



Commentary: Athletics and Disabilities Are Not Mutually Exclusive

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Youth sports create opportunities for children to be active, to form friendships, and to learn essential life skills. Playing sports teaches children endurance, stamina, and accountability. Athletics also help children to develop confidence, to enhance moral and physical character, and to learn executive functioning and emotion regulation skills. Yet, despite the overarching benefits of athletics, children with physical disabilities continue to be marginalized and excluded from athletic opportunities. They are excluded from private sports teams, minor leagues, extracurricular, and interscholastic athletic opportunities. These acts of exclusion create additional barriers for children living with disabilities by worsening their internal emotional struggles and wrongly confirming their misgivings of being productive members of society. This article explores the influence of the McFadden vs. Howard County Public School System, emphasizing the impact that exclusion from athletic opportunities has on children living with physical disabilities. It outlines key issues and provides actionable recommendations to promote a more inclusive environment where all children can have equal access to athletic opportunities.

Keywords: youth sports, athletics, interscholastic opportunities, disabilities

Youth sports were created as opportunities for children to be active, to form friendships, and to learn essential life skills. Playing sports teaches children endurance, stamina, and accountability. Athletics create an opening for children to develop confidence, enhance moral and physical character, and learn executive functioning and emotion regulation skills (Pearce, 2021; CDC, 2021). Yet, despite the overarching benefits of athletics, children with physical disabilities continue to be marginalized and excluded from athletic opportunities. They are excluded from private sports teams, minor leagues, extracurricular, and interscholastic athletic opportunities (Moran & Block, 2010; Lankhorst et al., 2015; Carol et al., 2021; Pearce, 2021). These acts of exclusion create additional barriers for these children by heightening their sense of shame and wrongly confirming their doubts of belonging. This article highlights the impact that the exclusion from athletic opportunities has on children with physical disabilities. It outlines key issues and provides actionable recommendations to promote a more inclusive environment where all children can have equal access to athletic opportunities.

How Exclusion from Athletics Impacts Children with Disabilities

Children with physical disabilities who are excluded from sports are simultaneously deprived of core developmental needs. To develop into healthy, functioning adults, children need to engage in opportunities that stimulate growth and challenge their character (Pearce, 2021; CDC, 2021). Moreover, children need healthy outlets to learn about success, failure, and the importance of human relationships. In fact, leading developmental and psychoanalytical theorists such as John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott, Melanie Klein, and Erik Erikson, assert that childhood development and human relationships are the cornerstones of a successful life (Turner, 2017). Discriminating against children with disabilities from participating in athletic pursuits only seems to disrupt the process of healthy development.

To provide children with an equal opportunity for healthy development, the discrimination against students with physical disabilities needs to be addressed (Williams, 2014). Students across the country continue to be excluded from extracurricular and interscholastic athletic programs. They are shamed, rejected, and deprived of opportunities that promote basic core development. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020) outlines that in the 2018-2019 academic year, 15% of children with “other impairments” requested special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). These students maintain limited strength capacities due to chronic or acute health illnesses, such as cancer, epilepsy, asthma, tuberculosis, heart conditions, nephritis, and sickle cell anemia (NCES, 2020). It is true that this percentage does not encapsulate the total amount of children with physical disabilities across the country, nor does it highlight discriminatory action; however, it does provide a glimpse into some of the challenges that these children endure on an emotional, physical, and academic level. Even more importantly, it informs the public of the urgent need for intervention and advocacy on behalf of these children.

Children with physical disabilities are less likely to engage in sports in comparison to their able-bodied peers (Carroll et al., 2021). In addition to the limited number of opportunities, these children encounter discriminatory behaviors that challenge their self-esteem, thereby causing them to further withdraw from sports (Pearce, 2021). Indeed, children who appear on the playing field are often marginalized by their coaches and teammates, which inadvertently reinforces their feelings of social isolation. The unintended consequences of exclusion are longstanding, as they are not only detrimental to the child’s development, but also to the functioning of their families and communities. The research shows that family is an integral source of support in the young athlete’s life, but in face of discriminatory action, many parents feel an increased sense of helplessness and hesitate to advocate for their children (Hellstedt, 2005; Pearce, 2021). This only heightens the children’s shame and sense of powerlessness, further interrupting the family system (Hellstedt, 2005). Pearce (2021) further explains, “The exclusion of people with disability from sporting opportunities affects their feelings of value and worth, and the rest of societies’ attitude to their treatment” (pg. 75). Discriminatory behaviors are deemed acceptable by communities over time, and the lack of response on a local and state level is both a cause and effect of this destructive attitude.

Foundations for A Disability-Inclusive Society

Despite the enactment of federal policies that address issues of discrimination, such as The American with Disabilities Act (ADA), The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), and

the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), there is a lack of response on a state and local level. This need is heightened since the IDEA does not consider participation in athletics an issue (Williams, 2014). Yet, the fact that the ADA is successful in generating awareness, equality, and in providing support to adult athletes in overcoming barriers to sports involvement, informs the public that change is possible for children as well (ADA, 1990). In fact, Tatyana McFadden, an individual with Cerebral Palsy, used these historical policies as evidence in her fight for equality (McFadden & Walker, 2016). McFadden was a young girl when she wanted to pursue athletics in her Howard County Elementary school in Maryland. However, due to her physical impairments, she was denied access to the interscholastic athletic programs (McFadden & Walker, 2016). McFadden refused to be held back by the injustices of the system and therefore filed a lawsuit against the Howard County Public School System.

Despite the numerous setbacks that McFadden encountered throughout the process; she fought until justice was served, and it was in June of 2008 when the Maryland Legislature passed the Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities. The act states that the educational country boards are required to develop policies that promote inclusion, opportunities for students to engage in extra-curricular activities and interscholastic athletic programs, and to submit an annual report that details the incorporated programs, prospective plans, and the number of students participating in these programs (Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). To ensure the implementation of these requirements, the state boards are responsible to monitor the compliance of the county boards (Maryland General Assembly, 2008).

Analysis of The Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities

The Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities is the only state legislature nationwide that addresses the ongoing discrimination that children with disabilities experience in their athletic pursuits. The policy successfully promotes inclusion and requires students with disabilities are given the opportunity to participate in interscholastic athletic programs. Through the promotion of inclusion, all students have an equal chance to have fun, to form friendships, and to develop the critical skills needed for healthy childhood development. McFadden's success serves as proof that this policy is working, in fact, she was recently named the "world's greatest Paralympic marathon legend" (Disability Rights Maryland, 2018). In the absence of her advocacy and the subsequent policy provision, it would have been nearly impossible for her to develop the skills needed to attain her life goals.

The policy also successfully defines numerous important terms such as "Adapted Program", "Allied Sports or unified programs", "Mainstream athletic program", and "Mainstream physical educational program" (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). The delineation of these terms ensures there is a uniformed understanding of the policy requirements, thereby increasing the probability of compliance. Yet, despite these strengths, there are weaknesses to this policy. The policy states that the educational systems are required to make "reasonable accommodations" for those students with disabilities (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). However, there is no delineate definition of what that term means or entails. In fact, trusting the educational system to make judgements based on their intuitions could create space for increased biases, stereotypes, and acts of discrimination. The policy further states that county boards shall provide "Evidence indicating that the interests and abilities of students with disabilities have been fully and effectively accommodated by the county board's implemented programs." (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). While this seems like a reasonable goal, it is unclear as to what

the words “fully and effectively accommodated” connote (The Fitness and Equity Act, 2008). It is hard to quantify the compliance of behaviors that lack clear, definite measurements.

Sectoral Actions and Recommendations for Future Policy

It appears that the need for policy implementation on a state and local level is of paramount importance. The passage of the Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities shows the public that students with disabilities can be provided with equal athletic opportunities in a safe, effective way. It also highlights the impact that discriminatory behaviors have on children with physical disabilities, as it is well understood that while McFadden is an individual, she represents as a member of a larger population - athletes with disabilities. In order to meet the needs of this vulnerable population it is suggested that state and local legislatures convene to discuss the implementation of educational policies, policy makers incorporate clearly defined terms when formulating bill texts, and that policy makers adopt the notion of collecting annual reports from educational county boards. This procedure ensures that educational leaders remain accountable and compliant with the law. It also provides the state boards with a means to measure the effectiveness of the policy and to identify if there is further need for corrective action or revision.

In conjunction to the suggested proposals on a policy level, actionable recommendation to ensure equality in sports include but are not limited to:

- Educating children about the benefits of inclusion in the classroom and on the playing field.
- Promoting diversity on an educational, familial, and communal level.
- Developing professional and parental workshops to better inform parents, educators, coaches, and community members about the determinants of exclusion on development.
- Establishing community-based organizations that focus on education and empowerment.
- Creating programs that foster inclusion for children with all forms of disabilities.

Conclusion

Athletics is an essential component of youth development and excluding the participation of a population constitutes discriminatory behavior. State legislatures need to take responsibility for the intolerable treatment that children with physical disabilities endure in their quest to participate in athletics. The passage of the Fitness and Equity Act for Students with Disabilities needs to serve as a model that equality and justice is attainable. It is thereby recommended that policy makers investigate and consider the implementation of educational policies so all children can have an equal and fair opportunity of healthy development.

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