

INTRODUCTION

Hi and welcome to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's ParentWise Podcast series. I'm Robyn Cummins.

Inclusion is about taking part in social, cultural, educational and sporting activities, regardless of our background or ability – it's the essence of a community. As Recreation Therapist, Jessica Tarr, explains in this podcast, for children with a disability inclusion is about much more than just building ramps for access.

Drawing on her experience of helping kids with a disability to achieve their recreational and sporting goals, Jessica reflects on the most effective ways to overcome barriers to inclusion.

WHAT IS INCLUSION?

Hi. I'm Jessica Tarr. A big part of my job involves working with kids and families to help them explore recreation and leisure options. Most importantly, I work with kids, families, recreation venues, clubs and coaches to make community activities more inclusive.

Inclusion is a collaborative process that each individual must embrace.

Inclusive recreation programs benefit everyone involved and bring people together to make friends, build self-confidence and awareness of disability.

As Robyn mentioned at the beginning of this podcast, inclusion isn't just about building a few ramps so that people have better access. It's also about giving everyone the same opportunities and ensuring that everyone involved is culturally, socially, emotionally and attitudinally accepting of a person with a disability to participate in an activity or program.

Inclusion affects almost every aspect of life including school, home, family, community, sporting teams, culture, leisure and recreation options.

I still come across situations in my work where there is little understanding and knowledge of strategies for including people with a disability.

Coaches, clubs, teachers and after school carers are often not aware of who to go to if they have questions about different types of disabilities. Because of this, a fear still exists around the expectations in knowing how to accommodate someone.

Additionally, sometimes parents are overwhelmed by the unknown. They don't know if including young children in an activity is the right thing to do for their child.

They're often involved in intensive therapy programs with their child. When time is limited, remember that recreation activities can also be used as a form of therapy.

There are also the fears and barriers that children with a disability can create for themselves around inclusion. They may ask themselves, 'What if I can't do what the other kids are doing?' 'What happens if I can't catch up?' 'What happens if they only see my disability and they don't see who I really am?'

BARRIERS AND BENEFITS

Creating truly inclusive environments and situations is tangible. It's about building safe and socially comfortable places for everyone - which embrace and teach respect and dignity for any child, of any age, in any environment.

This requires a cultural shift to transform the opinions of not only parents and people with a disability, but the community generally.

This is not an easy process and we've got to respect the concerns people may have.

Families are very passionate about inclusion and can have a big influence on helping the cultural shift to occur.

While parents should be aware that their child has a right to be included in sport and recreational activities, they also need to have a realistic picture of their child's interests and abilities as well.

As I say to many parents who ask for my advice about getting started with inclusion, 'Dream big, think outside the box and we'll work together to make the reality as close as possible to that dream'.

The benefits of inclusion almost speak for themselves.

For example, inclusion in recreational, sports and other activities challenge kids with a disability to go beyond their boundaries or what they think their boundaries are.

Children will also grow up more confident through learning their abilities (and learning to accept and adapt what they can't do so well).

Inclusion will also help your child to develop 'natural' friendship networks - friendships through shared experiences and social connections. At a young age typically developing children and children with special needs learn to accept and have compassion for those who are different.

Being part of inclusive recreation programs also offer children the balance of 'important therapy' and 'just being a kid'.

Therapy exercises can sometimes be incorporated into recreation activities which, for the child, means being included in socially engaging activities in the environment in which they live rather than indoors, one-to-one with a therapist.

Many parents report that one of the biggest benefits of inclusion for their child with a disability is that the child gets to contribute to the community.

As one mother put it, 'I can be on the sidelines while my child is independent'.

As their child become more involved with inclusive activities and programs, parents most often see that they can embrace the challenges and help minimise the barriers and fears people have for their child.

In the community generally, inclusion helps children and adults to be more accepting and treat everyone equally. It also breaks down long-held myths about why people with a disability can't participate in educational, sporting or recreational activities and programs.

Inclusion forces us to go beyond the disability. Rather than letting disability impose limits on a child, inclusion makes us look at someone and their needs and say, 'That's who they are'.

Inclusion is a journey that is constantly changing. Just because your child needs a particular type of support now - such as a particular piece of adaptive equipment - doesn't mean they

are always going to use it. And just because your child is included in an activity, doesn't mean they have to stay there forever and never change their mind. They choose their path.

Successful inclusion in activities and programs (and life!) is about being constantly aware of the inclusion process and the elements within it.

It might seem overwhelming right now but by taking small steps and using positive communication you can start to make it happen.

GETTING STARTED

There are a couple of options for getting started with inclusion.

Firstly, you can chat with your child's therapist about what opportunities are available.

You could also go straight to your local program and optimistically explain what your child's needs are. You might discuss what your child's dreams or aspirations are and look at what support the program can provide, and how therapy services can support the program. Most important, don't forget a picture of your child!

It's also a good idea to discuss with the club what your expectations are around providing a safe environment for your child.

For example, will the club ensure your child is safe in their wheelchair? Will the club be emotionally supportive? Does the club understand the disability and what support and modifications might be needed? How will the club manage the expectations of the other children in the team or group? Many of these questions can be supported by your therapy staff either by them speaking to the program coordinators directly, or possibly attending a few of the sessions.

Parents can play a critical role in educating community-based programs and activities about inclusion in this way.

Some parents and children find that mainstream sports clubs and organisations can be too competitive or just not right for their child, so disability activities can be another great option.

Being involved in a disability program can be fun, rewarding, and challenging and that's fantastic to know.

Some disability-specific sporting organisations are:

- Cerebral Palsy Sports and Recreation Federation of Australia
- Australian Sports Organisation for the Disabled
- Wheelchair Sports Australia
- Disabled Surfers Association of Australia
- Disabled Wintersport Australia

The Australian Sports Commission also has two programs called Sports Ability and Sports Connect. Visit their website at www.ausport.gov.au.

If you're interested in the arts, music and dance you can always contact Arts Access Australia at www.artsaccessaustralia.org or Accessible Arts at www.aarts.net.au.

CLOSE

Thanks for listening. We hope you've found these strategies and ideas useful.

You can download or listen to more episodes in the ParentWise Podcast series at the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's website - www.cpfoundation.com.au