

DISABILITY  
**AFRICA**  
CHANGING CHILDREN'S LIVES



# Play for Inclusion

Using playschemes as a force for inclusion and a means to deliver essential social, medical, education and family-support services - a simple guide to leave no-one behind.



## WELCOME TO OUR MOVEMENT FOR INCLUSION

Inclusion can transform the lives of disabled children and benefit entire communities. This is a straightforward guide to the basics of running a Disability Africa Inclusion Project. This guide will explain the challenges facing disabled young people and the role that an Inclusion Project, run by local people, can have in creating effective sustainable change.

We identify disabled children and young people as the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised people in the world. They are the most left behind and the last to receive help. In fact, the vast majority have never received any help from charities, NGOs, or governments.

We think that if we take the necessary steps to *include* the people who are most isolated and left behind, in any community, then we have taken the steps to include *everyone*. That is why we target the inclusion of disabled young people. Inclusion benefits everyone.

Disability Africa's Inclusive Community Development template is innovative and simple. This brief guide is an explanation of the practical steps which we think anyone can successfully replicate.

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## THE CHALLENGE: EXCLUSION AND ISOLATION

In many countries, there is a large degree of **ignorance and strong stigma** which surrounds people with impairments. In many communities across the world, people with impairments are considered to be cursed or non-human.

These negative attitudes result in **disabled children being isolated**. Many are unknown to their community and their wider family. Often, they are tied up and locked away in a single room in their home. In our experience, the primary reason disabled children are isolated is because their parents feel ashamed because of the pressure others put on them.

This isolation means disabled children are **comprehensively deprived of social interaction, education, medical care** and sometimes they are even deprived of food.

Across Africa only 2% of disabled children attend school, and fewer than 5% of disabled adults can read or write. The conditions faced by disabled children are unimaginably hard and the levels of poverty they are subjected to are extreme. They are deprived of the very basics of a normal childhood and their life chances are profoundly limited.

While 80% of disabled people live in low and middle-income countries (LMIC's), it is estimated that only than 4% have ever benefitted from any international aid. **Disabled people, especially children, are ignored and left behind.**

## 2 STEP SOLUTION: PLAY FOR INCLUSION


To include and to improve outcomes for disabled children immediately and sustainably, we take two steps:

1. **Raise awareness** of the rights and needs of disabled children in their local communities, and
2. Develop and **deliver services** to meet their needs

We have a simple, innovative approach to making sure that disabled children are not left behind: **Playschemes** or **play programmes**. We run playschemes because play is a **universal human behaviour**, it is the natural context in which children learn, and a basic human right which has the power to transform many lives.

**Play is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons.** Play is the most powerful strategy for inclusion. A playscheme is a time and place where disabled and non-disabled children can come together to play, to be with each other and feel included. In short, play can:

- **Instantly end a child's isolation**
- Improve the mental health of a disabled child, particularly important for children subject to stigma and isolation
- Help a child develop and learn
- Help a child develop their communication skills
- Help a child begin to make friends
- Improve a child's physical coordination

**IGNORANCE & STIGMA**  
OFTEN IN THE FORM OF  
**NEGATIVE TRADITIONAL BELIEFS**

**ISOLATION**  
FREQUENTLY ENFORCED  
**CONFINEMENT**



IT'S A MASSIVE PROBLEM

**COMPREHENSIVE DEPRIVATION OF SOCIAL INTERACTION**

EDUCATION, MEDICAL CARE & EVEN FOOD



**PLAYSCHEMES**  
**INEXPENSIVE, ACCESSIBLE & INSTANTANEOUS MEANS TO END A CHILD'S ISOLATION;**

**CHANGE ATTITUDES**  
& DEVELOP A FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL **SERVICE DEVELOPMENT.**

- Change negative attitudes of community members. When community members share positive experiences with a disabled child on a playscheme their negative attitudes change
- Change the expectations of parents and family members – when family members see their child at a playscheme they easily see the potential of their child demonstrated
- Provide an opportunity to assess medical and educational needs of disabled children

## HOW CAN PLAY DO ALL OF THESE THINGS?

Extensive scientific research and our own experience over many years, solidly support the brief explanations on “the power of play” below.

### A playscheme instantly ends a child's isolation bringing children into a supportive, loving environment

It is impossible to overstate how damaging isolation can be for a person, especially for their development and mental health. Children learn by copying other adults and children – for example, they learn to speak by being spoken to. A child who is isolated will be slow to learn physical skills, speech and social skills because they have no-one to copy from. We have heard stories of disabled children being left all day with only dogs for company. These children learn to move like dogs and make noises like dogs because, with no humans to speak to them or play with them, they can only copy dog movements and sounds. A playscheme is the perfect opportunity for a disabled child to be shown compassion and to be encouraged to fulfil their potential – this makes a big, positive difference to a child's development and mental health.

Play is also an ideal **educational** environment and is often a better solution than the education which may be available locally to a disabled child. A school classroom with 60 – 100 students and 1 teacher is often a desperately inappropriate place for a disabled child who has previously been isolated and needs additional support. However, a playscheme can be fun and stimulating for any child. It is in these environments that a child learns best.

**Education does not only happen in school.** In fact, we learn lots before we even start school, like how we use our bodies (to move, walk or pick things up), how to talk and how to behave and get on with others – these skills are spontaneously learnt through play.

Play **motivates** children to learn. A disabled child may struggle to communicate at first because they have been isolated, or because they may have a learning difficulty. **When playing, we learn to communicate effectively.** Through play and copying others, children learn to use language or other ways of communicating; they learn to solve problems and to express themselves. Play also helps develop creativity and imagination. Social interaction during play helps children make friends and become included. At Disability Africa, we have seen many children attend a playscheme for the first time who have been unable or unwilling to talk or communicate but, with a small amount of encouragement through play, many children are able to talk and communicate after a short while.

Similarly, children develop their coordination through play. Children play because it is fun, yet - whether walking, playing sports, using paints, playing with sand, or dancing to music or drums – children are also developing their physical abilities. Every child has some abilities, they may not be able to do everything but the more they are **encouraged**, the



more they will be able to do. Things such as hand-eye coordination, **small and big body movements**, muscular strength, muscular endurance, and balancing all improve naturally through play. The child usually does not realise that play is a learning environment but the more fun they are having, the more they are learning.

A playscheme provides the perfect opportunity for non-disabled members of the community (especially young people) to share positive experiences with a disabled child. These experiences help to challenge the negative beliefs people may have. We have found that play is a powerful way of starting vital conversations around inclusion: when people talk to other community members about the positive experiences they have had with disabled children on a playscheme and when they talk about the potential of all disabled children, they begin to convince others. In this way, **play changes attitudes**.

Far too frequently, a parent of a disabled child is told by another family member or a neighbour to “Get rid of that one.” or “Don’t bother with that one!”. Imagine how difficult and upsetting this is for the parent. After some time, a parent may lose hope. Yet, *play is persuasive*. At a playscheme, a **parent can see their children learning and growing – they see what their child is capable of doing**. They see the progress their child has made and they can easily recognise that their child has lots of potential which will be fulfilled if they are encouraged, loved, and supported in the right environment.

**“With your help, Fatou can walk. Beforehand she was carried everywhere. I thought she was a devil. You were the very first to help and support us. When I look at her, I cannot believe it. The Playteam can motivate her to do anything!” A Gambian Dad**

Playscheme volunteers really are agents of change.

Finally, a playscheme provides a context in which informal medical and educational assessments can be made. Once a child is known to the play team, it is possible to see what their other needs are and to begin to develop and deliver other services that are required. Essentially, **a playscheme is the hub from which everything else develops**; including inclusive education and medical support.

## WHAT IS NEEDED TO RUN A PLAYScheme?

Another reason that playschemes are a fantastic intervention is because they have a really high impact **without the need for specialist facilities or specialist staff**. In low and middle-income countries, specialist equipment and staff are rarely available. All that is required for a **playscheme is a safe place to play and a group of committed people who have a sense of fun and are compassionate**. *These can be found in every community across the world.*

Playworkers (volunteers who play with the disabled young people and supervise them) can become aware of how to bring the best out of each young person at a playscheme with minimal training. Through playing with a child a playworker becomes ‘the expert’ for that child. Simply by playing, they get to know the child really well – the playworkers become informal teachers, social workers, healthcare assistants, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and friends.

Establishing a playscheme is very simple and requires very little in terms of additional resource. In the section, ‘Play ideas’, below, you will notice that most of the games we suggest require no equipment. Those games that do require something extra are often easily available and inexpensive in most places.

## HOW TO START A PLAYScheme

**A playscheme can be set up anywhere, but how?** A good starting point would be to look at **what already exists** in the community. You may find that there is a Disabled Persons Organisation, a Self-Help Group or another organisation supporting and advocating for disabled people. They would be interested in hearing about a practical way of immediately supporting disabled young people and their families, while also creating sustainable change. They may be able to partner with you and may provide you with a list of children that would benefit from an inclusive project.

Think about approaching the chief, elders and parents of disabled children and teachers who may help you register to set up a playscheme. A community project requires cooperation, so getting support from influential community members can be very useful in helping the project succeed.

## Staff team

You will also need a group of people who are responsible and happy to interact, supervise and play with disabled children. We call these '**playworkers**'. They do not need any qualifications or specialist knowledge, but some simple training on play work and child safeguarding is important.

A typical staff staff needed to open a playscheme – once they are trained and you have agreed where you will run is:

**Leader** – to take responsibility for the delivery of activities, safety and welfare of children attending and staff on the day. This person needs to be a responsible adult and would ideally have experience working with disabled children but their attitude is crucial – they must be a role model and champion for disabled children, the project and delivering a fun safe playscheme where people feel safe and happy.

**Deputy Leader** – someone to back up and support the work of the Leader and deputise in their absence. This role is filled by a responsible adult and is a position equal in reality with the Leader. The Deputy and Leader need to work together easily and professionally.

**Play Workers** – these are the people who need to have the energy, attitude and interest in positive play work with disabled children.

**Attitude and recruiting the right people** – all the team (Leaders, Workers, Cooks, Drivers, Care Takers) need to have the right attitude, be playful and be prepared to be champions for the inclusion and safeguarding of disabled children. This can be reinforced with training but there needs to be an initial 'spark' and a commitment to inclusion that qualifies the person to be a team member.

## Location

You will need a safe location, or several locations, where a regular playscheme can take place. This may be a community hall, a school classroom, or any other available facility. A playscheme could even be set up in an outdoor play space.

Playschemes also work very well on a smaller scale where playworkers visit children in their homes and a 'mobile playscheme' is conducted.

## Children

Finally, don't forget the children! A playscheme works best when a large (but manageable) number of disabled young people and some non-disabled young people attend. At first, it may be difficult to find disabled children, they are often hidden, isolated and left behind. However, there are steps we can take to try and find disabled young people (see "Raising awareness" below). It is also true that the longer a playscheme has been running, the stronger the likelihood that more disabled children will attend over time: the word gets around.

**Playschemes are flexible and simple to set up but it is important to remember some key things**

- Playschemes are centred around the children. Each child will enjoy different things and it is the



responsibility of the play team to offer lots of different play activity and opportunities that are appropriate for each child and allow the child to make decisions and explore.

- Some young people may require close supervision, maybe even one-to-one support (i.e. making sure that the child always has one playworker with them and supporting them.) For most children, one playworker for every 6 children should be ok. You will need to think about the staff ratio to children before you start but be prepared to change as you meet and get to know the group of disabled children you are working with.
- It's important that everything done at a playscheme is **safe** and playworkers are aware of risks. Any risks should be removed or measures taken to prevent children from encountering them. Here are just a few examples of risks you should be aware of:
  - Check that the environment is secure – there should be enough staff to make sure that children cannot wander off or get lost – the environment should also be safe from unauthorised people wandering in.
  - Equipment that is used/purchased should be checked so that it can be used safely by disabled children – quality, strength, accessibility.
  - Check the environment is free of hazards – broken glass, sharp metal or other dangerous material.
  - They may eat things they find around so make sure the environment is clean
  - Make sure there are no stinging or poisonous plants.
  - There should be no open fires.
  - Some disabled children have little sense of danger (e.g. being happy to jump from big heights) so they need closer supervision.
  - They may have an injury that needs extra care.

## Safeguarding – keeping children safe from harm

Our duty – Disability Africa and Project Partners – duty is to protect all children from harm and abuse. All people responsible for the care of children at a project need to have a commitment to protecting disabled and non-disabled children we know from harm (physical, emotional, sexual harm and neglect). Staff and volunteers should be recruited who are prepared and interested to commit to this principle which will also need to be backed up training so that staff teams can improve and reflect on behaviour.

Disability Africa will support project partners with safeguarding policy, training and good practice – including concentrating the vulnerability of disabled children to harm and abuse.

## PLAY IDEAS

So now we have an understanding of the value of play and how to go about establishing a playscheme, **we need to have some ideas of what to do at a playscheme.**

There is an endless number of activities that can be done at anytime, anywhere. Below we list just a selection of activities that are inclusive and fun:

- **Singing and dancing.** Playworkers can help every disabled child dance - even if it is just moving their hands or arms. They will find it very enjoyable.
- **Playing drums.** This can be done in a group or independently. If there are no drums available, use objects you can find (empty containers and bottles can be great drums). This helps children with their coordination and it can reduce anxiety.
- **Storytelling.** This is important in many cultures and it can be one of the best activities to do with children. A playworker can encourage the children to participate, or retell the stories. They may



include costumes, puppets and instruments in their storytelling games. Stories teach people important lessons, they help people to think imaginatively, and they encourage conversations.

- **Musical chairs.** The children all start sitting on a chair; when the music (or drumming, or chanting) starts the children dance or run around the chairs. A playworker takes one chair away, when the playworker pauses the music, the children have to stop dancing and sit in a chair – the child who is slowest will be left without a chair and they are 'out' (meaning they have to sit out of the game until it is finished). The playworker removes a chair each round. The last person to be 'out' wins. But you don't even need music or chairs to play this. A playworker could sing and children could sit on the floor or just simply stop dancing (the last person to sit down or stop moving is 'out') this would work just as well. This game helps children with their mobility and coordination.
- **Mud modelling.** Mix together red earth and water to make clay. This is very good to develop a child's hand skills and strength. They can make models of: animals, dinosaurs, monsters, faces, houses, shapes. Even if they cannot make anything, they can squash it in their hands – they will enjoy the feel of the clay and playing with it will strengthen their hands. Encourage the children to talk about their models and make stories around them. The volunteer playworkers can do this with children who are less able.
- **Making toys.** Make toys from everyday materials for example, footballs from plastic bags and string or toy cars from old plastic bottles.
- **Drop it.** Played in pairs. Partners face each other and one holds a light object (such as a ball or plastic bottle) in each hand, outstretched at shoulder level and then drops one of the objects. The other person has to try to catch it before it touches the ground. This is a great way for children to improve their coordination and reflexes.
- **Fire on the mountain.** Everyone runs around in a circle while the leader sings, "There's a fire on the mountain." The group responds, "Run, run, run!" and they run in a circle. They continue this until eventually the leader calls out a number (either 2,3 or 4). Everyone has to stand in a group of whatever number was called. If there is a child left who is not in a group then they are 'out'. The leader keeps changing the number that the children must stand in as a group. This is played until there are only two children left and they are the winners. It's a great way for children to make friends.
- **Add to it.** Sit or stand in a circle. One person makes an action, the next person repeats the action and adds one of her own. The third person does the first two actions and adds another of her own etc. When someone forgets an action, the next person starts a new sequence off. This is a great memory and co-ordination game. Children with less ability can be helped by a playworker.
- **Sand drawing.** Using a stick in the sand children can make drawings and patterns. Talk to the children about what they are drawing. This helps improve hand-eye coordination, improve concentration, and help develop problem solving skills.
  - Play sand games like noughts and crosses. Two players write either O or X in a grid of nine squares. Each person takes it in turn to place their O or X in the grid. It is won by the first player who places three Os or three Xs in a straight or diagonal line.
  - Four in a row is just like noughts and crosses but you have a much bigger grid of ten squares wide by eight squares high, each person takes it in turn and the aim is to get four of your 'markers' in a row.
  - You could also draw sand 'mazes' for children to solve.

The games above are just a few ideas. You will notice that they require almost no materials or money. Obviously if some money is available then other toys, art materials and books etc. can be provided. All the games keep children happy and engaged but also help children develop many skills without them even realising it. **The most important piece of play equipment is you – play workers, play leaders who are interested in the child's world and their happiness and welfare.**



## RAISING AWARENESS

**Play is key to raising awareness – it helps change negative attitudes and provides a base from which other awareness-raising activities arise. Negative attitudes exist within the community, so this is where they must be challenged. There are numerous things that can be done to raise awareness of the rights and needs of disabled children, these *all* stem from a playscheme.**

Awareness raising activities can include:

- Organising events for parents and others to provide them with information about the nature of their child's impairment. These can include explaining medical problems which can cause impairments and explaining that children's problems are not due to a curse, witchcraft or other supernatural causes
- Organising meetings for parents of disabled children so they can support each other. Parents can be encouraged to tell their stories to each other and explain and discuss together what it is like to have a disabled child
- Putting on a play in the village which shows how disabled children are treated and challenges the negative thoughts about disabled children that are found in the village. This play can involve the disabled children themselves and can be practised at the playscheme
- Meeting teachers and non-disabled students to introduce them to ideas around disability and invite them to the playscheme. They may be able to run a playscheme in their school. The following questions are a good way to start the conversation:
  - Do we know any disabled children in the village?
  - What kinds of impairments can disabled children have?
  - How does an impairment make a disabled child's life harder?
  - What could we do to make a disabled child's life better?
- Start 'Inclusion Clubs' in schools: groups of non-disabled children who want to raise awareness and to help include disabled children in the community and the school. Inclusion Clubs might undertake some of the following activities and be encouraged to think about the following questions:
  - Create lesson-plans which allows time for non-disabled students to explore ideas around disability
  - Ask non-disabled children to write stories and dramas about disability ideas
  - What do they think it would be like to be disabled?
  - What would it be like to have no friends?
  - How do they think disabled children are treated? Is this right?
  - What could they do to improve life for a disabled child?



Traditional negative beliefs won't end overnight. It will take generations to change the way disabled people are viewed. Yet, the only way progress can ever be made is by starting important conversations. Many people will begin to understand the importance of inclusion early on, some people may not; eventually everybody will. These activities will lead to more disabled young people being found and brought out of isolation and into the Inclusion Project.

## DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING SERVICES

**At the same time as raising awareness, it is important to try and develop services for disabled young people.**

The playscheme is the first service which raises awareness and significantly improves children's lives but once a child starts coming to a playscheme, we may quickly see that they have other needs which must be addressed to support their progress. Some common examples are:

- Disabled children often do not go to school.
- Disabled children often need physiotherapy.
- Disabled children are found to have other medical needs such as infections or other injuries which need treatment.
- Disabled children are more vulnerable to harm, exploitation and abuse.

We have already discussed (above) how the playscheme can form a link with local schools by forming Inclusion Clubs. Non-disabled children can act as 'buddies' supporting disabled children: first at the playscheme and then in lessons in school. When students have a better understanding of disability and a commitment to inclusion, it will be much easier for teachers to include disabled children in their classes. In fact, studies have shown that students who help disabled children in the classroom also learn better themselves.

Non-disabled students who become friends with disabled children can act as 'buddies' with the goal of supporting a disabled child to be included in school. This is an example of how an education service that may not exist for disabled children can be organised through a playscheme. This requires minimal resources but can make a big difference to many lives.

Similarly, even in low-income, rural areas of the world some basic but life-changing services exist. Things like physiotherapy are often provided by the government or you may find other organisations that will send trained physiotherapists to the playscheme for those children that need it. We find that physiotherapist will often be very happy to attend a playscheme where it is easy for them to treat several children in one session. Exploring such partnerships can lead to substantial progress for many children.

It may be the case that children require more extensive medical interventions. Local health-care providers should be engaged to offer treatment for infections, wounds and other injuries to disabled children just as they would to any other child.

**REMEMBER – unlike injuries, infections or other illnesses, a child's impairment usually CANNOT be cured.** Parents and others should be aware that treatments offered by spiritual or other traditional healers may be very expensive but they will not cure a child with autism or cerebral palsy or Down syndrome or many other impairments BUT the child's abilities can be improved through physiotherapy and regular attendance at a playscheme.

**Always use a trusted medical professional.** Be careful to avoid medical practitioners who overcharge, or perform expensive, unnecessary tests to charge clients extra. No intervention should cause harm or worsen the child's condition or welfare.



**There are things that can do done to prevent a child's condition getting worse or acquiring an impairment.** At a playscheme, you should:

- Encourage new parents others to use the available maternal health services.
- Encourage parents to bring children to the local health centre when their child is ill or injured – they may need help and support to do this.
- Work with traditional healers and medical doctors to identify the best treatment for a child and prevent children receiving treatments that might make injuries and illnesses worse. So:
  - We see many cases where a traditional healer or bone-setter will bind a child's arm or leg so tight that it stops the blood flow and the child gets gangrene (the hand or foot starts to rot and die). This will lead to infection, impairment and disability in the worst cases.
  - People often don't realise that an impairment might not be curable – traditional healers may promise 'spiritual cures' that will not work. Some conditions CANNOT be cured but with support and help and the right attitude a condition can be managed and the child's welfare and health protected.

**It may be possible that parents all contribute a small amount of money in the early stages of the project to set up a 'savings and loan' scheme.** This would then allow income generation for members of the scheme. Initial contributions could then be paid back once the scheme is established.

**Finally, there are 'skill centres' that exist in many communities which may wish to become more inclusive.** It would be sensible to approach these centres and see what skill training sessions they could offer the disabled young at the playscheme. It could be an agreement that some playworkers will attend to support disabled young people and in return for building a truly inclusive skill centre, disabled young people will receive some free training.

As the project becomes more established, more options will become available, more services will be developed and more needs will be met.

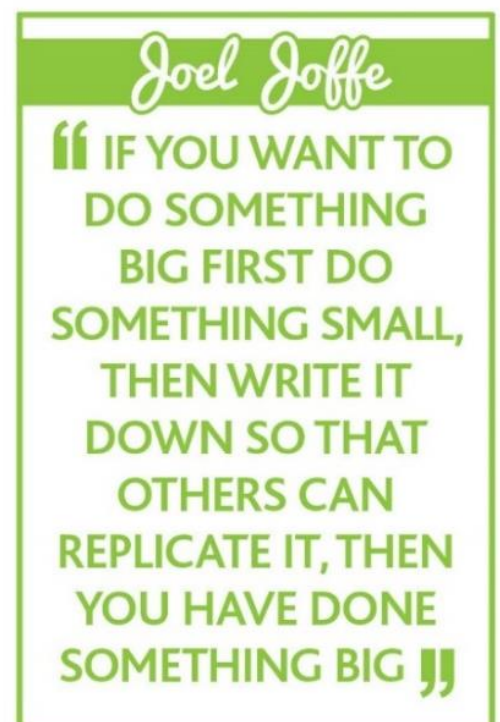
**Playschemes can help to make other local programmes more inclusive.** Teachers, medics and other professionals will become more aware of the disabled children in their community. Local professionals can be invited to meet disabled children at the playscheme, this will help them to become more aware of how to include and support disabled people in their own services. This helps build and strengthen local infrastructure. All of this is made possible because of playschemes and the people that work on them with disabled children. **The play team rapidly become local experts in inclusion.**

## CONCLUSION

We believe that the desperate inequalities that exist for disabled people are unfair and preventable. Inclusion is great for everyone. It is the driving force behind happy, prosperous societies – inclusion is morally right and economically beneficial to all. Whereas, exclusive societies are unhappy, aggressive and oppressive, they are short-lived and usually end violently. Every injustice can be attributed to exclusion and nearly every element of progress in society is due to inclusive thinking.

This template for Inclusive Community Development is innovative and simple – and we know it works! We encourage you to further your knowledge by reading and viewing the resources below.

Reading this guide should have given you an insight into how Inclusion Projects are run, why the power of play should never be underestimated, and how, by taking two simple steps towards inclusion, we can transform our global society.



## MORE INFORMATION

The statistics, information and guidance above has come from a variety of sources. These are listed below.

**Play Video Resources** – a number of Disability Africa videos which highlights the power of play and how play changes lives. You can view these by visiting [www.disability-africa.org/play-for-inclusion](http://www.disability-africa.org/play-for-inclusion).

**Our Case For Inclusion** - a comprehensive document which collates existing research relating to disability in low and middle-income countries and links it directly to Disability Africa's template for Inclusive Community Development. You can view this by visiting [www.disability-africa.org/our-case-for-inclusion](http://www.disability-africa.org/our-case-for-inclusion).

**Disability Africa Blogs** – where we explore a number of issues to do with Inclusive Community Development. You can view these by visiting [www.disability-africa.org/blog](http://www.disability-africa.org/blog).

**Mpika Inclusive Education: Final Report** - The text draws heavily on documentation, especially reports, lesson plans and case studies by teachers and heads from schools involved in a successful, innovative inclusive education project. You can view this by visiting [po.st/Mpika](http://po.st/Mpika).

**The African Report on Children with Disabilities** - Analyses the barriers preventing disabled children from realising their full potential. You can view this by visiting [po.st/ARCWD](http://po.st/ARCWD).

**World Health Organisation and World Bank: 'World Report on Disability'** - The first ever WHO/World Bank World Report on Disability reviews evidence about the situation disabled people face around the world. You can view this by visiting [po.st/WRoD](http://po.st/WRoD) **Play England: Why Play is Important** – a short article on why play is essential. You can view this here [www.playengland.org.uk/about-us/why-play-is-important](http://www.playengland.org.uk/about-us/why-play-is-important).

**All users of this guide should be aware that:**

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