

ABSTRACT

This informal systematic observation study was undertaken in spring 2012 exploring the hypothesis that playgrounds designed to higher universal accessibility standards, are more attractive to children of all abilities and to the general population, than are those designed simply meeting minimum ADA Standards. User counts were conducted in the playgrounds of seven parks in a single community. One park had a highly accessible playground, built using universally accessible concepts, having ramps and other features significantly exceeding ADA. The six comparison parks had playgrounds designed to meet ADA minimums. All seven parks were located in a suburban Dallas, Texas community with similar socio-demographics and similar park attributes such as size, amenities, and maintenance qualities. Findings showed the universally accessible playground had use ratios of children per play event being over three times the mean use ratios of the other playgrounds. These findings appeared supportive of the hypothesis that a playground built to the higher standards of universal accessibility, can attract more use by children and by all users than playgrounds meeting only minimum ADA standards. Despite the pilot nature of this study, it brings attention to the potential and understudied value universally accessible playgrounds may contribute to stimulating outdoor play activity and furthering the benefits of healthy active living for all children. Formal research is being developed using more rigorous protocols that combine analysis of physical conditions, user observations and user surveys to further test the hypothesis and support policies and guidelines encouraging the implementation of universally accessible play environments.