

***What a school for children with physical disabilities can teach parents about adapted sports.***

# LESSONS FROM ADAPTED SPORTS

BY PATRICE M. KUNTZLER

“There was no such thing as adaptive physical education when I was in school. We sat on the sidelines and kept score, were the time keepers or equipment managers, or read a book,” recalls Joe Slaninka, who was one of only three students who used a wheelchair growing up. “In high school it got better. We still didn’t actively participate in gym class but at least we were able to lift weights, or play ping pong or billiards, in another room. And there certainly were no sports-oriented extracurricular activities for us to participate in.”

Everyone has the opportunity to participate in athletics at the Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center, a private, state supported school for children with severe physical disabilities (Pre-K to grade 12) located in Albertson, NY. That’s the intention of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) who recently reminded public schools that students with disabilities must be provided with equal opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, including club, intramural or interscholastic athletics.

While traditional schools are making progress in this area, since

the population of students with physical disabilities is small, it is more difficult for them to address. Yet, if you look at the increased number of students attending public schools with a wide range of disabilities, you quickly see there is a great need to find a way to involve students with all disabilities.

“It really all comes down to access,” explains Mike Sweeney, the high school physical education teacher at the Henry Viscardi School. “We find a way for the students to participate and level the playing field because there really is nothing like participating with your peers.” Mariah, a freshman at the same school,

says she enjoys the exhilaration she gets from playing basketball with her teammates and that it also gives them a chance to express themselves through sports.

Recognizing the critical health benefits of physical activity for children with disabilities, and the invaluable life lessons sports provide that cannot be learned in a classroom—in addition to a robust academic curriculum—the school offers a wide variety of adapted physical education, as well as after-school extracurricular

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activities and adapted sports. All of these opportunities further enrich its student body's educational experience and start to set good habits that can lead to an active adult lifestyle.

"Through participation in athletics, children with disabilities learn teamwork, develop a work ethic and problem solving skills, become leaders, experience disappointment, and appreciate personal space boundaries," Sweeney points out. "What we do is allow kids to be typical kids. In many schools, gym is often the class adolescents want to skip. That isn't the case here. Our students try to find ways to participate in gym more than they have to."

"Our students are playing football, hockey, baseball, basketball, gymnastics, and swimming just like everyone else," notes

Angelo Zegarelli, swim instructor at the school. "They are learning in the classroom and through movement."

In fact, this past summer the staff used the Summer Olympics as a means of integrating sports into its common core learn-

***"One boy asked for a big ball for his birthday because he quickly saw that it could be something he could play with his cousins and neighbors."***

ing standards curriculum. Math classes counted and kept track of the number of medals won, history classes learned about other cultures and created flags of various countries, and art students tie-dyed t-shirts in their team colors to wear at the

culminating event.

## **ADAPTING SPORTING ACTIVITIES AT HOME**

It is relatively easy to adapt typical games and equipment for children with disabilities so that they can participate at home with their siblings, relatives and friends. "There are easy low tech solutions. I tell everyone, including my student-teachers who are our future educators, it's not rocket science," shares Joy Krebs, the elementary school physical education teacher at the Henry Viscardi School. "Think about the child and how can you make that child participate. Everyone has a different ability and the goal is simple. Find a way to make everyone play."

### **GOOD SPORTS**

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Sweeney uses the basics and notes the solution doesn't need to be expensive, "We bungee cord hockey sticks to their wheelchairs if they can't hold the stick. For baseball, if they don't have the range of motion needed to scoop and throw a ball, we have them use their wheel to move it."

Simple activities often bring the most fun, such as freeze dancing or inflatable, oversized balls. "One boy asked for a big ball for his birthday because he quickly saw that it could be something he could play with his cousins and neighbors," adds Krebs.

## A LIFETIME SPORT OR ONE THAT CAN BE ENJOYED TOGETHER

"Swimming is a lifetime skill and something children with disabilities can do on their own. They feel independent," explains Zegarelli. "The kids love it since they are able to get out of their wheelchairs and braces and are free of all of their equipment. In the water they can move fully the same as a person without a disability." Swimming is also a cardiovascular activity that they can participate in and can be enjoyed by the whole family. Many community pools offer swimming lessons for children with disabilities. Yoga, walking, jogging and bicycling are others to consider that may be enjoyed together and into adulthood.

## COMMUNITY BASED INTRAMURALS & AFTER-SCHOOL RECREATION PROGRAMS

"Intramurals and after-school recreation programs are all about having fun and exposing children to the games," says Slaninka who is the head coach of the wheelchair basketball teams at the school. Extracurricular activities of any kind are vital to the personal growth of children, particularly those with disabilities who often do not have many opportunities to socialize. "We really encourage students to participate since these activities foster their social and independence skills and let them take chances and act like leaders," continues Slaninka.

Jennifer Portnoy, whose son participates on the Viscardi Cubbies intramural basketball team, says she is excited that he has the opportunity to play and also be part of an annual tournament. "He learns so much about sportsmanship and being part of a team."

More communities are offering intramural level sports for children with disabilities, so if your town does not offer an activity your child is interested in, check the town next door. Parents may also want to consider initiating a team in their own community.

In addition, extracurricular activities other than sports, such as student government and the writing or production of a school

publication, should be explored since they too offer learning experiences and may cultivate a new interest, or deepen an existing one. Others like theater arts, music lessons, volunteering and youth organizations involve occasions for community integration.

## HITTING THE COMPETITIVE PLAYING FIELD

Competitive wheelchair basketball and swimming teams for children and adults with disabilities is on the rise. "There was a true need since many of our students were coming to school, going home and then just sitting and watching TV or playing video games," explains Slaninka when asked about the intramural and competitive wheelchair basketball programs at Viscardi. "The fact that one third of our school participates in either intramurals or competitive basketball shows we fulfilled a real need."

Competitive sports give children with disabilities the opportunity to get their adrenaline going, just like everyone else but they also serve as a social outlet. "It's fun, getting to know other kids and just knowing I also can play basketball like all the other kids who are not disabled," shares Chris, who plays on the Viscardi Cougars.

A sophomore, Malkeet Singh-Gill likes the "competition and teamwork" involved in playing basketball. Hoops at varying heights are used, and each player wears a different colored headband, depending on their physical capability, to indicate the hoop level they can shoot at. "They learn that while they may be the better shooter, they may have to shoot for the higher net so it may be better to pass it to a teammate who has a shot at a lower basket," says Slaninka. Co-player, Philip, loves the team because "it gives me a chance to be with my friends and really helps me socially."

## THE GREATEST LESSON

"At the end of any gym class or any class that you are teaching, you need to ask yourself a few questions. Did the child participate? Did they get something out of it? Did you accomplish your goals? If the answers are yes, then you've done

your job," concludes Sweeney.

Good questions and questions parents, coaches, or anyone interacting with children can ask themselves at the end of an activity, day or experience. •

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Patrice M. Kuntzler, is Executive Director of the Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center located in Albertson, New York. Learn more at [viscardicenter.org](http://viscardicenter.org)



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