Why Leisure Matters:
Facilitating Full Inclusion

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Abstract

The importance of people freely choosing and participating in valued activities for leisure and play has been documented by philosophers, scientists, helping professionals, teachers, political leaders, to name a few. Play is a contributor to thriving as a living being and is a fundamental human right. This article describes the importance of play, recreation, and leisure to well-being, the critical nature of social inclusion and affiliation, and a best practice approach to facilitating full inclusion in leisure for people with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusion, leisure, best practices, facilitators, barriers,
social model of disability, capabilities approach

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The importance of people freely choosing and participating in valued activities for leisure and play has been documented by philosophers, scientists, helping professionals, teachers, political leaders, to name a few. Play is a contributor to thriving as a living being and is a fundamental human right, now protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Article 30 (United Nations, 2008).

And we know that all people desire to have the opportunity to play in their communities, with their friends, neighbors, and teammates. Affiliation and social interaction are strong human needs. Historically, people with disabilities have been excluded from typical community-based recreation programs and services or relegated to segregated offerings. As the inclusion movement gains momentum and legislation mandates accessibility for people with disabilities, recreation environments and services have needed to evolve. Yet the systems that have been designed to monitor accessibility for public spaces have often relied on the expertise of specialists, and often act in a punitive way toward the business owners and operators of such spaces. The result is a growing frustration toward bureaucrats and the "ADA Police." Consequently, the attitudes formed by many about accessibility and inclusion are based on resentment instead of acceptance toward people with disabilities.

To break away from this thinking, we have designed a public access training and reporting system which empowers anyone of virtually any age to examine how inclusive public recreation spaces are, both physically and socially. The training model, called *Inclusion U*, is comprehensive and accessible to anyone who can participate. *Inclusion U* provides participants with a foundation of inclusion principles and skills in using the *Inclusivity Assessment Tool*, designed to gather descriptive information about the accessibility of recreation facilities and programs. Once trained, individuals complete an assessment then report back to the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center to help build a web-based database of information that can be shared with anyone. We have learned from this model that when ordinary citizens have the power to analyze and help make changes to recreation spaces, everyone benefits from this experience. No longer is lack of accessibility or inclusion a problem for the person with the disability to solve or avoid; rather, citizens have the ability to act directly to change a facility or program.

The Importance of Play, Recreation and Leisure

Play is important in our lives, regardless of ability, age, gender, or other difference. Play is an essential aspect of individual and community well-being; recreation and leisure are a part of most people's vision of a "good life." Without play in our lives, we experience a duller and less joyous existence and our communities become less vibrant (Anderson & Heyne, 2012a).

Nussbaum (2006) delineates play as an essential element of well-being in her capabilities approach theory. In the capabilities approach, Nussbaum and her colleagues conceptualize well-being as internal (how well one is able to be and to achieve) and external (sources of well-being, such as public action and social policy) (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). Nussbaum states, "Starting from a conception of the person as a social animal whose dignity does not derive entirely from

an idealized rationality, the capabilities approach can help us design an adequate conception of the full and equal citizenship of people with disabilities" (p. 92). Nussbaum (2006) identifies ten core capabilities that must be present for the good life, for respect, and for well-being. These core capabilities, described in Table 1, are what Nussbaum calls the bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires. Play, or recreation, is one of the fundamental capabilities that a culture or community must support for well-being to flourish and for people to achieve.

Table 1. *Nussbaum's (2006) Core Capabilities for Well-Being*

1.	Life	Is able to live to the natural end of a human life
2.	Bodily Health	Has good health and adequate nourishment
3.	Bodily Integrity	Is secure and safe, without fear of harm traveling from place to place
4.	Senses, Imagination, and Thought	Can think, reason, and imagine, informed by an adequate education; has freedom of expression and freedom to have pleasurable experiences
5.	Emotions	Has opportunities to love and be loved, and to experience a broad range of emotions
6.	Practical Reason	Can form an idea about goodness, and engage in critical reflection on one's life and its direction
7.	Affiliation	Lives and engages fully with others, with self-respect and nondiscrimination
8.	Other Species	Lives in a sustainable, respectful way with the natural world
9.	**Play**	**Enjoys recreational activities; has opportunities to laugh and play**
10.	Control over Environment	Participates in the political process, has material possessions, and works in respected employment

Many scholars have provided powerful rationales for why play, leisure, and recreation are core to well-being, quality of life, and social justice (Anderson & Heyne, 2012; Anderson & Kress, 2003; Brown, 2009; Carruthers & Hood, 2007; Hood & Carruthers, 2007; Hutchinson & McGill, 1992; O'Keefe, n.d.; Sylvester, 2005; Sylvester, Voelkl, & Ellis, 2001):

- Leisure provides a context for the experience of positive emotions, which are directly linked to health and well-being.

- Leisure contributes to the development of resources and strengths in one's life, from physical to social to cognitive to environmental resources.

- Leisure directly impacts self-development and self-determination, essential to well-being.

- Leisure provides opportunities to fully engage in activity and acts as a stimulus to health.

- Leisure directly meets the creative-expressive needs of people, and their drive to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

- Leisure provides a natural and sustaining vehicle to promote inclusion in community and develop friendship circles, again essential to well-being.

- Leisure can change communities, making communities healthier and more welcoming of differences, including disability and illness.

- Leisure can be pursued by everyone, everyday, everywhere – regardless of health or ability.

- People, *all* people, have a fundamental right to leisure.

Given the critical role that play, recreation, and leisure have in well-being and life quality, it is vital that all people have the opportunity to pursue their passions and interests on a daily basis in places and spaces of their choosing. Though numerous barriers continue to impede participation in inclusive recreation, we have begun to identify those actions or conditions that facilitate the participation of people of all abilities in inclusive recreation and play.

Barriers and Facilitators to Inclusive Play, Recreation, and Leisure

Barriers to Inclusive Recreation

What prevents all people from being able to play wherever they choose, regardless of ability level? What constraints must be negotiated to ensure inclusive recreation spaces? Barriers to inclusive leisure include: attitudes; the pervasiveness of the medical model and the "continuum" approach to services, with a long history of segregated services persisting from that model; characteristics of the built, natural, and social environment; and lastly, an overreliance on the compliance approach.

Perhaps the most significant barrier to inclusive recreation services is that of attitudes. Research has shown that attitudes can range from negative and discriminatory, to an attitude of fear and uncertainty based on lack of skills and knowledge (Anderson & Heyne, 2000; Scholl, Smith, & Davison, 2005). George Covington, former White House adviser on disability, said it best: "The first barrier to universal design is the human mind. If we could put a ramp into the mind, the first thing down the ramp would be the understanding that all barriers are the result of narrow thinking …. You have to ramp the human mind or the rest of the ramps won't work" (Szenasy, 2010, para. 2).

The pervasiveness and over-application of the medical model also creates a barrier for people with disabilities to experience full inclusion in recreation (Anderson & Heyne, 2012; Sylvester, 2011). In the medical model, people with disabilities are viewed as a diagnosis or problem, and

experts are needed to help "fix" the disability. This in turn creates the need for specialists and special services, different from those offered to typical community members. Over time, our communities have created many separate, but not equal, recreation programs for people with disabilities, ranging from Special Olympics, to "Saturday Morning Gym and Swim for the Handicapped." The segregated services are often offered as "skill-building," to prepare people with disabilities for "real recreation" once they have become more acceptable for inclusion.

This "continuum" approach, though based on good intentions to help move people to the "least restrictive environment," has several pitfalls that need to be made explicit to truly understand the limitations of this method of providing inclusive recreation services. Taylor (2004) described one major pitfall as a "readiness" assumption, where participants get "caught in the continuum" because they are unable to earn their readiness to move to the next level of services and, consequently, the next level of control in their own lives. People with disabilities are asked to show some kind of functional or other improvement within a more specialized or segregated service environment before they can move to or "graduate" to more inclusive services. They do not graduate to the next level of control or the next less restrictive service setting until they have reached a certain level of functioning, which is determined by the expert specialist. The vicious cycle of lack of self-determination leads to further entrapment in the continuum, leading to further erosion of freedom and self-determination, essential to meaningful recreation and play experiences. Taylor (2004) emphasizes the irony of this trap, as the most restrictive services meant to prepare people for a least restrictive environment do not prepare, and in fact disempower, them for self-determined community living that is needed for a high quality of life. More importantly, the continuum approach makes the false assumption that change must happen *in* the participant in order to move up the continuum toward more freedom and choice. The approach lacks attention to the changes, supports, and accommodations that may need to take place in the environment for a participant to achieve quality of life.

The built, natural and social environment can also present major barriers to inclusion in recreation for people with disabilities. Lack of accessibility, poor design, narrowly interpreted policies, and rigid programming practices can all prevent inclusion. The idea that "one size fits all" permeates recreation services and disenfranchises not only people with disabilities but many citizens who do not fit into a fairly narrow "norm."

Lastly, the "compliance approach" to moving recreation services from inaccessible to inclusive has created at the least a sense of disempowerment and perhaps worse, resentment toward making changes to be more inclusive. Disability advocates have historically often needed to resort to litigation to get the changes needed to access recreation services (Lewkowicz, 2006). Under litigation, recreation providers, from businesses to public services, often see the cost of forced accessibility without seeing the benefits to a broad range of users. The compliance approach not only builds resentment, but it has been less than effective. The Americans with Disabilities Act has been in force since 1990, yet, according to a recent national survey, large gaps still exist between people without and with disabilities in many areas of life including recreation and socialization (National Organization on Disability, 2010).

Though numerous barriers to inclusive recreation persist, we have learned much about what facilitates inclusion and accessibility. Focusing on facilitators has allowed us to develop approaches and strategies that lead to inclusion.

Facilitators to Inclusive Recreation

The social model of disability has helped foster inclusion in community recreation services. The social model of disability is built on a strengths-based and ecological approach (Anderson & Heyne, 2012b). When using a strengths-based, ecological approach to recreation spaces, we must understand people in the context of the environments in which they live and play. The World Health Organization (WHO), embracing a social model of disability, recognized the importance of the environment and a strengths approach in its conceptualization of the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) (2003). The ICF looks not only at how a person functions, it considers the "environmental factors" in which that functioning occurs. In a strengths-based approach, rather than view health and functional ability as a personal problem, the WHO regards it as a responsibility shared by society. Disability is no longer considered a minority issue; it is seen as a universal human experience. People with disabilities require more than medical care; they require social inclusion. Assistance with inclusion is designed not around deficits and diagnoses, but around ability and functionality. The WHO conceptualized ability and functionality at three levels: (a) body function and structures (e.g., physical functioning related to cognition, speech, cardiovascular health, and related systems); (b) the person (e.g., age, lifestyle, education, assets); and (c) social and environmental contexts (e.g., physical environment, social attitudes, interpersonal relationships). As such, well-being is described holistically from three perspectives: the body, the individual, and society. At the level of society and environmental contexts, the WHO acknowledges the vital role of *activities and participation* in well-being. Ultimately the WHO recognizes that an understanding of environments and contexts and the concept of inclusiveness are central to well-being at the individual level. Situating the person in the environment and focusing on strengths helps foster well-being and inclusion in recreation (Anderson & Heyne, 2012a).

Universal design is a natural outcome from the social model of disability, and a significant facilitator to inclusive recreation. Universal design is a planning concept that ensures that recreation amenities in all environments, both built and natural, are designed for access by all people, regardless of size, shape, or ability. Using principles of universal design enables participants to enter and use environments for leisure experiences (The Center for an Accessible Society, 2010; The Center for Universal Design, 1997; 2010). As well, universal design applies to programs and services, communication, and evaluation. It empowers all people to fully participate in a world designed to accommodate everyone.

An increased understanding of strategies that facilitate inclusion has also helped open up community recreation for people with disabilities. Research has helped us understand what concrete actions we can take to ensure accessible facilities, programs, and practices (Anderson & Kress, 2003; Klitzing & Wachter, 2005; Miller, Schleien, & Bowman, 2010; Miller, Schleien, & Lausier, 2009; Scholl, Smith, & Davison, 2005). With evidence-based tools at our disposal, we are able to modify normative programs, services, and environments to fully accommodate a broader range of people, including people with disabilities.

Collaboration is one of the key strategies to fostering inclusion (Anderson & Kress, 2003; Klitzing & Wachter, 2005; Scholl, Dieser, & Davison, 2005; Germ & Schleien, 1997). When partnerships are nurtured between people with disabilities, their friends, families, and recreation providers, a variety of strengths and perspectives can be used to increase inclusion. Resources, knowledge, talents, and networks are all amplified in a mutually beneficial collaboration, and inclusion becomes an easier process for everyone involved.

As inclusion in recreation becomes more the rule than the exception, a new norm is formed. Recreation providers are able to see positive outcomes from the changes made for accessibility and inclusion. Anderson (as cited in Lewkowicz, 2006), a recreation manager, stated, "We have come to realize that the changes will improve everyone's park experience, not just for people with disabilities." (para.19). New and modified facilities, policies, program practices, and partnerships result in inclusion of many diverse community members, shifting the "main stream" to a "wide stream" in recreation services. Deegan (1996), a self-advocate with a disability, once stated, "We say let the mainstream become a wide stream that has room for all of us and leaves no one stranded on the fringes ….The goal is not to become normal. The goal is to embrace our human vocation of becoming more deeply, more fully human. The goal is not normalization. The goal is to become unique, awesome, never to be repeated human being that we are called to be" (p. 92). Inclusion helps us reach that goal!

Inclusion U – Helping All People Play Wherever They Choose

Inclusion U is a training program designed to capitalize on facilitators and minimize barriers to inclusive recreation services for people with disabilities and their families and friends. Using a social model of disability, a strengths or capability approach, and universal design principles, we have developed a training experience that we feel empowers everyday citizens to make changes toward a more inclusive world. *Inclusion U* is a major focus of the work we do at the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center.

Brief overview of the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center

The Inclusive Recreation Resource Center is a university-based center whose mission is to promote and sustain participation by people with disabilities in inclusive recreation activities and resources. We provide many different services, including inclusivity assessments, training, an online database for inclusive recreation, technical assistance, a recreation referral service, partnerships, and research and evaluation. Our work is guided by several principles that permeate all we do (see Table 2). *Inclusion U* is a key part of our work and trains an army of volunteers to help increase inclusion in recreation.

Table 2. *Principles that Guide the Work of the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center*

Recreation is important	Participation in recreation improves quality of life and offers numerous individual and societal benefits.
Choice matters	Self-determination and choice are key to quality recreation experiences.
Honor interests	People with disabilities want to participate in recreation activities based on their interests, not their disability.
Strengths approach	All people have potential waiting to be developed (capability-based approach).
Celebrate differences	Differences are respected and appreciated – diversity is good.
Person-centered	The passions, interests, and dreams of the person with a disability drive the services, not the convenience of the system.
Services as supports	Conceptualize services as individualized, person-centered supports, not programs or places.
Natural supports	Natural supports are most effective to sustain inclusion.
Environmental and activity adaptation	Be ready to change environments, policies, equipment, and practices to meet a broader range of people.
Collaborate	Find as many diverse partners as you can.
Inclusion is a right…	Not a privilege. Be ready to be an advocate.

Overview of *Inclusion U*

At the Center, we have developed a simple intuitive tool, call the *Inclusivity Assessment Tool*, to gather descriptive information about recreation spaces in terms of physical, administrative, and programmatic accessibility. The *Inclusivity Assessment Tool* includes a user manual, a core assessment checklist, specialty checklists for the breadth of recreation facilities (from swimming pools to bowling alleys to museums), a 60" circle to measure wheelchair turning radius, a tape measure, a fish scale to measure door pressure opening, and a homemade clinometer to measure slope. With the user-friendly *Inclusivity Assessment Tool*, trained volunteers, college students, self-advocates, professionals, and other "*Certified Inclusivity Assessors*" are able to gather information for an online recreation database that is valid, reliable, accurate and specific. The training the volunteers complete is called *Inclusion U*.

Inclusion U is a one-day workshop that teaches one how to be a *Certified Inclusivity Assessor*. We have delivered *Inclusion U* to parks and recreation professionals, self-advocates, tourism professionals, human services professionals, people with disabilities and their families, and anyone interested in increasing opportunities for inclusive recreation. Once participants complete *Inclusion U,* they are able to complete accessibility surveys and submit the results to the Center to be included in an online recreation access database.

Inclusion U focuses on foundations of inclusion and the specific knowledge and skills needed to use the *Inclusivity Assessment Tool*. Table 3 provides an overview of the nine modules of *Inclusion U*. At the end of the day, participants take a "final exam" and must receive 80% or better to become certified. If a participant does not score high enough, we work individually with participants until they do understand inclusion and the tool and can become certified.

Table 3. *Inclusion U Learning Modules*

Module #1: Introduction	• The Inclusive Recreation Resource Center (mission, vision, activities) • Goals and objectives of *Inclusion U* • Process to complete the course and become a "Certified Inclusivity Assessor"
Module #2: What is Inclusion and Why is it Important?	• Definitions and core principles • Physical accessibility – built and natural environments • Social accessibility – programs, services & events, administration • A brief note on legal mandates (ADA and other laws)
Module #3: What Do I Need to Know about Disability?	• Person first language • The social model of disability • Functional abilities – physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional, social • Social model of disability
Module #4: Assessing Inclusivity	• Overview of the *Inclusivity Assessment Tool* • Tools and supplies needed • Description of each section of the *Inclusivity Assessment Tool* • Steps to approach a site, facility or program (partnering, collegiality, market potential)
Module #5: What is Physical Inclusion?	• Accessibility – approach, enter, use • The core *Inclusivity Assessment Tool* and specialty checklists • Universal design • The Access Board and other resources • The built and natural environments and inclusivity • Hands-on stations to learn how to measure physical inclusion
Module #6: Social Inclusion: Administrative Practices	• Mission, vision and values • Planning and involvement of people with disabilities • Administrative and ground level support for inclusion • Staff hiring, training, and evaluation • Inclusion point of contact • Marketing and promotion, including web page design • Communication in alternative formats • Policies and procedures (policy on personal assistants, use of service animals, etc.)

Module #7: Social Inclusion: Program Practices	• Registration and needs assessment
	• Supports
	  o Additional staff or volunteers
	  o Peer training or orientation
	  o Positive behavioral supports
	• Accommodations
	  o Adapted equipment
	  o Activity adaptations (skills, rules, space, goal structure, team formation, etc.)
	  o Task analysis
	  o Partial participation
	• Implementation and monitoring/evaluation of supports and accommodations

Module #8: Putting It into Action	• Completing the assessment at the site with staff • Reporting your results to the Inclusive Recreation Resource Center for the online database
Module #9: Networking, Partnerships and Collaboration	• Benefits of partnerships and collaboration • How to identify potential partnerships that are win-win • How to form productive partnerships; skills needed for collaboration and partnering • Resources available to partnerships • FINAL EXAM to become a *Certified Inclusivity Assessor (CIA)*

Overview of the Database

The purpose of the *Inclusivity Assessment Tool* is to gather descriptive information about recreation opportunities to be shared on a searchable online recreation resource database located on the Center website. The information on both physical access and social inclusion collected with the tool is descriptive, functional, and detailed, so that users of recreation programs, areas, and facilities can make better plans for inclusive recreation. In the database, for each recreation facility included, several tabs organize the information. Under the physical inclusion tab, users can learn whether they can approach, enter, and use a facility. Under the administrative practices tab, they can learn about policies, procedures, planning, communication, marketing, and other ways the agency accommodates people with disabilities. Under the program practices tab, users can learn about staffing, supports, accommodations, and the like. They can learn what adaptive equipment is available and if there are any specialized programs or services. By having this information, all people can make better decisions about the potential use of a recreational program or facility. Thousands of people have used the recreation database as documented by web analytics we have put in place. In a user survey we completed, we found that the people with disabilities we surveyed found the database well designed and helpful to their planning.

The online recreation database is located on this website: www.inclusiverec.org

Foundations of Change and *Inclusion U*

As we designed and field-tested *Inclusion U*, we found that education, empowerment, advocacy, and change were interrelated and key to the effectiveness of the training.

We learned that participants needed facts and skills, but also motivation and a positive attitude toward inclusion. They needed to be ready for the change process and take ownership in it. By focusing on principles and best practices, and providing the theoretical foundation for inclusion, we have helped foster that readiness. We also developed a sense of trust in the Center, with our consistent message and clearly defined and communicated values. With an enthusiasm for change, and armed with the tools, skills and knowledge to make it, we have helped create a grass-roots army of ordinary citizens widening the "mainstream" in recreation inclusion.

We also learned that participants in Inclusion U needed to have a concrete plan for action. One of the last exercises we complete during the day-long training is an "Action Plan," where

participants identify a tangible change they will make based on the training and one recreation agency they will assess for inclusivity. They also form naturally occurring partnerships that emerge throughout the day with other participants in their communities.

To date we have trained hundreds of *Certified Inclusivity Assessors* who are equipped to use the *Inclusivity Assessment Tool* and share best practices in inclusion with recreation agencies. Our evaluation data show a significant increase in participants' knowledge about and attitudes toward inclusion. The online recreation database continues to grow. Daily, we receive feedback that reinforces our sense that we are putting theory into practice in a powerful way. As one participant stated, "I left this training, as I am sure many did, with a renewed sense of diversity, inclusion, and cultural value... I am glad to have received the networking, resources, foundations, and awareness for what is possible for social equality."

Summary

Nussbaum (2006) stated, "A society that does not guarantee these [ten core capabilities] to all its citizens, at some appropriate threshold level, falls short of being a fully just society" (p. 75). The Inclusive Recreation Resource Center, through its innovative training *Inclusion U*, is helping to guarantee that all people can play wherever they choose. By giving people concrete skills and a simple, intuitive tool to assess recreation spaces, we empower them to work collaboratively with business owners and administrators to make positive changes that build more inclusive parks and playgrounds, more inclusive neighborhoods and communities. We can imagine a future where ALL choices for play, recreation, and leisure, so important to well-being, are open and welcoming to all!

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