

# Building playground parity

## Morton Grove opens a play area for both special-needs and able-bodied children

*Chicago Tribune - Chicago, Ill.*  
*[Near Northwest Final, NNW Edition]*  
*Jamie Francisco, Tribune staff reporter*  
*June 29, 2006*

Tony and Michael Mangino sat across from each other on cloud-shaped, bright blue plastic benches and swayed side to side as they tested new playground equipment in Morton Grove.

The motion was especially soothing for Michael, 10, who has autism.

"He loves the swinging back and forth," said Sue Mangino, their mother. "We didn't have much here. It's a big improvement."

The Morton Grove Park District recently unveiled the revamped playground at Prairie View Park, a \$240,000 project that is one of the first 100 percent handicapped-accessible playgrounds in the northwest suburbs, said Jeff Fougousse, district director. With the Maine-Niles Association of Special Recreation headquarters across from the park, it made sense to replace outdated swings and slides, he said.

"It was really more toward trying to incorporate special-needs kids who were using our facilities quite a bit," Fougousse said.

There are about 100 handicapped-accessible playgrounds in the Chicago area, with the majority in the suburbs, said John McGovern, director of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association in Northbrook. Most were built in the last five years, and park districts are working to meet accessibility requirements at older parks, he said.

The Chicago Park District is opening its first "boundless" playground this week at Columbus Park, a barrier-free playground for children with special needs, said spokeswoman Jessica Maxey-Faulkner.

The Park District has built 30 handicapped-accessible parks since 2000, with plans to break ground on 20 more this year. The district is working to update playgrounds with handicapped-accessible equipment, she said.

"Many of our parks are very old," Maxey-Faulkner said. "As far as playground equipment and parks themselves, we're going back and retrofitting these parks and playgrounds."

The Morton Grove park is for all children but has creative touches geared toward those with special needs, said Rick Bierterman, a sales representative for NuToys, a La Grange-based company that provided much of the equipment.

For instance, the pathways are made of a rubber material instead of blacktop. "It's a clean surface," Bierterman said. "A wheelchair could roll on it all day."

The equipment was placed where children in wheelchairs could reach, such as in a sandbox area with special scoops, he said.

The playground also includes special rock-climbing surfaces, and activity areas with a sign-language board and items with textures that attract children with disabilities, said Sue Bear, executive director of the Maine-Niles Association.

"The beauty of it is, it just blends one piece into the other," Bear said. "To the untrained eye, it just looks like a fantastic playground, which is the goal because families don't want to be special or different. We want to be all inclusive."

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the 1990s mandated that public parks improve handicapped accessibility. The Morton Grove site goes beyond minimum requirements and gives able-bodied and disabled children a chance to interact, Bear said.

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[jfrancisco@tribune.com](mailto:jfrancisco@tribune.com)

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[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: PHOTO: Tony Mangino, 12, who has a form of autism, swings from new equipment at Prairie View Park in Morton Grove. Tribune photo by Jim Prisching.