



"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 (2016)

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 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 63 players on the roster; players range in age from 3 years to 46 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 2016, 69 players participated in the league and nearly half (21) of the parents completed the survey. In the fall of 2016, 70 players participated and 25 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%	2%
Developed New Friendships	91.24%	8.76%
Improved Physical Health	91.24%	8.76%
Improved Mental Health	83.24%	16.76%
Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence	94%	6%

Perceived Benefits	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Overall Experience	84%	12%	4%	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>“Being his first time in an organized sport, he was very excited about the team photo and wanted to hang it in his room.”</p> <p>“He is accepted at the miracle field. At school, kids sometimes give him a hard time for being different.”</p> <p>“He feels like part of group and likes to see other players and buddies when we are out in town.”</p> <p>“My boy loves seeing his friends at the games he especially likes it when they all bust out dancing.”</p> <p>“Mary knows the other players on both her own team and the "opposing" team, and she's concerned about them when they aren't there.”</p>

New Friendships



“We have become friends with other families off the field as well. Who knew all the blessings that would follow after that 1st game?!”

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

“We have made many friends through the League and those friendships continue outside of the League.”

“We are hoping that this carries over into his school!”

“Not only has our son developed new friends but also our daughter which has been great!”

“Distance prevented seeing teammates other than at the game. However we began fostering friendships.”

Improved Physical Health



“Mary's level of physical activity is greatly increased (as is mine!) during baseball season! Mary's ability to run well has increased dramatically since she started playing for JMF.”

“My daughter's hand-eye coordination has improved considerably!”

“Baseball gave my child more enthusiasm and excitement at physical therapy b/c they worked on baseball "exercises".

“She has learned how to swing a bat and hit a ball.”

“Keeps her energetic about participating and being with friends.”

“He always "firms up" during the season.”

“Both children have better hand-eye coordination and are stronger.”

Improved Mental Health



“She is usually overly excited when it is baseball season and looks forward to going to the field.”

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

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

“My daughter 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



“My son has greatly improved at baseball as time as passed. Feels much better knowing he's become a better batter. (He really thinks very highly of himself already, lol)”

“Feels included and enjoys being a part of something worthwhile.”

“My child told me that they always wanted a trophy and were thrilled to receive it!”

“He feels very included and supported.”

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

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

“My son has gained much confidence in himself to do something well!”

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

Overall Experience



“We love that he's made new friends! He gets to socialize with old friends from school. He's gotten better at baseball and we come across other social events for him to attend by being part of your team, Thank you!”

“The best fun ever! It's a great thing you do! Thanks :-)”

“The coaches and staff making ALL the kids/young adults feel like they can do anything. It is a VERY positive experience and I would encourage anyone to do it, it is awesome!!!”

“The opportunity for my child to hang out with other kids. Not only are we his parents but we find that we are often his only friends at home. This gives him a chance to socialize.”

“It just makes my daughter so happy to be part of a team. She is so proud of her baseball bag she has put together.”

“It feels like a real baseball game, it doesn't feel like a game for children with special needs. It is so wonderful to feel "normal" sometimes.”

“It's inclusiveness. Making each player feel like a star!”

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 justinsmiraclefield@gmail.com or write:

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