



"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 (2014)

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 76 players on the roster; players range in age from 3 years to 43 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 2014, 62 players participated in the league and half (31) of the parents completed the survey. In the fall of 2014, 76 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	97.98%	2.02%		
Developed New Friendships	94.60%	5.40%		
Improved Physical Health	82.68%	17.32%		
Improved Mental Health	88.08%	11.92%		
Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence	96.21%	3.79%		
Perceived Benefits	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Overall Experience	82.75%	17.25%	0%	0%

The open-ended questions were answered by 85% 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 61% of the parents who answered the open-ended questions provided a response to this question, which ranged from requests to improve the parking,

offering more sports other than baseball and to encourage the volunteers to be committed to every game to better establish relationships with 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
<p><u>Sense of Belonging</u></p> 	<p>“My child feels like the star of the league...as I'm sure all the kids do. It's awesome to see each child grow and change from the beginning of the season to the end, and from one season to the next.”</p> <p>“This was a wonderful experience for our son. Meeting other families that have children with special needs in the area is very comforting.”</p> <p>“My child has expressed that everyone at the games are "his friends", even people he hasn't spoken to, and I believe it is due to the welcoming, friendly environment one experiences when at a JMF game.</p> <p>“My child feels fully accepted there!”</p> <p>“The Miracle League has changed both of sons lives! They have never felt more included and empowered!”</p>

New Friendships



“Both have bonded with (or become friends with) teammates and other players due to baseball, and strengthened friendships outside of baseball.”

“The Miracle League strengthens friendships my daughter already has, and offers opportunities to make new friends.”

“My child participates more willingly in group activities outside of JMF, and seems to be able to grasp concepts of reciprocal interaction within a group better, and I think a lot of that growth has to do with on-going exposure to being on the team.”

“Such a wonderful group of kids~so glad the boys have had the chance to meet them and make lots of new friends.”

“My child particularly enjoys her buddy. She sees people around town from the League, and is always happy to see them!”

Improved Physical Health



“My daughter gets very excited about the games. She loves to run the bases, and runs a little better...a little faster, more coordinated...every time.”

“No doubt! Even our therapists are loving it!!!”

“The initiative to be more active has increased the longer he has been on a team, his hand eye coordination is improving, and he can now bat without using a tee!”

“No, but he is in a wheelchair, so it's not applicable here. However, he LOVED, "running," the bases with his buddy pushing him so fast, an experience he cannot otherwise get on a traditional ball field.”

“We have seen a big improvement in coordination and strength.”

“Both children have gained in hand/eye coordination and strength. Also general coordination.”

Improved Mental Health



“My child is always happy on baseball days.”

“Absolutely! From the moment he arrives home from school on Friday, he starts repeating, "Baseball tomorrow?" and "Daddy take you to baseball tomorrow!" He loves to go and consistently laughs there.”

“For the most part, going to a game lifts his moods, give him enthusiasm, boosts his self-confidence, and also has helped him learn the value of encouraging others.”

“Both of our sons are much more attentive since starting in the league.”

Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence



“Absolutely! He gets a great boost from going to the games and hearing people cheer and encourage the players, and it is meaningful to him that family members will come out and watch him play.”

“You can tell he is SO proud of himself when he scores a, "home run!" Again, this is something he simply could not otherwise do on a traditional field in a typical baseball league.”

“The encouragement shown to every player at every game by the coaches, staff, teammates and fans made both of our boys feel like stars.”

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

“He wants to wear his jersey everywhere!”

“Especially when the fans in the bleachers cheer for him.”

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

“My child knows she's "all that and a bag of chips" and Justin's Miracle League reinforces that feeling.”

Overall Experience



“I don't know of another group of people who so consistently makes people feel welcome and loved. That goes for players as well as those who come to watch the game.”

“We love it and I know my child would be devastated if it were not available...”

“We'd never heard of this program and were encouraged to participate by our son's teacher at Camden County H.S. The league's facility is large, immaculate, and easy to navigate in a wheelchair. The program is very well-organized. And, most importantly, the volunteers are simply phenomenal! Our son simply couldn't have had a better experience.”

“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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