

## **The Importance of Play**

Over the past year, teens, adults and entire families have been looking for opportunities to stay active in new ways. And parks and playgrounds can provide the perfect solution. In addition to playgrounds for children ages 2 to 12, consider offering outdoor fitness solutions for ages 13+. Traditional outdoor fitness equipment—especially if positioned near playgrounds—provides caregivers an opportunity to build muscle strength, cardiovascular health, and balance and flexibility while kids play nearby. Even more, extreme fitness courses can be incorporated to deliver exciting challenge for teens and adults, and even kids ages 5 to 12.

Creating thoughtfully designed play spaces help bring children, families and the entire community together. Today's playgrounds offer modern design aesthetics and can be complemented with vibrant color palettes to make truly unique destinations for communities. Adding customized playground components into the design can help deliver a world of fantasy for kids. Even more, incorporating personalized or custom components into the overall playground design can help celebrate the heritage of a community.

Every community is comprised of people with diverse abilities. When planning to build an outdoor play area it's important to keep the needs of all users in mind during the design process in order to create a play environment that increases access, safety, comfort and social participation. By designing with inclusion in mind—incorporating no-transfer swings and spinners, sensory-friendly play panels, ramped play structures and other inclusive playground components—children and families of all abilities will be welcomed to play with their peers.

Adding freestanding play components is a great way to expand existing play spaces and freshen up the play experience. Placing a selection of outdoor musical instruments together can create a fun music zone for smaller groups of visitors. Encourage sensory nature play with nature-inspired climbers, balance beams and more. Or offer a thrill zone filled with individual spinners, playground zip lines or a variety of swings.

During the pandemic, many communities made the most of their existing outdoor spaces and have seen the benefits of that increased space going forward. Commercial shade sails and other shelter solutions along with benches, picnic tables and other site amenities will allow for outdoor meetings, community gatherings and so much more. And to increase precaution for visitors, incorporate large-capacity hand sanitizer stations throughout all the playground and recreation spaces.

**New England communities interested in building outdoor play and sports areas can use MHEC's B14 contract.**

*O'Brien & Sons, Inc., the local playground consultant on MHEC's B14 contract, partners with Landscape Structures Inc., based in Delano, Minn., to deliver innovative solutions that meet the needs of all ages, abilities and backgrounds within all sizes of communities.*