

Theme PARC

November 2007

Topic: Healthy Kids – Healthy Futures, The Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

“Disabled children are equally entitled to an exciting and brilliant future. We must see to it that we remove the obstacles... whether they stem from poor access to facilities; poor education; lack of transport; lack of funding; or unavailability of equipment... Only then will the rights of the disabled to equal opportunities become a reality.”
– Nelson Mandela, 1995

Physical activity is an important factor in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, reducing risk factors, and improving the quality of life. Setting physical activity behaviors early in childhood makes adherence to a healthy lifestyle more common and teaches the value of such a lifestyle. Especially important for people with a disability, physical activity helps mitigate secondary disability and reduces risk factors later in life.

Evidence Supporting Physical Activity

Children with disabilities are at a greater risk for secondary conditions such as heart disease, stroke, respiratory problems and emotional disorders. Therefore to offset the secondary conditions associated with disability, children with disabilities need outlets to be active. (Steele et al., 1996)

Unfortunately, people with disabilities (according to the Healthy Children 2010 Report), are less likely to participate in sustained or vigorous exercise than people without disabilities. Steele et al. (1996) found the only activity in which children with physical disabilities outscored their non-disabled peers was in watching television more than four hours per day (39% compared to 13%).

Physical Therapy (Fragala-Pinkham et al, 2005) published an article in which researchers concluded that “children with disabilities often are unable to participate in community activities or prefer not to participate because it is difficult for them to keep up with peers who are developing typically.”

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In 1998 researchers from Emory University and the University of Georgia evaluated the effects of sports participation in American Association of adapted Sports™ programs by students with no athletic experience. They found:

- 11% to 66% improvement in strength, coordination, flexibility and endurance within the first 10 weeks of participation;
- A decrease in behavioral problems and depression, an increase in academic performance and enhanced social interaction with able-bodied students at school and at home;
- Inclusion began to occur naturally with many non-disabled peers who regularly attended AdaptedSports™ games after-school; and
- A reduction over previous years in secondary health complications resulting from sedentary habits.

Studies have also shown that children with disabilities who exercise can increase strength, bone mineral density, vital capacity and mobility. (Wilson, 2002)

A 1999 study published in the *Journal of Rehabilitation and Research Development* (Cooper, et al, 1999) noted that physical activity may protect children with a disability from cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure.

Gaps and Barriers

There are numerous obstacles and barriers that parents and children with disabilities face when trying to live a more active lifestyle. These include:

- building accessibility
- transportation
- institutional policies (regarding safety and risk management)
- societal attitudes toward disability
- financial costs
- the need for adaptive equipment
- attendant care needs
- lack of trained staff and/or coaches
- lack of options for sport and recreational activities
- caregiver burden / parental burnout

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Considering the barriers to physical activity for children with a disability, it is no wonder that, in an article published in *Pediatric Exercise Science* (Longmuir and Bar-Or, 1994), researchers concluded that in the second decade of life, children with a disability adopted a sedentary lifestyle.

Another gap exists in the lack of national guidelines specifically for physical activity for children with a disability. Target times and suggested activities contained within existing guidelines are able-bodied focused.

Currently the majority of physical activity targeted toward children/youth with a disability mainly centers around adapted sports; however, in smaller rural communities where there may be only a handful of children with disabilities, adapted sport activities are not always feasible. In addition, a lack of funding for programs, lack of public support, and level of ability of those with a disability are some of the reasons these adapted programs fail to meet the needs of every child/youth with a disability.

Safety concerns for the health and welfare of children with disabilities are often a barrier to participation. Many sports associations shy away from becoming more inclusive for fear of injury or harm to the child.

Parent education for physical activity of children/youth with a disability does exist in some communities but is not widely accessible for most parents. Most parental education programs lack information on “how” to initiate and encourage daily physical activity with their child to their abilities.

In addition, programs currently offered for children with disabilities are typically short-term programs offered for a few weeks or weekly over the course of a few months. A broader spectrum of activities is required to encourage daily physical activity.

Recommendations

The diversity of Canada, the geography, differing provincial standards for health and education, socio-economic differences, rural vs. urban settings and individual differences in children with disabilities, point to the fact that a one-size-fits-all approach to tackling this issue is unavailable.

Like all of us, children with disabilities have different interests and ambitions. Not every child using a wheelchair in Moose Jaw will want to play sledge hockey or

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wheelchair basketball. Not every parent of a child with Down Syndrome can afford the time to drive to the next town for the hour-long adaptive swim program.

*Therefore, **choice** and **empowerment** are the overarching themes of our recommendations.*

Many models for training parents and care-partners in how to engage children/youth with a disability in physical activity do exist but are unfortunately limited in their availability and reach. The “Let’s Play to Grow” program developed by the Joseph P Kennedy Foundation in the 1970’s provided American parents with practical tips, tools and activities. Other examples include The Children’s Information Play Service developed by the National Children’s Bureau in the U.K. and The National Play Resource Centre in Ireland.

Specialized physical activity programs for children with physical disabilities such as Conductive Education have been shown to increase mobility, endurance and muscle strength. As these programs are offered in a group setting, rather than as individual therapy, there are additional benefits of social interaction as well as a cost-efficiency for funders.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is currently completing a five-year program to support physical activity for children and youth with disabilities called “*I Can Do It – You Can Do It*”. Collaborating with disability-based national organizations, the program links mentors with children and youth with disabilities. The mentors provide training and guidance to help the child accumulate minutes of daily physical activity for the Presidential Active Lifestyle Award.

The American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP) has developed a branded training program for coaches and trainers that teach them how to adapt a program for a child with a disability. This type of training is not currently available in Canada. Health history and physical exam forms have also been created by AAASP and others (Wilson, 2002) for sport associations to use to identify and mitigate health risks for children with disabilities.

Increase the Amount for the Children’s Fitness Tax Credit

We recommend increasing the eligible amount for the Children’s Fitness Tax Credit for children with disabilities from the current \$500.00 to \$1000.00.

Adapted Sports Equipment Lending “Libraries”

We would also recommend that the federal government encourage, through funding, the creation of adapted sports equipment lending “libraries” at the municipal and/or regional level.

Family Physician and Pediatrician Information Sheets

More information for both health care professionals and parents on physical activity and play need to be made available.

We recommend providing family physicians and pediatricians with information sheets to give to all parents of children aged 0 to 6 years that provides recommendations for play-based physical activities at all levels of development.



A Stakeholder-Driven Parental Information and Training Website

To accompany these information sheets – we also recommend a community-based (and stakeholder driven) website be developed targeted mainly at parents but also with sections for health care professionals and allied health professions.

Thanks to Industry Canada’s CAP program, the internet is a cost-effective and far-reaching way to educate and inform parents coast to coast to coast.

The website should have information for ages 0 to 21, all levels of development and for all types of disability (physical, sensory, developmental, cognitive, behavioural and chronic). A key focus of the website should be to encourage parents and caregivers of young children to incorporate daily physical activity into the child’s schedule.

The website should include: activities for play, adapted games, fact sheets, recommendations for developing and maintaining a physically active lifestyle, linkages to community resources and peer to peer linkages for resource sharing.

Physical Activity Guidelines for Persons with Disabilities

We recommend that Health Canada review the Physical Activity Guidelines and either amend the current guidelines to include recommendations for persons with disabilities or create separate recommendations for persons with disabilities. We agree that this is a complex task to undertake but feel it is important that there be

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general guidelines and standards for parents and persons with disabilities to aim towards.

Funding for Adapted Sports Equipment

While many sports can be adapted at little to no cost, some adapted sports require additional equipment that often prevents the sport activity from being offered.

Heritage Canada's Sport Funding Accountability Framework helps to encourage National Sport Organizations (NSOs) to integrate athletes with a disability, however in order to help achieve this goal, local community based sports associations must also become inclusive.



We do not believe the government should fully fund such equipment but should instead provide small grants of up to \$500.00 per disabled child to registered and incorporated non-disability focused sports associations that wish to become inclusive.

Funding for Training of Coaches



While equipment is important, without the proper training of coaches and staff, the inclusion of a child with a disability in a local sports program is less likely to be successful. We recommend funding the training of coaches and staff of registered and incorporated non-disability focused sports associations.

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Funding for Specialized Physical Activity Programs

We recommend the government fund specialized physical activity programs (such as Conductive Education) for children with physical disabilities.

Funding for Adapted Sports Teams and Associations

We feel inclusion is an important societal goal, however adapted sports associations are also important and we recommend that all levels of government continue to fund the development of such teams and associations.

With these recommendations, we hope to encourage daily physical activity of ALL children regardless of ability, in order to set a life-long pattern of physical activity and healthy living.

Websites

The National Play Resource Centre
<http://www.playinireland.ie/policy.htm>

Public Health Agency of Canada
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/child_youth/children/activityStats.html

Joseph P Kennedy Jr. Foundation
<http://www.jpkf.org/>

American Association of adapted Sports™ Programs
<http://www.adaptedsports.org/about/overview.html>

Variety Village
<http://www.varietyontario.ca>

Steadward Centre for Personal and Physical Achievement
<http://www.steadwardcentre.ualberta.ca>

Sport Canada – Policy on Sport for Persons with a Disability
http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/sc/pol/pwad/3_e.cfm

I Can Do It – You Can Do It – United States Department of Health and Human Services
<http://www.hhs.gov/od/physicalfitness.html>

Playground Accessibility Checklist
<http://projects.kaboom.org/Portals/630/checklistaccess.pdf>

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www.fusionfitness.ca

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