Let Me Play! Girls with Disabilities and Physical Activity

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This presentation addressed the benefits of physical activity, specifically the Bridge II Sports program, on the health and social issues facing girls with physical disabilities. The presenters briefly discussed relevant research, described the Bridge II Sports program, and shared personal experiences of four girls with disabilities before and after their involvement with Bridge II Sports.

Need for Physical Activity for Girls with Disabilities

Research shows that youth with disabilities demonstrate behaviors that vary from their non-disabled peers. For example, children with disabilities have demonstrated lower levels of school satisfaction, greater voluntary absenteeism, more frequent drinking/smoking, higher psycho-social distress, and higher sedentary activities. In addition, research found that girls were significantly less active than boys; more sedentary with increasing age (Hogan et al., 2000), at a greater risk for obesity (National Center on Physical Activity and Disability, 2007), had lower self-concept regarding physical appearance, social acceptance, athletic competence, and scholastic competence than their counterparts without disabilities (Shields et al., 2006).

Benefits of Physical Activity for Girls with Disabilities

Physical activity for women with disabilities has been shown to provide great benefits. Specifically, physical activity participation reduced physical de-conditioning and isolation (Santiago & Coyle, 2004), as well as improved psychosocial health and well-being, fostered a sense of independence and accomplishment, and increased awareness of their body’s abilities and limitations (Rolfe, Renwick & Bailey, 2009). For girls with disabilities, physical activity increased social support (Anderson, Wozencroft, & Bedini, 2008) as well as served as an “equalizer” and provided normalcy (Bedini & Anderson (2005).

Need for Organized Physical Activity Programs in North Carolina

Unfortunately, in North Carolina, children with disabilities have few opportunities for physical activity. Estimates suggest that of the roughly 43,000 high school students, approximately 8,600 have a disability. While
North Carolina has roughly 1000 high school basketball teams, there are only three youth wheelchair basketball competitive teams in the state - and participants travel an average of 1-hour to get to practices. These data illustrate that the exclusion of children with disabilities from opportunities for physical activity is significant and critical “systems” (community, medical, educational) are failing to serve these students.

Testimonies

Four participants shared their experiences before and after they got involved with the Bridge II Sports program. Initiated in North Carolina, Bridge II Sports “creates opportunities for children and adults who are physically challenged to play sports individually or on a team, helping them discover tenacity, confidence, self-esteem and the joy of finding the player within.” Each of the girls noted the physical, social, emotional benefits of participation.

Bella, a 10-year old with spinal cord injury, began her speech with “My name is Bella, and today I am going to talk to you about being a paraplegic athlete and how adaptive sports and Bridge II Sports has changed my life.” She continued to share how she found a basketball on the ground during recess one day and thought it could help her make new friends and become part of a team. Through Bridge II Sports, she was able to play. She described her first tournament saying:

“As a team we set goals for this first season and to do our best, play our hardest, and show good sportsmanship... We learned a lot at that tournament. All the other teams had been playing a lot longer than us... but it showed us how to be a team and work together... I just couldn't get enough basketball!”

A teammate she met during the tournament is also 10-years old and in a wheelchair:

“...just like me. I have never had another friend who understood what life was like every day and being part of a team and playing sports made that happen.”

She ended her testimonial by stating optimistically,

“My name is Bella, I am 10-years old and I am an athlete AND future Paralympian.”

Deja, a 16 year old with cerebral palsy, started, She described how she is now on the high school track team - the only member with a disability.

“I guess you could say sports have been my pride and joy... I have just started a new sport that is totally different than the others, because now I have to do it all by myself. Of course, I am the only “paralympian” out there so I sort of stand out. I am doing the shot put and the 100 meter dash. This has been quite a challenge because no one can help me. I have to throw the shot and roll my chair on my own. I have scored a point for my team in both track meets in the shot put, but I am still working on the 100. It is nice to finally be able to do a sport for my school. My goal is to make it to the State championships. Having the chance to participate in sports is great. It gives other people the chance to see that I am just as athletic as they are in my own way.”

Dania, a 19-year old, born with spina bifida, shared how this program helped her socially. She stated that

“...before I got involved in sports, I was very shy and had a hard time talking to people. Now I have more self-confidence and better leadership skills... Sports have given me enough confidence to speak to you today.”

Finally, Jill, 16 a year old with spina bifida summarized the sentiment of this presentation. She stated,

“From the beginning, I saw my disability as God’s way of picking on me. I always wondered why I had to be so different, or why I was the one who couldn’t play alongside my friends at school. At the age of nine, I stumbled upon wheelchair sports, and within two years, I was addicted and competing avidly in track, basketball, waterskiing, snow skiing, field, and swimming. Sport has given me more than I could ever ask for - confidence, lifelong friendships, goals to work for, a future as well as scholarship opportunities to take me to college. It has taught me to fully appreciate the aching feeling I get after a good workout, how refreshing Gatorade really is, and most importantly, that I’m not just some science experiment gone wrong; I’m a person with a love of life. I am an athlete.”