mind, BIS developed the playground as a platform for social change, structuring social and educational activities that reach over 800 children with and without disabilities, their families and teachers annually.

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- Physical accessibility: from the topography, restrooms, and coolers, to each piece of equipment – the playground is truly accessible. The playground is accessible to CWDs, as well as parents and caregivers with disabilities.
- Social inclusion: educational and social programming aim to raise awareness and teach children how to play together. Not only is the playground open to spontaneous play, but it also includes an array of initiated activities, including inclusive get-togethers of families of children with and without disabilities, educational programs within educational frameworks, and inclusive holiday festivals.

Impact

Friendship Park is the most popular playground in Ra'anana for children with and without disabilities. The playground has even impacted on the city being recognized as the leading mid-size city in Israel on the issue of inclusion.

Families of children with disabilities feel comfortable to come to the playground for spontaneous play, as well as structured community activities. Families of children without disabilities, have reported how it has changed the perceptions of their children towards people with disabilities: "...my daughter developed very high sensitivity about accepting those who are different..."

The work within educational frameworks spurred BIS to launch a [study](#) in 2013 to examine young children's perceptions toward children with disabilities. The findings stress the need to provide young children with knowledge and opportunities for contact between children with and without disabilities.

In addition, BIS partnered with HOP TV (children's station and producer of Israeli Sesame St.) to provide [exposure](#) to the playground and the message of inclusion.

Replicability and Scalability

Since Friendship Park was developed with replication in mind, the work process was documented thoroughly from start to finish. In addition, the model takes into account cultural sensitivities, which, paired with a well-documented model, allows for replication in diverse communities both nationally and internationally.

In Israel, the model has been replicated in over 30 municipalities throughout Israel, with the support of the National Insurance Institute of Israel and local municipalities.

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Internationally, BIS has presented Friendship Park at the UN and international conferences, as well as shared the model in countries in Africa, South America and the UK.

The model won the International Play Association's Right to Play 2014 Award, and was named Best Practice in 2017 by the [Zero Project](#).

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