

Letter to the Editor

Promoting inclusive physical activity for children with disabilities: A call for policy action in schools

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Dear Editor,

According to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health, disability is a broad term that encompasses impairments in body structures and functions, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.^[1] In parallel, physical activity is defined as any bodily movement that results in energy expenditure,^[2] and it plays a crucial role in promoting the growth, development, and overall health of children. Physical activity is not only essential for physical health but also for mental and social well-being, particularly in childhood, which is a formative period for growth and development.

Regular physical activity can significantly reduce the risk of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and hypertension in both children and individuals with disabilities.^[3,4] The positive impacts of physical activity are well-documented, with studies showing that children who engage in physical activities experience better cardiovascular health, enhanced metabolic function, and improved cognitive abilities.^[5] Moreover, physical activity is beneficial for mental health, contributing to a reduction in anxiety, depression, and stress, which is crucial for children, including those with disabilities, who may be at a higher risk for these conditions.^[5,6] In addition, physical activity provides school-age children with opportunities for enjoyment, relaxation, recreation, self-improvement, and goal achievement, enhancing their overall quality of life.^[5,6]

Furthermore, regular engagement in physical activity contributes to the development of key life skills such as competence, self-determination, identity, and social and personal development.^[5-7] These benefits are particularly important for children with disabilities, as participation in physical activities can foster a sense of inclusion, self-worth, and social integration, which are sometimes compromised due to the barriers they face in educational settings.^[7]

Schools are one of the most important social institutions for promoting physical activity among children.^[8] Research indicates that physical activity initiatives within the school setting can be particularly effective due to the significant amount of time children spend in school and the opportunity for structured physical activity programs.^[9] Schools can provide an ideal environment for promoting inclusivity and ensuring that children with disabilities are not left out of physical activity opportunities. However, despite the numerous health benefits associated with participation in physical activities, children with disabilities continue to face barriers to full participation in sports and physical activities within schools. These barriers often result in poorer health outcomes, as children with disabilities tend to live more sedentary lifestyles compared to their peers.^[10,11]

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Several studies have identified key barriers to the inclusion of children with disabilities in physical activities at school. Rizzo and Vispoel^[12] highlighted that teachers' attitudes play a critical role in the inclusion of children with disabilities in sports and physical activities. Teachers may lack the knowledge or skills to adapt physical activities to meet the needs of children with disabilities, and some may have negative attitudes or misconceptions about the capabilities of these children.^[12] In addition, documented barriers include individual preferences, fear, and negative attitudes toward disability, which can be further exacerbated by a lack of parental support and involvement.^[13] Furthermore, insufficient facilities, inadequate transportation options, and limited program availability can prevent children with disabilities from participating fully.^[13] Another critical factor is the lack of policies and enforcement mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of children with disabilities in physical activities, leaving them at a disadvantage.^[10]

Therefore, we urge policymakers to implement laws that mandate the inclusion of children with disabilities in sports and physical activities within disability-friendly environments. Research supports the idea that laws and regulations are essential to ensuring that children with disabilities have access to the same opportunities as their peers.^[9] In addition, educational institutions should prioritize creating an enabling environment for children with disabilities to engage in sports. This can be achieved by offering comprehensive training programs for teachers, ensuring the provision of adequate resources, and fostering a supportive system that promotes positive attitudes toward inclusion. Such measures will not only enhance physical health but also contribute to the social and emotional development of children with disabilities, ensuring that they are given equal opportunities to thrive.

Ethical approval

Institutional Review Board approval is not required.

Declaration of patient consent

Patient's consent is not required as there are no patients in this study.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

Use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for manuscript preparation

The authors confirm that there was no use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for assisting in the writing or editing of the manuscript and no images were manipulated using AI.

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