

Jonathan's Dream: A Playground for All Kids

Children of All Abilities Love This West Hartford Play Place

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Since October of 1996, Jonathan's Dream has provided Hartford-area children of all abilities with a fun, free place to play. The 25,000-square-foot playground, located in West Hartford at the Greater Hartford Jewish Community Center, remains as vibrant 10 years later as it was when it debuted as a model play place for children with and without disabilities.

My three-year-old and I visited Jonathan's Dream for the first time in June of 2006 (see pictures from our visit in this photo gallery), and we were immediately enthralled by the labyrinth of swings,

ropes, ramps, towers, tires, balance beams, sandpits and slides. I had read about the handicapped-accessible playground and heard good things from other mothers, but I was still overwhelmed by the sheer size of the facility and the diversity of active experiences available to children, even those confined to wheelchairs.

Jonathan's Dream was a community collaboration spearheaded by Amy Jaffe Barzach, who lost her son, Jonathan, to spinal muscular atrophy, a rare disorder, when he was only nine months old. The success of Jonathan's Dream inspired Barzach to create Boundless Playgrounds, a Bloomfield, Connecticut-based non-profit dedicated to building similar playgrounds across the nation. Since the organization was founded in 1997, more than 100 Boundless Playgrounds have opened in more than 20 states, and Barzach has received numerous awards for her efforts on behalf of children of all abilities.

What did we love about Jonathan's Dream?

As a mother, I liked the fact that the playground was entirely fenced in, with mature landscaping that created a secluded, park-like setting, even though Jonathan's Dream is located just off a busy road quite close to the Hartford city line. There were plenty of benches where parents can sit and observe older children, and while the playground's ramps were designed for children in wheelchairs, they also make navigating between play areas easier for older adults, making this a good destination if you're entertaining grandparents.

My daughter, who keeps asking when we can visit again, would tell you that the best thing about Jonathan's Dream is the roller slide, which she slid down gleefully over and over; we've visited many playgrounds but had never seen anything quite like it. When I asked if it tickled, she just gave me a look and invited me to slide down. If you want to know the answer, you'll have to try it for yourself.

Our only criticism of Jonathan's Dream was that when we visited on a Monday morning, all of the trash barrels were filled to overflowing with a variety of unsavory things, including many soiled baby diapers. The abundant garbage--probably the result of a busy weekend at the playground--made the picnic area less than appealing, and I was glad that we had already planned to take our picnic lunch to nearby Elizabeth Park in Hartford.

What You Need to Know About Jonathan's Dream

Directions: Jonathan's Dream is located less than four miles from downtown Hartford at the Greater Hartford Jewish Community Center, 335 Bloomfield Avenue, West Hartford. From the city, follow Route 44/Albany Avenue West, then make a slight right onto Bloomfield Avenue/CT Route 189. Jonathan's Dream will be on your left. The sign for the playground is small, so watch for the Greater Hartford Jewish Community Center entrance sign, then follow smaller signs that lead to ample free playground parking.

Accessibility: The playground is designed to be universally accessible. While the needs of children with disabilities played heavily in the design considerations, Jonathan's Dream is definitely a playground that all children will love.

Hours: Jonathan's Dream is open during daylight hours daily year-round.

Parties: To inquire about holding a party at Jonathan's Dream, call 860-243-8315.