

# Designing Play Spaces for Older Adults



# Introduction

**Play is an easy and enjoyable way to foster mental and physical wellbeing across all ages and abilities.**

Auckland's playgrounds are frequently designed for children and young adults; however, older adults also benefit from the provision of well-designed play spaces.



Play spaces for older adults can facilitate mental and physical activity, social interactions and a sense of community and connection. These can help to address issues frequently encountered by older adults including social isolation, dementia, depression and physical illnesses associated with sedentary lifestyles.

As research demonstrates that safety is a key consideration for older adults, this aspect of design will be discussed first. The remainder of this guidance follows the Mental Health Foundation's Ways to Wellbeing framework.

## **Ways to Wellbeing**

- Be active - Me Kori Tonu
- Connect - Me Whakawhanaunga
- Take Notice - Me Aro Tonu
- Keep Learning - Me Ako Tonu
- Give - Tukua

# Safety

**Older adults need to feel physically & psychologically safe in order to use a park or play space.**

Fear of being victims of crime and fear of falling can prevent older adults from using park spaces. Safety and people's perception of safety should be a top design priority. A well-designed park or play space is safe and makes users feel safe.



**Design for safety by:**

- Ensuring the environment is well maintained, well lit and clear of evidence of antisocial behavior (such as graffiti and litter).
- Providing accessible parking, toilets & drinking fountains close to the play space (refer to the Auckland Design Manual's Universal Design Hub<sup>1</sup>).
- Ensuring paths, handrails, seating and signage follow universal design guidelines<sup>1</sup>. Older adults' benefit from slightly higher seating with arms and backrests.
- Position the play space so it is well connected to and highly visible from surrounding buildings, streets and public spaces<sup>2</sup>. It should be approachable by short direct paths that are not too steep.
- Allowing a food truck or coffee cart to be onsite to facilitate activity and increase passive surveillance.
- Considering pandemic safety measures: wide paths with hand sanitizer stations provided.
- Actively work with community partners/ stakeholders to identify and improve existing safety issues.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/design-subjects/universal\\_design](http://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/design-subjects/universal_design)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/design-subjects/design-safety/designingforsafety/guidance/safetydesignsummarybysitetype/parks\\_reserve](http://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz/design-subjects/design-safety/designingforsafety/guidance/safetydesignsummarybysitetype/parks_reserve)

# Be Active - Me Kori Tonu

**Being physically active is very beneficial to health and wellbeing.**

Exercise increases muscle strength and endurance, reduces the risk and fear of falling, and decreases the likelihood of health conditions such as dementia.

**Design to promote by:**

- Installing a variety of exercise equipment that is suitable for the different abilities of older adults.
- Providing a well-drained, flat area for group exercise.
- Encouraging low cost or cost-free community group exercises such as zumba, tai chi, yoga etc.
- Providing equipment with elements that incorporate total body movement, such as changing direction and speed, pushing and pulling actions.
- Providing equipment that works to improve balance.
- Including manual dexterity equipment such as touch panels or musical instruments.





# Connect Me - Whakawhanaunga

**Humans are social beings; connecting with others strengthens peoples' sense of belonging and enhances their wellbeing.**

Well-designed parks and playgrounds facilitate social participation, support physical and mental health and build an individual's sense of belonging and community. Older adults need social connection to prevent social isolation, loneliness and depression.



**Design to promote social connection by:**

- Arranging tables, chairs and equipment to encourage social interaction, face-to-face or at right angles.
- Including a BBQ area with accessible tables and seating.
- Providing an activity area for groups to practice tai chi, yoga, zumba, line dancing, kapa haka, etc.
- Promoting physical, recreation, and cultural group activities led by older adults (flax weaving, mahjong, knitting etc).
- Holding diverse cultural events in park spaces.
- Providing board and outdoor games via an outdoor library where citizens can donate or borrow board games or equipment such as bocce ball, chess, etc.
- Locating older adults' playgrounds near children's playgrounds and providing equipment for intergenerational play (such as a caregiver and child swing).
- Providing cafés and accessible toilet facilities.
- Providing a communal garden area, which enables connection to whenua (land).

# Take Notice - Me Aro Tonu

**The benefits of taking notice include improved mental state, decreased anxiety and depression and enhanced self-awareness.**

Taking notice is about being present, aware, and mindful. It has a strong emphasis on nature and park settings.

## **Design to promote taking notice by:**

- Providing accessible paths that pass a variety of visual, aural and scent stimulus.
- Including a variety of planting for providing shade, scent and visual interest.
- Including a feature like a view, water feature or a duck pond.
- Providing signage with suggestions for mindfulness exercises

## **Touch**

- Varied playground equipment and surfaces (textures, shapes, and objects)
- Water

## **Hearing**

- Soundscapes to enhance sounds of nature (wind, birdsong etc)
- Outdoor musical instruments (drums, piano, chimes etc)

## **Vestibular (balance)**

- Equipment that challenges balance (balance boards, balance beams, trampoline, wobbly bridge)

## **Smell**

- Fragrant trees, plants, grasses and flowers

## **Sight**

- Strong visual aesthetic and variety
- Artwork
- View lines of visual interest

## **Proprioception (position sense)**

- Play equipment that involves activities that challenge where you are in space, such as pushing, pulling, jumping, swinging (trampoline, seesaw, swing etc)

# Keep Learning - Me Ako Tonu

**Lifelong learning positively impacts wellbeing and resilience.**

Learning means to be curious about the world and to acquire knowledge, drawing from people, the environment, and resources available. Older adults prefer to have autonomy over what they learn.

**Design to promote learning by:**

- Providing a variety of learning opportunities.
- Incorporating a notice board announcing opportunities for classes to learn a new language, sport, or hobby.
- Promoting activities in parks and play spaces in a variety of accessible formats including websites, social media and community newsletters.
- Encouraging independence to self-learn use of equipment by providing instructions on equipment use and benefits.
- Including individual and group games, puzzles and activities.



# Give - Tukua

**Being able to give promotes citizenship and enhances self-worth and wellbeing.**

Volunteering in the community provides opportunities for older adults to contribute in ways that are meaningful for them.

**Promote giving back to the community by:**

- Providing communal gardening opportunities.
- Providing opportunities for community-taught exercise classes, such as yoga or tai chi.
- Providing an outdoor library for exchanging books.
- Providing a signboard with ideas on how to give back, for example participating in working bees or picking up rubbish.
- Encouraging older adults to donate their time to run social, cultural, or physical activity groups.





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