



"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 (2015)

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, 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 63 players on the roster; players range in age from 3 years to 44 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 2015, 68 players participated in the league and nearly half (24) of the parents completed the survey. In the fall of 2015, 63 players participated and 24 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	100%	N/A		
Developed New Friendships	93.75%	6.25%		
Improved Physical Health	90.68%	9.32%		
Improved Mental Health	81.5%	18.5%		
Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence	97.92%	2.18%		
Perceived Benefits	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Overall Experience	90%	10%	0%	0%

The open-ended questions were answered by 70% 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 60% of the parents who answered the open-ended questions provided a response to this question, which ranged from requests to build a shade structure

over the bleachers, offer a social meeting to allow for player/family/volunteer interaction and to reinforce the importance of volunteer attendance and commitment.

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><u>Sense of Belonging</u></p> 	<p>“Not only YES, but so do we as the parents. We feel like we are part of a family!”</p> <p>“This league has opened up a whole new wonderful world for our special needs child. We will forever be grateful for everyone involved.”</p> <p>“My child loves her ballgame experience and loves socializing with all her friends.”</p> <p>“My daughter LOVES baseball ever since her first at-bat!”</p> <p>“My child feels fully accepted there!”</p> <p>“My player always asks why can't they play soccer... I respond "because you play baseball!" she says "oh yah!" I am thankful she is included in a sport, just like everyone else.”</p>

New Friendships



“Specifically she made new friends with the buddies- who were amazing!!!!”

“My son really connected with his buddy this fall season the high school buddies are awesome.”

“Many of the players go to the same school as our child, so it's a great bonding experience.”

“He is more outgoing as a result of going to JML.”

“The Miracle League has created new friendships and strengthened old ones.”

“I say yes, even if he is too young to realize it. But I know he is always **READY to go!”**

“They were able to make friends with other kids!”

Improved Physical Health



“We didn't realize until she swung the bat that the side muscles in her arms needed a workout. She got stronger throughout the season. It was therapy that was fun.”

“Mary runs faster and with greater skill as a result of playing for JML. Her hand-eye coordination has also improved as she often hits the ball on the first pitch.”

“Has improved more than going to physical therapy!”

“YES! There is no doubt that involvement in the league has made our son run faster! He knows where to go, what to do, etc.”

“My daughter is becoming more coordinated as a result of playing with the Miracle League.”

“Both children have gained strength, hand/eye coordination.”

“Steadier gait, follows directions better.”

“Hand/eye coordination has improved!”

Improved Mental Health



“Yes, attention is better. Went from shying away from Homer to giving him high fives and joining dances during half time.”

“It was at a Miracle League game that our daughter had her first experience of watching someone upset and not crying herself. She has a lot of empathy, and tends to cry even if she hears a baby crying in the church nursery. I think she is showing maturity by being able to know someone is upset, but not having to be upset herself because of it.”

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

“Baseball consistently improves Mary's mood. She is always excited to be able to play!”

“One of the few things my daughter can focus well on, most of the time.”

Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence



“Being able to play baseball has been a huge confidence booster. He feels like he's a normal kid.”

“The boys are very confident that they are baseball stars!”

“Absolutely~! This is a plus plus plus bonus all the way!”

“She feels very included and supported.”

“Showing off his trophy and wearing his baseball cap have become badges of honor for him.”

“Mary is pretty self-confident any way, but she GLOWS when she knows she is doing well on the field.”

“She is very proud of being a part of Miracle League!”

“My daughter has gained much confidence in herself to do something well!”

“They take pride in being a part of The Miracle League!”

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

Overall Experience



“My daughter is always excited to be a part of the games. She feels loved, accepted, and appreciated when she is there.”

“He genuinely enjoyed his experience and looked forward to it every week. Even verbally expressing his want to play baseball.”

“The positive experiences Mary has on the field carry over into daily life when she sees people she knows from Justin's Miracle Field out and about. The affection and sincere appreciation shown at the games is the same as that shown at other times.”

“We loved it from top to bottom. The other players. The buddies. The mascot. The music. My husband is a fan of the concession stand! I am awed by how organized everything is.”

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 jmf@camdenmiracleleague.com or write:

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