



We can ALL play: Participation in Adapted Sports and Recreation for children and youth with disabilities

Adapted Sports and Recreation Committee Fact Sheet

Introduction-

Participation is defined by the WHO International Classification of Function, Disability and Health (ICF) as “engagement in life activities.”¹

Engagement in leisure activities in the community, and play is a human right according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children, and on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

- **Participation in active-physical leisure activities has undisputed physical health benefits:**

- “Leisure activities” are pursued when not at school/work, or engaged in self-maintenance care or domestic tasks.
- These activities are comprised of active-physical, recreational, social, skill-based or self-improvement activities.
- Participation in these activities also promotes mental health and well-being (e.g. emotional health, self-efficacy and self-worth, social connections).
- The World Health Organization (WHO)² strongly endorses activities that support attainment of good health.

- **Participation is especially important for those living with physical and intellectual disabilities:**

- For children with disabilities, leisure participation develops skill competencies, promotes peer interactions, and enables children to

develop personal interests and identity³.

- Adolescents with cerebral palsy (CP) indicate that pursuing leisure activities of their choosing, with peers, is very important to their quality of life.^{4,5}
- Adults with physical disabilities further emphasize this important relationship between accessing leisure activities of their choosing and quality of life.^{6,7}
- Families of children with disabilities experience less stress and caregiver burden when engaging in leisure activities as a family⁸.
- Participating in leisure activities as a family is related to positive effects on adaptive coping and family cohesion.^{9,10}

- **Children and adolescents with disabilities participate in leisure activities less than their peers:^{11,12}**

- Children and youth with CP most often participate in unstructured recreational (e.g. TV, computer games) and social activities,¹³⁻¹⁷ but indicate a preference to participate more in active-physical as well as social activities with peers.^{18,19}
- Children with physical disabilities are at elevated risk for decline in their health status (‘cycle of deconditioning’) due to physical inactivity, enhancing risk for chronic health conditions in adulthood²⁰.

- **There are numerous barriers that limit participation in preferred physical activities:**



- Personal attributes such as low self-concept, poor mastery motivation and sociodemographic characteristics, developmental delays and activity limitations can limit participation.
- Environmental barriers include a lack of resources and inclusive programs, social supports, accessible venues and spaces, and challenges related to family coping and distress.
- Other potentially modifiable contextual factors also contribute to limited engagement across the life span.²¹⁻²⁴

There are a wide variety of options for children, adolescents and adults with disabilities to participate in more physical and social activities. There are local, regional, and national programs available, some states and provinces have specific policies and financial supports that can be accessed. The list below details a few of the options for children, families, and youth to consider.

Possibilities in adapted sports and recreation

Recreational Sports

- Individual
 - Dance, martial arts, tennis, swimming, cycling, track & field, road racing, skiing (Nordic & Alpine), equestrian, bowling, archery
 - “Extreme” Sports: rock climbing, scuba diving
- Team sports
 - Dance group, soccer, basketball, baseball, volleyball

Competitive Sports

- Paralympics
 - International organization involving elite sports for athletes with primarily physical disabilities (<https://www.paralympic.org/>)

- Special Olympics
 - Largest internal year-round organization of sports competition for athletes with intellectual impairments (<http://www.specialolympics.org/>)

Leisure activities

- Games: adapted videogames/VR, boardgames
- Cooking
- Outdoor activities: fishing, boating, camping, hiking, sailing, frisbee
- Arts: painting, drama, music, dance

Community participation

- Volunteering
- Elections
- Playgrounds – accessible playgrounds in the public spaces
- Adapted day camps, adapted overnight camps

Psychosocial benefits of participating in adapted sports and recreation

- The Right to Play – it’s good for all children when growing
- Engagement in the community – Inclusion
- Social – find friends, and make new networks that can be global
- Find motivation – examples of how people started as recreational program and now are Paralympians
- Find a passion to life – self-esteem, purpose, drive
- Possibility to adapt to different needs, ages, abilities

Resources to get more information

1. United Nations: <https://undocs.org/CRPD/CSP/2019/4>
2. Disabled Sports USA: <http://www.disabledsportsusa.org/>
3. National center of physical activity (NCHPAD): www.nchpad.org
4. UN office sports for development and peace document: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dsp/sport-development-peace.html>



5. Some US and Canada based resources for education, leisure and recreation
 - a. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201301-504.pdf>
 - b. <https://www.christopherreeve.org/living-with-paralysis/health/staying-active/recreation>
 - c. <http://sportforlife.ca/>
 - d. <https://www.participaction.com/en-ca>
6. CanChild Participation Knowledge hub: <https://www.canchild.ca/en/research-in-practice/participation-knowledge-hub>
7. Childhood Disability Link: Leisure research and policies www.childhooddisability.ca/leisure
8. Jooay App (Canada-wide list of adapted and inclusive leisure activities): www.jooay.com

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