



Observations and Recommendations





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Improving the availability and quality of beneficial play for the children of Alexandria is the ultimate goal of this study. The information provided in previous sections is intended to support that goal. This section prescribes actions to take.

Priorities

Improvements to playspaces can and should be made throughout Alexandria, but two areas emerged from the study as being most in need of improvement. These are described below, and the remainder of this chapter describes ways to improve access to healthy play throughout Alexandria.

Priority Action

Northwest Alexandria (SubArea One) and Northeast Alexandria (SubArea Three) should be prioritized for improvement.

SubArea One

Playspaces in SubArea One should be a priority for improvements in quality, since this subarea ranked lowest in overall LOS in the analyses. One of the main problems in SubArea One is that most of the playspaces that exist there are located on private lands or at schools. This limits access to play during the day and makes it difficult to control the quality of playspaces. Making school playgrounds available to people with younger children would be a good start. Working with HOAs and apartment complexes to assure that they provide high-quality playspaces will also help. The area around Saxony Square, Bennington Crossing, and the Seasons Condos is a good example of an area with no public playspaces but three private ones. They currently do not serve ages 2-5. If they can be improved to meet the needs of this age group, an important gap would be closed, and a large number of children would benefit.

In addition, the Alexandria Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities should identify potential locations within SubArea One where new playspaces that are open to the general public can be created. In the meantime, organizations such as churches, HOAs, and others can be encouraged and offered assistance in providing moveable playspaces, pop-up playgrounds, special play events, and other types of experimental play opportunities throughout the community.

Arlandria

The area in northeast Alexandria, also called Arlandria, has both a deficit of places to play and a high concentration of children. Adding playspaces here should be a priority. There are several apartment complexes that could provide new playspaces or enhance ones they currently have. This area is also relatively close to Four Mile Run Park and Charles Barrett Elementary School,



where high-value playspaces could be provided. However, access to those locations requires crossing major streets. Assuring that there are safe places to cross these streets is important.

Because this area has many immigrants and others for whom English is a second language, letting these residents know where existing nearby playspaces are and how to get to them safely should be a priority. But having good playspaces *within* this neighborhood is also needed. Until such permanent improvements can be made, temporary playspaces should be provided through events, activities, and pop-up playspaces.

General Ways to Improve Access to Play

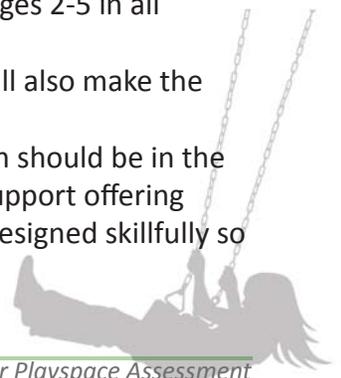
Actions for improving access to the full range of beneficial play can be categorized into three main strategies:

- **Quality and Configuration of Playspaces**
- **Location and Distribution of Playspaces**
- **Outreach and Facilitation**

These actions sometimes overlap and intertwine. For example, if an area has playspaces, but they do not serve 2-5-year-olds, improving the quality of those playspaces to make them useful for 2-5-year-olds is the same as adding new playspaces. Thus an improvement in quality can improve the distribution of playspaces.

General ways to improve the **QUALITY** of playspaces include:

- Make sure each playspace offers a full set of the five components of play whenever possible. Add these components to existing playspaces where they are lacking. In particular, improve the natural and intellectual components of playspaces where they are lacking.
- Encourage playspace owners to give playspaces a makeover: Provide age-appropriate equipment, natural features, more varied physical activity options, elements for pretend play, sand and water play, safety features (like a fence and soft surfacing), restrooms, and supervision.
- Make ALL playspaces appropriate for ages 2-5 unless circumstances dictate otherwise.
- Add modifiers (for example, shade or seating) to existing playspaces. Particularly address concerns about safety, security, and cleanliness.
- Provide at least some areas with rubberized surfacing for the use of ages 2-5 in all playspaces.
- Improve access for people with mobility and other disabilities (this will also make the spaces stroller-friendly).
- There are different viewpoints on whether older and younger children should be in the same play area. However, most of the people involved in this study support offering playgrounds for both ages at the same time. Playgrounds should be designed skillfully so that older kids do not interfere with the play of the younger children.



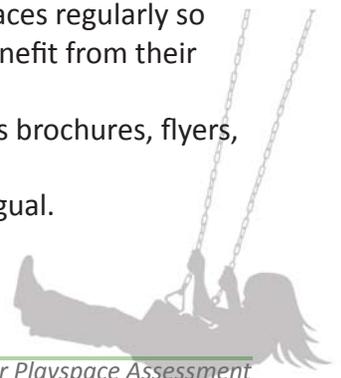


General improvements to the **LOCATION AND DISTRIBUTION** of playspaces include:

- Create a focus on improving walkable access. One way to do this is to make sure that all existing playspaces are appropriate for use by 2-5-year-olds.
- Find ways to add new playspaces in areas where there is a high density of children but a lack of playspaces. Some of these are identified on Map 3, such as the area southeast of Patrick Henry School, in between Raleigh Avenue and North Gordon Street. Specifically, contact agencies, organizations, and landowners in such areas and form partnerships to address the goals of this project. Offer incentives or assistance to HOAs, churches, private schools, and others to encourage them to add or improve playspaces and open them up to the public. This could include things like matching grants, sponsorships, and recruiting volunteer groups to do work days.
- Provide pop-up playgrounds and mobile play areas, as described in the Trends section, in locations where 2-5-year-olds are underserved by play.
- Because it may not be feasible to have all of the components of play provided at each and every playspace, consider looking at groups of playspaces that are located within a local area, and try to make all of the components available somewhere within the group.

Ways to improve **OUTREACH AND FACILITATION** include:

- Create partnerships to improve playgrounds in Alexandria. Examples include schools, the City of Alexandria, Head Start, and others. Consider the possibility of a coalition of agencies that own or manage lands along with organizations interested in play.
- Find ways to reach newcomers to Alexandria, especially those who do not speak English. This could be done through a campaign to improve awareness of where playspaces are located in the city and what amenities are available at each one. The inventory that was compiled for this project can be used to create maps and brochures to accomplish this.
- Create opportunities for physical activities during playgroup meetings. Ideas include playful gym classes, outdoor walks, and playground visits. Utilize the Head Start Body Start physical activity program for young children or a program called Active Play!, which is a physical activity program being used by a number of preschools and family child care providers in Alexandria. Include parents and caregivers in physical activity for the whole family.
- Explore linkages to play spaces—walking, play vans for transportation, bike caravans, special events, and providing moveable pieces.
- Create playgrounds that attract everybody’s attention across economic and cultural barriers. Make playspaces unique through theming, art, and customized features so that people will want to expand their play experiences beyond the playspace near home.
- Make going to play something special! Involve the community in designing and building playgrounds that they feel a sense of ownership in.
- Encourage caregivers and parents to take children to different playspaces regularly so that they can experience a variety of play components and get full benefit from their play activity.
- Have information on play available at recreation centers. This includes brochures, flyers, and knowledgeable staff.
- Have organizations that support play start blogs and make them bilingual.





- Create a website on playgrounds. Include a map with a guide showing what is at each playspace and what amenities, like restrooms, are available. Provide a photo of the playspace. This could also be done by linking to KaBoom’s Playspace Finder and making sure that all of Alexandria’s playspaces are accurately portrayed there.
- Share information with playgroups, doctors’ offices, schools, libraries, children’s clothing stores, parents’ magazines, and churches. Provide “prescription for play” forms to doctors so that they can prescribe play to their young patients.
- TV and radio are good ways to spread information, particularly for Spanish speakers. Radio also works well for people who lack reading skills.
- The Alexandria Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities puts out a brochure every fall with events. Incorporate information on playgroups and playgrounds in this publication.
- Direct mail can be used to communicate about play and special events. Send letters about who to contact about making playgrounds more updated and safe.
- Provide education about the importance of outdoor active play and buy-in from parents to advocate for better playspaces.

● Specific Places where Access to Play in Alexandria Should Be Improved

This section describes actions to take at selected locations to enhance the access to beneficial playspaces for ages 2-5 in Alexandria.

Improving Play at Public Spaces

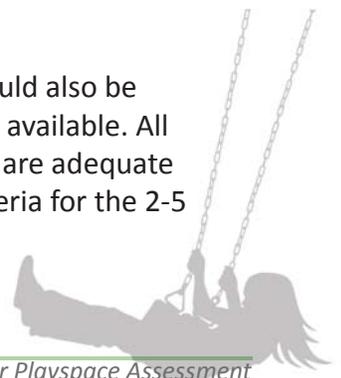
Because they are open to everyone, and because they are all owned and managed by a single entity, parks make a good place to start in improving play for younger children in Alexandria. Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority Sites (ARHA) sites also fit this description. By getting both the Parks Department and ARHA to adopt a policy to make all of their sites appropriate for ages 2-5, many people can be served at all times of the day.

The following parks and ARHA sites were rated as not serving ages 2-5:

- Buchanan Park
- William Ramsay Elementary School
- Charles Barrett Park
- Holmes Run Park
- ARHA Royal
- ARHA Oronoco
- ARHA Braddock

A policy should be adopted by both agencies, and these sites should be made appropriate for ages 2-5 as soon as possible.

Parks and ARHA sites that are currently rated as appropriate for ages 2-5 should also be upgraded to enhance the service they provide so that all domains of play are available. All of the playspaces at parks that were listed as serving ages 2-5 in the data set are adequate in the physical domain. This is to be expected since that was the primary criteria for the 2-5 designation. However, the other domains should be addressed as follows:





Enhancements for the **Social Domain** include adding things that kids in this age group can do together, such as sand play, play tables, see-saws, and other equipment suited to multiple children. Parks to improve in this domain include:

- Ewald Park in SubArea Two
- Four Mile, Angel, Warwick Landover, and Woodbine in SubArea Three
- ARHA Henry in SubArea Four

Four Mile has plenty of room where components can be added that serve this domain. Angel Park has play panels that serve this function somewhat, so it can be a lower priority than others. Warwick Landover has social elements like talk tubes, but these are not well-suited for younger kids. This is also true for ARHA Henry.

Enhancements for the **Intellectual Domain** include adding creative play elements. Moveable parts are particularly good for this, such as sand and water play or loose toys. Other loose items like twigs and bark chips are inspiring to creative young minds. Surfaces for writing with chalk are also good. Parks to improve in this domain include:

- James Mulligan Park in SubArea One (lacks any kind of themed play or moveable parts)
- Ewald and Tarleton in SubArea Two
- Four Mile, Warwick Landover, Chinquapin, and Mason Avenue in SubArea Three
- ARHA Henry in SubArea Four

Natural Domain enhancements include landscaping, planting beds, and planter boxes. Flowers, herbs, vegetables, and other plants can be used. Consider adding rocks, logs, and other nonliving natural elements. Parks to improve in this domain include:

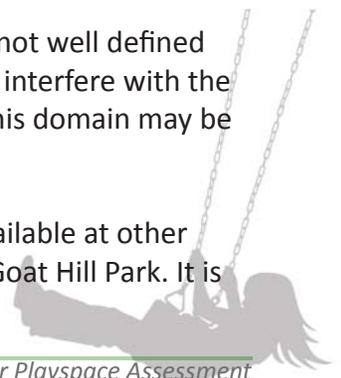
- Ben Brenman Park in SubArea Two
- Lynhaven and Chinquapin Recreation Center in SubArea Three
- ARHA Henry, Charles Houston Recreation Center, and Montgomery Park in SubArea Four

Free Play Domain features can be addressed by having an area with a relatively smooth and level surface of grass, mulch, or artificial surface that is adjacent to or readily accessible within the playspace. Ideally, this area should be fenced or otherwise configured to allow children to roam freely while being monitored by parents without fear for safety. Parks to improve in this domain include:

- ARHA Whiting in SubArea Two
- Angel Park, Lynhaven Park, Goat Hill Park, and Mason Avenue Park in SubArea Three

Lynhaven has areas of pea gravel that may serve this purpose, but these are not well defined and are in the path of travel between other elements, where larger kids may interfere with the free play of younger ones. Goat Hill is restricted by size and topography, so this domain may be difficult to address there. Mason Avenue is also limited by size.

An alternative would be to make sure that adequate space for free play is available at other playspaces nearby. For example, Warwick Landover Park is not too far from Goat Hill Park. It is





a very attractive park that offers adequate free play space but is lacking in the Intellectual and Social Domains. Between both parks all domains are covered, but there may not be enough age-appropriate amenities at Warwick Landover to draw parents with younger children there. Making Warwick Landover more appealing for children ages 2-5 would encourage parents that frequently visit Goat Hill to also take their kids to Warwick Landover and provide them with the full range of play experiences.

The nearest park to Mason Avenue Park is Simpson Stadium Park, which offers an appealing destination, but, like Warwick Landover, may not be as appealing for ages 2-5 as Mason Avenue. Enhancing the appeal of Simpson Stadium for ages 2-5 could draw parents who now take their children only to Mason Avenue to visit both parks and expand the play experiences for their children.

Public Schools

Public school yards in Alexandria tend to be well-designed, well-maintained, and offer a good balance of play domain opportunities. The primary drawback is that they are not available during the school day for use by the general public. Discussions with the school district are needed to determine if there are ways to address this. One possibility would be to open up the playgrounds to playgroups and other organized users through a permit system. Such a system would allow 2-5-year-olds on to the site during the day under controlled conditions. Another idea might be a “registry,” where parents and caregivers could register and obtain permission to use school playgrounds in a controlled way.

Improving Play at Private Spaces

Because there are multiple owners and other factors affecting control over playspaces at private locations such as apartments, HOAs, churches, and other semi-public providers, the best way to improve play at these locations may be through a campaign to increase awareness of the importance of play. The goal would be to get residents, church members, and others who use these facilities to advocate for improvements. Recognition and positive reinforcement can help—create an awards program to recognize good playspaces on private lands. Backing this up with money will help immensely. This can be done through grant programs, matching funds, and working with volunteer organizations that give time to build good playspaces.

Playspaces that are “almost” meeting the needs are good targets for upgrading if the owners of these are made aware of what needs to be upgraded. As explained for parks, such spaces and their deficiencies can be identified in the inventory. Examples of such locations include:

- Bishop of Arlington—needs natural play elements to enhance the Natural Domain
- Chatham Square—needs physical elements appropriate to the 2-5 age group
- Exchange at Van Dorn—has good balance of play domains, but needs improved access and invitation
- EOS 21 Condo—needs improvement in the Natural Domain and improved seating





Destination Playgrounds—A Combined Approach to Enhancing Play in Alexandria

A combined approach to the three strategies listed above would create synergies to greatly advance and enhance play in Alexandria. A good way to do this is through the creation of destination playgrounds. Destination playgrounds address the concerns of this study in many ways. They are places where high-value play that addresses all of the domains can be provided, along with all of the modifiers that enhances their value. This includes such things as restrooms, drinking water, and easy access by multiple modes of transportation. By creating a desirable playspace that everyone talks about, more people will be enticed and motivated to take their children to a place where play with all of its benefits is showcased.

A destination playground is one that draws people from a wide area together for extended periods of play. Destination playgrounds encourage people to set play dates with one another and to set aside special times for play. They are also places where events can be held that bring people together from across the entire community to meet and interact. They bring children and their families together across cultural and economic divides and raise awareness of the importance of healthy living and physical activity and provide a necessary opportunity to bond.

Destination playgrounds are special places that have unique elements, such as being located in a special place or having special features that cannot be found elsewhere. They offer a full range of comfort and convenience features, such as restrooms, shade, seating, and nearby picnic shelters for birthday parties and other gatherings. They typically are located in places where everyone in the family can find things to do, such as playing sports, observing wildlife, or enjoying a snack from a concession stand or vending cart. A wi-fi hotspot would be a good way to get parents to linger while their children play. Play monitors and play facilitators would further enhance such places.

Destination playgrounds are places that become part of the image and identity of the community, and their design reflects the history and culture of the region. Creating such a playspace in Alexandria would bring people together and enhance the sense of community, as well as the city's image within the region. It could be located in a large park like Four Mile Run or perhaps on a site along the river near Old Town. Another possibility could be next to the Nannie J. Lee Recreation Center, which would provide access to indoor space for activities associated with the playspace and the possibility for some monitoring and staffing.

Another type of destination playspace would be one that is intended as the focus of a smaller area, such as each of the subareas identified in the analysis for this study. Creating a destination playspace within each of the subareas would yield four special playspaces that would call attention to the importance of play, build a sense of community within the subarea, and might even encourage people from one subarea to visit another and get to know people there. These would be similar to the citywide playspace described above, but less elaborate. They should still be associated with other amenities, such as community gardens, local marketplaces, or other areas where people like to congregate and linger.





Potential locations for these smaller destination playspaces include:

- William Ramsay Recreation Center in SubArea One
- Ben Brenman Park in SubArea Two

In SubArea Three, possibilities include:

- Chinquapin Park
- Simpson Stadium Park
- Four Mile Run

In SubArea Four, possibilities include:

- Montgomery Park
- Hill Park

