



# Barriers to Participation of Children with Disabilities in Youth Sports

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## Abstract

Youth sports were created as opportunities for children to play, be active, and begin learning how to become better or more successful at a given sport. Unfortunately many children with disabilities may not get the same opportunities that are available to other children. There are a number of barriers that inhibit children with significant disabilities from either participating in the youth sport programming all together or have a strong impact their level of successful participation. This article both identifies key barriers as well as provides strategies to eliminate or minimize the impact of the given barrier. This problem-solution approach is meant to help to focus our attention on the root of the problem and begin using some practical strategies that will help better serve and provide opportunities for children with disabilities to help them “get into the game”.

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## Keywords

Disability, youth sports, children with disabilities, disability sport, sport participation, barriers, community based sports, training, parents, coaches

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For many parents and children, Saturdays are set aside for youth soccer, baseball, football, and other youth sports. Children as young as 5-years-old proudly show off their team uniforms around the community, and new friendships between players often lead to pick-up-games in the backyard, parties, and team sleep overs. For many children the best part of the week is practice with their friends, and the best part of the weekend is getting into their uniform and competing with their teammates. For many parents, nothing is more exciting and nerve-racking than watching their child play in a game.

Research supports positive effects of youth sports on young athletes. Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk (1992) summarized much of the research finding several benefits associated with participation in youth sports including: (a) improved sports skills such as learning how to correctly kick a soccer ball, throw a baseball, or dribble a basketball (The Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, 2007); (b) improved physical fitness including a greater understanding of and interest in getting into and staying in shape (Ewing & Seefeldt; 1989; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008); (c) improved self-esteem and self-confidence (see Malina & Cumming, 2003, for a review); (d) making new friends and having a sense of belonging (see Weiss & Stuntz, 2004, for a review), (e) moral development including concepts such as fair play and sportsmanship (e.g., Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Shewchuk, 1986; Gibbins, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995), and (f) learning how to manage one's time, how to set goals, and how stay in control (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003).

Positive effects of participation in youth sports can be as powerful for children

with disabilities as it is for children without disabilities. Unfortunately, many children with disabilities, particularly children with more significant disabilities such as physical, visual or intellectual disabilities or autism are excluded from participation in youth sports. In some cases leaders of sports programs may be concerned with the liability of having a child with a disability participate in and perhaps get hurt during a practice or game. In other cases coaches may not want a child with a disability on their team, because they feel that they lack the training in how to coach players with disabilities. In still other cases parents of children with disabilities (and children themselves) may be reluctant to sign up for youth sports fearing injury, lack of success, or being teased by peers. Finally, there may be limited sports programs (regular or special sports programs) available to serve the wide range of types and severities of disabilities. Exclusion from youth sports programs is unfortunate as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) specifically forbids public and private programs (including community youth sports programs) from ex-

**“Children with disabilities may be reluctant to sign up for youth sports fearing injury, lack of success or being teased by peers.”**

cluding individuals with disabilities from such programs solely on the basis of their disability (Appenzeller, 2005; Block, 1995; Stein, 2005). In addition, most youth sports programs can be adapted to accommodate the needs of children with significant disabilities through universal design (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2009) and game modifications (Block, 2007; Kasser & Lytle, 2005;

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Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2009). In fact, research shows youth sports programs can be accommodated to include children with disabilities (Bernabe & Block, 1994; Nixon, 1989), and youth sports coaches are generally willing to include children with disabilities on their teams (Block & Malloy, 1999; Rizzo, Bishop, & Silva, 1999; Rizzo, Bishop, & Tobar, 1997) Regrettably, despite laws and research there continue to be many barriers that prevent youth with significant disabilities from participating in youth sports. The purpose of this article is to review some of these more common barriers to participation of children with significant disabilities in youth sports with suggestions for how to overcome these barriers.

*Barrier #1: Leader of Programs Fear Liability/Do not know how to Accommodate*

*Problem*

Perhaps the greatest barrier to the participation of children with disabilities in youth sports is the fear of liability by program leaders (Appenzeller, 2000). League administrators have two fears. First, they fear a player with a disability will get hurt and then the child's parents will sue the league. Second, they fear an athlete's adapted equipment (e.g., walker or artificial arm), would injure another player. As a result, league administrators do what they feel is the most prudent and safest thing by not allowing athletes with certain types of disabilities to participate. For example, a Ryan Taylor, 9-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who used a walker to aid his walking, was barred from playing youth soccer in his community league in Oklahoma. The commissioner of the league said Ryan's steel walker was a hazard to others, even though the walker was padded with foam and red duct tape. Ryan's parents noted the steel goal-

posts were more dangerous than their child's walker, and his parents eventually took the league to court to force the league to let Ryan play. The U.S. District judge agreed with the parents finding it very unlikely another player would get injured from the walker. As a result, the child was allowed to finish the season with his team (Boyd, 1999).

*Solution*

As in many cases where people with disabilities are summarily dismissed from participation, education is the key to changing league administrators' preconceived opinions and attitudes. Parents of a child with a disability are the best advocates for their child, and they can begin the education process with league officials. For example, Ryan's parents did try and explain to the league president how they could pad Ryan's walker to prevent others from injury (although in this case it did not work). They also could explain some simple modifications that could be implemented to allow Ryan and those around him to play safely without negatively affecting the game for peers. For example, Ryan's dad (or an extra teammate) could be on the field with Ryan to prevent other players from bumping into Ryan. Another idea is marking off a small area with cones where only Ryan could retrieve and kick the ball. Both strategies are very practical and require very little effort on the part of the league or the coach. These strategies allow Ryan to be fully included with minor modifications to the game.

Another way to educate administrators about modifications is trying out some modifications during a practice session in front of league administrators and even opposing coaches. Administrators and officials can watch the practice game with the modifications and have a better idea of the effect the

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modification has on the safety and flow of the game. Administrators and coaches can also “tweak” modifications and create their own modifications. By participating in the process, administrators and coaches will be more likely to accept modifications. For example, Bernabe and Block (1994) included a 12-year-old girl with an intellectual disability and motor delays into a regular, fast pitch softball league. The authors went to a coaches meeting explaining the girls abilities and disabilities. They then lead a discussion with coaches and league administrators on possible modifications that would allow this girl to be successful and safe without negatively affecting the game for her teammates and other teams. The group came up with modifications including allowing the girl to hit a ball off a tee, running to a shorter first base, and then getting a pinch runner if she did make it first base. The girl was successfully included throughout the season, and no one com-

**“Administrators and coaches can also ‘tweak’ modifications and create their own. By participating in the process, administrators and coaches will be more likely to accept the modifications.”**

plained about her participation. At the end of each season coaches and administrators get together to discuss any potential rule changes or safety concerns that need to be addressed to ensure safe participation for all participants for the upcoming year. We acknowledge that many of the coaches already give an enormous amount of their time and energy to coach their team and very few have time to deal with the increased demands of including

a child with an intellectual disability on their team. An issue like the one described above could easily be addressed at this annual meeting and would allow coaches and administrators to be proactive in their approach. Parents could be encouraged to attend the meeting and use this platform to discuss issues with the league and assist the league in coming up with a plan that is functional and practical given the resources of the coach/league. This proactive approach increases the likelihood their child would be able to participate successfully and minimize the effort, in terms of developing appropriate strategies that would need to be put forth by the coach during the actual season.

#### *Barrier #2: Coaches – Lack of Knowledge and Training*

##### *Problem*

Gary is a volunteer little league coach who is excited about coaching his son and teaching young children how to play the game of baseball. Gary shows up on the first day of practice and sees Joey, a boy with Osteogenesis Imperfecta (brittle bone disease) rolling onto the field in his wheelchair. Coach Gary begins to panic and ask himself the following questions: “How in the world do I coach this child?” “What happens if he gets hit with the ball or gets hurt?” “Will this boy be able to learn like the other children?” Unfortunately Coach Gary is not alone, these are questions that many youth coaches are asking when a child with a disability wishes to play on their team. The coach enters the fear of the “unknown”.

Many coaches agree that children with disabilities deserve “the right to participate” (Kozub & Porretta, 1998). The problem becomes that many youth coaches lack the

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knowledge and the training to appropriately meet the needs of children with disabilities. Many youth coaches have never received any formal training on disabilities or special education, let alone how to meet their needs. Rizzo et al. (1997) conducted a study on the attitudes of youth soccer coaches towards children with intellectual disabilities. The results of the study indicated that as coaches' perceived competence increased, their willingness to coach players with intellectual disabilities increased. Those that were less competent in their ability were less willing, again supporting the coach's fears of entering the "unknown". Many youth coaches are wonderful volunteers who are willing to give of their time but their coaching and teaching experience does not go beyond their experiences as a high school athlete, let alone trying to help a child with a given disability learn and successful.

### *Solution*

Coaches should never feel like they are alone. Whether the coach needs assistance in developing more drills for their players at practice or needs advice on how to meet the needs of a child with a physical disability, every community has resources that would help all youth coaches feel more competent in their ability to work with a child with a disability. The problem is most organizations do not know where to go to find the support or resources. One practical solution for all youth organizations would be to establish a relationship with the local schools. Every school district has a special education teacher/coordinator that in most cases would be more than happy to provide their services or expertise to the coach, especially if they would know that it was benefitting their student. The special education teacher can work with

the league and/or individual coach to identify practical strategies that will work for the specific student. The teacher can share the strategies they are using in school. In addition, the teacher may be able to willing to come and assist the child during the practices/games or potentially find a cross age peer tutor within the school that would like to get community service hours and assist the child. Communities may also have disability support groups or advocacy groups that would also be able to provide the coach with helpful resources. Most communities have a local ARC, who has staff or volunteers that may be willing to share their expertise and/or time to ensure that their clients are successful. Some communities have regional centers that employ disability specialists. For example, in Harrisonburg, VA there is an organization called the Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC). TTAC contracts with specialists in many different types of disabilities and provides services for educators, parents, etc. who have issues or are struggling to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Another strategy would be to provide a clinic for coaches on how to meet needs of diverse learners. Many youth sports organizations provide clinics for their coaches at the beginning of the year to provide them with new ideas, activities, or strategies to use when they are coaching their players. A disability specialist or, if available, an adapted physical educator from the area could conduct a clinic and discuss some of the most common disabilities and provide appropriate strategies to meet their needs. Special Olympics often provides training for their coaches at local and state levels, and they would be happy to include regular youth sports coaches into their training programs. The way I would sell the thought of the training to the league is that this

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specialized training will not only help the one or two children with physical or intellectual disabilities who are enrolled in the league, but it will also help the coach deal with the child who appears to be a bit delayed in their motor skill development or the child that appears to have some minor processing delays or even the child that has major behavior or anger issues. This training will help the league deliver a program of universal design where every child can grow, develop, and be successful.

Finally, a strategy to help coaches is to find additional volunteers to assist the child with a disability during practices and games. Coaching youth sports and managing a group of 15-20 players at one time can be challenging for one adult – even if there are not children with disabilities on the team. It would not be fair or appropriate for coaches to focus all their effort, attention, and energy on assisting one child with a disability, so extra help is clearly warranted. Securing volunteers is not as difficult as coaches might think. Parents or siblings of players often come and watch practices, and these parents or siblings can be recruited to provide support for the child with a disability. Outside of the team there are many community organizations that require their members to complete a given number of community service hours (Boy Scouts, Key Club, Kiwanis, etc), and many school districts now require community services hours as part of the assist your player with a disability during practices or games. By utilizing and maximizing all these resources coaches would no longer feel like they are entering the “unknown” and they will be able to work with any player, regardless of their ability or disability. Many students who jump at this community service opportunity as they are able to see their clear purpose. This becomes quite an important leadership role as the indi-

vidual realizes that the child with autism or child with cerebral palsy would not be able to participate if I did not help them.

### *Barrier #3: Parent and Child Fears*

#### *Problem*

Bob is the father of Angie, a girl with autism. When Angie gets excited she begins flapping her arms and jumping up and down. Bob is very concerned about what other parents or players will think or how they will react when Angie begins “stimming” when she hits the ball or begins talking to herself on the volleyball court. Robbie, young boy with seizure disorders, refuses to sign up for youth basketball. Even though basketball is his favorite sport in physical education and he comes down to see Mr. McMahon (the physical educator) every day at lunchtime to shoot hoops. Robbie is so afraid of having a seizure in the middle of a practice or game and being teased by peers. Unfortunately, Robbie’s answer is to not play anything, even though the thing he wants most is to play sports and be part of a “team.” Just as coaches have their fear about meeting the needs of children with disabilities, children and their parents experience fears of their own when it comes to community based sports. Often parents refuse to enroll their child with a disability in community sports programs due to these fears. Parents fear for their child’s safety as they are concerned that their child may get hurt or harm others. What if my child gets run over by other children while running down the basketball court or happens to accidentally trip someone while running with his crutches down the soccer field? In addition, both parents as well as children with disabilities anticipate the child will not be successful in community based sports. Both parties predict that child will experience far more failure and

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frustration than success. As a result, a safe response becomes not to participate at all. Finally, parents are afraid of their child with a disability being ridiculed and teased by teammates or members of another team. Children are also very apprehensive of what others think or say about them. No one likes to be ridiculed or compared to others as it becomes very detrimental to their self-esteem as well as their perceived competence. As a result of these reactions parents are faced with the tough decision of *do I not let them to participate to protect them even though I want them to “belong” or do I take a chance and potentially subject them to negative experiences?* Parents feel as though they are in a “No Win” situation.

#### *Solution*

One strategy is to have youth coaches talk specifically about the player with a disability who will be on the team focusing on both the child’s disability but also his abilities. To begin a conversation the coach can begin by introducing the player with a disability – “Boys, we have a new player this year named Jamal, and Jamal has a disability known as Down syndrome.” The coach (or perhaps Jamal’s parents) can then provide brief explanation of Down syndrome and some of the specific characteristic of Down syndrome as it relates to playing the sport. For example, the coach might talk about how Jamal has a difficult time understanding directions and what exactly to do, so players can help Jamal if he seems confused. Besides the discussion on the child’s differences, it is important to talk to teammates about how similar Jamal is to them. For example, Jamal’s favorite baseball team is the Baltimore Orioles (the little league baseball team is in Maryland), and most of the other players on

the team love the Orioles too. Jamal also loves to eat pizza and hates doing his homework, and his teammates nod their heads in agreement when the coach explains this to them.

The coach can extend this discussion by asking his players to think of at least one way everyone on the team is similar (e.g., we all love baseball, we all live in Maryland). Now think of one way we are all different (e.g., each child has slightly different hair color, each player has a different height and weight compared to teammates). Once the players respond the coach explains that each player has different strengths (abilities) and different weaknesses (disabilities) but together we work as a “team” and we use our strengths to collectively overcome or minimize our weaknesses. By shifting the focus away from what Jamal is not able to do and what he struggles with and placing the focus on what he is able to do, the coach can help the players accept each other. Players quickly realize everyone has a unique and important role on the team.

Research shows with such discussion teammates without disabilities will accept a player with a disability onto their team (Block & Malloy, 1998). For example, Mike, a youth wrestling coach in Central Virginia, had this type of discussion with his wrestlers about a teammate named Jay who was a double, above the knee amputee. The coach found that the discussion about Jay and his abilities and disabilities quickly eliminated any issues or negativity toward Jay. What Mike found out later was even more amazing; Mike learned his wrestlers went home and talked about Jay with their parents. These teammates were very actually proud to have Jay on their team, and the excitedly explained to their parents how Jay was able to wrestle. There was even one



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instance where the team was at a tournament and a spectator from another team yells out, “hey look at that funny kid without any legs!” Mike explained that one of his wrestlers went up in the stands and said to the fan, “His name is Jay and he is my teammate. He is one of the strongest and hardest working people you will ever meet!”

Another strategy is for the coach to talk directly with the parent of the child with a disability. The coach can even admit that they have never worked with a child with a disability and have no formal training. If the parents realize the coach is willing to learn and do whatever he can to help the child, parents will provide any and all information to the coach to help their child be successful. Many parents are true advocates for their child and will do whatever it takes to help their child be successful. By the coach admitting their limitations and asking for help the parent is able to use their resources or “go to bat” for their child and get them whatever support the coach may need so their child can participate. Most parents simply want their child to be a contributing part of the team and have fun like the rest of the players. The parents can also offer any resources and/or suggestions they may have which will help the coach meet the needs of their child. The reality is coaches should have this same talk with all of their players’ parents as every child learns differently, has different abilities, and comes from different backgrounds. Once again, this proactive approach will allow the coach to be more effective in helping each member of his/her team grow and develop into the player they want to become.

Finally, it is very important for all community sports organizations to have a statement on all their programming and mar-

keting materials indicating that they encourage participation of children with disabilities. Often, parents receive a flyer about little league or summer soccer and really wish their child could sign up, but they do not think their child is welcome. A simple statement added to the flyer such as the following can calm the fears of the parents: “Children of all abilities/ disabilities are encouraged to sign up – appropriate accommodations will be made to ensure everyone can play and will be successful.” Such a statement is very inviting and can help parents overcome some of their fears.

#### *Barrier #4: Lack of Appropriate Programs*

##### *Problem*

A final barrier to participation of children with disabilities in youth sports is availability of appropriate programs. Availability of program includes regular youth sports programs that offer recreational levels as well as special programs such as Special Olympics and other special sports programs. This is particularly problematic in rural and inner city communities where funding, facilities, and experienced coaches are limited (Kleinert, Miracle, & Sheppard-Jones, 2007).. For example, the suburbs surrounding Washington, DC, offer a variety of levels of regular sports programs from recreation programs for beginners and those more interested in having fun to travel programs for very skilled athletes interested in competing at the highest level. In addition, these suburban communities offer a variety of special sports programs in including an extensive Special Olympics program, Challenger Baseball (Little League Baseball for children with disabilities), and community-run therapeutic recreation programs that offer special recreation and sports programs. On the other hand, an hour or so away in rural Virginia and Maryland there are fewer (if any)

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introductory sports programs and few (if any) special sports programs. Similarly, the city of Washington, DC, is limited in outdoor playing fields to offer the variety of sports available in the suburbs such as soccer, lacrosse, baseball, and softball.

Even when recreation programs are available, they may only be available for younger athletes. As children get older there tends to be a drop off in recreational programs. Teenagers who are not playing for their high school teams often have competing interests (after school jobs, more homework, other interests), and as a result there are fewer recreation division for in youth sports programs for teens. For example, the Soccer Organization of Charlottesville and Albemarle (SOCA) has trouble every year fielding a girls' 16-year-old and 18-year-old recreation division. As a result SOCA often combines the 16 and 18-year-olds, and in some years they have to combine 14-year-old into the mix as well because of a limited number of recreation athletes. Even when combining these three age groups SOCA may only field 4 or 5 teams. In other cases (e.g., baseball, basketball, and lacrosse) communities may simply eliminate the older recreation age divisions focusing solely on competitive programs for more skilled athletes. Unfortunately, teens with disabilities often will not have the skill level to play on these competitive teams.

### *Solution*

It is difficult for small rural communities and inner city communities to offer an array regular and special youth sports programs. One solution is to combine resources with other communities. For example, within a 45 minute radius five rural communities can join together to offer a Saturday morning

Challenger Baseball Program. While there are not enough athletes with disabilities or qualified coaches to run a program in any one community, the combination of the 5 communities leads to the creation of 4 teams that rotate to play each other each Saturday. Special Olympics follows this model by combining several communities into one "area." For example, Area 3 Special Olympics in Virginia encompasses the city of Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Greene, Louisa, and Fluvanna.

A similar solution is possible for regular recreation sports programs. Again, combining multiple community programs into one large recreation program might solve the problem. Recreation teams could be created by community, but then they play recreation games against other communities. In essence the program is a travel team but at a recreation level. This way less skill players and players more interested in participating for fun could have a place to play.

Another possible solution is allowing older players with disabilities (who are less skilled) to play at a younger age level. As noted above, there is a greater likelihood of recreation programs available at younger ages, and it is more likely that an athlete's (with a disability) skill level and understand of the game will match younger recreation-level players. This type of accommodation would not be appropriate when an athlete with a disability has an unfair advantage due to size, strength, and/or speed or when the athlete's size poses a safety risk for other players. In addition, it would not be appropriate to have a 14-year-old play on a team with 8-10 year-olds. However, in most cases a parent of a child with a disability makes a request to waive the age rule by a few years, because

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they know their child cannot compete physically or cognitively with same-age peers. For example, a child with Asperger's Syndrome – a high functioning form of autism - requested their 15-year-old daughter (who would have to play in a 16-year-old division) play in the 12-year-old division. The child was slightly built, very unskilled (she had not played soccer since she was 8-years-old and just on a whim decided she wanted to play again), and had a very short attention span. Still, she wanted to try to play again (her younger sisters played soccer). The league allowed this girl to play at the younger division, and even though she was still the least skilled player on the team and perhaps in the league, she was able to play and have fun.

One final approach that would allow communities to meet the needs of all individuals in the area would be for youth sports organizations to combine their efforts and find a way to offer two participatory options: a competitive, more advanced league and a recreational, less advanced league. Each league could be considered inclusive, but it would allow appropriate accessibility by all members of the youth sports community. Any child who is more advanced in their skill development and understanding of the game should enroll in the competitive league as it would be considered that child's least restrictive environment and provide the best opportunity for success as well as growth/development. On the other hand, a child who wants to play on a team but not in a competitive environment should have the opportunity to enroll in the recreational/intramural league. This parallel-program model is perfect for children with and without disabilities who do not have the sport/physical skills or understanding of the game to be successful in the more competitive, regulation program. This

recreational/intramural league also would be more flexible allowing modified equipment and rules to promote success for all athletes. Given this approach we remove the barrier of "disability" versus "non-disabled" and allow parents and children to choose a program that is most appropriate given their individual strengths and weaknesses.

### *Final Thoughts*

Participation in youth sports offers so many benefits, and every child should have the opportunity to participate in youth sports at least once in their life. Participation in youth sports is just as important to children with disabilities as it is to children without disabilities. In some cases opportunities to participate in regular youth sports might be more important to children with disabilities who attend special classes and special schools and have limited interactions with peers without disabilities (Maryland Disability Law Center, 2009). Unfortunately, opportunities for participation in youth sports are often limited due to various social and environmental barriers. The purpose of this paper was to present these barriers along with viable solutions to these barriers so more children with disabilities can successfully participate in and enjoy all the benefits of youth sports. Key strategies presented included educating and preparing league administrators as well as coaches and teammates, focusing on ability and accommodations rather than disability and obstacles, and helping communities provide new youth sports opportunities. By helping coaches and leagues understand and appreciate the uniqueness of each player we are able to create positive youth sports opportunities and successful participation for all. Practice and game days will be exciting as everyone is overcome their barriers and "get on the field". .

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