

Feeling included -- kids with disabilities have their say in landmark study

December 8 2010

The playground can be a daunting place for any kid trying to join in and be one of the gang. For kids with disabilities it's just as important to feel included, be accepted and valued -- particularly by their peers.

In a study to understand the perspectives of children with disabilities around inclusion in physical activities during free play, recreational sports and recess, Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, an adapted [physical activity](#) expert, in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta, interviewed children with a range of disabilities about their thoughts on what made them feel included or rejected during these activities.

"Children were asked to theorize about other fictional children who are like them, so they didn't have to pour their hearts out initially if they didn't want to. So I'd start by saying, 'Imagine if you were...'

"I found that as children theorized, they would float in and out of (describing things in the) first, second and third person. They wove their own experiences into those of the fictional child they were theorizing about. Final questions would ask, 'How about you? How would you feel?'"

Three themes emerged from the data: gaining entry to play; feeling like a legitimate participant, and having friends.

"Many children spoke about initiating play," says Spencer-Cavaliere,

"and either being invited to play or asking to play and being rejected or not being invited or not being allowed. Making that initial step into a play environment is really a critical step for children."

One of the children gave an example of wanting to play freeze-tag, a game he enjoyed. "He asked to play and was rejected. He asked the teacher to help and the teacher did nothing. Eventually he walked away. 'It feels like you're treated like an insect,' he said.' So a major part of being included was being asked to take part, or another child saying, "Yes, you can play."

Children frequently expressed the need to feel valued, evolving the second major theme: feeling like a legitimate participant. Says Spencer-Cavaliere, "For the children this meant that once within a physical activity or play environment, taking on roles that were meaningful, feeling a part of the game: feeling important, as though you had a valued role."

One boy talked about being sent onto the field during the closing minutes of a soccer match when the team was losing badly. "The child was told to go in," says Spencer-Cavaliere, "but with little time left and the team about to lose anyway, he said, 'I know it's being 'included' but you just don't feel like you're included.' Being in the game isn't the same as feeling as though you're part of it."

In the third theme, having friends, children stressed the value of true friendships, having someone they could depend on and trust. "That allowed children to be less concerned about their performance and more invested in being part of the game and having a good time because they were in a safe place with people who accepted and valued them."

One surprise for Spencer-Cavaliere: "Children were given a broad spectrum of things they could talk about but they never mentioned

physical education when discussing feeling included," she says. "This may mean they don't consider [physical education](#) as inclusive because it's very structured by adults. It seems that other children and their behaviour make the distinction between feeling included or belonging that could arise in other play settings where children could direct and make decisions about who takes part.

"With that said, the free play setting is a major challenge for children with disability," says Spencer-Cavaliere, "simply because you're really dependent on other children who are not always mature, or understand or appreciate difference and value that."

So what's a teacher, coach, parent to do to help kids with disability feel included? "When in doubt, ask the child," says Spencer Cavaliere. "You get valuable information and it gives them a say."

Spencer-Cavaliere cautions there is no one solution. "All children need to be in places where they feel included, whether they experience disability or not," she says. "This could mean specialized or integrated settings. Children need to have legitimate choices to have meaningful experiences in a variety of physical activity settings, and we should not be limiting the type of setting."

More information: The research was published in the *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, and named a landmark study by the journal.

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Feeling included -- kids with disabilities have their say in landmark study (2010, December 8) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-12-kids-disabilities-landmark.html>

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