

Listen

Step 1: Listen, of The Five Step Manual includes more information and activity ideas about gathering design inspiration from children, teachers, and parents.

Talking to parents of children with a wide range of abilities is very important. These parents have watched their children grow up and have developed ways to make their lives easier. They may have developed specific play equipment for their homes and they will have advice for you with regards to how their child move throughout the world and what will make it easier for them to get from place to place. While talking to parents remember to ask for practical dimensions and spatial characteristics. "The room should be 5 feet by 4 feet," is an example of a guideline. "The space is tight and hugs the child," is an example of a characteristic.

Example: "Passageways need to be at least 3 feet wide for his wheelchair to be able to pass through"

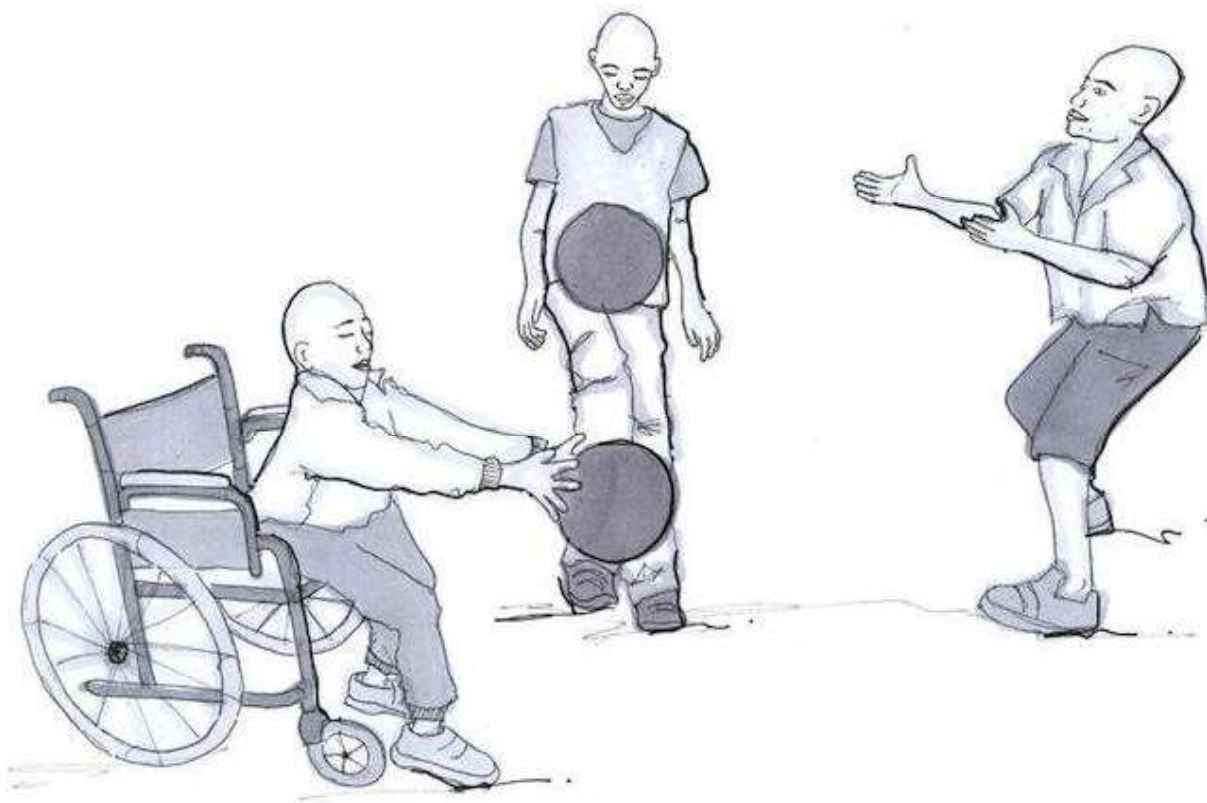


Example: "When she is feeling overwhelmed, she needs spaces that are tight and hug her"



Opportunities Over Problems

Design is about seeing opportunities where others see problems. When you run out of a particular material it is an opportunity to shift the design and make your material palette more interesting. When something is cut too short, it is an opportunity to celebrate that spot and add detailed design to where there previously wasn't. When children in your community do not have use of their legs, it is an opportunity to think about the world with a new constraint. If you see someone without the use of their legs as a problem, you might simply tack on a ramp wherever there is a change in level and expand every inch of the playground to accommodate the size of a wheelchair. If you see this as an opportunity you may design new ways for that person to interact with people who have full use of their legs. Everyone in a community has strengths, and these strengths lead to opportunities for interesting design choices.



Finding opportunities where others see problems is mostly about changing your mindset, but there are some concrete steps you can take that will make your job easier. As you listen to the community you are designing for, create a list of the disabilities you find are prevalent in your community. A good starting list may include:

+ Visually impaired

+ Children with reduced mobility (check all diverse type of reduced mobility: wheelchairs are just such a small percentage; besides, they want to get out of the wheelchair if possible)

+ Hearing impaired

+ Mentally disabled

See what those children are good at and note their strengths in the list you are developing. Someone without full use of their legs may have developed extra strength in their arms to compensate. This extra strength could allow them to climb in areas of the playground that are specially designed for this purpose. You may choose to look at climbing walls as a starting point in the design process and see how they can be a great equalizer when it comes to ability: the expert next to the novice, and the person normally bound to a wheelchair next to the star athlete. This is an opportunity for cross pollination of experiences and may lead to an understanding among children who lead very different lives.

But I'm Designing Handicap Playground for a Certain Handicap

Depending on the situation you find yourself in you may be designing for a specific group of children with a shared range of ability. In this case there are two things to think about. First all the steps that have been laid out so far can be used no matter what the make up of your "community" is. Your community may be a school, a neighborhood, or a section of a city. The second thing to keep in mind is it is not a bad idea to allow other children from the surrounding community to join in. If at all possible, opening the playground up and allowing the children to interact with different people in a safe environment will benefit both the children you oversee and the larger community.

