

Disability and ability in sport participation in children

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Sports participation and physical activity (PA) in children are known not only to have a positive effect on general health and well-being but also to play an educational role in the development of psychosocial skills and self-esteem. Perhaps most importantly, sports participation creates a sense of belonging¹⁻³.

The UN convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, the legal binding international instrument addressing sports participation for persons with disability, asks us "To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system." (Article 30.5d). They also call upon governments to make sure "persons with disabilities have access to sport and recreational venues, both as spectators and as active participants."⁴

In 2019, the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMO) published national guidelines on physical activity for the general population relative to age¹. While most subgroups were addressed, physical activity levels for children with an impairment were not included. In February of this year, the UK CMO published, for the first time, guidelines on physical activity for disabled children and young people². Evidence-based recommendations were created, and an infographic

communication was developed to highlight equality, inclusivity, and provide guidelines to facilitate the introduction of more activity into the child's day. A minimum of 120-180 minutes of physical activity per week (e.g. 20 minutes of PA per day) are recommended, with strength and balance activities three times a week (Figure 1).

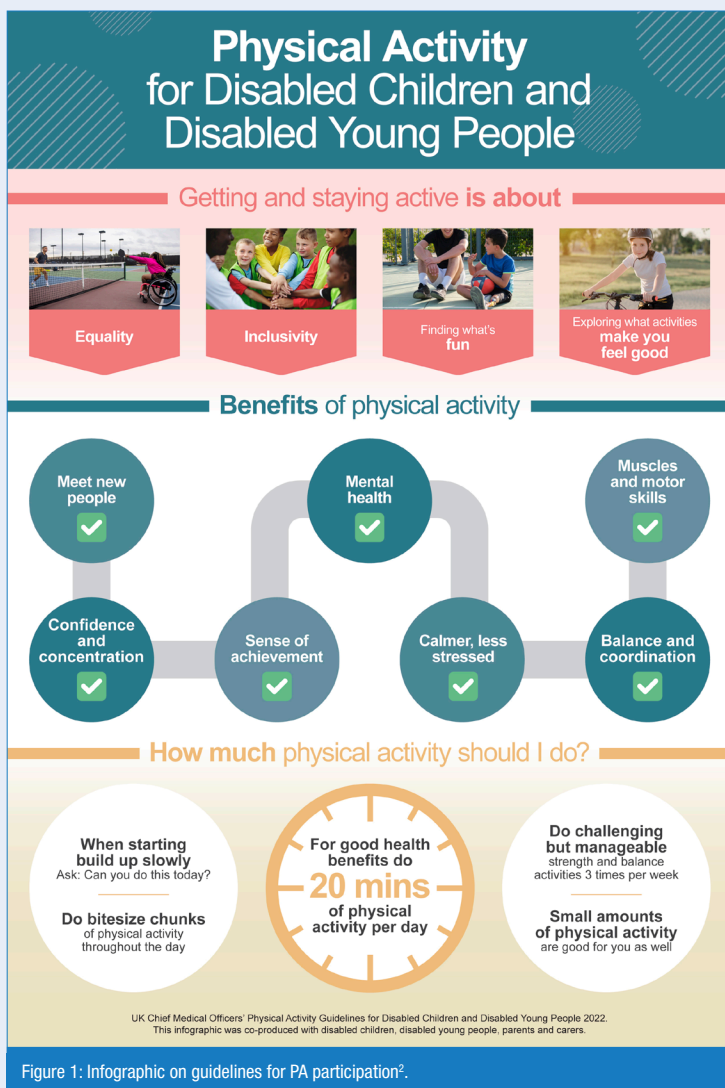


Figure 1: Infographic on guidelines for PA participation².



Figure 2: Oliver Miller, true ambassador for Cerebral Palsy Football.

These are all steps in the right direction but still leave many children without access to physical activity. Problems of acceptance, discrimination, access to sports facilities and a lack of clubs and coaches being inclusive for disabled children have all been factors leading to lower participation³. Also, parents, caregivers, health care providers, communities and schools are often unaware or do not know where to find access to all ability and inclusive sport activities and perhaps as healthcare professionals we fail to promote this as much as we should.

In a hearing to the members of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in December 2021, Lauren Rowles, double paralympic gold medallist in rowing and Ellie Robinson, paralympic gold medallist in swimming, provided evidence for National Lottery funding and the importance of grassroots level of participation⁵. Problems with access to facilities, equipment, and inclusivity for sport participation for people with disability, for all incomes, were raised. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of the continuation of the next generation of paralympic (elite) athletes to maintain funding. The London 2012 Paralympics, were a watershed moment with athletes competing in front of sell-out crowds and since then there has been more emphasis on sport participation for individuals with a

disability, but despite this access for children to grassroots and para-youth sport activities is limited. And nine years later, in 2021, as most of us watched the Tokyo Olympics Summer games, how many of us continued on watching the Paralympic games?

I was fortunate enough to meet Oliver Miller, a 15-year-old GMFCS-level 1, Cerebral Palsy United football player, in my clinic recently (Figure 2). Ollie is an exemplar of successful grassroots sport participation. Both Ollie and his parents agreed to share his story to increase awareness (amongst health care providers) of the opportunities that exist. Ollie started playing football in primary school, as he enjoyed it and it kept him active. His physiotherapist pointed him towards the Bolton Wanderers Pan Disability Football Club and he joined the team. As it became clear Ollie had not just the love for the game but also the talent, his coach encouraged the family to contact Cerebral Palsy United and he was invited for a taster session. Ollie is now on the Football Association regional talent pathway, being awarded not only the Rising Star for Manchester FA but also the prestigious Bobby Moore award in 2020. He is also an ambassador for sport participation for children with a disability and helps others where he can. Kevin de Bruyne, Phil Foden, Jack Rutter - ex CP England and Paralympian, and

Matt Crossen, who is the current CP England captain, are his role models. He hopes to play for CP England one day.

Oliver's parents stated that the biggest obstacle was to find facilities for disability sport. Whilst his medical team has been supportive over the years, he was not really encouraged to participate in sport, but was referred to physiotherapy. This is where we can play a key role as (paediatric) orthopaedic surgeons, treating children like Oliver. Just as we encourage non-disabled children to participate in physical activities, why should this be any different for the child with an impairment?

Focussing on the physical health and well-being is a good starting point in the non-disabled child but can hold back the child with disability (and the community) to develop and learn a sport-specific skill. Furthermore, the typical structure of a pyramid, with general health and well-being at the bottom, will make it difficult to reach top elite para-sport level⁶. By showing what is possible through individuals like Oliver, athletic successes can lead to further social changes and closing the gap between the non-disabled and the disabled youth athlete.

With accessibility being the biggest hurdle, developing grassroots sports programmes >>

are essential. This, however, requires a unique way of thinking and turning the pyramid into a wheel, circling around culture – the culture of the nation and the culture of disability (Figure 3). This was proposed by the international disability sport outreach program, led by Jean Driscoll, world-renowned wheelchair athlete and a global advocate for disabled individuals⁶.

The success of a program is multi-variable and requires a good project leader, policies for persons with disabilities, existing opportunities, an interest level of Paralympic sport and will depend on the nation's demographics, healthcare, and education. By continuously identifying, assessing, and evaluating what is important on every level, the program can develop sustainably.

We are fortunate to live in a developed country but regardless, there is still an important disproportion in funding, accessibility, and participation. Models like these can help improve awareness and social changes, the most important reason to promote sport participation for the child with disability, aiming at equality, integration, and inclusiveness in society, not only in sports, but also in work and in life.

Just as the grassroots Paralympic sport development program is about changing the mindset through awareness, Disability Sport Wales (DSW) developed the InSport project, aiming at inclusivity of disabled people⁷. The program developed toolkits for clubs, national governing bodies and local authorities to widen and increase participation by awarding InSport incremental standards (Ribbon, Bronze, Silver, Gold) based on inclusive thinking, planning, and delivery, offering sport participation for all abilities. Furthermore, through their club finder tool, they made it accessible to find an InSport club in your local area. It would be great to see this project expanded across the country.

If we can change our mindset and see *the disability not as a disadvantage but as an advantage to make it into an ability*, we have a lot to offer to our patients and their families. By encouraging children and young people into physical activity, we provide an integrated approach to our care, not just looking at the biomechanical problem, but stimulating general well-being, mental health, and social integration. The latter is known to be a struggle for many young people with an impairment.

Oliver's mindset is to 'have a go' at anything, he never blames his disability, is not afraid to take on the extra challenge. So why don't

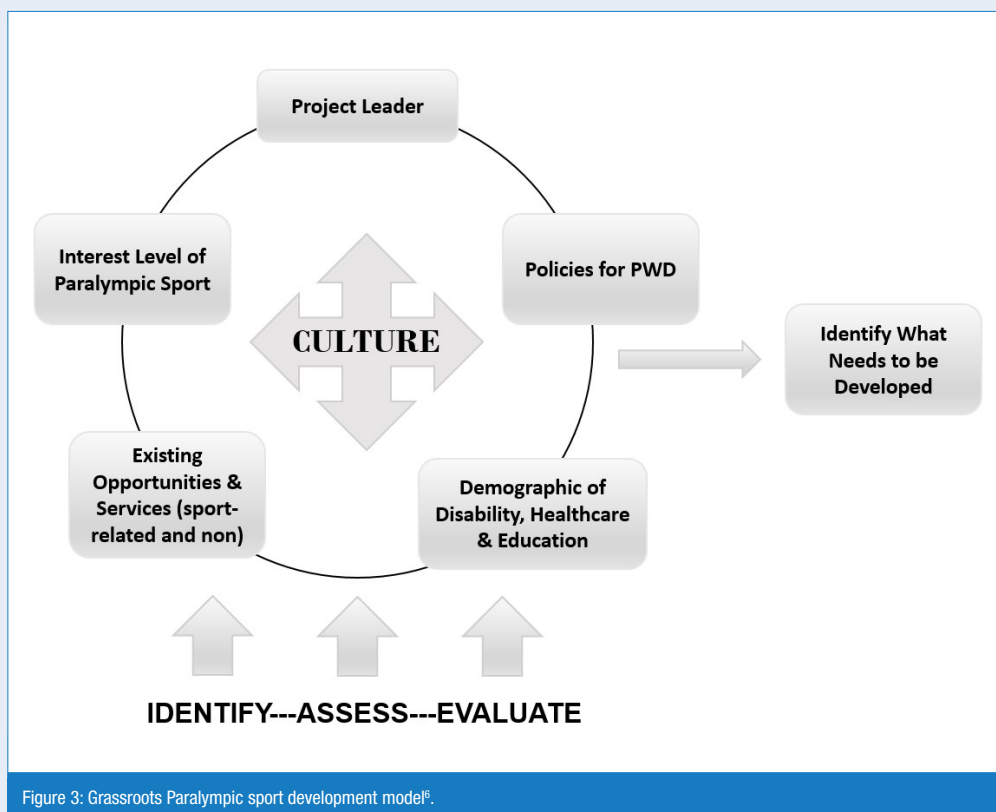


Figure 3: Grassroots Paralympic sport development model⁶.

we take a moment and identify our local track and field club, swimming club or football club offering programs for children with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, spina bifida etc., being able to advise our patients on sport activities for all abilities and help to close that gap.

With the origins of the Olympic Games dating back to ancient Greece, Olympia, and the Paralympics created in the 20th century, with 'para' meaning 'side by side', the question has been raised if both events should merge. With (world-wide) increased focus on inclusivity in present days, is the rise of a 'Pan-Olympic Games' – one I would enjoy watching – slowly becoming a reality? ■

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