

Health promotion and social participation of youth with intellectual disabilities through sports: Occupational therapists' leadership needed

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Introduction: Individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) encounter considerable physical and mental health challenges and difficulties being involved in meaningful occupations in their community (Hawkins & Look, 2006; Horwitz, Kerker, Owens, & Zigler, 2000; Office des personnes handicapées du Québec, 2007). Participating in sports can promote better physical and mental health for these people as well as social participation. Although an increasing number of individuals with ID participate in sports, few are involved in sports with their non-disabled peers.

Objectives: The objective of this study was to describe the factors facilitating and hindering the integration of youth with ID in community-based sports.

Methods: Data were gathered during Fall 2008 using multiple methods and sources in Quebec (Canada), including: individual interviews with youth with intellectual disabilities and their parents; a discussion group with rehabilitation professionals; and questionnaires with staff working with this population. The Disability Creation Process model (Fougeyrollas et al., 1998) was used to guide the analysis.

Results: Many personal and environmental factors involved in the integration of youth with ID in sports with their non-disabled peers were identified. Among other factors, the individual's prior experience in integrated contexts and in sports, as well as his or her ability to behave appropriately, were believed to be helpful. As well, attitudes towards this population, the support available and knowledge of coaches about intellectual disability were revealed to be important.

Conclusion: The promotion of inclusion, the creation of tools to support coaches and staff working in centers for people with ID and a comprehensive analysis to ensure a good person-environment-occupation fit (Law et al., 1996) will be discussed.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: This research provides support for the use of sport as a meaningful occupation to promote the health and social participation of youth ID. To this end, in light of occupational therapists' knowledge and experience of activity analysis and the role of occupation, they are called upon to take on a leadership role.