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Adapted Physical Activity and Sports Recreation as a Key Element for Regional Development and Improvement of the Quality of Life

Summary

The benefits of physical activity are universal for all participants, including those with disabilities. The participation of individuals with disabilities in sports and recreational activities promotes inclusion, minimizes deconditioning, optimizes physical functioning, and enhances overall well-being. Despite these benefits, children with disabilities are more restricted in their participation, have lower levels of fitness, and have higher levels of obesity than their peers without disabilities. Professionals and parents may overestimate the risks or overlook the benefits of physical activity in children with disabilities. Well-informed decisions regarding each child's participation must consider overall health status, individual activity preferences, safety precautions, and availability of appropriate programs and equipment. Child, family, financial, and societal barriers to participation need to be directly identified and addressed in the context of local, state, and federal laws. The goal is inclusion for all people with or without disabilities in appropriate sports and recreation activities. This study discusses the importance of physical activity, recreation, and sports participation for individuals with disabilities and offers suggestions to professionals and local government for regional development and the promotion of the quality of life for people with disabilities.

Key words: physical activity, sports, recreation activities, inclusion, quality of life.

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Why Physical Activity is so important?

Physical activity and sport have a significant impact on the quality of life for people across all ages. This is supported by the increasing number of national and regional strategies and programmes that focus on the importance of increasing participation. Participation in regular physical activity and sport is well known to positively impact upon health and wellbeing, but it is also contributing towards social development and supports stronger and safer communities and social networks.

Physical inactivity is now widely recognised to have a direct impact on poorer health both physically and mentally. Increasing regular participation in physical activity and sport has been proven to significantly reduce the risk of a wide range of health conditions. These include preventing the onset of obesity, coronary heart disease (CHD), stroke and hyperten-

sion, diabetes, cancer, osteoporosis, a reduction in falls among older adults and minimising the effects of arthritis.

Regular participation is also beneficial to psychological and social health (Frank & Patla, 2003). The mental health benefits from regular physical activity and sport includes the positive impact of reducing stress and anxiety while also raising self esteem, confidence and purpose. Physical activity and sport brings people together and contributes to breaking down social and cultural barriers, creating common ground, and a sense of belonging. It can foster civic and social pride as well as achieving community cohesion, especially in diverse communities. Participation can also help tackle isolation and improve people's sense of purpose, self-esteem and confidence. Sport and physical activity projects can make a significant contribution to the reduction in crime rates and anti-social behaviour. This has been particularly demonstrated among young people who are recognised as the most significant group in terms of offending. Early involvement in sport and physical activities can help in preventing a person starting to engage in crime or diverting others away from re-offending.

Finally, there is an increasing weight of evidence to demonstrate that involvement in physical activity and sports has a positive impact on educational attainment especially in young people. Sport helps give both young and older people the opportunity to develop new skills, and the confidence and motivation to gain qualifications that can ultimately lead to employment and career development. This can be particularly relevant to young people in developing early skills and habits that will take them into adulthood.

Physical Activity and people with Disabilities

There are people with disabilities who have had little or no experience of physical activity or exercise. They need, first of all, to develop their motor skills through adapted physical activity programmes and through physiotherapy where indicated. Other people with disabilities do not have the opportunity to participate in active leisure pursuits and sports that suit and appeal to them. They have had little or no opportunity to engage in physical exercise and sport with others and enjoy their social aspects. In school and in college the experience of children and young adults with disabilities are not always quality ones. Everyone with a disability, including athletes with a disability, need to be adequately catered for and their potential recognised, respected and nurtured.

Central to conducting research in the field of physical activity and sport is a clarification of important words and terms. Sport is often considered as physical activities that are engaged in for competition/ excellence and/or pleasure and that have defined rules and scoring systems. The European Sport's Charter (Council of Europe 1992) defines sport as all forms of physical activity, which through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels. Exercise is defined as purposeful physical activity, which is often structured, and pursued for health and fitness benefits. Physical activity is defined

as all forms of bodily movement which use energy including such tasks as housework and gardening (Council of Europe 1992).

In this report sport and physical exercise are used inter-changeably. Other pertinent terms and concepts are discussed including physical literacy, “elite” athletes, inclusive or adapted physical education/activity and independence, participation, inclusion and interdependence. The enormous benefits of physical exercise have been recognised but they need to be more widely experienced. The pleasure and enjoyment that comes from physical exercise and sport can be sufficient reasons in themselves for participation.

A Department of Education document, *The Economic Impact of Sport in Ireland* (2004), cites frequently suggested reasons for participation in sport: participation for health, for achievement, for social experience, for excitement, for compensation and for play. Chawla (1994) summarises some of the benefits of physical activity for people with disabilities: “Sport instills self discipline, a competitive spirit, and comradeship. Its value in promoting health, physical strength, endurance, social integration, and psychological wellbeing is of little doubt. It is not difficult to understand why sport is so important for the wellbeing of people with disability.»

Participation in physical activity has a role to play in personal development. It improves physiological and mental functioning and gives rise to feelings of physical, psychological and social competence. It is hugely enjoyable and can increase a person’s resistance to stress. Through physical exercise and sport people can learn values and habits such as perseverance, constancy and competitiveness, fair play and sportsmanship.

Sport can play a role in facilitating social participation, friendship and inclusion. It can be important in generating goodwill within and between diverse groups, places and countries. It is thought that physical exercise and sport can be used to contribute to a range of societal goals such as increasing community regeneration and social capital and reducing truancy and youth crime.

Positive effects of physical activity in persons with learning and physical and sensory disability that have been demonstrated include improvements in general health, physical fitness, bone metabolism and increased functional independence. There is also increased mobility and a reduction in chronic disease and secondary complications. Physical activity also has a mitigating effect on challenging behaviour (Efstratopoulou 2015; Washburn et al. 2002; Nary et al. 2000).

Physical exercise is important in maintaining fitness for daily living, reducing functional limitations, facilitating independent living and preventing, delaying and reducing chronic illnesses and secondary conditions (Fentem 1994). In addition, participation in sport/physical exercise can help them come to terms with their disability, regain self-esteem and social integration.

The concept of empowerment was linked to physical activity and individuals with disability for the first time by Hutzler (1990), making explicit the impact of physical activity on psychological well-being, social control and self-determination. A great example for the process of empowerment and self-determination through participation in recreation and sport

activities is provided by Linda Hamilton, a young woman with an acquired disability who participates in a variety of summer and winter sports:

“In general, my participation in recreation activities has helped me to know my abilities my skills and needs and to make informed choices about activities in which I want to take part. Through my activities, I have continued to learn more about myself and my capabilities. I have set goals and worked hard to achieve these goals. Slowly I have felt that I have more control over my life and have gained greater self-esteem. These activities have given me greater opportunities to be part of the community again. I have made more social contacts and developed relationships. As my confidence increased, I have taken on leadership roles as a Board member in a sport and recreation organisation for people with disabilities and a community health care facility (Hamilton 1997).

In people who have acquired a disability, participation in sport/physical exercise can help them come to terms with their disability, regain self-esteem and social integration (Chawla 1994). Persons with learning difficulties appear to gain significant mental, social, spiritual and physical benefits from sport and leisure activities (Chawla 1994). Weiss et al (2003) reviewed studies that demonstrated the importance of social participation for the self-concept (self-esteem, self-regard, self-worth) of persons with intellectual disabilities. Weiss et al (2003) citing Sherrill (1993) define self-concept „as the perception and evaluation of the self, and includes the beliefs, feelings, and intentions that a person holds in regard to self”. Edgerton et al. (1984) and Landesman-Dwyer et al. (1984) showed that individuals with developmental disabilities attribute greater life satisfaction to the presence of family and friends and active social lives than persons without a disability.

Thus, while social participation and friendship are important in the lives of everyone they may have particular significance for the self-concept of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

A thought-provoking study by Fujiura et al (1997) on the relationship of excess weight to diet and activity in persons with Down’s syndrome found that diet and activity were not predictors of Body Mass Index (BMI) as in the general population. While dietary indices (K-calories, cholesterol, saturated fat) were relatively unimportant in predicting BMI, interestingly, the pattern of friendship and access to recreation and social opportunities co-varied with BMI. These results suggest that the factors influencing BMI are much more complex than one might expect, in this population at least, and illustrates well how crucial the whole context of a person’s life is for health status, well being and quality of life. While Fujiura et al. (1997) consider that the results do not imply that friendships and social interaction are the panaceas for good health they do indicate that „simple proscriptive recommendations, such as „eat less saturated fat” and „exercise more” may represent quite incomplete portraits of effective health promotion strategies”.

Zetlin and Turner (1988) found that the perceived abilities of persons with an intellectual disability to conform socially, to participate in activities, and to have competent interper-

sonal skills seemed to matter most in how persons' with an intellectual disability evaluated themselves. Schalock et al. (1981) investigated the quality of life of adults with developmental disabilities living in the community. They found that, along with the importance of perceived functional skills and autonomy, persons with a developmental disability reported a consistent desire for more friends.

Weiss et al. (2003) examined the impact of participating in the Special Olympics (SO) on the self-concept of people with developmental disabilities. They examined the relationships between various SO components - the number of years in the organization and the number of competitions, sports, hours per week training, and medals and ribbons obtained - and participants' self-concepts as well as parental views of participants' self-concepts, and participants' actual competency. They highlight how their study utilizes the most representative sample of Special Olympics participants in research to date, randomly selecting from local chapters across Ontario.

They consider that their research offers empirical data to support and encourage the development of theoretical models of how particular physical activity programs can effect psychological and behavioural change beyond improving physical fitness.

Weiss et al. (2003) point out that they are the first to report on the components within the programme instrumental in improvement of self-concept. Other studies have supported the hypothesis that involvement in Special Olympics promoted positive self-concept and competence in participants using quasi-experimental pre-post designs and by correlating the length of enrolment in the organization with variables of interest. While the length of time in Special Olympics, the number of medals won, and the number of competitions were related to the participants' sense of general self-worth, only the number of competitions emerged as a significant predictor of self-concept.

The more athletes participate in competition, from local to international level events, the more positive their sense of general self-worth. „While it may be that the better an athlete feels about him/herself, the more competitions they choose to participate in, research has also shown that competition, when combined with peer acceptance, parental support, and a positive coaching style, can lead to improvements in athlete self-esteem” (Weiss et al. 2003 p. 298).

Factors other than competition appear to be important determinants when examining perceptions of other factors such as physical competence and social acceptance. Different aspects of an athlete's experience in Special Olympics are linked to different facets of self-concept. Participants' perception of their physical competence was positively associated with the number of years, sports, competitions, and hours per week. In school-aged and non-disabled children competition has been linked to high self-esteem when it is related to task mastery and not to the desire to outperform peers (Tassi, Schneider, Richard 2001), a context similar to the competitive spirit espoused by Special Olympics. „It has been argued that participating in competitions increases an athlete's sense of self-worth because it represents personal effort, the act of doing more than winning, and successfully meeting the challenges

of a task. With success comes confidence, and with confidence comes the sense of self-worth and accomplishment” (Weiss et al. 2003, p. 298)

Research aims and objectives

The aim of this research study is to make recommendations as to how participation in quality physical exercise and sport can be made a reality for people with disabilities. The following elements have been examined:

- The infrastructure at community and school level underpinning the delivery of sports and physical activity programmes in UK and Ireland.
- The important role that physical activity and sport has for the individual and for society.
- The factors, barriers and incentives, which influence participation in physical activity and how they vary at different stages of a person’s life. (It is important to identify the personal, social, environmental and economic factors, which impact on whether or not people with disabilities engage in physical exercise and sport. Only then can comprehensive recommendations be made on how barriers can be overcome and incentives introduced or increased).
- Action that must be taken if people with disabilities are to have the opportunity to participate in quality sport and active leisure activities of their choice.
- Best practice in UK, Ireland and elsewhere in achieving quality in physical activity and sports.
- Ways that people, organisations and institutions, including government departments, can plan strategically and work together to ensure that everybody becomes and remains active.

The study will be of particular interest to people with disabilities. It will also be of interest to individuals and organisations who are involved in the organisation and provision of sport and physical activity and physical education, training and coaching. These include owners, managers and staff of leisure centres, gyms and clubs; coaching and training bodies; relevant government departments; staff of agencies that provide public and community services or are engaged in community development; disability organisations and also educators/teachers in pre-school, primary, secondary, third-level and adult education. In third level institutions, educators and lecturers, in the fields of education, leisure and sport management, physical education and sports.

Method

Individual interviews were conducted by phone and face to face. For the focus groups an explanatory letter and consent form were distributed and informed consent was obtained from those who volunteered to participate. Interviews were held with individuals from educational institutions, National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and agencies involved in leisure and sport provision and regulation. Individual interviews and focus groups focused

on the reasons for participating/ not participating in physical exercise and sport, barriers and incentives to participation, good and bad experiences at different stages of the life course, role models and opinions and suggestions regarding improving physical exercise and sport experiences.

Analyzing the reports

After analyzing the results of interviews and focus groups and completing the literature review, a draft report was written. This was circulated to lecturers in the field of sport and leisure management, individuals working in sport disability organizations, physiotherapists working in the field of inclusive physical activity, the sport development officer for people with a disability in Dublin City University (DCU), people with disabilities and the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism who forwarded it to the Irish Sports Council for comments.

Inclusive strategies for increasing participation and quality experiences

1. National, regional or local public awareness campaigns around physical activity should take into account the national framework developed for inclusive physical activity and sport. These campaigns should
 - Reflect the diversity of the population by, e.g., including images of inclusive physical activity and athletes with a disability in national and local media.
 - Address the simple, broad and environmentally friendly opportunities that exist for physical activity (Targeted campaigns to promote physical activity can challenge attitudes and sedentary lifestyles and contribute to behaviour change.)
2. Disability Awareness Modules should be included in the education and training of all those who deliver Irish Sports Council recreation programmes including Sports for All, Buntús, Go For Life and all LSP initiatives.
3. Particular organizations or an umbrella group that brings representatives of different organizations together, or perhaps the Irish Adapted Physical Activity Alliance (IAPAA) could develop a nationwide information service regarding facilities, opportunities and participation.
4. Develop the Role of Local Sports Partnership in coordinating information provision and service development and delivery for people with disabilities. The Local Sports Partnerships should continue to work together with all other relevant local, regional and national bodies regarding the planning and implementing of policies and services in the field of sport including the provision of transport and facilities. Promote liaison and co-ordination between service providers. Develop partnerships between governing bodies, leisure centers and clubs and disability organizations.
5. The media could be more inclusive by developing strategies that:

- Allot space to a greater diversity of sports including disability sports. Give “air-space” to national and international “minority” sports championships, including those of disability specific sports.
- Increase the profile of national, international and local players and champions with a disability in the national and local media.
- Portray images of children and adults with a disability in all publicity material regarding sport and physical activity.

Tackle fears, false perceptions, prejudices and apathy that hinder people with disabilities engaging in sport and active leisure pursuits by promoting a pro-active, can do attitude. One of the ways the media can achieve this is by communicating the realities of ability and achievement of people with disabilities in the field of physical activity and sport. (This can help to change the attitudes of people with and without disabilities about people with disabilities engaging in a wide range of physical activities and sport. People with disabilities need to see others like them who are playing sports including sports such as canoeing, kayaking, sailing etc.).

Education and training

1. Curricula in schools should be constantly monitored, evaluated and amended until PE literacy becomes a reality. Parallel to curricular changes in schools is the need for appropriate changes in the education and training programmes for physical education teachers and coaches.
2. Mandatory modules on inclusive/adapted physical activity (APA) could be introduced into all pertinent third level courses - physical education, leisure and recreation management etc. The PEAI, the HEA, the Dept of Education and Science, the IAPAA and all other relevant bodies should work together to ensure that the necessary changes in education and training are planned for and implemented so that teachers develop the capacity to deliver inclusive physical activity and sport.
3. Disseminate the achievements of best practice from third level colleges where students do mandatory Inclusive/Adapted Physical Activity modules.
4. Disability Awareness Training should be mandatory for all staff in childcare and leisure and play settings. Educate everyone for access and inclusion so that access, adapted programmes and activities that meet the needs of people with disabilities can be provided. This means training and education for all those who provide services so that they have the relevant knowledge and training on the specifics of children and adults with disabilities and special needs so that they can facilitate their participation by addressing their needs.

The economic benefits

Ten years ago, in the Strategy of the Department of Education, *Targeting Sporting Change in Ireland* (2007), the economic benefits of sport in Ireland were outlined. The combined ex-

penditure on sport in Ireland in 2005 was reported as 752.21 million Irish pounds based on data collected during the Sports Strategy Process. Sport related activity generated in excess of 11,000 full and part-time jobs representing more than 8,000 full time equivalent jobs. The inclusion of sport spending on media, travel and tourism raised this figure to 18,200 full time equivalent jobs. The value of voluntary sports work was quantified conservatively at 6.5 million pounds. A report by Delaney and Fahey called “*The Social and Economic Value of Sport in Ireland*” was published in October 2005. It highlights the levels and patterns of investment in sport with three people volunteering in sport for every four who play regularly and many more taking part in social activities connected with sport. The main social aspects of sport have a combined value of 1.4 billion euro, 1.26% of GNP in 2003. Comparable direct investment through the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism in 2004 was 122 million euro. Physical activity also has economic benefits in terms of reduced health care costs, increased productivity and healthier physical and social environments (WHO 2003).

Conclusions

In summary, the importance of sport and physical activity must be underlined by strategic action at national, regional and local level. Social commitment and an appreciation of the benefits to society of diversity is promoted and fueled by clear national policy and frameworks and coordinated strategic planning. Clear leadership at a national level makes widespread social commitment to equity for everyone more likely. Long-term plans on how to provide adequate school and community facilities and programs as well as comprehensive PE and sport education and training are crucial. Positive experiences and the acquisition of physical literacy at the early learning stages facilitate positive self-concept with regards physical activity and makes lifelong interest and participation in physical activity and sports.

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Przystosowana aktywność fizyczna i rekreacja sportowa jako kluczowy element regionalnego rozwoju i poprawy jakości życia

Streszczenie

Korzyści z aktywności fizycznej są uniwersalne dla wszystkich uczestników, wliczając niepełnosprawnych. Udział osób niepełnosprawnych w zajęciach sportowych i rekreacyjnych promuje włączenie, minimalizuje odwarunkowanie, optymalizuje funkcjonowanie fizyczne i zwiększa ogólny dobrostan. Pomimo tych

korzyści dzieci niepełnosprawne mają bardziej ograniczoną możliwość uczestniczenia, są mniej sprawne fizycznie i mają większą otyłość niż ich pełnosprawni rówieśnicy. Fachowcy i rodzice mogą przeceniać ryzyka lub nie dostrzegać korzyści aktywności fizycznej u dzieci niepełnosprawnych. Świadome decyzje dotyczące uczestnictwa każdego dziecka muszą uwzględniać ogólny stan zdrowia, indywidualne preferencje, jeżeli chodzi o aktywność, środki bezpieczeństwa oraz dostępność odpowiednich programów i sprzętu. Należy zidentyfikować i poważnie podejść do barier dotyczących dziecka, rodziny, finansowych i społecznych utrudniających uczestnictwo w kontekście przepisów lokalnych, regionalnych i ogólnokrajowych. Celem jest włączenie wszystkich ludzi, niepełnosprawnych lub pełnosprawnych, w odpowiednie zajęcia sportowe i rekreacyjne. Opracowanie omawia znaczenie udziału w aktywności fizycznej, rekreacji i sporcie dla osób niepełnosprawnych oraz oferuje fachowcom i samorządom ds. rozwoju regionalnego i promocji jakości życia osób niepełnosprawnych.

Słowa kluczowe: aktywność fizyczna, sport, zajęcia rekreacyjne, włączenie, jakość życia.

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Умело подобранная физическая активность и спортивная рекреация как основной элемент регионального развития и повышения качества жизни

Резюме

Выгоды от физической активности – универсальные для всех участников, включая людей с инвалидностью. Участие лиц с инвалидностью в спортивных и рекреационных занятиях поощряет включение, минимизирует ухудшение физического состояния, оптимизирует физическое функционирование и повышает общее благосостояние. Несмотря на эти выгоды у детей с инвалидностью более ограниченная возможность участия, у них хуже физическая форма и выше ожирение, чем у их ровесников без инвалидности. Профессионалы и родители могут переоценивать риск или не замечать пользу от физической активности у детей с инвалидностью. Сознательные решения, касающиеся участия каждого ребенка, должны учитывать общее состояние здоровья, индивидуальные предпочтения в отношении активности, средства безопасности и доступность соответствующих программ и снаряжения. Следует выявить и серьезно отнестись к барьерам, касающимся ребенка, семьи, к финансовым и социальным барьерам, затрудняющим участие в контексте местных, региональных и общенациональных законоположений. Цель – включить всех людей, с инвалидностью или без нее, в соответствующие спортивные и рекреационные занятия. Разработка обсуждает значение участия в физической активности, рекреации и спорте для лиц с инвалидностью, а также предлагает профессионалам и органам самоуправления по вопросам регионального развития и поощрения качества жизни лиц с инвалидностью.

Ключевые слова: физическая активность, спорт, рекреационные занятия, включение, качество жизни.

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