

# The right social supports to inspire youth with physical disabilities to stay active



## What is this study about?

Youth with physical disabilities are often missing the health benefits of regular physical activity, and can risk feeling isolated. Recent research has helped to uncover barriers that block their participation.

This qualitative study aimed to discover what factors motivated youth with physical disabilities to feel comfortable playing a sport or getting physically active. It focused on how having social support can encourage youth with physical disabilities to embrace physical activity. What would that motivating environment look like? Some say the answer lies in dedicated programs such as wheelchair basketball, where everyone has a disability. Others believe that all kids should participate together, regardless of physical ability, in “integrated programs.”

Researchers interviewed 11 youth (aged 12 to 18, most with cerebral palsy) who were already engaged in Holland Bloorview programs.

### What is ‘qualitative research’ in healthcare?

Qualitative research is a type of science that works with data gathered through interviewing people, either individually or in a group. Qualitative research allows people with particular experiences to teach researchers about their lives, so that different areas of healthcare can be tailored more to the needs of those using them.



## What did the study find?

Three overarching themes emerged:

### Fair, equitable participation

- It was important to participants to have a supportive and fair environment for physical activity, regardless of whether it was a dedicated or integrated program.
- They disliked feeling excluded by activities that weren’t physically accessible or game rules that didn’t adapt well to wheelchairs or walkers.
- Flexible rules, such as giving extra time or space to players with disabilities, gave them greater motivation to participate.

### Belonging to a team:

- While some youth enjoyed competing against others, some were happy striving for their personal best. Regardless, participants felt motivated by being part of a team and feeling a sense of belonging.

### Socially-supported independence

- Some participants strongly felt that they wanted to be able to do physical activities themselves as it gave them confidence. Meanwhile, others were more likely to engage in games with support from others.
- Researchers call the middle ground “socially supported independence” – where caregivers (refers to parents and others caring for the child) and teams find the right balance between helping and stepping back.



## What this means for caregivers

Family caregivers play a special role in understanding how children want to be active and what activities each child is interested in playing. Caregivers can talk to youth about what motivates them most- whether that's competition, striving for a personal best or simply enjoying being active with others and feeling part of a team.

In terms of equity, a top priority is to find activities that are fair and balanced.

Understanding the amount of help a youth desires is also important. Some may thrive with plenty of family support, while others prefer a sense of freedom. In those cases, caregivers could provide indirect support, such as simple encouragement, sharing their own positive experiences, or making sure that they can actually get to the activity.

Even for youth who are quite sedentary, the route to having fun through physical activity begins with understanding what types of social supports they need to get there.



### Additional resources

#### Local resources:

- Abilities Centre: Provides sports and fitness, arts, research and education, and life skills opportunities for people of all ages and abilities.  
<https://www.abilitiescentre.org>
- Variety Village: An inclusive and family-friendly fitness, sports and life skills facility in Toronto.  
<http://www.varietyvillage.ca>
- Toronto Accessible Sports Council: Provides information related to adapted sports and recreation in Toronto.  
<http://torontoaccessiblesports.ca>

#### Other resources

- The National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) has a range of online resources to support physical activity for those with mobility limitations, chronic health conditions, and physical disabilities.  
<https://www.nchpad.org>
- Check your local Parks and Recreation website for accessible parks and activities
- Talk to your child's teacher about incorporating inclusive physical activities at school



## Ideas to design supportive physical activity programs

To support youth with physical disabilities, it takes a purposeful approach to design the right activities. It's an opportunity to build on the principles of games being fair and equal, promoting teamwork and minimizing competition.

These characteristics could be part of dedicated and integrated programs. The real answers lay in personal preferences. We must work with youth to find out what's important to them, and what it means to feel successful.



### For more information

Find the [abstract here](#) or visit your local library:

Knibbe, T.J., Biddiss, E., Gladstone, B., & McPherson, A.C. (2017). *Characterizing socially supportive environments relating to physical activity participation for young people with physical disabilities*. *Dev Neurorehabil*, 20(5): 294-300. doi: 0.1080/17518423.2016.1211190. Epub 2016 Aug 11.

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This lay summary and all research at Holland Bloorview is made possible by the generosity of donors to the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital Foundation.