

Getting All Girls into the Game: Physically Active Recreation for Girls with Disabilities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Local public parks and recreation programs are beginning to address the problems associated with inactivity among America's youth. With a mission that focuses on serving all populations through recreation programming, community recreation seems an ideal conduit for increasing social justice. However, research as recent as 2003 (Jones, 2003) found that girls with disabilities are still overlooked in recreation programming. Girls with disabilities in particular are often disenfranchised because of the "double whammy" of being female and having a disability. Overcoming the barriers to membership in one group does not automatically dispel the difficulties tied to being a member of the other group. Research consistently documents the benefits of regular physical activity. Access to opportunities for all children to participate in activities that will give them opportunities to grow is essential to the health of future generations. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how girls with disabilities participated in active recreation as well as how they perceived their status as female participants with a disability. In addition, the researchers sought to determine the opportunities and related benefits to which the girls with disabilities had access. The purpose of the study was guided by the tenets of standpoint theory and co-cultural theory. The subjects were 14 girls between the ages of 10 and 16 years who had a physical disability. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Interview questions addressed participation in recreation activities, perceptions of self when in recreation activities, reactions of friends and family, role models, and perceptions of disability. Results produced three overarching themes: (a) being a girl with a disability; (b) perceived benefits to participation in physical recreation; and (c) barriers to participation in physical activity, with specific attention paid to formalized programming opportunities. The responses to this study, along with information gathered from previous studies, illustrate the inequities in active recreation opportunities that still exist for girls with disabilities within their communities. Detailed recommendations for practitioners are included in the areas of increased marketing efforts; education for families, peers, and staff; and outreach.

KEYWORDS: Girls, disabilities, sport, physically active, recreation, programming.

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We should notice, first, that many people with disabilities now assume the ordinary responsibilities of citizens, meet normal performance standards, and flourish, with no more or very little more than the ordinary resources, supposing only that they are offered equitable access to the community benefits all other citizens enjoy. (Silvers, 1998, p. 96)

With the help of national initiatives out of the Centers for Disease Control and the National Recreation and Park Association, local public parks and recreation programs are beginning to address both the causes and effects of the problems associated with inactivity among America's youth. Unfortunately, not all youth are included in these programs. Despite the profession extolling its goals of social justice through a mission to serve all populations, children with disabilities, especially girls, have long been underserved (e.g., Lockwood & Lockwood, 1997; Smith, Austin, Kennedy, Lee, & Hutchinson, 2005). Whether children with disabilities are kept protected from society or whether practitioners are untrained to work with this population, children with disabilities still want and need opportunities to pursue physical recreation, not only for fitness, but also as a basic right to expression as a citizen.

Girls with disabilities in particular are often disenfranchised because of the "double whammy" of being female and having a disability. Being female brings with it the inherent ramifications of fewer opportunities; societal perceptions of weakness; and barriers tied to safety, self-esteem, body image, and numerous other gender-specific obstacles. Compounding their status in society, girls with disabilities must struggle with their status as a person with a disability, a group with traditionally fewer opportunities and less power than those without disabilities. Membership in two minority groups doubles the chances for fewer opportunities and positive experiences and doubles the chances of being compromised. Overcoming the barriers to membership in one group does not automatically dispel the difficulties tied to the other group. As recently as 2003, after speaking with parents of children with disabilities in Maine, Jones (2003) reported that girls with disabilities are still overlooked in recreation programming because of negative staff and community attitudes as well as a lack of staff awareness.

Research consistently documents the benefits of regular physical activity. Beyond increased physical well-being, participation in sports and other activities can lead to greater psychological, mental, and emotional functioning. Access to opportunities for all children to participate in activities that will give them opportunities to grow in these ways is essential to the health of future generations. At the very least, it would be irresponsible to ignore children with disabilities, considering what we know about fitness (<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/physicalactivity/promoting-health/#references>).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how girls with disabilities, as members of two nondominant groups (female, having a physical disability), participated in active recreation (e.g., sports, dance, exercise) as well as how they perceived their status as female participants with a disability. In addition, the researchers sought to determine what opportunities girls with disabilities had access to as well as what benefits they were currently receiving from the recreation opportunities. The purpose of the study was guided by the tenets of standpoint theory and co-cultural theory. The following review of literature addresses current issues in participation rates for girls with disabilities and the rationale for participation in physical activity. In addition, the review outlines the theoretical framework that guided the study.

Literature Review

Participation in Recreation and Physical Activity for Girls with Disabilities

The opportunities for girls to participate in and enjoy sports and various forms of physical activity can be limited. Physical activity rates for girls are lower than those for boys (Gordon-Larsen, Nelson, & Popkin, 2004; Sallis Prochaska, Taylor, Hill, & Geraci, 1999). Parents report unsafe neighborhoods and cancellation of or lack of community programming as barriers to their daughters' participation (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2004). While these barriers may affect boys as well, research has shown that they do not have as negative an impact on boys' recreation participation. Garcia, Pender, Autonakos, and Ronis (1998) found that while girls, like boys, reported low social support from family and friends as a barrier to participation in active recreation, the girls also reported not only a lower benefits/barrier differential associated with physical activity but also fewer active role models. These barriers are likely compounded by the presence of a disability.

Girls with physical disabilities are confronted with a "double whammy" of gender and disability stigma that can serve as a barrier to recreation opportunities and participation. This double whammy can lead to a particular risk of compromised health and fitness because of both gender-related stigmas and contradiction regarding issues such as feminism and sexuality (Henderson & King, 1998) as well as stereotypes, misperceptions, and the related stigmas associated with people with disabilities. Looking at one side of the twofold dilemma, research with adolescent girls suggests that despite the benefits of physical activity, their levels of physical activity

drop off as their self-confidence drops in puberty (e.g., Frederick & Shaw, 1995; Kimm, Glynn et al., 2002). For example, in a longitudinal study of boys and girls, Telama et al. (2005) found that girls preferred sedentary, rather than active, behaviors. Barriers to physical activity for girls included lack of affordable and accessible recreation facilities, lack of role models, low social support from family and friends, and lack of enjoyment (Garcia et al., 1998; Sallis, 1999). Girls also face gender stereotypes as our society continues to label particular sports as appropriate or inappropriate for female participants (DePauw, 1997; Henderson, 1994; Royce, Gebelt, & Duff, 2003). The traditional societal perception of women's bodies as weak, inferior, and lacking physical ability causes women to face marginalization, trivialization, and stigmatization in sport (Blinde & McCallister, 1999). DePauw (1997) also pointed to homophobia as a constraint to girls' choices in activities. For years, the sexuality of girls who participated in sports that had historically been developed for men (e.g., basketball, baseball/softball, etc.) has been questioned (Boxill, 2003; DePauw, 1997; Royce et al., & Duff, 2003). Many of these barriers are perhaps even more applicable to girls with physical disabilities.

On the other side of the double whammy, girls with disabilities are influenced by agency barriers such as financial barriers that contribute to a lack of programming (Devine & Kotowski, 1999). A pervasive limitation for girls with disabilities is the lack of opportunities for active participation (e.g., Rimmer, Riley, Wang, Raworth, & Jurkowski, 2004), often a result of inadequate staffing, which Lockwood and Lockwood (1997) noted is the largest barrier to the participation of children with physical disabilities in physical activities. Smith et al. (2005) referred to a lack of opportunities as a possible "barrier of omission," whereby, rather than the presence of an obstacle, it is the "failure of society to provide for the needs of individuals who have disabilities" (p. 86). These obstacles remain despite work such as that by Page, O'Connor, and Peterson (2001), who found that for athletes with disabilities, sport negated society's perception of incompetence.

Smith et al. (2005) suggested that three types of barriers prevent people with disabilities from participating in leisure activities. These barriers include intrinsic barriers from within the individual (e.g., participants' lack of knowledge, health problems), environmental barriers in which factors from outside the individual pose limitations (e.g., architectural, others' attitudes), and communication barriers. For girls with disabilities, research indicates that elements from each of these categories are evident and provides examples of how having a disability can prevent individuals from participating in recreation activities. For example, research shows that people with disabilities (and specifically girls with disabilities) have consistently been overlooked in community recreation programs due in part to the negative attitudes of staff and community as well as to a lack of staff awareness about disabilities. In addition, they identified the lack of physical accessibility, the lack of information on accessibility of facilities and programs, the lack of opportunities, and poor policies and procedures as the

major barriers to pursuing physical activity in the community (Centers for Disease Control, 2005; Jones, 2003; Rimmer et al., 2004). Of most concern, however, was the finding that many of the facility owners identified accessibility as a “necessary evil” or “unimportant.” This is a finding that likely contributes to the trend of youth with disabilities dropping out of parks and recreation programs at higher rates than children without disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

Rationale to Increase Participation

Important to girls both with and without disabilities, physical activity can help a girl perceive her body as a source of strength and experience a greater sense of control over her life (Blinde & McClung, 1997). The importance of physical activity is increasingly evident in a society in which unhealthy diets and an increase in sedentary recreation have led to epidemic health concerns such as childhood obesity and diabetes for all children, (e.g., Kimm, Barton, et al., 2002; Fulkerson et al., 2004). Recognition of the vital importance of active living had led the federal government to publish Healthy People 2010, a national agenda for improving the health and physical activity levels of all Americans (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

Sport and physical activity have been shown to have myriad benefits associated with them. The U.S. President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sport (2005) (fitness.gov/physical_activity_fact_sheet.html) reported that regular exercise can decrease health risks (e.g., obesity, high blood pressure) and that exercise and sport participation can be used for increased physical and mental health. Similarly, the Report of the Surgeon General on physical activity and health (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1996) noted that regular activity is associated with high physical and psychological health. Physical activity is specifically relevant to girls of varying abilities as they can learn motor skills, adaptation, self-confidence, priority setting, and goal setting, all of which are skills that girls often lack (Aarnio, 2003; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Moucha, 1991).

Other reasons for participation include opportunities for socialization and psychological benefits such as relieving stress and the “high” of active living. In fact, there is a belief that in some instances, active recreation may be more beneficial than physical therapy (French & Hainsworth, 2001; Valliant, Bezzubiyk, Daley, & Asu, 1985). Blinde and Taub (1999) found that college students with disabilities who were active in various forms of sport and physical activity such as weightlifting reported increased independence and control as a result of their participation. And while a plethora of research indicates that many girls become or remain active solely for reasons related to body appearance, Blinde and McClung (1997) found that teenage girls with physical disabilities did not participate in sport and physical activity to make their bodies more attractive, but rather to be healthy.

The research consistently suggests that physical activity is a necessary component of a healthy lifestyle (Pate et al., 1995). The benefits of an active

lifestyle for girls, and specifically girls with disabilities, are often missed because of a litany of potential barriers. Therefore, it is crucial to obtain a better understanding of how these barriers can be overcome in order to give all girls the potential for an active lifestyle.

Theoretical Foundation

Social justice refers to the principle that all people are entitled to “basic human needs regardless of superficial differences such as economic disparity, class, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, age, sexual orientation, disability, or health” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/social_justice). Typically, social justice refers to power relationships at a local, national, or global level in which the privileged are those in the dominant group who actively or inactively oppress others. Both females and people with disabilities may be referred to as two oppressed groups who face numerous inequalities in treatment (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004).

According to Henderson et al., (2001), the service philosophy of community recreation is “enriching the lives of the community by providing opportunities for the meaningful use of leisure” (p. 18). They also noted that community recreation is “unlimited and open to all” (p. 18), not just the dominant or majority group. That is, it is the purview of community recreation to support social justice. There is a procedural justice element inherent in social justice. That is, a situation is considered just if the procedures by which people have access to opportunities are fair (Rawls, 1999). Therefore, social justice is a relevant guide in the examination of the opportunities of girls with disabilities for healthy, active recreation within their communities.

Within the framework of social justice, co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) and standpoint theory (Wood, 1993) were useful to the researchers in studying the lives of members of non-dominant cultures such as girls with disabilities within the perspective of their relationships with the dominant culture and whether indeed social justice was being served.

Co-cultural theory references co-cultural groups, or people who belong to cultures of minority status (Orbe, 1998). Co-cultural theory is derived from muted group theory, which recognizes that there is a social hierarchy in which those who are at the top dictate the communication to the rest of the social world. Their view is the worldview. The voices of minority groups are distorted or simply not heard. In other words, individuals in non-dominant groups must function within a communication system that is not representative of their own experiences (Orbe, 1998).

Historically, research has been conducted from an androcentric perspective and generalized to all cultures. However, researchers have come to realize that this approach will not provide an accurate reflection of the lived experiences of those in the nondominant cultures, including women (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Feminist methodologies such as “feminist empiricism, standpoint theory, and postmodernism, recognize women’s

lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 773).

Hartstock’s (1987) description of obtaining data from members of nondominant cultures in an examination of an event illustrates the benefit of this approach. She stated,

The standpoint of women, therefore, as I am deploying it here cannot be equated with perspective of worldview. It does not universalize a particular experience. It is rather a method that, at the outset of inquiry, creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds. (p. 107)

There are five premises to co-cultural theory. First, each society has a hierarchy that privileges certain groups. In the United States, these groups include European Americans, heterosexuals, the able-bodied, and the middle/upper class. Second, dominant groups do what they can to maintain power, including manipulating communication. Third, directly or indirectly, the system impedes the progress of minority groups. Fourth, although representing diverse groups, co-cultural groups will share a similar position in society—that of being marginalized and underrepresented. Finally, to confront the dominant group, the minority group must adopt certain communication behaviors (Orbe, 1998). Although community recreation programs probably do not see themselves as a dominant group in comparison to girls with disabilities, they do have significant power as they have the opportunity to provide recreation to groups that traditionally have been disenfranchised.

In concert with co-cultural theory, standpoint theory (Orbe, 1998) acknowledges that obtaining the standpoint of people who are in the subordinate position is necessary to understand those groups (Orbe, 1998). As Orbe (1998) stated, standpoint theory is used as a feminist theoretical framework “to explore the lived experiences of women as they participate in and oppose their own subordination” (p. 25). While this is certainly applicable to co-cultural groups beyond women, the focus of this study is on females with disabilities as a unique co-cultural group. Orbe outlined three tenets of the theory. First, the researcher must begin with his or her own lived experiences and include the experiences of the marginalized group in the process of inquiry. Second, the theory recognizes that much of the existing research gives the viewpoint of the dominant groups. Finally, the value of the nondominant group’s perspective is increased because they can also see the dominant structures as “outsiders.” Therefore, it is imperative that, to get at the lived experiences of a co-cultural group, researchers must go directly to that group to get their perspective on the phenomena being closely examined. While research on boys with disabili-

ties is important to our field as well, girls constitute a co-cultural group that is inherently different and must therefore be studied independently to take into consideration their unique experiences.

Girls with disabilities constitute a co-cultural group from the perspective of their experiences both as females and as persons with a disability. It is imperative to determine whether these girls have access to physically active recreation opportunities, and whether social justice is being served for this group. Limited research to date has outlined that people with disabilities have little access to recreation opportunities. Much of that same research has outlined methods by which community parks and recreation programs can facilitate this group's access to programming. However, little follow-up research has been conducted to determine the progress that has been made for the provision of active recreation for girls with physical disabilities, and certainly, the viewpoint of these girls is rarely recognized. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how girls with disabilities, as members of two nondominant groups (female, having a physical disability), participated in active recreation (e.g., sports, dance, exercise) as well as how they perceived their status as a female participant with a disability. In addition, the researchers sought to determine what opportunities girls with disabilities had access to as well as what benefits they were currently receiving from the recreation opportunities. The methodology used to address the purpose of the study is explained below.

Method

Subjects/Sampling

The subjects were 14 girls between the ages of 10 and 16 years who had a physical disability and who lived in North Carolina, South Carolina, or Georgia (Table 1). For the current study, only girls with physical disabilities, rather than a combination of physical and developmental disabilities, were included in the sample. Both girls who were and girls who were not currently involved in physically active recreation programs were sought out for this study; six (43%) of the girls participated in organized, physically active recreation programs. Five of the girls had spina bifida, six had cerebral palsy, two had osteogenesis imperfecta (OI, or brittle bone disease), and one had nonspecified limited mobility.

Theoretical sampling was used to obtain the sample. Theoretical sampling is not predetermined; rather, it is a dynamic process whereby the choices of subject evolve as the data are collected. In essence, this type of sampling allowed the researchers to invite girls from representative demographic backgrounds (including type of disability) to participate in the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initial subjects were recruited through advertisements and word of mouth at churches, recreation centers, schools, and disabled sports and recreation organizations. The researchers then employed "snowball sampling" whereby once a participant was identified and interviewed, the researchers asked her (and/or her family) to suggest additional girls with disabilities who met the criteria and might be willing

Table 1
Description of Respondents with Pseudonym

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Disability	Mobility Aid
Jan	16-years	mixed race	osteogenesis imperfecta	wheelchair
Marsha	13 years	white	cerebral palsy	walker
Brandi	16 years	white	cerebral palsy	electric w/c
Michelle	10 years	white	limited mobility	wheelchair
Ginny	14 years	white	spina bifida	electric w/c
Cindy	16 years	white	osteogenesis imperfecta	electric w/c
Mary Ann	14 years	white	spina bifida	walker
Molly	15 years	white	cerebral palsy	wheelchair
Christine	10 years	white	spina bifida	wheelchair
Janie	10 years	white	spina bifida	wheelchair
Hannah	16 years	white	cerebral palsy	wheelchair
Dani	13 years	white	spina bifida	wheelchair
Carrie	11 years	white	cerebral palsy	none
Jaime	16 years	white	cerebral palsy	wheelchair

to be interviewed. Then, depending on the appropriateness of the recommended subject, she was contacted to participate in the study and subsequently asked for additional contacts. Thus, the selection of subjects “snowballed” from the initial contacts. As noted in the limitation section, the recruitment of the subjects was difficult because of the delimitation of type of disability (physical only).

Instrument

An interview guide was designed by the researchers to include questions about participation in recreation activities, perceptions of self when in recreation activities, reactions of friends and family, role models, and perceptions of disability. The researchers included appropriate prompts to facilitate the interview in the case that a question was unclear to a respondent. Two interviewers were trained in interviewing techniques by the primary investigators. See Table 2 for a sample of interview questions.

Table 2
Interview Guide

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1. What do you do for fun? [prompt: describe activities, etc.]
 2. Why do you like to do these things?
 3. What physical activities do you like? [prompt: give examples, hiking, dancing, bicycling, sports, aerobics, etc.]
 - If involved,
 - a. Who do you do these things with?
 - b. Where do you do them?
 - c. How often do you do these?
 - d. Where/from whom did you learn how to do them?
 - If not involved in physical activity,
 - a. Why? [prompt: is it your choice?]
 - b. Are there activities for you?
 - c. How does that make you feel?
 - d. Would you like to be able to participate in physical activities?
 4. How does your family react to you doing (or not doing) physical activities?
 5. How do your friends react to you doing (or not doing) these activities?
 6. Do you ever feel uncomfortable doing these activities in front of people you don't know?
 - a. Explain.
 7. How do you feel about yourself when you are doing (or not doing) these activities?
 8. Do you ever feel that if you participate in physical activities, others might stare/laugh?
 9. Do you have role models in physical activities?
 - a. Who are they? From where?
 - b. Who is your favorite athlete?
 - c. Have you ever thought of being a collegiate or professional athlete?
 - d. Why or why not?
 10. What is it like to be a girl with a disability?
 11. What does the word "normal" mean to you?
 12. Where and when do you feel most normal?

*For a copy of the complete guide, please contact the first author.

Data Collection/Procedures

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview was audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim by graduate students. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes. Appointments were scheduled with each participant at a location of her choice (i.e., home, school, or other convenient location). In some cases, family members were present during the interviews. Since all participants were minors, the interviewer apprised each participant of her rights within this study and attained written consent from a parent/guardian as well as assent from the participant.

Data Analysis

The authors conducted qualitative analyses of the interview transcripts. Guided by co-cultural and standpoint theories, the researchers sought to create a general description of the participants' recreation experiences (Creswell, 1998). For this study, data were analyzed using the steps recommended by Orbe (1998) for phenomenological analysis. First, the

researchers obtained a collection of descriptions of the lived experiences of the girls. Second, the researchers reduced the data into essential themes related to the overriding purpose of the study. Finally, an interpretation of the themes was conducted as structural meanings were analyzed to provide an understanding of the experiences identified by the study.

Trustworthiness (similar to reliability in quantitative methods) was addressed in two primary ways. First, the researchers attempted to conduct an “interpretive read” (Mason, 2002, p. 149) by which they inferred meanings from the understanding and representations of the data to make sense of a social phenomenon—in this case, participating in physical recreation as a girl with a disability. Second, it was important to protect against one-sided interpretations; therefore, all three of the researchers read and re-read the data to determine appropriate themes and code the themes as appropriate (Henderson, 1991). In addition, an external reader read and analyzed the data to confirm the researchers’ themes and patterns. This review demonstrated a high level of agreement in terms of themes, as well as the meanings of responses. Whenever agreement was not initially present, a re-reading of the data was conducted to account for differing viewpoints until consensus on the data was achieved.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine how girls with disabilities, as members of two nondominant groups (female, having a physical disability), participated in active recreation (e.g., sports, dance, exercise) as well as how they perceived their status as female participants with a disability. In addition, the researchers sought to determine what opportunities girls with disabilities had access to as well as what benefits they were currently receiving from the recreation opportunities. Like all research, there were limitations inherent in this study. First, although the snowball sampling technique was used, the researchers still had difficulty in obtaining subjects for the interviews. As a result, the variance of subjects’ backgrounds and disabilities was somewhat limited. In addition, the sample may have been biased toward girls who had higher activity levels as they were easier to “find” as subjects. Related to this, all but one of the subjects used a wheelchair or other ambulatory device. Thus, girls with physical disabilities that may be less noticeable were absent from this study. Finally, in several cases, a parent was present for the interview. It is unclear, then, to what extent this influenced the responses of these participants.

The purpose of the study was guided by the tenets of standpoint and co-cultural theories, which suggest that, as opposed to gathering data from practitioners or caregivers, data should be gathered directly from a group whose voice is often unheard. By interviewing the girls with disabilities (see Table 1 for a description of the respondents), their perceptions were recorded and analyzed. Results are presented within three overarching themes: (a) being a girl with a disability, (b) perceived benefits to participation in physical recreation, and (c) barriers to participation in physical

activity, with specific attention paid to formalized programming opportunities. Sub-themes for each theme are reported below.

Being a Girl with a Disability

The girls were asked to describe what it was like to be a girl with a disability. Some did not see any major differences between themselves and able-bodied girls. Jamie saw herself as “just a normal girl who uses a wheelchair” while Ginny stated, “I’m no different just because my legs don’t work well.” Cindy, who has OI, saw herself as luckier than boys with the same disability, “I am luckier than most guys with OI. . . . It [OI] tends to be more serious and [they] die younger.” Others, however, reported various ways they felt different or compromised because of their disability. Three of the girls referred specifically to female-oriented difficulties that accompany their disability status, “It’s harder to get a date,” said Brandi. For Molly, it was even more personal, “When, like, I’m going to the bathroom, it’s always hard because sometimes somebody new has to help me wipe. And like when I am on my cycle they have to help me.” Finally, Michelle summed it up when she said, “It is just that sometimes you know how people used to reject girls and then people used to reject people with disabilities? Well, to be both of those is kinda weird.” For two other girls, their responses to the question were more tied to not “fitting in.” Christine reported that

Everybody is saying that they would like to have a wheelchair. They really want to ride my wheelchair, but they don’t know what it is like to be in one for your whole life. I think it’s good most of the time, but then sometimes when you see people running it kind of gets you a little bit down and you just want to be like them.

Dani shared that

It is hard for me to explain to my friends at school because I don’t want to get embarrassed in front of the whole school I feel like being in a wheelchair and um, some people just don’t think that I can do anything.

Benefits

While assumptions are often made about the benefits of physical activity for girls with disabilities based on research with girls without disabilities, the girls in this study were very forthcoming about the benefits that they felt they received from being physically active. The physical activity benefits traditionally documented, including better health, were also applicable to girls with disabilities in this study.

Importance of activity. These girls recognized the importance of movement to their own well-being. In fact, nine of the girls specifically indicated positive outcomes of being active. For example, Marsha stated her desire to be healthy, “. . . if you don’t get up and exercise and you just sit there . . . your muscles become weak and you can’t do anything at all.” Mary

Ann agreed, stating, “I like to keep myself active. So I can like, umm, keep myself like, umm, in good health and all that stuff. But it’s also like fun, and it’s, it’s fun because all my friends do it, and like it’s, it doesn’t take the kinda time.” While Cindy stated that her activities helped her “feel refreshed,” Ginny indicated that physical activity gave her “independence . . . and health.” Jaime found that her participation in horseback riding allowed her greater ability to participate in other activities: “Horseback riding was active, but, now that I’ve stopped them I can do, um, more active things.” She also indicated that it allowed herself to “keep in good health and all that stuff.”

Opportunities away from home. The opportunity to participate in formal and organized activities away from home such as those found in a community parks and recreation agency held value for the girls. Multiple respondents referred to recreation opportunities that they had away from home and the importance of these activities. Out of the 14 girls interviewed, 6 reported engaging in organized activities such as a horseback riding program, karate, basketball, track and field, soccer, and swimming. While many of the girls in this study enjoyed informal physical activities at home, including basketball, and playing tag and hopscotch, research has shown that some individuals with disabilities perceive physical activity as leisure and experience multiple benefits more often when it is done away from home (e.g., Henderson & Bedini, 1995). Although some of the girls in this study did not have access to formal external programs, those who did enjoyed them. For instance, Michelle explained how she felt about participating in an integrated karate program: “[I feel] good that I am getting out there and trying and that I am having fun and sometimes I just like to forget all about my disability and just have fun.” In response to being questioned about how she learned different activities, Christine, who is active in an Adaptive Sports and Adventures Program (ASAP), stated, “They [ASAP staff] just teach you along the way; it really helps a lot too.” Janie, in response to her enjoyment of her program, shared that she is “just having fun, and it’s just a good feeling.” Janie found out about her wheelchair sport program through word of mouth and expressed great interest in being active, “[I found out about wheelchair sports from] my friend, my friend Sean . . . he is on the team . . . I begged my mom and she finally let me go.” Jan was probably the most active in outside opportunities stating,

I am on the high school track team, I also participate with the, with Carolina Tigers for track, field, and swimming and the Charlotte Racers for, um, basketball, and then I have been on the U.S. Team...U.S. Junior Team to go to Australia and I’m hoping to get on the World Team to go to the International Championships.

Minimization of disability. Physically active programming including individuals with disabilities not only can contribute to the health of a participant, but it can also be “freeing” (Blinde & Taub, 1999). Blinde and McClung (1997) found that college students with disabilities who partici-

pated in individualized programs felt barrier-free and less restricted, and they wondered what else they might try to do for the first time (Blinde & Taub, 1999). The girls in our study reported that activity gave them the same sense of freedom. For example, Jan stated that in sports, "I feel free when I'm doing them [sports]." She continued, "I don't want to categorize everybody who doesn't do sports, but it, I mean, I think the people in sports feel the same kind of freedom that I have." Jan was one of the girls who played in a number of organized wheelchair sports programs, specifically, basketball and track and field, on a local, regional, and national level. Cindy concurred, "it (participation) is just good escapism." Michelle also enjoyed the sense of freedom, sharing that "sometimes I just like to forget all about my disability and just have fun." Participation allowed girls to transcend their disability. For instance, Michelle explained why she liked to do things like biking and trampolining, "I guess they are just really fun and they, um, it does not really matter that I have a disability to do these things or not." Michelle's activities were not limited to informal backyard recreation but also included a formal karate program. Jan also referenced her feelings of "normality" in activity when she answered the question about where she felt most normal: "probably playing sports." Marsha responded much the same way, stating, "I feel better doing things like regular people."

Regardless of their current opportunities to participate in active recreation, it is apparent that the girls in the study recognize and relish the importance of being active. For the girls who reported an active lifestyle, the benefits included greater health, increased functioning, and minimization of their disabilities.

Barriers

Lack of opportunities to participate. While previous research has indicated that play opportunities for children with disabilities are hindered by myriad barriers including a lack of skills, overprotection, social isolation, the time needed for rehabilitation, and a lack of available programs and leaders (Longmuir & Bar-Or, 1994; Taub & Greer, 2000), little has been done to ascertain the perceptions of access held by girls with disabilities. Unanimously, the girls in this study stated that they deserved the same opportunities as girls without disabilities—in other words, they appeared to desire social justice. Christine explained, "It is no different for a person who is walking, than a person who is rolling. . . . It does not matter where you have it as long as you get to play."

Marginalization in sport for girls, and even more so for girls with disabilities, often results from the inability of the public to reconcile the ideals of both physicality and masculinity, both central to the idea of sport and physical activity, with disability and femininity (Blinde & McClung, 1997). In fact, as Bedini and Henderson (1994) pointed out, females with disabilities have multiple oppressions and are marginalized unless they fit in based on others' ideas of what they should participate in. This is further exemplified by the fact that girls are often protected from failure while boys are challenged (Henderson & Bedini, 1995). This issue was relevant for the

girls with disabilities in this study. For instance, Jan, who is now extremely active in wheelchair sports, stated that before she started participating, her parents were very overprotective, “scared [she] might break.” Cindy’s mother, in response to her daughter’s comments on differences between boys and girls, stated, “I think men are expected to be more physical; the boys and friends are more physical.”

Additional barriers such as rules and regulations also existed for these participants. Brandi complained about not being allowed to participate in a wheelchair basketball league: “I wanted to go out on the team [basketball] but see, they won’t let people with motorized chairs play. That’s just the way it is. I don’t know why.” While limitations on participation may be valid, if a girl with a disability cannot participate in what would seem like a logical opportunity and does not know the rationale behind the guidelines, the situation will lead to greater frustration. It is through repeated frustrations that girls can grow to believe the misconception that they are not equal and thus not able.

Consequences of stigma. Palmer, Redinius, and Tervo (2000) addressed how the stigma of disability can compromise opportunities for socialization and community integration. Certainly the issue of stigma is relevant to non-dominant groups and accessibility issues for those groups. On one hand, some of the girls felt that their peers viewed them as somewhat helpless. Dani indicated that some people “. . . stare at me or say that I can’t do anything because I am in a wheelchair.” Hannah indicated that her cousins had their own doubts about her abilities. She stated, “They were kind of scared when they saw me [water ski] last summer. They, um, [were] scared of me falling . . .” Brandi indicated the difference in reactions from a friend with a disability and one without. Around Cameron she feels normal because “he sort of accepts, accepts me because he’s, um, had a stroke a couple years ago.” On the other hand, in reference to a female friend of hers without a disability, she commented, “I think she does that [acts like she knows everything] ’cause she’s a bit afraid to be around me.” Fear of being stigmatized is a concern for many of the girls. When asked about others’ response to them, Michelle indicated that when others stared, she felt “kinda strange and sad and stuff.” Tracey had a fear that if she did any of her exercises at school, that “the class and the school might be laughing at me.” In reference to other people’s unwanted attention, Marsha said that when she experienced it, “I’ll cringe inside sometimes.”

Others’ friends expressed surprise at their abilities. “They think it’s amazing that I play wheelchair basketball,” stated Janie. Mary Ann indicated that her friends “. . . think it’s really good for me to do stuff like this [physical activities].” Compared to other girls’ perceptions of “staring,” Molly indicated that she felt if people were staring it was not to “laugh at me, just stare at me . . . because I think they are interested (in what I am doing).” School, and often the playground, is an arena where stigmatization also occurs, as illustrated by Marsha: “It’s just, it’s just a pain they have to pick on me ’cause they don’t have anything else to do.” For girls who do

not have the support and resources to fight these perceptions, these inaccurate identities become real to them and they can start believing their own incompetence and frailty, falling into the trap of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Lack of role models. Development of relationships with adults, specifically nonrelatives and those who can serve as positive role models, has been shown to be important to youth development (Lerner & Benson, 2003). Therefore, it was relevant to examine the availability of role models to this specific population as it might be more difficult to find role models who have a somewhat parallel life course. While role models have been shown to be important to youth, especially those with disabilities, many of the girls did not have this type of support in their recreation centers. “It’s mostly observation and then trial and error,” noted Brandi, when asked how she learned to play her sports. Cindy does not play sports, nor do her parents watch or read about them. She stated, “I have no idea if there [are] any female athletes out there that are disabled.” Most of the girls who named role models listed male athletes. For instance, Jan listed “Sala Mendoza, he’s a track, um, Para-Olympian,” although she continued that “anyone who I see actually doing a sport and not sitting on the sideline I think is pretty special.” Jaime named Marshall Paul Sumner, a professional football player, as her role model: “. . . he went through really a lot of bad behaviors when he was young but, um, he’s overcome them.”

Interestingly, some of the girls mentioned friends with disabilities as their role models. For Molly, one of her role models is her friend Heather “. . . she like had something wrong with her back and the doctors mess up on her back and she can walk fine now.” Marsha also listed a friend with a disability: “. . . my friend, she’s handicapped just like I am, but she can go around with crutches everyday and I can’t. I’m working at that.” However, few of the girls had female role models who were actively participating in recreation programs. For those who have found female role models, however, these relationships have been critical. Christine said that from the women with disabilities that she has interacted with, she has learned “basically how to believe in yourself and how to do sports and that kinda stuff.”

Discussion

The benefits of physical activity for all youth have been repeatedly documented (e.g., Kimm, Barton, et al., 2002; Fulkerson et al., 2004). Both informal and formal programs have positive outcomes to offer participants. However, as providers of formal opportunities, practitioners have a responsibility to recognize deficiencies in programming opportunities for youth with disabilities. The benefits of formal programming may be more salient for youth with disabilities compared to programming for youth without disabilities. For instance, a formalized program helps ensure that the availability of opportunities is not simply left to chance (e.g., thinking that “someone else” will provide the program, especially for an

activity in which numerous participants, a recreation facility, and specific equipment are needed such as with wheelchair basketball). In fact, the necessity for specialized equipment is certainly something that a funded program would be able to address. For example, girls in the study who were active in formal programs were often dependent on a recreation organization such as Blaze Sports for the provision of expensive sports wheelchairs.

In addition, an organized program can help provide family members and friends with the skills to help ensure an active life for the youth with a disability through education programs. Qualified coaches or instructors are also necessary for a safe and beneficial experience. Again, these can be more readily provided through a formal program. While informal programs can offer opportunities for socialization, formal programs again are more likely to offer opportunities for socialization with other youth with and without disabilities and can also help facilitate the sense of belonging that is crucial during the adolescent years.

It was evident that the girls in this study who had access to formal programs experienced much greater levels of benefits from their participation that went well beyond simple exercise. Unfortunately, it appears that despite the fact that the sample was perhaps biased toward girls who were more physically active, many of the girls in this study still did not have access to formal programming, underscoring the importance of the role of recreation programmers to expand programming opportunities.

A number of additional issues, while not specifically addressed through interview questions, nonetheless provide further insight into the interpretation of the results of this study. The experiences of the girls in this study should be examined in light of issues raised by past researchers that are relevant to the participation rates of girls in general, including the issues of single-gender programming, stigma, and the support of family and friends, albeit within the context of programming for girls with disabilities.

Past research has examined the issue of girls' participation rates in light of program structure, including the sex of participants. In both academics and recreation, research has illustrated the benefits of single-gender classes and programs, including greater freedom to participate and increased self-esteem (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; Culp, 1998; Riordan, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). However, for girls with disabilities, single-gender programs may not be realistic. With regard to formal participation, none of the girls were involved in single-gender programs; they all participated in co-ed programming. The reality is that there often would not be enough girls with physical disabilities in a reasonably close geographic area to participate in a segregated program. Co-ed teams allow for the critical mass necessary to offer the programs. While the issue of co-ed versus girls-only programming was not directly addressed in the interviews, it did not appear that the girls were negatively influenced by their participation with male youth with disabilities. In fact, many of the girls referred to male teammates as being instrumental to their own participation.

The availability of adaptive sports and recreation programs is also critical for this population. Often this programming takes the form of inclusive programming because of the small numbers of eligible participants for a segregated adaptive sports or recreation program. In fact, those girls who did participate in adaptive programs often traveled on average one to two hours for practice and competition. Participation with able-bodied peers is beneficial for both groups. For girls with disabilities, inclusive programming can provide greater social acceptance, friendships, peer role models, fitness, reduced loneliness, and increased opportunities for interaction. For peers without disabilities participating in the program, the experience can help decrease fears related to the disability, increase self-esteem, and increase social cognitive growth (Devine & Wilhite, 2000; FPG Child Development Center, 1997; Staub & Peck, 1994).

Also of issue for recreation participation for girls in general as well as for girls with disabilities is the issue of stigma. It seems apparent that participation in physical activity helped reduce the stigma that the girls experienced in everyday life. According to a number of girls, participation in sport and physical activity allowed them to feel more "normal." This was the case whether the girls were participating in informal or formal programming, including co-ed programs. While at times they may have felt singled out for their "extraordinary accomplishments" by family and friends, they generally felt like they had a lot of support from both groups. Although stigma may have been an issue when the girls encountered strangers or peers who were not familiar with their abilities, this could also be an issue for girls without disabilities as well.

Interestingly, despite research focused on the gender-related difficulties girls may have associated with sport participation, for this population the disability seems to be more of an issue than being a girl. While a limited number of participants revealed difficulties associated with being a girl and the double whammy of being a girl with a disability, most addressed issues of normality and participation within the context of their disability. Perhaps overcoming difficulties associated with the disability are more difficult than those associated with being female when both are present. However, it remains relevant that even if programmers are able to provide suitable programming for all youth with disabilities, that the gender-related issues will still need to be addressed and may come more to the forefront once the hurdles of the disability have been overcome.

Overall, the voices, the standpoint, of the respondents in this study, along with research gathered from previous studies, illustrate the inequities in active recreation opportunities that still exist for girls with disabilities within their communities. As one parent noted in a side conversation with one of the researchers, alluding to the extreme lengths they went to in order to find opportunities for physical recreation, ". . . you can't go the extra mile; you have to go the extra 1000s of miles . . . literally."

Although they do not use the term "social justice," the girls' beliefs and perceptions are in line with a desire for a somewhat unrecognized degree

of social justice. They feel that they have every right to participate in physically active recreation. While some are involved in organized programs, some have to expend excessive energy to access these programs. Similarly, many are not involved in formal recreation programs and feel the loss and frustration. Regardless, as a group, they and their families experience multiple barriers to participation.

If community recreation is to fulfill its service philosophy of “enriching the lives of the community by providing opportunities for the meaningful use of leisure” (Henderson et al., 2001, p. 18), then agencies need to have an all-encompassing definition of community. As Henderson et al. noted, community recreation is “unlimited and open to all” (p. 18). For these reasons, practices tailored to increase participation and opportunities for girls with disabilities are limited only by our imagination.

Recommendations for Practitioners

The findings of this study suggest a number of recommendations for practitioners currently working in the field of public parks and recreation. The recommendations are a direct result of findings that continue to suggest less than satisfactory opportunities for girls with disabilities to engage in active recreation. These recommendations, although not mutually exclusive, are presented in three categories that address the respondents’ experiences: (a) marketing, (b) education, and (c) outreach.

Marketing

Despite the documented benefits of participation in formal programs (e.g., Henderson & Bedini, 1995), many of these girls only had, or knew about, informal opportunities for recreation with family and friends. As Marsha indicated when asked about her engagement in physical activity, “I do horseback riding and sometimes—I’m not on a team, I just play wheelchair basketball around the yard.” Multiple researchers have noted that not knowing what programs are available poses a threat to recreation participation for people with disabilities (e.g., French & Hainsworth, 2001; Henderson & Bedini, 1995; Lockwood & Lockwood, 1997; Smith et al., 2005). Coyle and Kinney (1990) noted that when girls with disabilities do not show up for a new program designed for them, programmers often assume it is due to lack of interest, when in reality the girls may not know it exists. Therefore, as simple as it seems, appropriate marketing of available programs is essential.

Appropriate marketing is also necessary to explain program goals and procedures as related to skill level, instruction, staffing and volunteer help, transportation assistance, and so on. This is especially important for “first-time users,” participants who, often because of ignorance, assumptions, or bad experiences, may never have utilized community recreation services before because of previous barriers. Marketing efforts need to be distributed in venues where the intended participants will receive them and be aimed at teachers, parents, guardians, and caregivers as well as the girls themselves; word of mouth should not be the only source of information

(Fiorini, Stanton, & Reid, 1996). In addition, the message being communicated needs to be inviting, nonthreatening, representative, and accessible. For example, visual materials should include pictures of girls with disabilities participating in programs, such as the Women's Sports Foundation does with their Go Girls Go initiative (www.GoGirlGo.org).

"Sampler days" could also be very beneficial with this population, in which girls with disabilities are invited to "sample" programs and services. The inclusion of outside providers and guest speakers with disabilities would be beneficial. The results of this study as well as other research clearly noted that girls with disabilities have few role models. Including others who have similar experiences would strengthen marketing efforts substantially.

Finally, marketing (and programming) should target young girls as well as teens with disabilities. Since lack of skills and low skill development are top reasons for nonparticipation by youth without disabilities, it follows that these would also be barriers for youth with disabilities (Murphy, 1999). Earlier opportunities for the youth to be involved in skill stations might allow them to experience greater success, thus encouraging them to continue with the program.

Education

Education programs can be viewed as a form of marketing whereby the recreation agencies take responsibility to help people without disabilities have a clearer understanding of the recreation needs and abilities of people with disabilities. As people with disabilities become more visible in sport and other forms of recreation, they increasingly participate with able-bodied participants. However, they still often experience stigma. This stigma may take the form of trivialization by onlookers (Henderson & Bedini, 1995); fear, ignorance, and patronization (French & Hainsworth, 2001); lack of exposure (Palmer, et al., 2000); or beliefs that people with disabilities are somehow less equal than those without (Bedini, 2000). In addition, Bedini (2000) found that people with disabilities are vulnerable to perceiving themselves as inadequate when they encounter it on a regular basis in the community.

Education programs can be very helpful for families in particular. As noted by Michelle, girls with disabilities have a "double" stigma. Not only does society sometimes view them as weak and fragile because they are female, but it can also constrain them through applying stereotypes of having a disability (i.e., sick and frail). Similarly, parental "ignorance" as well as "overprotection" and uncertainty can be barriers to participation, as noted by Jan and Michelle. Therefore, a variety of techniques can be used to help educate family members through the use of recreation programs. For example, recreation agencies can design education programs using existing models from national, community-based disability sport organizations like BlazeSports (www.blazesports.com) and the national youth sport education organization, the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS, www.nays.org). These organizations assist agencies with designing educa-

tion programs for their parents to help them work on ability-appropriate skills at home, which can increase the comfort and interest levels of both the parents and child.

Education of peers is also an important consideration. Contact theory suggests that the more contact one group has with a dissimilar group, the greater understanding individual members of each group will have of one another (Emerson, Kimbro, & Yancey, 2002; Williams, 1964). However, Tripp, French, and Sherrill (1995) reported that any inclusion needed to be direct, personal, and intense. Facilitating interaction between children with and without disabilities would provide both groups with a greater understanding of how they can enjoy recreation opportunities together at their local agencies, in school, and at home. One of the girls in this study, Janie, indicated this about her own friends, "They [friends] think it is amazing that I play wheelchair basketball, and they always ask questions, 'how do you play basketball in your chair?'" Michelle also noted her friends' responses to her participation: "They don't act very strange . . . Sometimes they are like 'Wow! You are doing that?' and then we just move on to the next subject." Programs that accommodate individuals both with and without disabilities in an educational framework can address the questions, concerns, and fears of people like Janie and Michelle's friends.

In addition to providing opportunities for direct interaction between individuals with and without disabilities, recreation programmers can provide education efforts for peers through examples of activities and adaptations. Films or real-life demonstrations of youth with disabilities participating in sports and other forms of physical activity are very effective. Local wheelchair sports programs, for example, often are willing to visit groups as well as provide demonstrations of activities. Ultimately, this type of education would help girls with disabilities become more active with other children and vice versa.

Finally, as noted in the literature (e.g., Centers for Disease Control, 2005; Jones, 2003; Rimmer et al., 2004), not all staff who work with people with disabilities know how best to serve these individuals. It is important to educate the staff working with these programs. A complaint of many people with disabilities is the lack of staff and volunteers with sports expertise as well as experience and expertise working with athletes with disabilities (Blinde & Taub, 1999; French & Hainsworth, 2001). Increased awareness through volunteer and staff training can include the creation of appropriate sporting opportunities, accessible facilities, research, training, integration, elite sports, consultation with users, and increased public awareness. Education as to what constitutes a disability, the ramifications of different types of disabilities, and different types of adaptations is critical to the success of a disability sport program (Bedini, 2000). There are many ways that professionals can become more adept at programming for diverse populations, including continuing education sessions, on-site training, or site visits with organizations that have been successful in developing programs for girls (and others) with disabilities, including BlazeSports, the

Women's Sport Foundation, and NAYS. It is the responsibility of the agency, however, to ensure that staff pursue and attain these experiences and skills.

Outreach

Finally, providing role models and engaging in strategic hiring can be beneficial to girls with disabilities. Smith (1993) reported that therapists and athletes with disabilities are important socializing agents for athletes with disabilities, specifically, congenital disabilities. Many of the girls who were interviewed had difficulty, however, identifying role models or even acquaintances with disabilities. Interestingly, many of the role models they listed were male athletes. A portion of the role models had physical disabilities themselves, but many of them were able-bodied individuals, including professional athletes. However, having a disability does not constitute having a shared experience. For example, when the interviewer asked the respondent if she had ever met a female athlete with a disability, she answered, "I think maybe once but I don't really remember it," but she then suggested that if she did have a female athlete as a role model, it would "inspire" her. Therefore, community recreation programs should make concerted efforts to identify and subsequently incorporate appropriate women with disabilities in various administrative and practical roles. Vescio and Crosswhite (2002) noted that agencies must have the support of senior management for change to occur—hiring is one area in which this support is vital. In addition, involving people with disabilities on citizen and advisory boards can be helpful. In some instances, communities might not be able to hire or "employ" individuals with disabilities, however. In these cases, it would be helpful to bring appropriate role models in on a visiting basis for workshops, clinics, "guest appearances," or mini-courses.

In summary, the current state of opportunity for girls with disabilities to engage in physically active recreation still appears to be lacking. Therefore, with a vision that includes valuing social justice, community recreation must continue to work to develop programming opportunities to all potential user groups. While there are barriers to doing so, the benefits to all participants and the community as a whole will outweigh the costs when we have healthier and happier youth and adults participants. To repeat the wise words of Christine, a study participant, "It is no different for a person who is walking, than a person who is rolling. . . . It does not matter where you have it as long as you get to play."

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