

Parents and families value time outside the home to access play spaces.

Community play spaces afford families and children rich opportunities for social connections, development of motor skills, enjoyment, relaxation, and access to nature. Typically such opportunities cannot be provided in the average backyard. A considerable number of families live in apartments or medium density housing.

Families who have children with disabilities have fewer opportunities to access community play spaces for a variety of reasons.

Families who have a child with autism look for opportunities to support social and community engagement in an age appropriate environment.

For families who have a child with autism there are particular concerns around being able to ensure the safety of their child in open play spaces.

Many of the families who work with Aspect find it difficult or impossible to find safe play community play spaces. It can leave them with limited opportunities to enjoy what most Canberrans take for granted.

One of our clients, Amy from Moncrieff, writes:

We thought the playground at Weston Park might be safe until the moment we arrived and he immediately ran across the park at full speed and straight into the water....The first time we went to [a fenced playground in a rural town outside of Canberra] it was a huge weight off my shoulders. I could relax and so could my child....Sadly for our child his early childhood was spent mainly at home with the doors locked. We would have loved a safe place to play."

Another mother, Paula from Latham, who has two children with autism notes her difficulties trying to look out for both children:

"Carers usually have other children they are there with as well. Having fences keeps the children with special needs safe from running away when they do not understand boundaries...Fences protect our children so they feel safe."

Many of the children we work with have significant fears around dogs and feel insecure without a boundary protecting them. Therapists routinely experience difficulties in playgrounds when a dog approaches—ranging from children running without caution towards busy roads to having children literally leaping into the arms of a therapist.

"On a public [unfenced] playground a child saw a small off-leash dog that was at least 100 metres away. As soon as he saw that dog a look of terror crossed his face and he leapt into my arms. This was not fear. It was terror."

This level of anxiety prevents families from experiencing the multiple benefits of accessing outdoor play spaces in Canberra.

Fully fenced playgrounds would offer more families access to the multiple health and social benefits of outdoor play.

We hope the ACT government will seriously consider providing a significant number of fully fenced spaces well distributed across Canberra.