

The Mommy Files

The first truly inclusive playground opens in the Bay Area

By [Amy Graff](#) on April 30, 2015 7:07 AM

Story courtesy of [Red Tricycle](#)

Image 1 of 4 |Magical Bridge Playground: Kids in wheel chairs can pull up to this table.
(Magical Bridge)





Image 2 of 4 |Magical Bridge Playground

Movement across the Magic Harp's invisible laser beams triggers soothing, musical sounds.



Image 3 of 4 |Magical Bridge Playground

This slide with rollers is designed for individuals with limited mobility. (Magical Bridge)



Image 4 of 4 |Magical Bridge Playground

Magical Bridge in Palo Alto is the Bay Area's first truly inclusive playground. (Magical Bridge)

The Bay Area is home to some of the best playgrounds in the country, but children with special needs haven't always been able to share in the fun ... until now. Palo Alto's brand new all-inclusive [Magical Bridge Playground](#) goes way beyond wheelchair ramps: Think wheelchair-accessible treehouses, signs in braille, bucket swings, and wide slides. It's truly a place where children of all abilities can play side by side.

Building bridges: The story behind the playground

The Magical Bridge Playground is the brainchild of Palo Alto parent Olenka Villareal. Her daughter Ava was born with developmental challenges, and Olenka quickly realized there were no places where she could take Ava to play. Olenka envisioned a playground where kids of any

ability could have fun and feel included. When she couldn't find one, she set out to create her own.

It took 6 years and over \$3 million to make Olenka's vision a reality, but the result is nothing short of magical: The first truly inclusive playground in the Bay Area. The Magical Bridge Playground is a place so accessible that children with varying disabilities can play, and so cool that typically developing children want to join in the fun.

Fun for everyone

The smiles begin as soon as you enter the playground area: Sensors built into the main entrance wall trigger a series of soothing sounds as you cross the threshold. The playground has everything little ones need for hours of swinging, sliding, spinning, climbing, and pretending. Bucket swings let groups of children swing together, and spinning cocoons will make kids dizzy with happiness. A two-story play house is set among the trees, and a swinging bridge leads young adventurers to a slide hill, with multiple paths to the bottom. There's even a place for the littlest tots, with a mini play structure and a set of musical bells.

On top of the world

The playground's piece de resistance, a giant two-story play house, was designed by local artist Barbara Butler. Inspired by her own free-range childhood, Barbara set out to create a magical space filled with nooks and crannies for kids to escape to. Colorful accents, large windows, and a simple floor plan help visually impaired individuals navigate throughout. The second floor looks out onto a stage area, where budding performers can sing or act their hearts out. Both floors are wheelchair accessible, so kids and adults in wheelchairs can enjoy the sensation of living in the treetops. Even the swinging bridge leading to the slide hill is wheelchair accessible.

Music to our ears

Kids of all ages are sure to enjoy the playground's Light Harp, a 20-foot arch whose "harp strings" are actually invisible laser beams spanning the top of the arch to the playground floor. Movement across the beams triggers soothing, musical sounds; wave your hands, arms, legs across the arch, or use your entire body to create sweet music.

Thoughtful touches

Magical Bridge Playground is designed to allow individuals—children, teens, and adults—with disabilities to access each and every attraction. Among the inclusive features: signs in braille, bucket swings for individuals with limited upper body strength, slides with rollers for individuals with limited mobility, wheelchair-accessible teeter-totters and merry-go-rounds, wide pathways, nooks and quiet areas for overstimulated kids, lots of hand railings, and trees for shade. One of our favorite features is a slide with an extra-wide landing area, so that kids who need a moment to get back up (or into their wheelchair) can scoot over and let the next kid in line slide down.

Good to know

The closest parking is located at the adjacent Abilities United center, a non profit that supports children and adults with disabilities. Additional parking is located at the Mitchell Park Library, and restrooms are located across the bridge at the Mitchell Park Playground. The closest snack bar is Ada's Cafe at the Mitchell Park Library; in addition, an Ada's Cafe snack cart, staffed by

disabled individuals with the help of Abilities United volunteers, will make its way to Magical Bridge once a day to sell their goodies.

[Magical Bridge Playground](#)

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By Ana Picazo



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