

Inclusive Design Standards

Universal Design as the baseline for every Variety KC park

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Our Philosophy

Variety KC is the Children's Charity of Greater Kansas City, and inclusive play is at the center of everything we build. Our design philosophy is simple: if it's great for a child with a disability, it's great for every child. We do not design a standard playground and then bolt on an accessible corner. We design one place, from the ground up, where children of every ability play side by side.

The Americans with Disabilities Act is the legal floor for accessibility in the United States. At Variety KC, we treat it that way, as a floor, not a ceiling. Universal Design asks a different question than ADA compliance does. ADA asks, can a person with a disability enter and use this space. Universal Design asks, can everyone use this space together, independently, and with dignity, without needing a separate or specialized version of it.

This document establishes the Inclusive Design Standards that Variety KC requires of every park, playground, and public play space that carries the Variety KC name, and that we ask our municipal, philanthropic, and design partners to build toward through the Ten Parks Project and all future Variety KC initiatives.

Definition of Universal Design

Variety KC adopts the following definitions of Universal Design, consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the foundational work of architect Ronald Mace and the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University:

Universal Design is the design of products, environments, programs and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

Universal Design does not replace assistive devices; it works alongside them. Mobility equipment, sensory aids, communication devices, and adaptive tools remain essential parts of how many children and families experience play. Good Universal Design means those tools are supported, not made unnecessary.

The Good, Better, Best Framework

Not every park Variety KC touches is a Variety KC signature park, and we are honest about the difference. We use a three-tier framework to describe what a project is committing to:

- **Good:** The project meets or exceeds ADA requirements and incorporates select inclusive features where feasible.
- **Better:** The project incorporates Universal Design across most standards in this document, including continuous accessible surfacing, sensory-considerate design, and parallel play opportunities.
- **Best:** The project meets every standard in this document in full. This is the tier required of any park that carries the Variety KC name.

For a park to bear the Variety KC name, it must be 100 percent accessible, not 95 percent. A single unaddressed gap, one missing curb cut, one piece of ground-level-only equipment, one restroom without a family option, can be the exact detail that tells a child or a parent they were not fully considered. We do not accept that trade-off on our own parks, and we ask every Ten Parks Project partner to build toward it.

Applicability

These Standards apply in full, at the Best tier, to every park, playground, or facility that carries the Variety KC name. On these parks, 100 percent compliance is required, not 95 percent.

Ten Parks Project partner sites are held to the same Standards as the goal. Municipal and nonprofit partners applying for Ten Parks Project funding agree, as part of the application, to work collaboratively with Variety KC to incorporate these Standards throughout design and construction, and to work toward Best-tier compliance across every standard in this document. Variety KC collaborates with each partner from concept design forward to close any gaps between a project's starting point and full compliance. Projects that meet only minimum ADA requirements do not qualify as Variety KC signature parks.

Design Standards

1. Site Access and Circulation

Accessible routes shall connect parking, drop-off areas, restrooms, and all play zones without gaps, detours, or transitions onto non-compliant surfaces. Pathways throughout the park shall be wider than the ADA minimum wherever feasible, sized to allow two mobility devices, such as two wheelchairs or a wheelchair and a stroller, to pass one another comfortably at the same time. Grade changes shall be addressed through ramping integrated into the landscape design rather than treated as an afterthought.

2. Surfacing

Accessible surfacing shall be continuous through every primary play zone, not limited to transfer points or entry areas. Poured-in-place rubber surfacing or an equivalent unitary surface is required beneath and connecting all elevated and ground-level play components in destination-tier parks, so that a child using a mobility device can move between activities without leaving an accessible surface. Engineered wood fiber and similar loose-fill materials, where used at all, shall be limited to non-critical secondary areas and shall never separate a child from any play component covered elsewhere in these Standards.

3. Restroom Accessibility

Every Variety KC park shall include restroom facilities that serve users of all genders, family configurations, and abilities. At minimum, one restroom shall be a fully private, single-occupancy universal restroom that accommodates a caregiver assisting a child or adult, a family with young children, and a user of a mobility device. Restroom design shall prioritize usability, dignity, and clear wayfinding to its location. Restroom entrances shall be located within clear line of sight of the primary play area wherever site conditions allow, so a caregiver never has to choose between supervising a child and using the restroom, and so a child with a cognitive disability can locate the restroom independently.

4. Adult-Sized Changing Facilities

Destination parks shall include an adult-sized changing table where restrooms are present, so that older children and adults who require assistance are not left without a dignified option. Placement and configuration shall be determined during project design, in consultation with Variety KC.

5. Sensory-Considerate Design

Parks shall incorporate design elements that support children and adults with sensory sensitivities, including attention to ambient noise levels, lighting quality, and spatial predictability. Every destination park shall include a named, clearly signed quiet space, separate from the active play environment, where a child who is overstimulated or under-stimulated can regulate without leaving the park experience. This space shall offer a different intensity of sensory engagement than the main play area, such as softer textures, filtered light, or gentle manipulables, rather than simply being a bench in the shade.

Planting throughout the park shall be non-toxic, non-thorny, and low-allergen, selected deliberately for the sensory experience it offers, texture, scent, sound in wind, rather than as landscaping alone. Trees and shrubs also serve as a natural shade source and should be planned alongside built shade structures.

6. Wayfinding and Visual Accessibility

Signage and wayfinding shall be legible, consistent, and accessible to users with visual impairments, including high-contrast signage, clear pictograms, and tactile identifiers at key destinations, with braille included on primary signage and mounted at a height accessible from a seated position in a mobility device. Color shall never be used as the only distinguishing cue on signage, wayfinding, or play equipment; every color-based distinction shall be paired with a distinct shape, pattern, or texture so the design remains legible to children and adults with color vision deficiency. Where feasible, digital resources such as an online map identifying accessible routes and features shall be made available.

Sightlines between distinct play zones shall remain as open as design allows, so that a deaf or hard-of-hearing child can maintain visual contact and sign to a caregiver or friend across the park rather than being visually cut off by structures or landscaping.

7. Communication and Hearing Accessibility

Indoor facilities and structured programming spaces shall provide visual equivalents for audible information, including emergency alerts and program instructions. Assistive listening needs shall be addressed in any facility with a public address system or formal programming space. Slide material shall be selected with hearing devices in mind: steel slides are required in place of plastic wherever feasible, since plastic slides generate static electricity that can disrupt hearing aids and cochlear implants.

8. Inclusive and Parallel Play

Play is only inclusive if children of different abilities can do the same activity, at the same time, next to each other, rather than a child with a disability being routed to a separate accessible feature off to the side. Variety KC requires parallel play design: ground-level and elevated play components shall be paired so that a child using a mobility device and a child who is walking or climbing can engage the same type of play experience side by side, at the same time, in the same space.

Roll-on access is required wherever feasible in place of transfer-based access, meaning a child can reach a play component directly from a mobility device without needing to transfer out of it. Equipment selection shall prioritize components usable without a transfer, including accessible swings and other dynamic elements that serve wheelchair users. Where transfer is unavoidable, platforms shall support multiple transfer methods and provide turn-around space wide enough for a mobility device.

Play options shall span a range of physical challenge, rated informally as easy, medium, or hard, so that every child is genuinely challenged at their own level rather than every child being offered the same simplified experience. This range shall include some degree of graduated risk, such as landforms, hills, and boulders that support climbing, rolling, and sliding at a child's own comfort level, alongside structured equipment.

At least one water or sand play element shall be included at destination parks where feasible, designed for safe, independent use, since water and sand offer sensory value that is difficult to replicate elsewhere and benefit autistic, blind, and deaf children in particular. Solitary play options shall also be available alongside social and parallel play, for children who engage best through individual, self-directed activity.

9. Shade and Rest

Shade structures shall be provided at or adjacent to every primary play area. Shade is not a comfort amenity in Variety KC's parks, it is an access requirement. Many children in our community manage heat sensitivity tied to medical conditions or medications, and extended outdoor time is only realistic for these families when shade is designed in from the start, not added later if budget allows. Material selection for equipment and

surfacing shall account for heat gain and cold retention, since metal and dark unitary surfacing can reach temperatures that are unsafe or uncomfortable for bare skin.

10. Fencing and Safety

Every Variety KC destination park shall be fully enclosed by a secure perimeter appropriate to its setting, most often gated fencing with a single point of entry. Enclosure is a safety requirement, not a design preference. Children with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities are at documented risk of elopement, the tendency to wander or bolt suddenly from a supervised area, and a secured perimeter is the single most effective design response to that risk. Where a fully fenced perimeter is not feasible, a combination of dense plantings, landforms, and other physical barriers may serve the same function if it achieves an equivalent level of containment. Where fencing is used, incorporating sensory panels or interactive elements into the fence line is encouraged so the boundary contributes to the play experience rather than only marking its edge.

11. Seating: Social and Respite

Parks shall provide seating and gathering areas integrated directly into play zones, not only at the perimeter, so that caregivers, grandparents, and children who need to rest remain part of the social experience of the park rather than watching from a distance. Seating throughout the park shall include armrests and back support to accommodate older adults, caregivers, and individuals with endurance limitations, and shall be distributed to keep sightlines to active play areas.

In addition to social seating, every destination park shall include dedicated respite seating set slightly apart from the busiest play zones, for a caregiver or child who needs to step back from overstimulation without leaving the park. This is a distinct requirement from general seating: its value is in the separation it offers, not in its proximity to activity.

12. Intergenerational and Adult Play

Destination parks shall include at least some equipment designed for adult and senior use, such as accessible fitness stations or adult-scaled play structures, so that grandparents and caregivers can actively play alongside children rather than only supervise from a bench. Intergenerational play reduces isolation for older adults and reinforces that Variety KC parks serve every stage of life, not only childhood.

Design Review and Partnership Process

Universal Design compliance under these Standards shall be evaluated at three points in every Variety KC project: concept design, design development, and pre-bid. Waiting until construction is underway to identify a gap is how good intentions quietly become 95 percent instead of 100 percent. Variety KC works alongside our design and municipal partners at each of these checkpoints, not as an inspector at the end of the process, but as a collaborator throughout it.

Partners applying to the Ten Parks Project should expect this collaboration to begin early, often before a design firm has been selected, so that Variety KC's standards inform the project from its first sketch rather than being reconciled against a finished plan.

Working With Variety KC

Variety KC maintains ongoing relationships with playground design and equipment partners who have built fluency in these Standards over multiple projects, spanning surfacing, universal restrooms, fencing, wayfinding, and sensory design as a connected system rather than a checklist. Organizations new to this work are welcome, and Variety KC will invest the time to build that same fluency together, because the goal is not compliance with a document. The goal is a Kansas City where kids of all abilities are playing side by side, in their own neighborhoods, at parks that were built for all of them from the very beginning.