Developmental Playground Takes Shapes | CPD

The dream of a developmental playground for very young children is on the verge of coming true. The last needed ingredient is your continued support. Now, as we approach the day when the groundbreaking begins, we also look back at the steps that brought us to where we are today.

**Step One: Realize that you can fill a need.**

Experts within the CPD have long known the benefits of play; how it stimulates development, encourages language and helps a restless child relax. Danielle Swartz has seen the benefits of play with her own child, Dax, who has autism. “One of the very first times that Dax and I had some good back-and-forth communication was when I would swing him,” she said. She noticed that swinging and spinning helped him relax if he was overstimulated, and that encouraging him to play with different textures helped him to eat foods that he would not touch before. The CPD serves many families with infants, toddlers and preschoolers with developmental delays, disabilities, or diagnosed conditions that can result in developmental delays. If there’s anywhere that could use a playground designed specifically for little tykes who need therapeutic play, the CPD is it. While young children who receive services at the CPD are encouraged to play, they don’t have an age-appropriate, easy-to-access outdoor playground onsite. The CPD’s outdoor play area was designed for older children. Its climbing hill is too steep for the toddler set. Its equipment is not permanently fixed to the site, and that equipment is limited in the kinds of play it can encourage. The wood fencing that surrounded the area is now gone, but it was a great place for wasps to nest. Vegetation attracted bees that created a hazard for playing children. As planners pulled together their vision for a new play area, they settled on the site of the existing outdoor playground. It’s a good spot, but it needs a lot of work.

**Step Two: Bring together some experts and make a plan.**

As plans for a new playground began to take shape, its planners drew from the experience of occupational therapist Amy Henningsen and Sue Olsen, the exemplary services director who is over the Up to 3 program. They worked with Justin Wilson, a graduate student in Utah State University’s Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning department to come up with designs and playground features that would stimulate the minds, bodies and development of young children. It became a research assistantship for Wilson. “Originally we (Wilson and his research mentor, Keith Christensen) had a bunch of ideas that I thought would look cool,” Wilson said. Then the research began and new ideas started to emerge. He began looking at the space as a way to encourage social interaction, cognitive development and mobility skills. The focus shifted from the features to the results they would create. “It’s still cool,” he said. “It’s cool on a deeper level than esthetics.”

The design invites play, said Ryan Winn, an occupational therapist who works with children in the Up to 3 program. What’s more, it will invite parents to play with their kids. The playground will be more than pretty. Wilson looked for equipment that was accessible, and he added a couple of original designs that would stimulate development in a fun, safe way. “The best part of it is, it’s just been a wonderful learning experience.”

The playground also adds many advantages that current play areas don’t have. Built-in are places where over-
stimulated children can go and wind down a little before getting back into the action. Winn said there are a variety of climbing surfaces that will encourage more development. “That’s going to challenge the body and the nervous system to adapt, because it’s different.” The playground will also offer a water feature where children can safely explore wet textures, and a play pit will be filled with other textures to further stimulate the senses.

*Step Three: Ask for help.*

The playground has been the site for volunteers to remove the old fencing and clear away unwanted vegetation. It is now the subject of a *fundraising campaign*. We invite you to look at the playground’s design and to contribute to its success.

Because every child should have a place to play.