



*"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 (2018)

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, Gauthersona, 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, 2017) indicate that the prevalence of disabilities among children ages 5 to 17 years is 5.5%. The prevalence of disability among adults ages 18 to 34 is 6.4% and 35 to 64 is 12.7%. 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 80 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 83 players on the roster; players range in age from 3 years to 47 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.

Our spring of 2018 season was cancelled to facilitate some improvements. In the fall of 2018, 83 players participated and 23 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	95.65%	4.35%		
Developed New Friendships	91.30%	8.70%		
Improved Physical Health	91.30%	8.70%		
Improved Mental Health	100%	0%		
Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence	100%	0%		
Perceived Benefits	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Overall Experience	100%	0%	0%	0%

The open-ended questions were answered by 68.5% 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 64% of the parents who answered the open-ended questions provided a response to this question, which

included requests to have more games in the season and to provide better training to the on-field volunteers.

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
<p data-bbox="89 1157 349 1197"><b><u>Sense of Belonging</u></b></p> 	<p data-bbox="657 1228 1502 1312">“Aidan proudly tells people that he plays baseball and he is a Cardinal.”</p> <p data-bbox="657 1344 1485 1428">“Not only does our daughter experience a "greater sense of belonging," but her parents do too!”</p> <p data-bbox="657 1459 1469 1543">“Our son is able to interact with other individuals just like himself.”</p> <p data-bbox="657 1575 1453 1659">“My grandson feels a part of his team and encourages the other players.”</p> <p data-bbox="657 1690 1469 1774">“My son finally has a place where he can be himself. Since being a part of the team, he’s become more social!”</p> <p data-bbox="657 1806 1502 1848">“Ethan begun shy and scared ended the season with a happy outgoing personality...we thank you for that!”</p>

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## New Friendships



**“Old friendships are strengthened and new friendships are encouraged at Justin's Miracle Field.”**

**“He considers his teammates to be his friends and looks forward to seeing them at these games.”**

**“We love the baseball. Jared did make new friends.”**

**“Not only has she met others, we as a family have also met many people we might not have otherwise met.”**

**One volunteer stated: “Looking forward to taking sign language classes and continuing to be a Buddy to Layla.”**

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## Improved Physical Health



**“My daughter can run faster and better than she would ever have been able to without her baseball experience. She also throws better and farther than she would have without this baseball opportunity.”**

**“He is getting much better at swinging the bat and hitting the ball.”**

**“Definitely coordination.”**

**“Yes he is enjoying working out in fun he keeps doing the fun activities. He loves baseball!”**

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## Improved Mental Health



**“He is paying better attending to directions and is much more attentive than before he started playing.”**

**“He is outgoing and confident.”**

**“He feels better about himself as he gains confidence.”**

**“Has learned to take turns and play as a team.”**

**“His involvement with The Miracle League gives her a sense of belonging and gives her a desire to participate.”**

**“Increased sense of belonging.”**

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## Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence



**“Our daughter is very motivated to be ready for her games.”**

**“He has a lot of self-esteem and tells his counselor that he is proud of himself.”**

**“By a 1000% he has become confident!”**

**“Yes, has become more confident.”**

**“He feels very included and supported.”**

**“Is now a part of a group~ and included for who she is!”**

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## Overall Experience



**“I appreciate all of the volunteers and donors who make this possible for our children. They are able to participate in a sport they would not otherwise have the opportunity to do.”**

**“My daughter can participate in a team sport and not feel like she is not good enough to either make the team or be a star player. They are all star players!”**

**“We love the friendship and the acceptance!”**

**“Our daughter's familiarity with the people at The Miracle League of Camden County provides her with many opportunities to greet them in other surroundings. Her memory for names and faces amazes me!”**

**“Everyone gets a chance to play and it’s a family atmosphere.”**

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## **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](http://www.camdenmiracleleague.com), call (912) 322-1970, email [justinsmiraclefield@gmail.com](mailto:justinsmiraclefield@gmail.com) or write:

Justin’s Miracle Field  
P. O. Box 37  
Kingsland, GA 31548

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