

Westchester Parent

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Special Needs

Just Do It!

Children with special needs can make great gains playing sports, whether in programs just for them or on integrated teams.

Sporting endeavors are a quintessential part of childhood, and experts agree that children benefit from them. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, girls do better in school, boost their self-esteem, and learn teamwork and goal setting. Boys can learn leadership skills, establish new friendships, and channel their energy. Both sexes can establish a life-long relationship with physical fitness, too.

Children with physical and mental disabilities, however, often face hurdles when they try to join sports teams. Incredibly, competitive coaches may not want a child with limitations on their team. Others fear that they won't be able to effectively coach the child or manage medical emergencies that could occur.

That does not - and should not! - stop parents from getting their children with disabilities onto the playing field.

As a parent of three girls with autism, Kim Stagliano enrolled Mia, Gianna, and Bella in a TOPSoccer league in Fairfield County. TOPSoccer is a national program which serves athletes with disabilities. The program is designed to allow any boy or girl with a mental or physical disability to thrive on the soccer field.

In addition to the Fairfield County TopSoccer program, about 500 children play on more than a dozen clubs in Queens, Nassau County, and Suffolk County, says Ann Marie Toth, the chairperson for the Long Island Junior Soccer League's TOPSoccer program. Teams are divided by age and ability, which means that it's possible to have children from a wide range of ages on the same team if they play at a similar level.

"The participants seem to gain confidence, a sense of belonging, accomplishment, and camaraderie," Toth says. "That confidence has allowed them to pursue other sports and activities."

Danny Bernstein, who runs the Backyard Sports program for children with disabilities in Westchester County, takes a similar approach. Baseball, soccer, and basketball games are modified to accommodate the children's needs, and each child is paired with a peer mentor or staff member who can help them stay on task, learn new skills through simple, visual coaching, and ultimately achieve their goals.

Creativity is key for Bernstein. Basketball hoops are lowered to make shooting easier. In other programs, like New York Road Runners' Mighty Milers, wheelchair-bound track athletes wheel around cones while their able-bodied teammates jump over hurdles.

If programs that cater to children with disabilities are

not available in your area, it's possible to integrate disabled and able-bodied children as long as parents and coaches take a realistic approach, advises Richard Horowitz Ed.D., the author of *Peaceful Parenting: Parent Empowerment and Child Empowerment*.

Parents should understand their child's abilities. Children in wheelchairs may need to join special leagues, like The Miracle League of Westchester, which has a rubberized baseball field that allows children with disabilities to use their wheelchairs to get around the diamond. Children with emotional or behavioral challenges might choose individual sports like track, swimming, or golf over team-based activities where emotions run high and children can easily upset each other.

Parents must also explain their child's disability to his or her coach. Teammates should be informed of the disability and what it means to be disabled so that they understand their teammate's situation.

"Being compassionate is not sufficient," Horowitz says. "There are specific skills and information that the adult coaches and non-disabled peers need to learn about participants with disabilities."

Participating in track or yoga are two popular ways for children with disabilities to participate alongside their able-bodied peers.

The Mighty Milers charts children's progress while they walk or run a half mile two to five times a week. During the 2008-2009 school year, the program served about 500 kids in adaptive physical education classes. Last year, they served more than 800 students with disabilities, says Jennifer Slomack, senior communications manager for the New York Road Runners.

Running can be a good activity for those with physical disabilities because it's a straightforward sport that serves as a component of other sports; and, unlike those sports, running focuses on each athlete's personal best. Programs like Mighty Milers allow children to take a run-walk approach so they can be successful regardless of their ability. They can also push or wheel around the track if they're using wheelchairs.

Likewise, yoga is popular with children with disabilities because the exercise can be customized to meet their needs, says Laurie Jordan, the director of Kaia Yoga's "Little Sprouts" Children's Programs.

Yoga studios can tailor their classes to enhance relaxation, promote self-control, increase body awareness, develop coordination, and improve



Special Sports Programs

You don't have to go far to get your child with special needs involved in the right sports program. We did the legwork for you: Here is one highlight in our area:

Backyard Sports

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Basketball and soccer for boys and girls ages 5-15 with special needs. Programs are held at SUNY Purchase. Programs focus on basic coordination, athletic development and building confidence while stressing proper behaviors and group cooperation. Trained teachers and coaches handle each child's needs. Group sizes are small and determined by age and ability.

self-esteem. Classes usually follow a specific structure, so children can predict what comes next, which is important for children with special needs who need routines.

As with all sports, many coaches have similar advice: "When it comes to coaching special needs children, you are looking at a population of athletes not with disabilities, but with different levels of ability," says Bernstein, who runs Backyard Sports. "With this mindset, a coach can easily and successfully work with inclusive teams of both typical and special need learners."