Neurodiversity at ParkPlay: what we've learnt and what we'll do next

Summary

ParkPlay is already a good place for neurodivergent children and adults, and in 2027 we will make four practical changes to make it even better.

Over the past year we set out to understand how neurodivergent people experience ParkPlay, and how we could improve that experience and welcome more neurodivergent families. We listened to participants through our survey, to volunteers with personal and professional experience, to a steering group and to specialist organisations.

The headline is positive. Neurodivergent families rate ParkPlay as highly as everyone else, come more often, and say it has helped them make friends and feel part of their community. Parents talk about their children growing in confidence.

Everyone we heard from pointed to the same few things that make the biggest difference: knowing what to expect, being able to join in your own way, having somewhere calm to take a break, and volunteers who feel confident. Our four changes build on those:

1. **Clearer information before people arrive,** so families know what a ParkPlay looks like before their first visit.
2. **An optional question when people register,** so PlayDirectors know if there's anything that would help.
3. **Simple guidance for volunteers,** building on tips our own PlayLeaders have already shared.
4. **Reaching more neurodivergent families,** through their stories and local connections.

Each change works within the ParkPlay model: free, weekly, outdoors and volunteer-led. None needs specialist knowledge or significant cost, and each can work at every ParkPlay.

Where we are today

ParkPlay was set up to be a welcoming place for people who feel that other sport and activity isn't for them, and many neurodivergent families have found exactly that. ParkPlay is free, weekly, outdoors in local parks, and run by volunteers. Children and adults play together, the games are non-competitive, and nobody is told they're doing it wrong. There's no kit and no pressure to perform.

Those features weren't designed with neurodivergent people specifically in mind, but they suit many of them well. A quarter of the families who answered our latest survey said someone in their family who comes to ParkPlay is neurodivergent. Our volunteers see the same thing every week.

By neurodivergent, we mean people whose brains work differently from what is typically expected. Following Neurodiverse Sport, we include autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, OCD and other cognitive differences. Every neurodivergent person is different, so there is no single set of needs to design for.

What we set out to do

We started this project with three aims, supported by London Marathon Foundation and Herts Sports Partnership:

- Understand how neurodivergent people experience ParkPlay, as participants and as volunteers.
- Test improvements, including by starting a new ParkPlay designed around neurodivergent needs from the outset.
- Create a template that every ParkPlay could use to welcome neurodivergent people better.

From the start, we agreed that any changes had to be practical and work within the ParkPlay model, rather than change what ParkPlay is.

We brought together a steering group of partners, volunteers and people with lived and professional experience of neurodiversity. We ran a survey, gathered volunteer insight and looked at guidance from specialist organisations.

How the project changed

We've decided not to start a dedicated new ParkPlay. Instead, we'll make improvements across all ParkPlays.

There were two reasons. First, the evidence showed that existing ParkPlays already work well for neurodivergent families, so a separate model wasn't needed. Second,

despite support from Herts Sports Partnership, we didn't find local partners ready to help set up a new ParkPlay on that basis, and it proved hard to keep the steering group meeting regularly.

We think this is the better outcome. Small changes at every ParkPlay will reach far more neurodivergent families than one new event could, and they're more likely to last.

What we've learnt

Every source we looked at tells a consistent story: ParkPlay works well for neurodivergent families, and a few simple things would make it work even better.

What participants told us

Our April 2026 participant survey had 132 responses. 34 respondents (26%) said someone in their family who attends ParkPlay is neurodivergent. Their answers were as positive as everyone else's, and on some measures more so.

Measure	**Neurodivergent families**	**Other families**
Overall experience (out of 5)	4.79	4.82
Net Promoter Score	85	82
Come every week or 2-3 times a month	82%	70%
Have made new friendships	100%	92%
Feel more involved in their community	97%	92%
Children more active since starting ParkPlay	73%	63%
Feel happier or more energised	88%	95%

Three things stand out:

- **The welcome works.** Families talk about volunteers who are friendly, open and do their best to include everyone, whatever their age or ability.
- **Friendship and community matter most.** Neurodivergent families put more weight on meeting people and feeling part of something. For some, ParkPlay is one of the few places where their child can play safely with others nearby.
- **Confidence grows.** Several parents said their child had gained confidence through coming to ParkPlay.

"My youngest child has gained so much more confidence from attending ParkPlay. We just hope it never stops running."

Where families suggested improvements, they mentioned things like a clearer flow to the games, the balance of organised games and free play, practical issues like toilets and dogs in the park, and winter provision. A slightly smaller share of neurodivergent families said they felt happier or more energised afterwards, which may reflect how tiring social situations can be, even enjoyable ones.

What our volunteers told us

Volunteers with personal and professional experience of neurodiversity gave us some of our most practical ideas.

Joseph Smith, former PlayLeader in Buckinghamshire, shared five tips for a more welcoming ParkPlay: tell people what's coming up, create a quiet area, let people play their way, keep an eye out for people on the sidelines, and talk to parents.

A former PlayLeader in Hertfordshire with professional SEND experience made similar points. Many neurodivergent children benefit from knowing what to expect, watching before joining in, and having somewhere quieter to go. She also reminded us that needs vary widely. Some children need time and space; others arrive full of energy and need help with boundaries in a busy space. She noted that parents often judge how inclusive somewhere is by how calmly and confidently volunteers respond.

What our steering group told us

Our steering group gave us three principles:

- **Be honest about what's on offer.** Families can make their own decisions if they know what to expect, such as whether there are toilets nearby or whether the park is enclosed.
- **Focus on what ParkPlay controls.** Many practical factors, like facilities and fencing, are down to the park, not us.
- **What helps neurodivergent people helps everyone.** A calmer, clearer, more predictable ParkPlay is better for all families.

One ParkPlay showed what local volunteers can do: two volunteers with SEND experience give two autistic children a safe space each week, and one of the children now DJs, which lifts the atmosphere for everyone.

What specialist organisations say

Neurodiverse Sport is the leading not-for-profit for neurodivergent people in sport. Their case study of a young autistic person joining a new club shows how much of a good experience happens before someone arrives: a clear welcome statement, a simple outline of what will happen, a chance to share any needs when signing up, and a known place to take a break. They also offer a free online course for community sport volunteers, A Blueprint to Neuroinclusion in Community Sport.

General inclusion guidance points the same way: short, clear instructions, time to process them, specific praise, clear boundaries marked with cones, and a calm space for anyone who feels overwhelmed.

The common themes

Across all these sources, five things come up again and again:

1. **Knowing what to expect,** before arriving and throughout the morning.
2. **Joining in your own way,** including watching first or playing alongside rather than in the main game.
3. **Somewhere calm** to take a break.
4. **Clear, simple communication,** with more showing and less telling.
5. **Confident, calm volunteers** who talk to families about what helps.

What we don't yet know

Our evidence has limits. The survey was short and mainly quantitative, and the number of neurodivergent respondents was relatively small, especially adults. It tells us how people feel about ParkPlay overall, but less about the detail of their experience. We'll treat these findings as a strong starting point and keep learning as we make changes.

What we're going to do

We'll make four changes in 2027, each linked to what we've learnt and each simple enough to work at every ParkPlay.

1. Clearer information before people arrive

Why: Knowing what to expect was the most consistent theme across every source. Neurodiverse Sport's guidance shows how much of a good first experience starts before someone arrives.

What we'll do:

- Add a short statement to our website that everyone belongs at ParkPlay, and that it's fine to join in at your own pace, watch first or take a break.

- Create a "What to expect at your first ParkPlay" page with a simple visual outline of a typical morning: arrive, welcome, games, free play, goodbye.
- Add honest practical details to each ParkPlay's page, such as where to meet, whether there are toilets nearby, and whether the park is enclosed.

This is a general outline, not a list of each week's games. PlayDirectors who want to share their plans in advance can still do so.

2. An optional question when people register

Why: Volunteers told us that talking to parents is the best way to find out what helps. Asking at registration gives families an easy way to share this before their first visit.

What we'll do: Add an optional question to registration, such as "Is there anything that would help you or your child enjoy ParkPlay?" We'll first agree how answers reach the right PlayDirector and how the information is handled safely.

3. Simple guidance for volunteers

Why: Parents judge inclusion by how confident volunteers seem. Our own PlayLeaders have already shared excellent advice, and the practices that help most are simple.

What we'll do: Build on Joseph's tips to create a short ParkPlay guide on our volunteer Team Hub. It will cover a handful of everyday practices:

- Explain the plan for the morning during the Welcome, and give a heads-up before games change.
- Start with the same opening game each week, so the beginning feels familiar.
- Make it clear that watching first, or playing alongside, is absolutely fine.
- Mark out a quiet spot with a few cones where anyone can take a break.
- Show rather than tell: keep instructions short and demonstrate games.
- Offer simple choices within games.
- Stay calm and supportive if someone becomes overwhelmed, and talk to parents about what helps.

We'll also point volunteers to Neurodiverse Sport's free online course as optional extra learning.

4. Reaching more neurodivergent families

Why: Neurodivergent families are among our most loyal participants, which suggests many more would enjoy ParkPlay if they knew about it.

What we'll do:

- Share stories from neurodivergent families and volunteers on our website and social media, with their permission.
- Encourage PlayDirectors to connect with local SEND groups, parent networks and special schools, and give them a simple introduction they can use.

Trying it first

Before rolling out the volunteer guidance and the quiet spot everywhere, we'll try them at two or three ParkPlays that already welcome many neurodivergent families. We'll use their feedback to refine the approach.

What we considered but aren't doing

We looked at several other ideas and decided they don't fit ParkPlay right now, mostly because they rely on paid staff, fixed groups or changes to the ParkPlay model.

- **A dedicated new ParkPlay for neurodivergent families.** Existing ParkPlays already work well for this group, so improving all of them reaches more people.
- **Indoor winter provision.** Some families asked for it, but ParkPlay is an outdoor activity in public parks and indoor venues would change the model and add cost.
- **Publishing each week's games in advance at every ParkPlay.** This would add work for volunteers and limit how they adapt on the day. A general outline (change 1) gives families most of the benefit.
- **Pre-visits, assigned buddies and individual communication cards.** These work well in clubs with paid coaches and fixed groups, but are hard to deliver at a free, drop-in, volunteer-led activity.
- **Sensory kits at every ParkPlay.** Items like ear defenders could help some children. We may test a simple kit at one or two ParkPlays before deciding whether to go further.

When it will happen and how we'll know it's working

We plan to have all four changes in place by the end of summer 2027. The timings below are proposed and will be confirmed in our 2027 action plan.

When (proposed)	What happens
January to March 2027	Website statement and "what to expect" page live; volunteer guide drafted; trial ParkPlays agreed

April to June 2027	Volunteer guide and quiet spot trialled at two or three ParkPlays; registration question set up
July to September 2027	Volunteer guide refined and shared with all ParkPlays; practical details added to every ParkPlay's page
Throughout 2027	Stories shared on our website and social media; PlayDirectors supported to connect with local groups

We'll know it's working if:

- Feedback from the trial ParkPlays shows families and volunteers find the changes helpful.
- Our next participant survey shows neurodivergent families continue to rate ParkPlay as highly as everyone else. We'll add a few more specific questions so we learn more about their experience.
- Families use the registration question, and PlayDirectors find the answers useful.
- More families tell us they found ParkPlay through local SEND or parent groups.

Thank you, and sources

Thank you to London Marathon Foundation and Herts Sports Partnership for supporting this work, to our steering group members, and to the volunteers and families who shared their experiences with us.

Sources:

- ParkPlay participant survey, April 2026 (132 responses), and our internal analysis of neurodivergent respondents
- ParkPlay neurodiversity project plan and steering group notes, February 2026
- Input from ParkPlay volunteers with personal and professional experience of neurodiversity
- Joseph Smith, Making ParkPlay more welcoming and inclusive, ParkPlay website
- Neurodiverse Sport, including the case study Joining a New Sports Club and the free course A Blueprint to Neuroinclusion in Community Sport
- General inclusion guidance for physical activity (inclusion resource document, September 2025)