

EXERCISES AND GAMES SUITABLE FOR BOTH CHILDREN AND THE ELDERLY

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The aim of this report is to give a short introduction to the research conducted as part of the Moto+ project of the School of Sports and Leisure at the Rovaniemi University of Applied Sciences. The research focused on exercises and games suitable for both children and the elderly.

The researchers set out to 1) examine the effect that structured exercise and games involving both children and the elderly have on the body, 2) establish how the people involved perceive playing together, 3) explore the possibilities that playground and park environments present as arenas for games and exercises of people of different ages. The target group in the study comprised physically active volunteers from the retired population (68) living in the Rovaniemi area and preschool age children (20) from Rovaniemi. The target group was divided into two smaller play teams and four exercise teams.

The play teams comprised both senior citizens and children who together engaged in structured play and games in an indoor playground and other facilities during a six-month period. The exercise teams engaged in structured exercise together with their contemporaries. Both the play teams and the exercise teams engaged in similar elements of exercise and play. The exercise teams' activities targeted motor skills and balance.

Senior citizens in play teams

The senior citizens who participated in the project were healthy, fit and sporty. Almost all had experiences of children and grandchildren. According to interviews, the elderly found playing together with children fun and looked forward to their weekly play session. Playing together with children clearly boosted the elderly people's spirits. The senior citizens increased their already commendable activity levels; some experienced clear improvement in their ability to function in everyday situations, and some added new sporty hobbies to their agenda. Thanks to the children's contribution, physical activity turned into a positive event and the elderly found themselves taking exercise as if by accident. The senior citizens' ability to guide and support the children also gave them a sense of satisfaction and purpose. For the elderly, children represent equals in terms of physical abilities. The shared play and exercise experiences of children and senior citizens enabled social contacts between previously unfamiliar people. In some cases the interaction even compensated for a missing relationship with grandchildren.

Children in play teams

The project made the participating children change their perception of old people. Prior to taking part in the shared activities, the children had firm opinions, which nevertheless became a lot more varied by the end of the project. The children were clearly confused about the appearance and range of abilities of the old people. The children's assessments of the elderly people's abilities improved significantly during the course of the project. The children found the participating senior citizens to be better and more skilled at play than the elderly people with whom they were already familiar. The children enjoyed the fact that the elderly people in the play teams had time to play with them - their own grandparents do not. The children found playing with the elderly fun, and many missed them after the project. At the end of the 12-month project, one of the participating preschool children proclaimed: "The things I associate with the play classes are fun things, amusement, equipment and old people climbing and helping me so I help them as well".

Children's nursery and cooperation

The children's nursery teachers felt that the most important outcomes of the shared activities were engaging in and developing social contacts with elderly people and improved motor skills. The children also learned new games, which can be adapted to the nursery's daily activities. The project demonstrated that physical activity could create a multitude of connecting factors between different age groups. It also paved the way for continuing this kind of activity in the future.

Exercises in different arenas

The children and elderly people worked well together both in the built playground and in an unconfined park environment. With regards to playing with children, the elderly considered the playground a more functional arena than an unconfined park environment. The playground provided guidance for both the children and the elderly in terms of what exercises to take. The participants praised the mutual assistance and support in the playground. The elderly felt that a built playground provided an environment where they could test their limits and get an all-round workout for their body.

The senior citizens said that they wished playgrounds could be accessible for all age groups in the future. In their eyes the factors that would make going to a playground more appealing include location, architecture, colours and shapes. "Permission" to play is also given in the instructions on how the different equipment can be used - in writing or even using pictograms.