

POINT OF VIEW

THE BENEFITS OF SPORT FOR MENTALLY HANDICAPPED PEOPLE

Social Differences

People with a mental handicap are often isolated, excluded and set apart from the society we live in, rather than being an integral part of it. They are stigmatised. People with a mental handicap may form part of our society and live within it, but they are isolated from it as society treats mentally handicapped people differentially in a variety of ways.

Many people hold stereotyped expectations and prejudices which result in unfavourable attitudes towards people with a mental handicap. An attitude can be composed of 3 parts:-

- a) **The person's knowledge** - very often a biased collection of 'facts' given by friends or the media, and very rarely from one's own experience.*
- b) **Affective component** - refers to emotions and feelings. For example, being upset at the sight of a handicapped person - seeing the handicap, not the person.*
- c) **Behavioural component** - how one behaves towards a handicapped person. If one is upset at the sight of someone, one may ridicule, avoid, etc.*

Society's attitudes towards mentally handicapped people appear to have passed through various phases. In years gone by, a person with a mental handicap was blamed for his condition, either in terms of his behaviour, or neglect of society, and therefore was

given a low social status. Due to this, mentally handicapped people were often rejected by their families and 'put away' in institutions. Social attitudes resulted in mentally handicapped people becoming isolated as they were not seen as part of the community and were discouraged from becoming so. Many mentally handicapped people neither worked, lived or socialised within their local communities. Due to this, their life experiences were consistently restricted.

The 1913 Mental Deficiency (Scotland) Act helped to start changing attitudes towards mentally handicapped people as this brought with it state supervision of the mental defective, for the first time. As society began to recognise that people with a mental handicap needed help, skilled professionals emerged to help people with a mental handicap become more independent and integrated within our society. Public attitudes are now less prejudiced, more enlightened. It is now part of the philosophy of the welfare state that society should provide for those of it's members who cannot make provision for themselves. Yet, the individual's experience is still often one of discrimination and deprivation. While the aim of social security is obviously to assist those in need, too often in practice, the result is to push the handicapped person further out of mainstream society and leave him marooned on an island of poverty and dependency.

Beyond this, deep-seated prejudices, though verbally denied, continue to find behavioural expression. In small ways, discrimination is a daily occurrence. The handicapped person ignored in the shop queue, the assumption that he is incapable of comprehension, or the gushing sentimentality of the hotel waiter. All of these attitudes devalue the handicapped person. Due, not only to the limitations that their specific handicap imposes upon them, but also the attitudes of the public and treatment from society, the handicapped person is often devalued, demoralised and afforded less opportunities and experiences throughout his life, than the non-handicapped person.

We live in an age of increasing awareness of the needs and rights of minority groups. Undoubtedly, attitudes towards handicapped people are in the process of change - the notion that a handicapped person is a disgrace to be concealed from the neighbours has given way to public discussion of the problems and attempts at rehabilitation. Equally important, handicapped people are attempting to gain recognition of themselves as a category with specific needs, and pressure groups are forming to help change attitudes by publicising these needs. Social discrimination is becoming less prevalent.

However, as I see it, one major problem still exists. The emphasis up until now, has been on changing the handicapped person to fit into our society. It is time that we, as professionals committed to helping handicapped individuals, attempt to help change attitudes not only by helping educate the public, but by facilitating the opportunities for mentally handicapped people to become active members of their local communities. By doing so, we may help get rid of many

misconceptions and unfavourable attitudes towards mentally handicapped people, as the public will experience for themselves the fact that mentally handicapped people are exactly that - PEOPLE - with a mental handicap. Rather than changing the handicapped person to fit into our society, it is time that society changed to accept the mentally handicapped person as part of it.

Benefits of Sport

Sports provide for the full development of a person's capacities for growth and learning - physically, intellectually, socially and aesthetically. Sport incorporates values, norms and beliefs. It has cultural interests, can be enjoyed for its own sake and is an area of education in its own right. "Education through the physical will be judged, therefore, even as education of life will be judged by the contribution it makes to fine living".⁽¹⁾ Mental handicap often leads to a poor personal identity, low esteem etc., and therefore involvement in sport has much more social importance for people with a handicap than it does for non-handicapped people. Mental handicap often results in restricted life experiences and through participation in sport, mentally handicapped people can broaden these life experiences not only by the intrinsic value of the sporting activity itself, but by the social aspects surrounding it.

There is much more going on during physical activity than merely playing the game. The ability to assess success and failure, levels of aspiration, growth of attitudes to oneself and others, interaction and communication within groups, freedom, authority and discipline, using human movement as a means of communication and expression.

These aims are important for the development of a mature and well-integrated person. After all, movement is a universal means of communication.

Sport can help greatly in the area of communication. Activities can be structured to allow people to work and play with others, to follow directions, to make decisions, to accept decisions made by others, and to work along with others. Through sport, security and self confidence could develop due to successful experiences, and interaction with peers make an important contribution towards social development.

Emotional development is often a by-product of sporting activities, where one has to learn to respond to daily failures and frustrations in an emotionally sound and socially acceptable fashion. Apart from this, sporting activities provide opportunities for self-expression and relaxation. Sport can help towards greater independence. Learning to accept defeat, or conduct oneself in an appropriate manner when successful helps mature emotional development and helps personal independence. Developing social relationships and co-operating with others, considering their needs as well as one's own, helps to establish and maintain relationships and build up self-confidence. This can also help personal initiative and confidence in social settings

Sport, for mentally handicapped people, can be of particular benefit to their overall growth and development and can make a positive contribution towards improving their overall quality of life. Sport can provide mentally handicapped people with the opportunity to succeed, where in other areas of life, they appear to fail. It provides them with an avenue through which they can learn basic behaviour such as socialising, building

relationships and co-operating with others which can extend into all areas of life, on and off the sports field. Sport can be a learning medium through which mentally handicapped people mature, learn to cope and experience life as mature individuals. Some of the most important benefits which sport can provide for the mentally handicapped persons are listed below:-

- a) Release from tensions.
- b) Ability to get on with others.
- c) Satisfaction from success.
- d) Ability to persist in all difficulties.
- e) Help towards independent thinking.
- f) Motivation to achieve in other areas.
- g) Ability to communicate through movement.
- h) Self-confidence outside the sports situation.
- i) Thinking before taking action.
- j) Self discipline.
- k) Enjoyment of participation.
- l) Ability to take the initiative in a situation.
- m) Improve motor co-ordination.
- n) Understanding others points of view.
- o) Awareness of one's own deficiencies.
- p) Sense of responsibility.
- q) Character building.
- r) That the person will, because of the need for choice, involvement and commitment in movement situations, become more firmly established in his identity.
- s) That the person, because he has been touched by the spirit of "sportsmanship" and all that this implies about fellowship and the quality of relations with others, will become more morally conscious and socially responsible.

"Another important aim is that there shall be an awakening of the senses beyond that which would occur otherwise, a heightening of hearing, touch, bodily sensation and sight, and an increase of sensitivity to the ways and needs of others".⁽²⁾

Sport, however, can be competitive, as well as educational and therapeutic, and competition has its own benefits to offer the mentally handicapped person. "Generally, people are interested in competing because success in a competitive venture brings approval of others and a feeling of accomplishment. Through competition, people learn to accept failure, which they must do to meet life as mature individuals".⁽³⁾

Through imitation, repetition, succeeding, failing - the person is laying down the foundations of behaviour. Success is important, for success brings approval, either from elders or from peers. Approval is important, for it is part of the satisfaction of the deep need for security felt by everyone. Everyone needs to feel successful in something and sport is one avenue available to help meet this need, especially for the mentally handicapped person who experiences intellectual failure and social failure frequently, due to his/her handicap.

"People need to experience all the ways of competing, as individuals for their individual success, as members of groups, and as individuals competing against their own level of achievement. When they reach the stage of being able to reach their own levels of aspirations, they still probably need to continue to compete individually or on group projects. Through all these varieties of competition, a child becomes aware of the part she plays in life generally, since her social awareness must widen to include everything and everybody

in her environment, thus helping to fulfil a person's need for self-actualisation. Especially through participation in games and other activities with age-group mates, the child develops a grasp of reciprocal human relationships - role and status reciprocities. He comes to see his viewpoint and the viewpoint of others as give and take affairs in a consistent way".⁽⁴⁾ There are many advantages therefore, to competition in sport. It increases interaction and co-operation, is an aid to motivation, a stimulus to effort and an incentive to participation as there is always a positive desire to be accepted as a group member.

Of course, in the area of competitive sport for mentally handicapped people, we have to be extremely careful, for although it can help to enhance a person's quality of life due to the advantages outlined above, it could also have a detrimental effect if it is not structured and used properly. We have to be careful that the person who seems always doomed to failure in other avenues of life, is not always a failure on the sports field also! If this were to be the case, non-competitive sport would be a better avenue in helping improve that person's quality of life. We also have to be aware of the emphasis we place on winning. This is not always the most important factor in competitive sport, and we have to remember the other values that competitive sport can offer also.

Integration

"Integration is having an empathy with those of special needs which will allow the creation of a total environment within which total functioning will be encouraged." ⁽⁵⁾

The case for integration rests on the belief that handicapped people should enjoy

the same opportunities for self-fulfillment as are enjoyed by other people. This self development must take place within the community; segregation from the community maintains barriers of ignorance and prejudice which lead to discrimination and a refusal to accept handicapped people as full members of the community. In addition, segregation works against a wider understanding and awareness of handicapping conditions both at school level and beyond.

The barriers to integration are not caused simply by the nature and severity of individual handicaps, but by the limitations of our own experience.

Modern medicine, increasingly sophisticated rehabilitation techniques, advanced technology, as well as enlightened legislation, have began to make it easier for people with a handicap to share more fully in the world. Nevertheless, genuine cross-the-board integration is still an ideal.

Like everyone else, people with a handicap have the right to choose where they will go, how they will live, with whom they will associate and how they will be educated. Every person, whether handicapped or not, has the right to contribute to society to the full extent of his or her talents and abilities. However, undermined self confidence, decreased motivation, underutilisation of facilities and unenlightened public attitudes, continue to screen people with a handicap from the community. This sets a vicious circle in motion - the less visibility there is, the more delayed will be public accommodation and acceptance.

Wide, varied and flexible provision, to lead a normal, active life, without being forced into special segregated activities - this is maximum integration. However, there are of

course, many handicapping conditions which themselves are so limiting, that full integration is not really possible. We have to be aware that the issue of integration is not simply black and white - integration or segregation, but that there exist many grey areas inbetween, within which people with a handicap can achieve their own levels of integration within their communities - although this may not constitute maximum integration.

Many mentally handicapped people require additional help and support from the communities in which they live and from professional services, if they are to develop to their maximum potential as individuals, and become integrated members of their communities, as much as their specific handicaps allow.

Regarding the issue of integration via sport for the mentally handicapped person there exists a real dilemma! Does sport promote integration for mentally handicapped people or does it result in further segregation within our society? Many people may argue the latter. Separate sporting organisations, clubs, activities, events and competitions exist solely for people with a handicap, such as regional sports days, Special Olympics etc. The disadvantages of these are obvious. They may result in social isolation, labelling, stigma - and on the surface therefore, they do appear to segregate further, people with a handicap. However, there are two main points surrounding this issue which have to be addressed:-

- 1. Many mentally handicapped people do not have the ability to compete with the rest of society in the world of sport. If these separate events, competitions, clubs*

etc., did not exist, then the mentally handicapped person would be deprived of the opportunity to participate and compete in many sporting activities. The disadvantages of these events therefore, have to be weighed up very carefully against the advantages which sport and competition can offer the mentally handicapped person. After all, most mentally handicapped people are going to require some degree of support and guidance to partake in various activities, throughout their lives. If we are going to deny them this opportunity, we may, in fact, be contributing towards a poorer quality of life for that person.

2. Many of these clubs, organisations, events and competitions can be seen as a means to an end - to help people with a handicap become integrated members of our communities via sport. By participating in these activities, learning to socialise, co-operate, conduct themselves in an acceptable manner, learn self-discipline etc., the mentally handicapped person can prepare for participation as an active member of an everyday sporting club, leisure centre etc. Had they not been afforded this opportunity, and provided with help and guidance, then the mentally handicapped person may never have achieved a sufficient degree of independence to participate in these activities within their local communities.

Sport is an excellent vehicle to use for those mentally handicapped people who find it difficult to structure their own leisure time. Many sports centres and outdoor pursuit centres provide opportunities for people with

a handicap to participate in their programmes. Many voluntary organisations provide recreational activities and sporting clubs which welcome people with a handicap. When they are satisfied that there is a real need, local authorities are empowered by the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, to help disabled people who are resident in their areas to enjoy a wide range of recreational and sporting activities. Help is available therefore, for those people who wish to enjoy and take part in sport within their local community. After all, sport has an important and valuable part to play in all our lives - but perhaps even more so for those people with a handicap.

Fiona Rennie

Deputy Manager,
Lilybank Adult Training Centre,
Arbroath Road,
Forfar,
Tayside.

References

1. Myrle James, J. Education and Physical Education. The Camelot Press Ltd., p. vii.
2. Arnold, P. J. Meaning in Movement, Sport and Physical Education. p. 72.
3. Myrle James, J. Education and Physical Education. The Camelot Press Ltd., 1969, p. 2.
4. Best, D. Expression in Movement and the Arts. Lepus, 1974, p. 102.
5. Hackett, L. C. Movement and Exploration and Games for the Mentally Retarded. Peek Publications, 1977, p. 44.