



"Every Child Deserves the Chance to Play Baseball"



Take Me Out to the Ball Game!

The Effects of a Community Baseball League for Individuals with Disabilities

Justin's Miracle Field Annual Survey Report (2013)

According to Coker, P. (Development Disabilities Newsletter), occupational therapy practitioners believe that engagement in meaningful activities will lead to increased life satisfaction (Yerxa & Baum, 1986). It is well documented that participation in age-related activities is important to developing friendships and achieving mental and physical health (Edouards, Gautheron, D'Anjoub, Pupiera, & Devillarda, 2007; Wilson, 2002). Regular participation in physical activity is one of the most effective ways for adults and children, including

those with disabilities, to help prevent chronic diseases, promote independence, and increase quality of life (Cress et al., 2004). Participation in sports and recreational activities empowers adults and children with disabilities to develop friendships and an understanding of each other's capabilities. Integrating athletes with and without disabilities provides a setting where all athletes are challenged to improve their skills while increasing public awareness of the spirit and skills of individuals with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. For adults, participation

in recreational activities is significantly related to the development of social support networks, quality of life, and overall well-being (Cress et al., 2004; Law & Dunn, 1993).

Despite the increased number of community-based programs for children and adults with disabilities, there is limited research that examines the specific benefits of baseball as the primary form of recreational activity for children and adults with mental and physical disabilities. Additionally, little is known about the satisfaction of those parents of children or adults with disabilities who currently are involved in structured community-based recreational programs. This report will provide insight into the benefits of participation in a community-based baseball league specifically designed for children and adults with all types of disabilities and the potential impact on the players, their families and the volunteers.

In the United States, data from the U.S. Census Bureau using the American Community Survey (ACS, 2011) indicate that the prevalence of disabilities among children ages 5 to 15 years is 5.2% and the prevalence of disability among adults ages 18 to 64 is 10.2%. Unfortunately, the lives of children and adults with disabilities are often made more difficult by societal barriers and the way society responds to disabilities (Sloper & Turner, 1992). Children and adults with disabilities are limited in their participation in recreational and social activities relative to their peers without disabilities (Murphy & Carbone, 2008). As a result, many feel socially isolated, thus compounding the magnitude of the disability (Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Groff, 2005). This isolation can lead to poor

health, limited community participation, and poor quality of life (Zabriskie et al., 2005).

Participation in sporting activities leads to a greater sense of competence in self-esteem and motor skill acquisition (Murphy & Carbone, 2008). In research concerning the impact of the traditional Special Olympics programs, parents reported increased self-esteem in their children.

Coaches have noted athletes' improved self-esteem and self-confidence, and desire to make new friends (Costagno, 2001).

Justin's Miracle Field

Justin's Miracle Field succeeds at providing a recreational outlet for children and adults with all types of mental and physical disabilities. Each baseball season, approximately 70 children and adults with disabilities participate on a custom-built baseball field. This field has a cushioned synthetic rubberized surface that eliminates any barriers to wheelchair users or those that use walkers (or other devices) for mobility. Justin's Miracle Field provides an opportunity for children and adults with disabilities to be part of a team, to be able to play with their peers, and to be accepted openly by their teammates and buddies. Buddies are parents, siblings or community volunteers who assist the players with batting, reaching the bases, fielding and throwing. Games operate using the following basic rules: (a) all players have a turn to bat each inning, (b) all base runners are safe, (c) every player scores each inning, and (d) each team and each player wins!

Justin’s Miracle Field was founded in 2010 and officially opened for game play in October, 2011. Two seasons are played each year and there are currently 70 players on the roster; players range in age from 3 years to 41 years old.

A 10-question survey was designed by the staff of Justin’s Miracle Field to measure: (a) the perceived recreational needs of children with disabilities residing in Camden County, GA, (b) the benefits of participating in Miracle League baseball, (c) parents’ satisfaction with their child’s participation in Miracle League baseball, and (d) the perceived benefits or improvements in motor function, self-confidence, social skills, and beliefs about being able to succeed. Survey responses consisted of yes/no questions and questions that could be rated as excellent, very good, good and poor. The survey also included a section for parents to provide written responses to open-ended questions related to specific areas

including: (a) physical and mental health, (b) self-esteem/confidence, (c) friends/social relationships, and (d) sense of belonging and being part of a team. The intention of the survey was to examine the parents’ perception of the benefits of their children’s participation in a structured baseball league and to seek recommendations for improvement of the league. The information from the survey was collected anonymously from the families. Therefore, responses could not be linked to specific families or players.

In the spring of 2013, 63 players participated in the league and more than half (40) of the parents completed the survey. In the fall of 2013, 70 players participated and 35 of the parents completed the survey. The specific benefits reported by the parents as a result of their children participating on Justin’s Miracle Field are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 – Perceived Benefits of Participation in the Justin’s Miracle Field Baseball League

Perceived Benefits	Yes	No		
Increased Sense of Belonging	98.53%	1.47%		
Developed New Friendships	87.64%	12.36%		
Improved Physical Health	91.03%	8.97%		
Improved Mental Health	90.46%	9.54%		
Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence	97.24%	2.76%		
Perceived Benefits	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Overall Experience	75.74%	19.05%	5.22%	0%

The open-ended questions were answered by 98% of the parents who completed each survey. Responses to the open-ended questions regarding observed benefits suggest that the parents valued their child’s participation in the league. Comments also indicated benefits such as improved motor coordination, greater motivation to participate in recreational activity, improved self-esteem, and improved physical health and ability. Specific examples of parents’ comments are provided in Table 2.

An additional question on the survey asked parents what could be done to improve the experience for the players. Only 47% of the parents who answered the open-ended questions provided a response to this question, which ranged from requests to increase the size of the

field, better rotation of the batting order, improvement of volunteer training and making the league more competitive for the players.

The principal findings were that parents of children with disabilities who participated in Miracle League baseball highly valued their child’s involvement. The majority of the parents responding to the survey reported that participation in this weekly sports activity resulted in increased self-esteem, motor functions, social skills, and improved overall mental and physical health. Most parents reported that their children made new friends, and that their participation in the Justin’s Miracle Field baseball league had a positive impact on their entire family.

Table 2 – Samples of Reported Benefits of Participation in the Justin’s Miracle Field Baseball League

Theme	Parent Responses
<u>Sense of Belonging</u>	<p>“My son really looks forward to getting out and playing the game and hanging out with friends. It's heartwarming to see all the smiles and high 5s.”</p> <p>“My son LOVES going to his games. He has a sense of comfort and friendship with his team mates, even if it outwardly seems that he is withdrawn. He also has a great connection with his buddy! He absolutely loves her!”</p> <p>“He knows this is THEIR game. They can be themselves and there is no fear of lack of acceptance”</p> <p>“Yes, this is the first sport team my son has ever been on. He loves it!”</p> <p>“My daughter LOVES playing baseball like her sister, but it is so much 'deeper' than just a game.”</p>



New Friendships



“My daughter loves her new friends and looks forward to seeing them, she even asks during summer break "is it time for baseball yet?" Lol.”

“My son has no friends but when he goes to the baseball games, he has more friends than he can count and they all know him by his name”

“My son was tremendously excited that a member of the Cardinals was in his classroom this year.”

“My son feels connected to his team mates, and he rejoices when something good happens for them, and he feels saddened or concerned for them as needed. I think being part of the team has helped him developed more empathy for others.”

“My son, who is usually indifferent to most children as far as developing friendships, has made some friends there :)”

“Her speech has improved greatly and she makes new friends easier both on and off the field!”

Improved Physical Health



“My son is now much more interested in playing games and sports when before he would not want to participate in anything whatsoever. It’s really pulled him out of his shell.”

“Went from using the "T" for batting to free swinging the bat to hit the baseball! Improved coordination!!!”

“Committing to games once a week improved Mary's physical health, as well as my own!”

“He runs the bases without his crutch!”

“Both my children have developed much better hand/eye coordination, strength, etc.”

“The more physically active my daughter is the less she depends on her wheelchair”

“Because of her active involvement in baseball and karate, she is taking a break from physical therapy.”

Improved Mental Health



“My son has more desire to practice baseball at home, where as in previous seasons he has not really wanted to. He focuses more on hitting the ball and has even been trying to hit a ball that has been pitched. He has more initiative to try, and to persevere even if it is hard.”

“**GREATLY** enjoyed baseball and looked forward to it **ALL** week! It could often be used as a "mood lifter" or motivator!”

“It's also given him an opportunity to learn that not every time he gets up to bat or goes out in the field will he have it work out exactly as he planned. He might not get to take the position he wanted or get a hard enough hit..he's learning that you have to take turns and that even if it doesn't go all the way to the fence... he's doing a good job.”

Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence



“He's quite proud of himself when he gets a hit. And so are we proud of him.”

“My child really shines when she's on the field!”

“Oh Yeah! Taunting the pitcher--"bring it". Being able to hit the ball without the Tee. Believing he's the fastest runner. Yeah, self esteem, pride, confidence is greatly improved.”

“He feels he is good at something now – baseball! He loves the crowd cheering him on!”

“He is so proud when he hits the ball and everyone cheers him on.”

Overall Experience



“This was her first year playing and she asks every day if she has baseball 'tonight'. She cannot wait to play next season.”

“We were a military family and now a DoD civilian family. We have traveled and lived numerous countries, and we have never encountered a program like the Miracle League. Kids with disabilities typically don't get invited to birthday parties and recreational events with their peers; the miracle league gives them a place to be with other kids and have fun.”

“My son loves playing baseball! He gets excited every season, and he enjoys the music, the mascot, people cheering, the trophies. It has been a great experience for him each season!”

Conclusion

Justin's Miracle Field is an example of a successful community-based sports program for children and adults with all types of mental and physical disabilities. The results of the parent survey reveal the positive effects of participating in team sports. The attitudes and perceptions of the children and adults who participate in team sports, as well as their families, are essential for planning successful community-based sports programs. The results of the Justin's Miracle Field parent survey provide important insight into the perceptions of the benefits of participating in Miracle League baseball. This information speaks to the importance of community-based sports for children and adults with disabilities, as few studies have reported the potential impact of community recreation on the players as well as the entire family unit. More importantly, the findings highlight the need for local communities to develop and sustain recreational opportunities for children and adults with disabilities.

For more information about Justin's Miracle Field, please visit www.camdenmiracleleague.com, call (912) 322-1970, email jeff@camdenmiracleleague.com or write:

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