

# Valuing Inclusive Recreational Activities for Special Children: Leave No One Behind

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## Abstract

Recreational activities promote children's overall development and well-being, including those with special needs. This paper aims to explore the importance of inclusive recreational activities for special children, emphasizing the benefits they provide in terms of physical, social, and emotional growth. It highlights the significance of creating an inclusive and accessible environment that caters to the unique needs of each child and examines various types of recreational activities that can be adapted or specially designed to accommodate special children. Emphasizes the importance of individualized tips for designing and implementing inclusive recreational programs and approaches that consider the child's specific abilities, interests, and preferences. Collaboration among professionals, families, and community organizations is crucial for establishing inclusive programs that encourage participation and empower children with disabilities. This article was derived from published articles in several journals. Over a hundred papers were carefully studied, and fifty (54) papers were referenced. In conclusion, the significance of inclusive recreational activities for special children highlights the idea of providing opportunities for fun, engagement, and empowerment. These activities promote children's overall well-being and development, fostering a sense of inclusivity and equality. Creating an inclusive recreational environment requires a collective effort to ensure that children with special needs can fully enjoy the benefits and joys of recreational activities, leading to a more inclusive society overall.

**Keywords:** *Behind, Inclusive, Leave no one, Recreational activities, Special children, Valuing.*

## Introduction

In recent times, recreational activities are crucial at every level. Since there is little to no involvement in educational activities among children with intellectual or developmental disabilities. The ability of children with disabilities to engage in leisure activities is an important factor in determining their physical and mental health. It is also crucial for the development of skills and competencies, peer interaction, the pursuit of personal interests, academic success, and other factors that improve overall well-being and quality of life (Dahan-Oliel et al., 2012; Dieringer and Judge, 2015; Bullock and Mahon 2017).

As described by Hurd and Anderson (2011), Recreation is a free-time activity that an individual can enjoy and acknowledge as having socially beneficial effects. According to Miller et al. (2010), inclusive recreation is a step towards treating persons with and without disabilities equally and getting rid of the concept of "they."

According to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, participation in leisure and recreational activities is a fundamental human right. For children with disabilities to exercise their rights, accessible, inclusive settings and facilities must be provided.

To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to quality physical activity and sporting opportunities as their peers without disabilities, all structures, strategies, and programs should be incorporated to plan a physical education curriculum. Children with a disability (CWD) involvement in physical activity should be introduced in schools, including adapted or therapeutic sports programs, community facilities support and entertainment, and public awareness campaigns (Coates and Vickerman, 2010; Bertills et al., 2018). The therapeutic and inclusive recreation program (TIRP) is a deliberate effort to encourage kids' emotions of school connectedness, respect, and inclusion among their peers, as well as their ability to form social and emotional ties with others. Through participation in structured diversion-based mediations to promote school connectivity, social close-to-home wellbeing, and self-assurance, pupils learn knowledge and skills to effectively engage with other students. Sharing strengths and qualities during planned, significant, all-encompassing educational and entertainment experiences helps schoolchildren with and without limitations, disabilities, and wellbeing create friendships and cultivate a sense of belonging (Maciver et al., 2019; Ramella and Ross, 2020). Institutions for children with disabilities need to provide them with suitable leisure choices throughout their academic years in order to ensure that no child is left behind and to balance the specified risk of acquiring secondary health issues. *The importance of inclusive recreational activities for special children* Children with special needs have opportunity to socialize and form bonds with their classmates who are usually developing through inclusive leisure activities. They can improve their communication skills, build a sense of community, and develop social skills by engaging in activities together (King et al., 2015). Recreational activities help unique kids develop their motor skills and physical conditioning. Through adapted sports, swimming, dancing, or other physical activities, they can strengthen their balance, coordination, and overall physical fitness. Additionally, engaging in leisure activities can improve a person's mental health overall and their sense of confidence and self-worth (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2019). Institutions for children with impairments need to provide them with suitable leisure choices throughout their academic years in order to ensure that no child is left behind and to balance the specified risk of acquiring secondary health issues.

Problem-solving, making decisions, and strategic thinking are frequently incorporated into inclusive recreational activities, which can improve cognitive capacities in children with special needs. Engaging in creative, imaginative, and cognitive functions including memory and focus can be boosted by participating in arts and crafts, music, or theatrical activities (Shields and colleagues, 2018). Family members are frequently included in these activities, allowing them to take part and aid in the growth of their particular kid. Through possibilities for shared experiences and a support system for the kid and the family, this participation improves family relationships (National Recreation and Park Association, 2018). Special children experience delight, fun, and a sense of success when they participate in recreational activities. It gives kids the chance to express themselves, look into their hobbies, and identify their strongest points. Their mental health, stress levels, and feeling of general well-being all increase when they participate in fun activities (WHO, 2009). *Barriers to participation in recreational activities for special children*

There may be a lack of accessibility or equipment to meet the requirements of special children in many parks, recreational centers, and other public areas. Inaccessible entrances, a lack of ramps or elevators, and a dearth of accessible bathrooms are a few examples of physical barriers that might be present. Additionally, it can entail a dearth of participation-required assistive technology or adapted equipment (Baldwin and McPherson, 2015). The many requirements of special children may not be catered for in recreational programs and activities. This may lead to fewer choices or chances for inclusive involvement. Special children may find it challenging to participate completely in and gain from the activities in some programs because there may not be qualified staff or adequate resources to enable their inclusion.

Social obstacles to participation may be caused by unfavorable attitudes, misunderstandings, and a lack of knowledge about special needs. Children with disabilities may encounter prejudice, bullying, or rejection from their peers, which may discourage them from engaging in recreational activities. These social hurdles may affect their confidence and sense of self, which may result in decreased engagement and isolation (Shields et al., 2018).

For many families with special needs children, the expense of engaging in recreational activities can be a substantial obstacle. Some families may struggle to cover the increased costs associated with adaptive technology, specialized programs, and therapeutic treatments. Access to inclusive recreational options may be hampered by a lack of funding (National Recreation and Park Association, 2018).

Some exceptional kids could struggle with communication or need extra assistance to engage fully in leisure pursuits. Lack of skilled personnel, translators, or communication tools might provide obstacles to comprehension and active participation. Parents and other caregivers could worry about the security, oversight, and assistance offered in recreational environments. They could be hesitant to sign up their special children for activities out of concern for their safety or a lack of faith in the programs' inclusion (Almqvist et al., 2009).

### ***Successful Recreational Program for Special Children***

An international organization called the Special Olympics provides year-round physical training and sports coaching. The program provides a broad variety of inclusive sports activities and has been very effective in fostering children with intellectual disabilities' physical health, social inclusion, and self-confidence (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007).

Children with physical limitations can take swimming lessons and participate in water-based activities thanks to the Adaptive Aquatics Program, which is being used in several areas. The program promotes water safety knowledge, physical health, and recreational enjoyment by providing specialized teaching, adaptable equipment, and a friendly atmosphere. (<https://www.disabledsportsusa.org/programs/adaptive-aquatics-program/>)

Children with disabilities can participate in a variety of artistic endeavors thanks to inclusive arts programs, such as those provided by groups like VSA (previously Very Special Arts). These initiatives promote creativity, self-expression, and interpersonal relationships by providing accessible classes, workshops, and performances in the performing arts, visual arts, music, dance, and more. (<https://education.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/about>)

Horseback riding and equine-assisted activities are used in therapeutic horseback riding programs, like those provided by organizations like PATH International, to foster the physical, emotional, and cognitive growth of kids with disabilities. These programs boost sensory processing, offer therapeutic advantages, and promote balance, coordination, and self-esteem.

Children with disabilities can participate in outdoor exploration, cooperative games, and recreational activities in inclusive adventure camps, such as those run by groups like Easterseals. The adaptive recreational programs provided by these camps, which include hiking, canoeing, rock climbing, and other outdoor sports, help to develop physical prowess, social skills, and self-assurance. (<https://www.easterseals.com/camping-recreation/our-camps/camp-programs/>)

The baseball program for those with physical and mental limitations is called Challenger Baseball. To guarantee that everyone who participates in the sport can fully participate, it offers adjusted regulations and adaptable equipment. For kids with exceptional needs, the program encourages physical exercise, social contact, and skill development. ([www.littleleague.org/play-little-league/challenger](http://www.littleleague.org/play-little-league/challenger)).

International nonprofit Autism Swim instructs people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) how to swim and be safe around water, they provide customized swimming programs and materials to address the distinct requirements and problems experienced by people with autism in aquatic situations ([www.autismswim.com](http://www.autismswim.com)).

### **Tips For Designing and Implementing Inclusive Recreational Programs for Special Children.**

To determine the target population's unique talents, interests, and support needs, conduct a thorough needs assessment. To guarantee meaningful engagement, create tailored programs that consider each child's specific requirements. To make sure that the physical environment, facilities, and equipment are inclusive and accessible for kids with a range of abilities, use universal design principles. Provide equitable possibilities for participation by modifying and adapting as necessary. Training on inclusive practices, disability awareness, and efficient communication techniques should be made available to program workers. Give them the information and talents required to assist and include children with impairments in leisure activities (Lenker et al., 2006; Spanierman et al., 2018; Cairney et al., 2019).

In order to promote peer involvement and support, encourage inclusive activities that encourage connections and cooperation between children with and without disabilities. The entire program experience, socializing, and inclusion can all be enhanced through peer assistance. Include neighborhood people and families in the program's development and execution. Ask for their opinions, suggestions, and help to make sure the program fits with the needs and values of the neighborhood and fosters a feeling of community. Evaluate the program's success, effect, and satisfaction of participants and stakeholders on a continuing basis. In order to maintain the program's inclusivity, relevance, and value, required modifications and enhancements must be made (Casey et al., 2005; Goodwin et al., 2017; Eshun & Gurung, 2019).

### ***The Role of Parents, Caregivers, and Community Members in Promoting Inclusive Activities***

Parents, caregivers, and community members play a crucial role in promoting inclusive activities for individuals with diverse abilities. Their involvement and support are essential in creating inclusive environments that foster the participation and well-being of people with disabilities.

Parents, caregivers, and community members can advocate for inclusive activities and raise awareness about the importance of inclusion. They can actively engage with schools, organizations, and local authorities to promote inclusive practices. Parents and caregivers can advocate for an inclusive society by working with schools and community organizations to promote inclusive activities and challenge barriers to participation" (Beauchamp & McEwen, 2019).

Parents and caregivers can collaborate with schools and educational institutions to ensure inclusive education and extracurricular activities. They can provide valuable insights into the needs of their children and work together with educators to develop inclusive strategies. "Parent-school collaboration is important for creating inclusive education environments, where parents and educators work together to create inclusive activities and opportunities for all students" (Fadare et al., 2022; Fadare et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2016).

Parents, caregivers, and community members can lead by example, modeling inclusive behaviors and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. Their acceptance and inclusion of individuals with diverse abilities can have a significant impact on promoting a culture of inclusion in society. Positive role modeling by parents, caregivers, and community members helps create a culture of inclusion, where individuals with disabilities are accepted and valued" (Ana and Odet, 2014; Kang & Decker, 2018). Parents, caregivers, and community members can provide emotional and practical support to individuals with disabilities, encouraging their participation in inclusive activities. This support can boost self-confidence and motivation, leading to increased engagement and social inclusion. Parental support is essential in encouraging and promoting the participation of individuals with disabilities in inclusive activities, as it positively influences their self-perception and motivation (Bariroh, 2018).

### ***Overcoming Stigma and Promoting Acceptance of A Special Child in Recreational Settings***

Overcoming stigma and promoting acceptance of a special child in recreational settings is a critical goal. By fostering understanding and empathy among peers, stigma can be reduced, and acceptance can be promoted. Creating inclusive recreational environments where all children can participate and feel valued is essential. Through education and awareness campaigns, attitudes can be shifted, and stereotypes can be challenged. Encouraging positive interactions and fostering inclusive behaviors can help break down barriers and promote acceptance (Smith and Johnson, 2017; Brown & Jones, 2019; Miller et al., 2020).

### **Collaboration Between Recreational Providers and Special Education Professionals To Create Inclusive Programs.**

Collaboration between recreational providers and special education professionals is crucial in creating inclusive programs. By working together, they can combine their expertise and resources to design activities and environments that accommodate the diverse abilities of participants. Effective communication and information sharing between the two parties are essential for understanding participants' needs and implementing appropriate accommodations. Joint planning and program development allow for the integration of inclusive practices, such as modifications and adaptations, to ensure accessibility and engagement for all individuals involved. Ongoing professional development and training are also important for both recreational providers and special education professionals to enhance their knowledge of inclusive strategies and approaches. Regular evaluation and feedback processes help assess program effectiveness and guide continuous improvement efforts (Garcia & Davis, 2016; Roberts et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2018; Jones & Williams, 2019).

### **The Impact of Inclusive Recreational Activities on Socialization and Emotional Well-Being For Special Children**

Inclusive recreational activities positively impact the socialization and emotional well-being of special children. By participating in inclusive activities, special children have opportunities to interact with peers without disabilities, fostering social connections and friendships. This interaction promotes social skills development, such as communication, cooperation, and empathy (Shields and Synnott, 2016; Batorowicz and Batorowicz, 2019; Brown and McPhee, 2020).

Inclusive recreational activities also contribute to the emotional well-being of special children. Engagement in enjoyable and meaningful activities boosts self-esteem and self-confidence. It provides a sense of belonging and acceptance, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting positive emotional experiences. Participating in inclusive activities can also enhance emotional regulation and coping skills ((Dattilo & Estes, 2013).

Inclusive recreational activities support the overall development of special children, including their socialization and emotional well-being. These activities create inclusive environments where special children can connect with others, experience a sense of belonging, and develop important social and emotional skills.

### ***Future Direction for Research and Practice in Promoting Inclusive Recreational Opportunities For Special Children.***

Future research and practice in promoting inclusive recreational opportunities for special children should focus on several key areas:

Studies have shown and explored the long-term effects of inclusive recreational opportunities on special children's overall well-being and quality of life. Research could investigate the sustained benefits of participation in inclusive activities on socialization, emotional well-being, physical health, and academic achievement (Shields et al., 2018). Conducting rigorous evaluations of inclusive recreation programs is essential to determine their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. This includes assessing program outcomes, participant satisfaction, program accessibility, and the effectiveness of accommodations and adaptations (Batorowicz & Batorowicz, 2019).

Research should examine the effectiveness of individualized approaches to inclusive recreation, considering special children's unique needs and preferences. This includes exploring personalized support, activity modifications, and the role of assistive technology in enhancing participation and enjoyment (Dattilo & Estes, 2013). Further exploration is needed on effective collaboration between recreational providers, special education professionals, and other stakeholders. Research should investigate the most effective models of collaboration, strategies for training and professional development, and the impact of collaborative efforts on the design and implementation of inclusive recreation programs. Future research should examine the impact of interventions aimed at promoting inclusive attitudes and awareness among community members, including peers, parents, educators, and recreational providers. This research could focus on the effectiveness of awareness campaigns, educational programs, and advocacy initiatives in fostering inclusive attitudes and reducing stigmatization (Brown and McPhee, 2020).

### Conclusions

Inclusive recreational activities are essential for special children as they provide numerous benefits including social integration, physical and emotional development, cognitive stimulation, skill enhancement, increased inclusion and acceptance, family engagement, and overall well-being. These activities contribute to the holistic development of special children and help them lead fulfilling lives.

### Declaration of Conflict

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the scholars whose works were referenced in this research. Our internal peer reviewers include Prof. Dina A. Gumanoy, Prof. Lowelyn Mabandes, and Dr. Hendely Arreza Adlawan, the Dean of the College of SPEAR. We also acknowledge the editor and anonymous at JPES peer reviewers for their helpful remarks.

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