

**PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY AND THEIR PARTICIPATIONN SPORT:  
ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

**By**

**Mr. Hazratullah Khattak**

Coordinator/Lecturer-cum-Field Officer,  
*Department of Sports Sciences & Physical Education,*  
SARHAD University of Science & Information Technology Peshawar  
*Email: hazratullah.ss@suit.edu.pk*  
*Cell: +923459812070*

**&**

**Dr. Mohibullah Khan Marwat**

*Director Sports,*  
Gomal University D.I.Khan  
*Email: dsmarwat@yahoo.com*  
*Cell: +923333161616*

**&**

**Mr. Ashfaq Ali Khattak**

*MS Scholar, (Sports Sciences & Physical Education)*  
SARHAD University of Science & Information Technology Peshawar  
*Email: ashfaqlikhattak@gmail.com*  
*Cell: +923459109889*

**&**

**Mr. Nasir Ali**

*MS Scholar, (Sports Sciences & Physical Education)*  
SARHAD University of Science & Information Technology Peshawar  
*Email: sadsun33@gmail.com*  
*Cell: +923009372972*

**&**

**Mr. Arshad Ali**

*MS Scholar, (Sports Sciences & Physical Education)*  
SARHAD University of Science & Information Technology Peshawar  
*Email: arshadsmi399@yahoo.com*  
*Cell: +923326191979*

**&**

**Mr. Muhammad Zakarya**

*MS Scholar, (Sports Sciences & Physical Education)*  
SARHAD University of Science & Information Technology Peshawar

*(A Publication of the Augustinian Institute in collaboration with AATREPSCHOLARS)*

Email: muhammadzakarya9@gmail.com  
Cell: +923068189851

## **Abstract**

*In addition to physical, mental and social benefits of participation in sport, it also has the capacity to boost health and prevent some health deteriorating ailments. The benefits of sport are universal for all irrespective of age, class, section or gender including those with disabilities. Participation in sport on part of the people with disabilities promotes the spirit of inclusion, social poise, confidence and improves functional capacity of the different organs of the body. Despite these universal benefits of participation in sport, it has been a matter of common observation, that the people with disabilities have very limited opportunities of participation in sport and other recreational physical activities, therefore they have got comparatively poor standard of fitness, and are confronted with a number of health affecting problems. According to a careful estimate, there are more than 180 million young people throughout the world who live with some sort of disability either physical or mental. It is very serious health issue and needs to be addressed on war footings bases at local, national and international level. This paper reviews the issues and challenges associated with the normal life of the disabled people, and urges upon the need to provide proper educational, economical and socio-cultural opportunities, in line with the needs and requirement of the special people.*

**Key Words:** disabilities, participation, sport, recreation, fitness

## **1. Introduction**

The term disability is a complex phenomenon, it stands for the position of the body in which normal capacities of either physical, mental, emotional or cognitive aspects of life is impaired and does not function properly. Disability is a comprehensive term, encircling impairments of an organ or part of the body resulting in incapacity or limitation in proper functioning. World Health Organization (WHO) defines disability as *“Disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives”*. The Oxford Dictionaries, Language Matters has offered definition of the disability as *“A physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities”*. Impairment of the health or incapacity of any organ or part of the body can occur irrespective of the age, gender, social class or occupation and no one is immune to it. However, research has proved that it generally affects the poor and underprivileged class of the society. *“Experts*

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generally agree that disability disproportionately affects the poor" (Elwan, 1999, & Brock, 1999). The research has further revealed that male are more prone to disability as compared to female and similarly, people from the rural areas are more affected by the disability in comparison to the people from the urban areas. These findings are endorsed by the WHO report claiming that eighty percent of the total disabled youth belong to the developing world. The data from a few nations data sets suggest that throughout the developing world, disability affects more males than females, and is found more commonly in rural than in urban areas (UNDIESA Statistics Office Report, 1990). But the findings of another study conducted in the Organization in six Asian Pacific nations do not confirm these results, the study claims that the incidence of disability was in fact higher for women than for men (Harper & Momm, 1989). Another interesting result of the study which points out towards the socio-economic aspect of the problem; reveal that disability rates are higher in wealthier countries. The reason for which seems to have been the prompt and affective screening system of these nations as a result of which disabilities are timely diagnosed, identified and rrecorded (Suris, 1995).

## **2. Need for provision of sport opportunities**

Though there is clear evidence regarding the social and health benefits of participation in sport, but still the people with disabilities are far less likely to engage in physically active lifestyles than are people without disabilities (Rimmer, 2002, and U.S. Department of Health, Healthy People, 2010). Sport and physical activity are the true benefactors to human health and fitness. Some sport sociologists have taken sport and physical activity in different contexts. On one hand physical activity is the medium for the execution of different sport skills but on the other, physical activity itself has its own vitality and significance whether it occurs in sport or in any other undertaking of the daily life. Climbing the tree, upstairs walking, and farming, for example, are not the activities of sport but these activities also yield a number of health benefits. Sport and other physical activities are generally believed to have a number of health benefits. Omar-fauzee, et al., (2009) has concluded that participation in sport yields health benefits. In physio-psychological perspectives, one thing common in recreational activities, exercise and in sport is that, in addition to health benefits, these activities have got very high values in terms of providing fun and entertainment to the performer.

Sport activities have the potential and can be used as a medium to pave the way to bring the disabled people back to normalcy and include them in the mainstream of the society. Sport and recreational activities play significant role in preventing some important physical health problems like obesity, inefficiency of the organs and poor health, and sense of isolation, frustration, and inferiority complex on the psychological front of life. Individuals with disability do need to avail chances of participation in sport and other physical activities. The benefits of participation in sport are equally the same for the disabled ones as these are for the people without disability. Obesity is one of the alarming and growing health problems of the world. It attacks the individuals of all ages and both genders particularly those having the habit of intake of the rich food and who follow sedentary life style. Children with disabilities are more likely than other children to be sedentary, placing them at higher risk of obesity and associated health conditions (*Fragala, 2005*). Inactive disabled people are also the worst victim of the obesity. Participation in sport and physical activities provides the best solution to the problem particularly to the obese people. Generally, the people with disability remain keen to participate in sport and other physical activities. As and when they are provided with the opportunity of participation in sport, their sense of inclusion is developed and they consider themselves as part of the society, feel high level of self-esteem, mental satisfaction and improved physique.

Maintenance and promotion of physical as well as mental health and general wellbeing are directly linked with the life full of action while sedentary life renders the person prone to various deadly diseases. *"Physical inactivity is a major public health challenge in the developed world and is recognized as a global epidemic"* (Chief Medical Officer, London: Department of Health, 2004). The physical and mental health benefits of the active life are the same for the people with disability. With respect to the disabled people, research has proved that physical activity can not only reduce the risk for secondary health problems but can improve all levels of functioning (*Hidde et al., 2004*).

### **3. Benefits of Sport for the Disabled People**

Research has proved the most encouraging role of physical activity in providing public health benefits particularly with reference to the prevention and control of the different fatal diseases. Studies have also found linkage between physical activity and primary and secondary prevention of

cancer (Holmes et al., 2005). (Bouchard et al., (1990); and US Department of Health and Human Services (1996) claim that participation either in sport or in any other recreational activity pledges for numerous health benefits. Physical activity is one of the most effective ways for the productive use of leisure as it provides useful way for the outlet of the surplus energy of the body. About physical activity, the same standpoint is endorsed by Bouchard and Shephard (1994). Regular physical activity is essential for the maintenance of normal muscle strength, flexibility, and joint structure, function and may slow the functional decline often associated with disabling conditions (*Durstine et al., 2000*). The benefits of participation in sport and physical activity in respect of the individuals with disability are very much vital from the viewpoint of maintenance and promotion of health. *“Physical activity and sport participation for individuals with disabilities prevents health problems by reducing the risk of developing heart disease, controlling weight, building lean muscle, reducing fat”* (US Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1996). In addition to the health benefits of participation in sport, it also fosters social and psychological poise of the participants. Sports participation enhances the psychological well-being of individuals with disabilities through the provision of opportunities to form friendships, express creativity, develop a self-identity, and foster meaning and purpose in life (*Dykens, Rosner & Butterbaugh, 1998*).*Patel & Greydanus (2002) have also concluded that participation in regular physical activity can foster independence, coping abilities, competitiveness, and teamwork among the individuals with disabilities.*

The nature, duration and frequency of sport activity for the disabled people should also be taken into consideration. It is always wise to plan and design the programme of sport and physical activities that suits the interest and choice of the person and which is in line with the nature of the disability of the person who is to follow it. *Exercise that is of longer duration, greater frequency, and lower intensity compared with programs for typically developing youth is recommended (Durstine et al., 2000)*. The programme of activities needs to be followed under the skilled supervision so that to the participant may get maximum benefits of it. This will ensure safe play and help in avoiding any chance of injury or hurt to the participant. With the proper guidance, the risk of injury to physically disabled ones is no greater than that to athletes without disability (*Patel & Greydanus, 2002*).

With reference to participation of the disabled person in sport and physical activities, the role of family has always been vital. In most cases it has been observed that the person with disability is always at the mercy of the rest of his/her family members who rarely make any arrangement for his/her participation in sport and physical activities. But on the contrary, research has proved that the families keeping association with sport and physical activities encourage and promote the disabled member of the family in connection with his/her participation in sport and physical activities. Families who engage in physical activities themselves tend to promote similar participation for their children with disabilities (*American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006; King et al., 2003*)

#### **4. Motives of the Disabled People for participation in Sport**

The motives of the people with disabilities with reference to participation in sport are diverse encircling socio-cultural, psychological and emotional aspects of everyday's life. The person with disability does need acceptance and inclusion in the educational process and in the day-to-day societal affairs, worth and value in the society, and active role in resolving the home and neighboring problems. Disabled people's motives for participation are similar to those of non-disabled people, for example, using after-sport social activities to seek acceptance from others (*Brasile et al., 1994*). The person with disability can play very positive and constructive role in exchanging the socio-cultural values of the society. In this regard, the role and support from the family and environmental factors determines the level of success. Overall, environmental and family factors seem to be more significant determinants of participation than characteristics of the children themselves (*King et al., 2003*).

Close interaction of the player with the relatives and the people around him/her serves the role of motivator with reference to participation in sport. The factors such as interpersonal relationship with coaches, family members, friends etc serve as motivation for athletes to become involved in sports activity (*Ryan, 2006*). To get distinction and dominate in performance, and to cope stress and fatigue, are the common motives for participation in sport. Motives help the person to become active in sport (*Omar-fauzee, et al., 2009*). Parental and teacher's encouragement at home and at school and personal confidence of the child motivates him/her to do the difficult and skilful task with courage and determination. Positive attitude of the people associated with the person with

disability plays significant role in encouraging him/her in the routine matters. It is important that children are empowered with an "I can do" attitude rather than discouraged by the message "you can't do that" (Wilson, 2002).

## **5. Main Barriers to Participation in Sport**

Participation in sport and physical activities has always been beneficial for the people with disability but in our educational institutions, they are generally offered very limited opportunities of participation in sport and physical activities. And probably, in many cases they do not have any chance of participation in sport and physical activities. In most cases, disabled people have been treated as weaker in performance, and they are least preferred for any important assignment. The first and foremost important barrier in the way of participation in sport and physical activities in respect of the people with disabilities is the negative and humiliating behaviour of the society. In public and private affairs, they are generally treated inferior and not at par with the people having no disability. Globally, it is widely acknowledged that the greatest impediment to the lives of young people with disabilities is prejudice, social isolation and discrimination (Despouy, 1991). Social behaviour and thinking of the masses in respect of the people with disabilities is also one of the major barriers in the way of the disabled people in their participation in sport. Many disabled persons are still, to a large extent, socially segregated and experience negative societal stereotypes and low performance expectations, rendering them with limited opportunities for participation in group physical activities (King *et al.*, 2003).

Disabled are the special people and they need special attention in all matters related to their lives. In most cases disabled are dependent ones and they seek help and assistance from the people around them. Similarly the nature and type of their participation in sport and physical activities is somewhat different in terms of facilities and equipment. Disabled people need special equipment for their participation in sport, which are costly and sometimes not affordable for them to arrange the required equipment for their entertainment. Cost and non-availability of the specialized sport equipment is the second main barrier in the way of disabled people participation in sport. In fact, adolescents with disabilities cited the cost of specialized equipment as the most frequent reason for nonparticipation (King *et al.*, 2003).

Psychological impediment is the next barrier that hinders the disabled people particularly children from participation in sport. As discussed earlier, disabled people are generally presumed to be incompetent and weaker member of the society. Resultantly they too begin to think of themselves as the incompetent and weaker member of the society. The child's perceived image of his/her self-incompetency is one of the principal psychological barriers towards his/her participation in sport and physical activities. Participation on part of the disabled people is further influenced directly by time, the home environment, and the child's perceived self-competence and indirectly by social support from schools and communities, family demographics, and child preferences (King *et al.*, 2003). In addition to that, the disability factor itself and health standard of the disabled person are also amongst the barriers to his/her participation in sport. Research undertaken in the United Kingdom (Sport England, 2001) identified that the main limitation to participation was the respondent's health. As a matter of fact, the people with disability are confronted with a number of constraints including physical, mental, emotional, social, financial and demographic factors. Research has confirmed that the extent of participation in physical activity by those with a disability is affected by a multi-factorial set of barriers and facilitators that are unique to this population' (Rimmer J.H. *et al.*, 2004).

## **6. International Sport Arena for the Disabled People**

The term Paralympics is a recent title replacing the previous disability or organizationally defined nomenclature such as the Paraplegic Games (Doll-Tepper, 1999). *"International efforts to promote the social and emotional well-being of the children with disabilities through participation in recreational sports and physical fitness activities began with the first competitive sporting event for individuals with disabilities in 1948, followed by the first Paralympics competition in 1960, and the establishment of the Special Olympics in 1968"* (Wilson, 2002). Since then it has been playing significant role in upholding the cause of the disabled people in the field of sport. The inception of the Paralympics was considered one step forward in the way of solidarity with the disabled people. *"This is proven by the massive involvement of the disabled individuals in the Paralympics* (Zurn, Lopiano, and Snyder, 2006). The first summer Paralympics Games were held in 1960 immediately after the Olympic Games in Rome (Italy). Tracing its origins to a hospital in central England in 1948, the first Stoke Mandeville Games grew from two competing wheelchair teams to an international event by 1957 (Scruton, 1998). The Special Olympics is now the largest recreational program for the



disable people with intellectual disabilities, having more than 1 million players in 125 countries (Special Olympics, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center Report, 2005).

## **7. Conclusion**

It is concluded that despite existence of a vast number of the disabled people in the world, very limited attention has so far been paid towards their sport and recreational requirement. Conduct of the *first competitive sporting event for individuals with disabilities in 1948* has been regarded as the first landmark in connection with the acknowledging the rights of the disabled people at the international forum. Socially, discrimination exists in the society in dealing with them and they have been treated as inferior than the other people without disabilities. Least educational and job opportunities are available for them and they have been treated as the second class citizens of the society.

Need of the hour is to treat them as equal members of the society, all out efforts should be made to establish the required sport infrastructure for them at all main cities of each country.

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