

Seattle Children's PlayGarden

The Seattle Children's PlayGarden is a nonprofit organization providing children of all abilities full access to outdoor recreation space and offering inclusive programs that encourage every child's potential. The PlayGarden provides a well-designed, safe, and supportive environment to interact with nature, to learn, to explore, and to create. Here children will enhance their cognitive, motor, and social skills—and develop their sense of wonder and independence.

Until now, children with physical limitations, such as cerebral palsy, or developmental delays, such as autism, have been largely excluded from participation in local outdoor activity areas. Parents of children with special needs have had few options of enjoyable yet safe and supported outdoor learning experiences for their fragile children. The PlayGarden offers options for these families that will accommodate not only the children with special needs in the family, but the typically developing children as well.

"The lives of families of children with special needs is a constant struggle. Activities outside the home are centered in classrooms, therapy cubicles, physicians' offices, and hospital waiting rooms. I never hear the word *fun* mentioned." These observations by Seattle Children's PlayGarden Executive Director Liz Bullard prompted her to form the PlayGarden in 2002. Liz, a Seattle speech/language pathologist, had sought outdoor play spaces that were both accommodating and nurturing for children with special needs. Her research revealed a striking lack of safe and accessible outdoor learning environments in Seattle/King County. She approached Ken Bounds, former Seattle Parks and Recreation Department Superintendent, about this finding. Mr. Bounds agreed, and offered the Department's support for developing this program.

In 2003, the Seattle Parks Department offered the south end of Colman Playfield, at 24th Avenue South and South Grand Street, as the site for a public-private development. The PlayGarden eagerly accepted the offer of this site for the opportunity it presented to involve the residents of the surrounding economically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods and its easy access for families of children with disabilities from all over King County. A 10-year renewable, no-cost lease for the site was ratified by the Seattle City Council in September of 2006.

The PlayGarden became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in July 2003, and is led by a volunteer board of directors along with Ms. Bullard. A volunteer advisory board and leadership council now assist the group. Committee members have expertise in children's health, children with special needs, gardening, and various business and social services professions.

In 2004, schematic designs and engineering studies were completed for the garden and associated facilities. Construction will be completed in 5 phases. Phase I is complete, and involved moving an existing basketball court on the site, and improving its design to accommodate wheelchair athletes. The court also includes adjustable hoops to encourage children to play.

Construction documents for renovation of an existing Shelter House and a new Garden House were completed in early 2008. A capital campaign is underway; the PlayGarden anticipates funds will be in place to begin construction in September 2008, with completion by summer 2009. When these facilities are in place, programming will occur year-round.

In the meantime, the PlayGarden has held summer programs since 2006. All programs integrate children with special needs with typically developing children. Programs are often multi-age, to maximize the opportunity for siblings and friends to attend together. Throughout the year, the PlayGarden holds informal planting parties, play dates, and celebrations, such as our Earth Day event in April, Summer Barbecue in August, and Harvest Festival in October.

For more information please contact:

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"A Garden for Everyone" www.childrensplaygarden.org