



*"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 (2012)

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 are 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 60 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 60 players on the roster; players range in age from 4 years to 40 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 2012, 60 players participated in the league and more than half (35) of the parents completed the survey. In the fall of 2012, 58 players participated and 20 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	97.1%	2.9%		
Developed New Friendships	71.4%	28.6%		
Improved Physical Health	62.9%	37.1%		
Improved Mental Health	71.4%	28.6%		
Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence	94.3%	5.7%		
Perceived Benefits	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Overall Experience	76.5%	17.6%	5.9%	



The open-ended questions were answered by 91% of the 35 parents who completed the 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 80% of the parents who answered the open-ended questions provided a response to this question, which ranged from requests to add more games 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>“I don’t know if he understands yet or understands the concept of being part of a group but as parents, we have definitely felt that way.”</p> <p>“Both my son and daughter LOVED being part of a team! They were so proud to say that they played on a baseball team. :)”</p>
<u>New Friendships</u>	<p>“He’s happier and having an easier time being around people he doesn’t know well for longer periods of time.”</p> <p>“My son seems to be much more comfortable to just walk up to other children, introduce himself &amp; start playing than he has been in the past. He feels more confident to be accepted, instead of worrying that no one likes him.”</p> <p>“We have made many new friends!”</p>



### Improved Physical Health

“He has more motivation to be active and puts a little bit more effort into doing things.”

“Both of my children’s occupational therapists were thrilled to hear that they were playing baseball! They thought it was just what they needed and would reinforce what had been worked on in therapy.”

“Balance and energy level has increased.”

### Improved Mental Health

“In the sense they looked forward to the ball game every week; they got to do something they liked to do and felt no pressure to “perform” in doing it. They just got to be kids :).”

“He has definitely enjoyed his experience and has a great attitude before/after the games.”

“Mood had gotten better and he’s much happier!”

“Learned to be patient for others.”

### Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence

“She’s proud of her team and what she accomplishes! Warms my heart!”

“She loves the crowds cheering and gets so happy when she crosses home plate.”

“He is beyond proud to tell people he plays baseball and “wins every game”. He likes to show off his trophies.”

“Confidence to hit pitched balls versus using the tee.”

### Overall Experience



“It’s given her something to look forward to, and even feel a part of....When in most cases at school, etc she is alienated, the miracle league gives her an opportunity to belong and feel loved.”

“My son LOVES going to games, seeing all the other players, laughing at Homer. He gets excited and wants to try to excel. He feels special that friends and family will come to watch him play. The environment is full of fun and love, without pressure or judgment to be as good as someone else.”



**“I can’t put into words just how wonderful this has been for my family and my friends. Everyone that has come to watch my child play just shakes their heads in disbelief at just how positive and inspiring these kids playing baseball is...”**

**“There is no other like this in the community for kids with disabilities to do and enjoy immensely.”**

**“As a parent of a child with special needs, it feels great to have the support of other parents and the community to give our kids and ourselves to interact with other special needs families.”**

**“My son has a place to belong and can participate in a group activity without judgment. It’s the one place my family can go, have fun, and be relaxed without having to worry about our son’s “weird” behavior due to his Autism.”**



**“With Justin’s Miracle Field, people that could never be able to participate in a neuro-typical game like baseball get the chance to play a fun game, in an accepting environment that meets their special needs with love. You can feel the positive attitude in the air. Watching the joy on each player’s face, and how excited they get, is a moving experience. As a parent, watching my son’s very first game was beautiful, and I am so thankful to this organization that makes it possible for him to participate without fear of rejection.”**

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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.

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