

A place to play: Researcher designs schoolyard for children with autism

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A Kansas State University graduate student is creating a schoolyard that can become a therapeutic landscape for children with autism.

Chelsey King, master's student in landscape architecture, St. Peters, Mo., is working with Katie Kingery-Page, assistant professor of [landscape architecture](#), to envision a place where elementary school children with autism could feel comfortable and included.

"My main goal was to provide different opportunities for children with autism to be able to interact in their environment without being segregated from the rest of the school," King said. "I didn't want that separation to occur."

The schoolyard can be an inviting place for children with autism, King said, if it provides several aspects: clear boundaries, a variety of activities and activity level spaces, places where the child can go when overstimulated, opportunities for a variety of [sensory input](#) without being overwhelming and a variety of ways to foster communication between peers.

"The biggest issue with traditional schoolyards is that they are completely open but also busy and crowded in specific areas," King said. "This can be too overstimulating for a person with autism."

King researched ways that she could create an environment where children with autism would be able to interact with their surroundings

and their peers, but where they could also get away from [overstimulation](#) until they felt more comfortable and could re-enter the activities.

"Through this research, I was able to determine that therapies and activities geared toward sensory stimulation, [cognitive development](#), [communication skills](#), and fine and [gross motor skills](#) -- which traditionally occur in a classroom setting -- could be integrated into the schoolyard," King said.

King designed her schoolyard with both traditional aspects -- such as a central play area -- and additional elements that would appeal to children with autism, including:

- A music garden where children can play with outdoor musical instruments to help with sensory aspects.
- An edible garden/greenhouse that allows hands-on interaction with nature and opportunities for horticulture therapy.
- A sensory playground, which uses different panels to help children build tolerances to difference sensory stimulation.
- A butterfly garden to encourage nature-oriented learning in a quiet place.
- A variety of alcoves, which provide children with a place to get away when they feel overwhelmed and want to regain control.

King created different signs and pictures boards around these schoolyard elements, so that it was easier for children and teachers to communicate about activities. She also designed a series of small hills around the central play areas so that children with autism could have a place to escape and watch the action around them.

"It is important to make the children feel included in the schoolyard without being overwhelmed," King said. "It helps if they have a place --

such as a hill or an alcove -- where they can step away from it and then rejoin the activity when they are ready.

King and Kingery-Page see the benefits of this type of schoolyard as an enriching learning environment for all children because it involves building sensory experience and communication.

"Most children spend seven to nine hours per weekday in school settings," Kingery-Page said. "Designing schoolyards that are educational, richly experiential, with potentially restorative nature contact for children should be a community concern."

The researchers collaborated with Jessica Wilkinson, a special education teacher who works with children with autism. King designed her schoolyard around Amanda Arnold Elementary School, which is the Manhattan school district's magnet school for [children](#) with autism.

"Although there are no current plans to construct the schoolyard, designing for a real school allowed Chelsey to test principles synthesized from literature against the actual needs of an educational facility," Kingery-Page said. "Chelsey's interaction with the school autism coordinator and school principal has grounded her research in the daily challenges of elementary education for students with [autism](#)."

Provided by Kansas State University

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