

# 1 Introduction

The work of the LUDI network, established and funded by COST in 2014, is underpinned by a commitment to the right of children and young persons with disabilities to recreation and play, as stated in international Conventions on the Rights of the Child and Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These human rights conventions place signatories under an obligation to put in place an appropriate set of entitlements, actions and resources to ensure their implementation. Importantly, the LUDI network recognises the importance of play and recreation for children with disabilities *in and of itself* – that is, *play for its own sake* – and its centrality to children and young people’s overall well-being and quality of life. Play and recreation is more than an enabler or a tool in relation to social, educational, physical and psychological development and health promotion/maintenance. Play has intrinsic value to all children.

This book examines the environmental barriers to play and recreation in everyday worlds of children and young persons with disabilities as identified within current literature. We commence with a brief overview of the work of the LUDI network, a COST TD Action TD1309 project, to provide context. We then provide a brief overview of the interdisciplinary nature of play studies (Henricks, 2008). We consider how play has changed in recent decades and what is known about play and recreation for children and young persons with disabilities. This is followed by a closer examination of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) and General Comments 9 (2007) and 17 (2013) as they relate to play and recreation for children and young persons with disabilities. Since disability is a contested concept, we next outline our definition of disability and justify our use of the International Classification of Function, Disability and Health (ICF; WHO, 2002), International Classification of Function, Disability and Health-Children and Youth (ICF-CY; WHO, 2007) and associated terminology. Finally, we provide a detailed narrative review of existing research and knowledge surrounding play for children with disabilities within four key locations/spaces.

Play and recreation does not occur in a ‘vacuum’ (Meires, 2007); it happens ‘somewhere’ in a physical, social and cultural setting (Barron, 2013). The locations where children with disabilities engage in play and the influences on their choice of location and activity have only recently begun to be explored, and there is need for further research in this area. Children of course play wherever they are (NCB, 2002). Reading across literature in Children’s and Childhood Studies and the reports by organisations such as the National Children’s Bureau (UK) and Play England, four key locations for play, each broadly defined, can nevertheless be identified as important venues for children’s play: the home, educational settings, the built environment and the natural environment. In this book, we focus on each of these locations in turn, considering the unique and the generic barriers in operation. We conclude with a discussion of the findings of our literature review and make recommendations for future research and policy work in this area.

## 1.1 Background to the COST Action TD 1309 – Play for children with disabilities

This Action aims at the creation of a novel and autonomous field of research and intervention on play for children with disabilities. The network has three main objectives:

- a. Collecting and systematising all existing competence and skills: educational researches, clinical initiatives, know-how of resource centres and users' associations
- b. Developing new knowledge related to settings, tools and methodologies associated with the play of children with disabilities
- c. Disseminating the best practices emerging from the joint effort of researchers, practitioners and users

Play for children with disabilities is the object of a fragmented set of studies, and it has given rise, in different countries and at different times, to niche projects (i.e. social robotics for autistic children, adapted toys for children with cognitive and motor disabilities, accessible playground areas). There is a need, however, for transdisciplinary cooperation between researchers and practitioners in the fields of psycho-pedagogical sciences, social sciences, health and rehabilitation sciences, humanities, assistive technologies and robotics, together with the vital contribution of children with disabilities, their families and friends and support organisations to find ways to ensure and empower children's right to play.

The main objective of the Action, therefore, is to spread awareness of the importance of giving children with disabilities the opportunity to play, while ensuring equity in their exercise of the right to play and by putting play at the centre of multidisciplinary research and innovation in relation to the lives and well-being of children with disabilities. Within this Action, there are four working groups. Each has specific objectives. The objective of Working Group 3 – to which the authors of this book are associated – is to examine the impact of environmental factors on play for children with disabilities. Environmental factors are understood here in terms of WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). Such factors include products and technologies, services, systems, laws and policies, the natural environment and human-made changes to the environment, support, relationships and attitudes (both individual and societal). These factors may operate as barriers or facilitators of play for children with disabilities.

In this book, arising from LUDI Working Group 3, we explore the environmental factors operating as *barriers*. Identifying and understanding these barriers is a vital first step in the process of their removal.