

# Parents' conceptions of the influences of participation in a sports programme on their children and adolescents with physical disabilities

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## Abstract

Parents of children and adolescents with physical disabilities have an important role in strengthening and supporting their children in everyday life. Children and adolescents with physical disabilities do not ordinarily have natural access to club activities, nor do they receive the same support for physical activities as their peers without disabilities. The aim of this Swedish study was to describe parents' conceptions of the influences of participation in a sports programme on their children and adolescents with physical disabilities. The data were collected from 20 parents of children and adolescents with disabilities in the 9–15 year age group through interviews based on a holistic view. The method of analysis used was inspired by phenomenography. Three descriptive categories emerged: achieving good health, being part of a social group and learning a sporting activity. The findings show that the parents regarded sport as a form of health education and as a means for their children to achieve increased participation in society. The findings also show that the learning process was important for empowering the children to influence their life situation.

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**Key-words:** parents • phenomenography • physical disabilities • social support • sport

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## Introduction

The sports movement is Sweden's largest and most vigorous popular movement. In Sweden, the concept of a popular movement contains a number of characteristics, for

example, voluntariness, independence, duration and organizational construction (Östnäs, 1997). Karp (2001) reports that no other organization has so many active members as well as engaging so many young people as the sports movement. Close to three million people are active members of just over 20,000 associations and 17,000 inter-company clubs. Sport is also dominant among adolescents. In the 7–15 year age group, about two out of every three boys and every second girl are members of a sports club of some sort. Every 10th young person in that age group participates in sports other than organized sports (Swedish Sports Confederation, 2000).

The fact that parental support and influence are fundamental to children's participation and success in sport has been well documented in children without disabilities (Alfermann and Würth, 2001; Hellstedt, 1987; Hoyle and Leff, 1997). Hoyle and Leff (1997) found that parental support of young tournament tennis players was significantly associated with enjoyment, an objective measure of performance and the importance the players ascribed to their game. Parental support has also been found to influence athletes' competence, motivation and satisfaction levels (Alfermann and Würth, 2001). Hellstedt (1987) concluded that coaches are involved in a whole family process and that good relationships with the parents are essential for the success of a programme.

Parents of children and adolescents with disabilities constitute an important link in the chain that makes a sporting activity possible (Colon, 1998; Kohn, 1990; Wolff, 1997). Family influence and support are important for all children and adolescents, whether they have a disability or not. At the same time, family support is especially important for the development of adolescents with disabilities (Blum, 1998). Family support is aimed at stimulating every child and adolescent to reach his or her full potential. It is essential that the family's needs and judgements govern the shaping of the supply of services within society in general (Downing, 1999; Janson, 1995). This, in turn, calls for cooperation between personnel within health care, education and the social sector in consultation with the family (Colomer, 1998). Today, sports with different degrees of community support are only enjoyed by a minority of children and adolescents with disabilities. Sherrill and Williams (1996) found that persons with physical and sensory disabilities had limited possibilities for participation in the context of sport and physical activity. There are few studies available that focus on parents' conceptions of their children's participation in sports, and the advantages and disadvantages of their participation in sporting activities are seldom discussed (Bjorklund et al., 1988; Castaneda and Sherrill, 1999; Colon, 1998). The Bjorklund et al. (1988) study indicated that, according to their parents, young people with disabilities who took part in a sports programme improved their overall functioning in several areas. Parents of children with physical disabilities mentioned the physical and emotional benefits of sport participation. The parents also reported that barriers still exist, such as a lack of disability-specific opportunities (Colon, 1998). Castaneda and Sherrill (1999) concluded that participation by family members in alternative sports is personally meaningful and empowering. This is also true of the importance of family support for sports participation as well as the commitment of

different professional categories when it comes to diffusing information about sporting activities and their importance. Parents of children with and without disabilities have been found to be among the primary sport socializers (Zoerink, 1992).

An important starting point is that sports are intended for everybody, irrespective of individual abilities. The special situation of people with disabilities has attracted much attention in recent years (Arhammar-Tjernström, 2000; Norling and Sullivan, 1993). The opportunities for people with disabilities to engage in stimulating and meaningful fitness training as well as the importance of satisfying physical, mental and social needs through play, movement and sport are being discussed, in order to improve the situation for these groups.

Some studies (Pate et al., 1995; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996) have shown that sport can provide a means for the development of people's physical, mental, social and spiritual/existential well-being. Regular physical activity can exert a positive influence on different components of health and, for people with disabilities as a group, sport can help, among other things, to increase the degree of well-being and social development (Ferrara et al., 1994; Kristén et al., 1999; Smith, 1993). At the same time, proportionately few of all people with disabilities practise any sport or other physical activity (Sherrill and Williams, 1996). Obstacles such as attitudes, accessibility and a lack of suitably educated leaders are given as reasons for the modest level of participation (Kristén et al., 2000; Levinson and Reid, 1991). When reviewing the available studies, it is evident that the researchers' assessments within the area are relatively well documented. On the other hand, few studies exist (Castaneda and Sherrill, 1999; Colon, 1998; Downing, 1999; Levinson and Reid, 1991) that address the views of the parents of children and adolescents with disabilities on the subject of sports and leisure activities. Furthermore, most of these studies are quantitative in character and few have used qualitative approaches. The aim of this study was therefore to describe parents' conceptions of the influences of participation in a sports programme on their children and adolescents with physical disabilities.

### Theoretical foundation

Two models developed in the USA, which guide teaching/coaching practices, are presented by Sherrill (1998). The distinction between the categorical or old medical model and the social minority or individual differences model of disability lies, among other things, in the purpose of the models, where advice, prescription or remediation correspond to the categorical model, and empowerment of the individual to assume an active role in self-actualization corresponds to the individual differences model. The first model served as a guide for service delivery in the 1970s and 1980s, while the second model was used from the 1990s on.

Furthermore, Sherrill (1998: 6) stresses the importance of the concept of an ecosystem: 'An ecosystem is an individual in continuous interaction with his or her environment.' Both the individual and the environment are in continuous interaction

and encompassed by the ecosystem. According to parents of children and adolescents with disabilities, this comprises their relations with their surroundings, including school, leisure time and society, as well as the professional groups that the child encounters. It is therefore important to determine which specific functional impairment children and adolescents have and what is needed to enable the families to manage their life and family situation. Taking the view that a human being consists of different parts which can be studied separately (Sarvimäki and Stenbock-Hult, 1993) risks that the wholeness and the individual aspects of the life situation may be disregarded. This, in turn, can lead to the neglect of the parent's own resources. It is, therefore, important to apply a holistic perspective, focusing on the relationship between body and soul, as well as on the influence of the family, community, neighbourhood, school or workplace on an individual. Within sport and health, this means that education and leadership in movement-and-exercise activities are characterized by building up and maintaining the individual's self-esteem and self-actualization (Keegan and Keegan, 1992; Sherrill, 1998). Descriptions of holistic models can be found in the literature: in these the human being is regarded as a whole, not merely from the perspective of disease, injury or disability.

## Method

A descriptive, qualitative design with an approach inspired by phenomenography was chosen to promote a comprehensive view for the study. Phenomenographic research was developed by Marton at Göteborg University (Marton, 1981). The research is methodologically inductive, which means that inductive procedures result in principles or generalizations based on the examination of individual cases (Kroksmark, 1987; Uljens, 1993). Phenomenography is a way of identifying, formulating and managing specific research questions, a specialization which, at the same time, is highly useful when it comes to issues related to the understanding of learning in different educational environments (Marton and Booth, 1997). Phenomenography builds on an interest in describing how people perceive phenomena in or aspects of their surroundings, using two different levels of description: the first-order and the second-order perspective (Alexandersson, 1994). The first-order perspective is concerned with facts, what can be observed from the outside, and the interest is directed towards the phenomenon as such. Marton (1981) argues that phenomenography describes experiences from the second-order perspective. The second-order or inside perspective focuses on people's experiences and conceptions of a particular phenomenon. It is the second-order perspective that is unique to phenomenography. The question is not whether something is true or false, but what is being studied (Svensson, 1997). Moreover, Larsson (1986) emphasizes that the concept of conception is central to phenomenography, claiming that conceptions are the unreflected foundation, created by experiences, from which our views emanate. The conceptions can then be used to analyse how people perceive different situations. The empirical foundation for examining conceptions is the interview. The conceptions

are recognized based on each informant's statements about the phenomenon under study. This includes a contextual consciousness, where context appears as the field in which conceptions are generated (Marton, 1992). Conceptions stand for that which is implied, which constitutes the framework for the collected experience, on which different lines of reasoning are based. In this case, they are regarded as possible relationships between parents of children and adolescents with disabilities and their surrounding world (Marton and Svensson, 1978).

### The sports programme

The aim of the programme was to use sports, such as orienteering, golf and archery, as a means of stimulating and facilitating the participation of children and adolescents in sports club activities in their community.

The sports programme covered three years and was run in two municipalities in south-western Sweden. The programme was instigated by Halmstad University in cooperation with the County Council's child rehabilitation care centre, local sports clubs and sports clubs for people with disabilities. During the course of the project, cooperation was developed between the Sports Federation for the Disabled, the Federation for physically disabled children and adolescents and the county council Handicap Care Centre. In all, seven sports clubs for people with disabilities and sports clubs for able-bodied people in south-western Sweden took part in the programme. Cooperation between the two types of sports clubs was supported in order to strengthen participation, integration and the feeling of well-being.

Children and adolescents of the 9–15 year age group with physical disabilities were sent a letter informing them about the programme and asking them if they were interested in participating. Some 60 letters were distributed to the members of the target group before each new 12-month period and, each year, on average 10–15 children and adolescents responded that they wished to take part. During the three-year period, a total of 50 children and adolescents with physical disabilities took part in the sporting activities.

The children and adolescents with disabilities could choose to take part in orienteering, golf and archery over a period of three years. Each sporting activity lasted one year, with training during both the spring and autumn terms. The children and adolescents took part in one sporting activity at a time. Each year the study group consisted of new participants. The training usually took place in the evenings with one training session per week lasting 1–2 hours, i.e. more than 16 training sessions over a six-month period. Several of the clubs involved appointed a coach to be responsible for the training. The coach had no special training in sports for persons with disabilities but a genuine interest in disability issues. In all, some 20 coaches participated during the three-year period. The clubs independently decided on the design of the training, and most of them chose to divide the training into a theoretical and a practical part. To sum up, a model was designed to complement traditional interventions for children and adolescents with physical disabilities and to find forms for

cooperation between the child rehabilitation care centre and sports clubs for people with and without disabilities (Kristén et al., 1999).

## Participants

Parents of children and adolescents with physical disabilities were sent a letter, asking them whether or not they were willing to take part in a study in connection with their children's participation in a sports programme. The parents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their statements would be treated confidentially. The parents were chosen based on a strategic selection in line with the phenomenographic tradition (Fridlund and Hildingh, 2000) with regard to age, sex, sport and physical disability of the children and adolescents who participated in a sports programme. Twenty parents of children and adolescents with physical disabilities in the age group 9–15 years participated, of whom 11 were women and 9 were men (see Table 1). Twelve parents were manual workers and eight were non-manual employees (socioeconomic classification: Statistics Sweden, 1984). Their average age was 42 years, range 30–51. The participants were connected to the child rehabilitation care centre, where families with children and adolescents with physical disabilities received medical care and support. Regarding ethical considerations, a member of staff with medical responsibility gave permission for the study.

**Table 1** Parents' of children and adolescents with physical disabilities sociodemographic background ( $n = 20$ )

Gender	Age	Socioeconomic status	Children's sports activity
F	46	NME	Orienteering
F	44	MW	Orienteering
F	47	MW	Orienteering
M	38	MW	Orienteering
F	51	NME	Orienteering
M	38	NME	Orienteering
F	41	MW	Orienteering
M	30	MW	Orienteering
M	50	MW	Golf
M	41	MW	Golf
M	46	NME	Golf
F	39	NME	Golf
F	46	NME	Golf
F	43	NME	Golf
F	44	MW	Golf
M	30	MW	Archery
M	42	NME	Archery
F	46	MW	Archery
F	39	MW	Archery
M	37	MW	Archery

F = female; M = male; MW = manual workers; NME = non-manual employees.

## Interviews

In phenomenographic studies, data are usually collected by means of interviews. The interviews range from semi-structured to open questions (Larsson, 1986). In this study, the interview guide consisted of opening questions, which could then be used to turn the conversation to a number of limited phenomena: sports participation and influences of sport. The interview guide was tested in a pilot interview, in order to ensure the trustworthiness (reliability) and the reasonableness (validity) of the questions. The guide was found to be appropriate after minor modifications. The main researcher conducted an interview in conversational form with the parents regarding the influences of participation in a sports programme, consisting of orienteering, golf and archery, on their children and adolescents with physical disabilities. The following questions were asked. As a parent, how do you feel about the training in orienteering, golf or archery? What has happened? What are your thoughts about orienteering, golf or archery as a sport? How do you think that orienteering, golf or archery has affected your child? How has orienteering, golf or archery changed your child's life situation? The interviews were carried out over a period of three years in connection with the completion of the sporting activities and in the following order: orienteering, year 1, golf, year 2, and archery, year 3. The interviews usually took place in the informants' homes and were conducted with each set of parents on an individual basis. The 20 interviews, which each lasted 25–35 minutes, were conducted by the main researcher and tape-recorded.

## Data analysis

The intention behind phenomenographic data analysis is to identify the meaning content of conceptions and to formulate descriptive categories. In the phenomenographic study, there are no predetermined categories (Alexandersson, 1994; Larsson, 1986). In the present study, each interview was first transcribed verbatim immediately after the interview and then read through several times in order to get a sense of the whole. The parents were then given an opportunity to read the text in order to provide feedback on the data. Following some minor modifications, the text was found to be accurate. After this, the interview material was analysed for the purpose of finding relevant statements that contained conceptions of sports participation in orienteering, golf or archery. In all, 224 statements were analysed. The analysis was focused on comparing the statements to find similarities and differences. These similarities and differences were then grouped into patterns in order to obtain an overview of how they were interconnected. After this, the patterns in the answers were critically examined in order to detect dimensions that required new formulations and categories to describe conceptions. For example, the statement:

. . . one gets out and meets others. One gets out into the countryside and sees many things. One can either do that with the family or with both family and friends. It's an all-round sporting activity but you need to have access to a car

contributed to the conception 'Experiencing a feeling of togetherness'. Another statement:

. . . he gets to train his whole body, it's not just a question of picking up the bow and shooting, but it's concentration, it's posture, it's to some extent strength in one's arms, shoulders and neck so as to get it right. So I think that it has done him good because it has influenced his whole body. The brain, the body, the feet. He has definitely learnt to concentrate more on his body. To co-ordinate his movements and suchlike has of course been positive

contributed to creating the conception 'Training one's motor abilities'. At the same time, the statements were not completely one-dimensional but contained a certain degree of overlapping information. The predominant conception in the statement provided the basis for categorization. For example, the statement

Per has made great progress since he started. He really likes it. You are outdoors, get physical exercise and fresh air, you reap all the benefits of sport. It will continue to develop his interest in nature and map-reading. He can form a different view of nature and perceive more each time he is outdoors

which contributed to the conception 'Being out in the countryside', also includes elements of the conception 'Gaining knowledge and skills'.

Through the data analysis procedure that compares the whole and the parts of the interviews, a pattern finally emerged that resulted in three descriptive categories (Table 2), where each category was made up of three conceptions. For example, the conception 'Experiencing a feeling of togetherness' was included in the descriptive category 'Being part of a social group', and the conception 'Training one's motor abilities' was included in the descriptive category 'Achieving good health'. The

**Table 2** Parents' conceptions regarding the influences of participation in a sports programme on their children and adolescents with physical disabilities with regard to interrelationships as illustrated by the descriptive categories and conceptions

	Achieving good health	Being part of a social group	Learning a sporting activity
Feeling well	X	(X)	
Being out in the countryside	X		
Training one's motor abilities	X		(X)
Experiencing a feeling of togetherness	(X)	X	
Having a good time	(X)	X	
Making new friends	(X)	X	
Discovering a sporting activity		(X)	X
Gaining self-confidence	(X)		X
Gaining knowledge and skills	(X)		X



co-assessor in the categorization process was one of the supervisors, who had knowledge of both the method used and the relevant facts. The co-assessor had access to category descriptions and conceptions as well as the interviews but not to information about which category the different interviews belonged to. The task of the co-assessor was to verify to what extent the recognized category system was consistent with the resulting interpretation of the interviews. Thus, the co-assessor checked whether or not the categories were in agreement with the conceptions contained in the interviews. When comparing the concordance between the two assessors in their interpretation of the data, total agreement was found regarding 85 percent of the conceptions leading to the descriptive categories.

## Results

As shown in Table 2 the data analysis revealed nine conceptions and three descriptive categories. The conceptions are illustrated by quotations. In order to clarify which interviews belong to which descriptive category and conception, the interview number is given after each category and quotation.

### **Achieving good health (1–3, 5–7, 9, 11, 12, 15, 18–20)**

This descriptive category describes the importance attributed by parents to the achievement of good health by their children and adolescents with physical disabilities. The category comprises three conceptions: feeling well, being out in the countryside and training one's motor abilities.

#### *Feeling well*

This conception describes how the children's health is affected by the sporting activity. The physical activity contributes to the children getting exercise and experiencing relaxation. The children gain an understanding of the importance of exercising and keeping fit:

I think it has a positive influence on him, as it means being outdoors and getting some exercise . . . they discover their own style, even with these disabilities.

(interview 12)

#### *Being out in the countryside*

This conception describes how the children are influenced by the outdoor sporting activity. The children have the opportunity to experience nature through spending time in the woods and seeing animals in their natural environment:

Per has made great progress since he started. He really likes it. You are outdoors, get physical exercise and fresh air, you reap all the benefits of sport. It will continue to develop his interest in nature and map-reading. He can form a different view of nature and perceive more each time he is outdoors. (interview 5)

### *Training one's motor abilities*

This conception describes how the children's motor abilities are influenced by the sporting activity. The children perform a manual task that includes coordination, strength and mobility. As the activities demand concentration, they are important for training the children's senses. The activities are performed on uneven ground, which provides them with motor abilities such as balance:

... he gets to train his whole body, it's not just a question of picking up the bow and shooting, but it's concentration, it's posture, it's to some extent strength in one's arms, shoulders and neck so as to get it right. So I think that it has done him good because it has influenced his whole body. The brain, the body, the feet. He has definitely learnt to concentrate more on his body. To co-ordinate his movements and suchlike has of course been positive. (interview 20)

### **Being part of a social group (1–2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 13–16, 18–20)**

This descriptive category describes how the parents perceive the opportunities given their children and adolescents with physical disabilities by being part of a social group. This category comprises three conceptions: experiencing a feeling of togetherness, having a good time and making new friends.

#### *Experiencing a feeling of togetherness*

This conception describes how the social context influences the children's and adolescents' opportunities for meeting others. The sporting activity is something that the family members do together, children as well as parents. A family activity is being built up:

... one gets out and meets others. One gets out into the countryside and sees many things. One can either do that with the family or with both family and friends. It's an all-round sporting activity but you need to have access to a car. (interview 2)

#### *Having a good time*

This conception describes how the children's and adolescents' well-being is affected. The sporting activity is perceived as fun and exciting. It contributes to holistic thinking, where body and mind interact:

He has found it great fun and he has been very positive about it. Being good at reading the map and finding his way through the woods may enhance his self-confidence. (interview 7)

#### *Making new friends*

This conception describes how the children and adolescents make new friends through the sporting activity. The children meet others both with and without a

disability, and they gather around a common interest that introduces them to new friends:

Well, other sporting activities are difficult for him as he has no ball skills, which are needed, for example, in football and many other sports, but perhaps such skills are not necessary for golf. It's a sport that most people can perform with some training, it's a way of getting out, being together with one's friends. Valuable . . . Well, I suppose when it comes to friends, it's a way of getting to know others. (interview 10)

### Learning a sporting activity (2, 4–9, 11, 13–20)

This descriptive category describes how the parents view the possibilities of their children and adolescents with physical disabilities learning a sporting activity. The category comprises three conceptions: discovering a sporting activity, gaining self-confidence and gaining knowledge and skills.

#### *Discovering a sporting activity*

This conception describes how the parents consider the importance of finding a leisure activity that is adapted to the child's or adolescent's physical disability. The parents stress the importance of equal access to the activity, while at the same time acknowledging the positive educational and individual elements of the chosen sporting activity:

It's a type of sport that I think she would be able to take part in. I mean, there are many sports that she cannot participate in, such as football, which many of her girlfriends play. I think it could complement the rather active life that Stina leads at school and with her friends. (interview 15)

#### *Gaining self-confidence*

This conception describes how the parents consider the importance of their children being able to manage an activity and become good at something. The children dare persist with the sporting activity and feel that they have made progress, at the same time as their feeling of being brave is strengthened. Taken together, this means that their self-confidence is positively affected:

. . . it's that, watching Olle, it's possible to see that he has become more self-confident, that he feels confident that he will be able to perform this task . . . Well, he sort of knows that he will be able to follow the instructions he has received, that he is able to carry out the process of shooting without having to ask questions all the time, I mean in view of his problem. (interview 17)

#### *Gaining knowledge and skills*

The conception describes how the parents consider the importance of their children learning a sporting activity. It is a question of combining knowledge and making use

of the experiences they have gained and using their powers of reasoning to develop practical skills:

It's that the children are developing in different ways, by learning to read a map, gaining a good sense of direction and being able to take care of themselves if they lose their way. I suppose that's something that develops gradually. (interview 5)

## Discussion

### Methodological considerations

Fridlund and Hildingh (2000) argue that the applicability, concordance, security and accuracy of the investigation should be ensured. When it comes to qualitative studies, such as phenomenographic ones, this implies that the identity, reasonableness, trustworthiness and conscientiousness of the investigation are scrutinized. In the phenomenographic tradition, a number of different approaches have been developed in order to satisfy the methodological requirements. In the phenomenographic approach, applicability is considered to be satisfactory when the aim has been attained and categories describing different conceptions arrived at (Marton and Booth, 1997). A limitation of this study is that the populations used for the data collection are small. Thus, it is not possible to generalize the findings of the interviews in a statistical sense, as the sample was strategic and small. Nevertheless, their conceptions are important as well as specific to that particular sample of parents of children and adolescents with physical disabilities. A certain number of interviews are required in order for different conceptions to emerge. Considering the choice of method of analysis, 20 interviews can be regarded as a normal number in phenomenographic tradition (Marton and Booth, 1997). It is possible that if more parents had been interviewed, a larger number of conceptions would have been generated. However, at the same time, larger data material involves a risk of the analysis becoming superficial, thereby compromising the trust in the aim of the study (Alexandersson, 1994). In phenomenographic studies, the interest is in discovering patterns of identities, whether or not the informants are representative in a statistical sense is of less interest (Trost, 1997). In this study the trustworthiness of the analytical work is built on the systematic data collection as well as the interpretation with a high level of agreement (85%) between the co-assessors. The use of a co-assessor is established practice, and if the contents of the different conceptions are identified and the interviews placed in their proper descriptive category, then the degree of trustworthiness can be calculated. At the same time, a strength may be that one and the same person has conducted the interviews and that they were carried out under similar conditions. Svensson (1996) considers that identical questions in the qualitative interview can be reliable even if the answers differ between the two interview occasions. The main researcher transcribed the audio-taped interviews to text immediately after the interview in order to minimize the risk of misinterpretation of facts in the interview material. The

interview guide used consisted of semi-structured questions, which were formulated so as not to be leading. This is in line with Kvale (1997), who states that the validity or reasonableness follows the seven stages corresponding to the seven steps of the interview process: thematization, planning, interview situation, print-out, analysis, verification and reporting. Kvale (1997) claims that it is important to counteract arbitrary subjectivity; however, overemphasizing reliability and validity may obstruct creativity and variability. Conscientiousness was ensured through the design of the investigation and through the use of quotations from the conceptions in the analysis of the interview texts. In phenomenographic studies it is usual to rely on the quotations in order to develop descriptive categories. At the same time, the quotations have the function of enriching and concretizing the meaning of the categories.

### Programme considerations

The results also demonstrate the diversity of the parents' conceptions regarding the participation of their children and adolescents with physical disabilities in a sports programme, including: achieving good health (feeling well, being out in the countryside and training one's motor abilities), being part of a social group (experiencing a feeling of togetherness, having a good time and making new friends) and learning a sporting activity (discovering a sporting activity, gaining self-confidence and gaining knowledge and skills). The findings show that all nine goal areas in Sherrill's holistic model (1998) are represented in the parents' conceptions (see Table 3) the purpose being to promote an active, healthy lifestyle and self-actualization.

The conceptions mirror the difficulty of dividing people into different categories and of delimiting important areas. At the same time, the conceptions are not

**Table 3** Parents' conceptions regarding the influences of participation in a sports programme on their children and adolescents with physical disabilities with regard to interrelationships as illustrated by Sherrill's holistic taxonomy

	Achieving good health	Being part of a social group	Learning a sporting activity
Positive self-concept	X		X
Social competency		X	
Fun/tension release		X	X
Motor skills and patterns	X		X
Physical fitness	X		
Leisure-time skills	X		X
Play and game behaviours	X	X	X
Perceptual-motor function and sensory integration	X		X
Creative expression	X	X	

completely one-dimensional but contain a certain degree of overlapping information (see Table 2). The conceptions are important in a general sense as well as specific to that particular group of parents of children and adolescents with physical disabilities. In a similar study (Castaneda and Sherrill, 1999), five social benefits of Challenger baseball, as perceived by families and coaches, were considered particularly meaningful: fun and enjoyment; positive effects related to equal opportunities and feelings of 'normalcy'; social networking/emotional support for families; baseball knowledge and skills; and social interaction with peers. The results from both investigations show similarities as well as differences with regard to cultures and scientific traditions. At the same time, the results identify different ways of experiencing a phenomenon, as is the case in these two studies about parents' conceptions of the participation of their children and adolescents' with physical disabilities in a sports programme. Further, the results suggest that the conceptions of sports for children may not differ very much between parents of children with disabilities and parents of children without disabilities (Smith, 1993). The three descriptive categories could just as well be found in the latter group as in the former. Earlier studies (Ferrara et al., 1994; Kristén et al., 1999; Pate et al., 1995; Smith, 1993; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996) have demonstrated the importance of physical activity and its influence on health for all human beings, regardless of any disability. The first descriptive category, 'Achieving good health', is supported by these studies, while at the same time pointing to the benefits of a sporting activity. The conceptions of 'Feeling well', 'Being out in the countryside' and 'Training one's motor abilities' constitute aspects of well-being in the everyday life of a child with a physical disability. It then follows that a stimulus in the form of physical activity as a natural part of everyday life can bring health benefits to these children and adolescents.

Sport offers fellowship, and the social aspect of a sports programme can be decisive for whether a child will take part or not. In recent years, the social situation of individuals with functional disabilities has been highlighted (Arhammar-Tjernström, 2000; Norling and Sullivan, 1993) and the descriptive category 'Being part of a social group' confirms the importance of the social dimension. The conceptions 'Experiencing a feeling of togetherness', 'Having a good time' and 'Making new friends' illuminate the importance of a sense of affinity in the sports club, which in turn may counteract isolation in society.

The descriptive category 'Learning a sporting activity' implies active involvement in the learning process on the part of the children, their parents and the club leaders and coaches. Learning also implies cooperation between the relevant actors in the surrounding community in order to facilitate knowledge about aspects of physical activity (Downing, 1999; Janson, 1995). The conceptions 'Discovering a sporting activity', 'Gaining self-confidence' and 'Gaining knowledge and skills' underline the importance of the involvement of the family as a whole in health work to enable the use of sport as a means of habilitation or rehabilitation (Blum, 1998; Colon, 1998; Kohn, 1990; Wolff, 1997).

## Conclusion and implications

The aim of the study was to describe parents' conceptions regarding influences of participation in a sports programme on their children and adolescents with physical disabilities. Three descriptive categories emerged: 'Achieving good health', 'Being part of a social group' and 'Learning a sporting activity'. This constitutes an important knowledge bank, which can be used to design sporting activities for children and adolescents with physical disabilities, where sporting activities can be regarded as one arena among many leading to social integration.

The parents' conceptions can also be used for educational purposes as well as forming the basis for the preparation of documents setting out the goals for activities for the disabled organized by county councils, municipalities and sports clubs. The results should encourage cooperation between different social authorities and various sports support groups to facilitate participation by children and adolescents with physical disabilities in ordinary sporting activities. The parents' conceptions could equally well apply to children without disabilities. At the same time, there is a desire for the sports programmes to have structure and continuity, partly in order for the programme to function satisfactorily and partly to provide a secure social environment for the children. The parents consider that sport develops their children's bodies so that they feel well and gain knowledge that may be useful to them throughout life. The wishes expressed by the parents could be met by an intervention programme where actors from different sections of the community (health care, various voluntary associations, organizations for people with disabilities and universities) cooperate, based on a holistic perspective. Support should be given to learning about the importance of physical activity as a way of achieving well-being and creating more opportunities for these children to take part in everyday activities. Learning is important from the perspective of both parents and children as well as the institutions, clubs, associations, etc. that provide activities for children and adolescents with physical disabilities. It is a question of using knowledge to empower people to exert an influence on their own situation as well as to gain a perspective on health factors, such as physical activity, good self-esteem and fellowship. Within rehabilitation, sports and sports club activities, cooperation, education and activities can serve to support and generate well-being in children and adolescents with disabilities. Even if the results of this study cannot be generalized, they suggest that a physical activity can involve different positive aspects for the child or adolescent with a physical disability as well as facilitating their participation in society. In future studies, it would be of importance to evaluate how parents' conceptions can influence the structure and continuity of supportive sporting activities for children and adolescents with physical disabilities as well as establishing the differences in conceptions between parents of children and adolescents with and without physical disabilities on the subject of sporting activities.

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## Résumé

### **Les conceptions des parents concernant leur influence sur la pratique sportive chez leurs enfants et adolescents handicapés moteurs**

Les parents d'enfants et adolescents ayant des déficiences physiques ont un rôle important de renforcement et d'aide dans leur vie quotidienne. Les enfants et adolescents déficients moteurs n'ont ordinairement pas un accès naturel aux activités en club, ni ne reçoivent le même encouragement que leurs pairs valides, à pratiquer les activités physiques. Le but de cette étude suédoise était de décrire les conceptions des parents concernant l'influence qu'ils peuvent avoir sur leurs enfants et adolescents déficients moteurs au regard des pratiques physiques et sportives. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entrevues basées sur une approche holistique, auprès de 20 parents d'enfants et adolescents déficients moteurs de 9 à 15 ans. Le traitement des données s'est inspiré de la phénoménographie. Trois catégories descriptives émergent: Se maintenir en bonne santé, Participer à un groupe social, et Apprendre une activité sportive. Les résultats montrent que les parents conçoivent le sport comme une forme d'éducation à la santé et un moyen pour leurs enfants d'accroître leur participation sociale. Ils montrent aussi que le processus d'apprentissage est important dans une perspective de restitution aux enfants de leurs capacités à influencer leur propre vie.

## Resumen

### **Ideas de padres de niños y adolescentes con discapacidades físicas acerca de las influencias que sobre sus hijos ejerce la participación en programas deportivos**

Los padres de niños y adolescentes con discapacidades físicas juegan un papel importante a la hora de proporcionar fuerza y apoyo en su vida diaria. Niños y adolescentes con discapacidades físicas no tienen por lo general un acceso normal a las actividades de los clubes, ni tampoco reciben el mismo apoyo en las actividades físicas que sus compañeros sin discapacidad. El objetivo de este estudio Sueco fue describir las ideas de padres con hijos con discapacidad física acerca de las influencias que sobre éstos ejerce la participación en programas deportivos. Los datos se recogieron a través de entrevistas basadas en un punto de vista holístico, con 20 padres de niños y adolescentes discapacitados con edades comprendidas entre los 9 y los 15 años. El método de análisis utilizado estuvo inspirado en la Fenomenografía. Surgieron tres categorías descriptivas: alcanzar una buena salud; formar parte de un grupo social; y aprender una actividad deportiva. Los resultados mostraron que los padres consideraban los deportes como una forma de educación para la salud y como un medio para que sus hijos consiguieran una cuota mayor de participación en la sociedad. Los resultados también pusieron de manifiesto que el proceso de aprendizaje fue importante para capacitar a los niños para influir en su situación vital.

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