



"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 (2017)

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 65 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 67 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.

In the Spring of 2017, 63 players participated in the league and one third (20) of the parents completed the survey. In the Fall of 2017, 67 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	100%	0%
Developed New Friendships	87.00%	13.00%
Improved Physical Health	89.50%	10.50%
Improved Mental Health	89.00%	11.00%
Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence	100%	0%

Perceived Benefits	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Poor
Overall Experience	93.50%	6.50%	0%	0%

The open-ended questions were answered by 67% 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 62% 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 1155 349 1197"><u>Sense of Belonging</u></p> 	<p data-bbox="665 1155 1429 1281">“JMF brings out the best in the athletes as well as the volunteers. It gives everyone involved a greater sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves.”</p> <p data-bbox="665 1312 1323 1354">“It’s wonderful to have a place my child fits in.”</p> <p data-bbox="665 1386 1518 1501">“My child/player said he did not have to worry about being picked on and that he liked being a part of the team of players like him.”</p> <p data-bbox="665 1533 1534 1617">“She loves being a part of a team, there is no way she would get this anywhere else.”</p> <p data-bbox="665 1648 1518 1827">“My husband and I felt as if there was finally a piece of the community that understood us. It is the one place we can go to, knowing we wouldn’t be judged by our son’s actions before knowing and the one place we could go that we were understood! Thank you!!”</p>

New Friendships



“Created new friendships, and provided an activity to keep physically active and mentally alert. Great memories are created for new and old friends.”

“We parent/child found a playmate right around the corner from our home. He found this friend at the ball field!”

“We love all our baseball friends!!”

“She actually goes to school with 6 of the kids on her team. She knows their names now!”

“He's still nonverbal but he sure did love coming to Justin's miracle field every Friday night!”

Improved Physical Health



“Physical activity is so important, and JMF provides a fun way to play, where the players don't realize they are working. (The Buddies know they are working though...)”

“This league is important to my child / player because he has little upper body strength. Baseball will help enormously and we can't wait until fall season.”

“She is getting stronger as well as an improvement in her coordination.”

“My child's coordination and ability to run and throw the ball accurately have all improved the longer she plays.”

“He is getting better at hitting the ball.”

“Ball is an activity that she always wants to participate in.”

“The exercise we receive is awesome!”

Improved Mental Health



“My child was really excited to get to the ball field. It was the first time I actually saw him really happy to be there. Also he seemed more attentive as the season progressed.”

“My daughter pays attention to a lot of things, and is very detail oriented. But JMF gets her out of the house and motivated to keep her eye on the ball. It also helps her make sure she's not leaving anyone out when the ball is thrown around.”

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

“Gives her a positive attitude.”

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

“Increased sense of belonging.”

“She's really happy to go.”

Improved Self-Esteem, Confidence



“He takes pride in his uniform. He actually hung it up instead of throwing it on the floor! I think the miracle league has done a lot for his confidence and self-esteem, especially when he got his trophy and sees all the pictures of himself on Facebook. He has remarked about how everyone in the stands cheers for him when he is on the field, and he said that it makes him feel good.”

“He enjoys being the center of attention when he's batting.”

“My daughter is pretty self-assured any way, but JMF definitely increases her sense of being able to do what she sets her mind to!”

“Yes, has become more confident.”

Overall Experience



“I love that my child is excited to go there every week and what a great job everyone does to make it a fun experience for our kids.”

“I am thankful that we have a safe, positive activity for her to do where she can take pride and learn teamwork.”

“I love their faithfulness to bring out the best in each person at the field, whether they are playing, being a Buddy, or a fan.”

“The players, families and staff all come together to make it a great time for the kids!!!”

“All that workers are so encouraging and you can tell they love what they do.”

“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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