

PERFECTING SOCIAL AND MOTOR SKILLS IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT AND ASSESSING AND DEVELOPING THE STRUCTURE OF THE LAPPSET GROUP'S PLAYGROUNDS, 2002-2003

Riikka Rusi MSc (Sports and Leisure), Rovaniemi Polytechnic

Introduction

The primary objectives of the project were (1) to provide children with a time for regular, target-oriented and guided exercise and consequently to promote the development of their social skills and (2) to assess and develop playgrounds. The playground used in this project is located in the Motor Control Studio at the Santa Claus Sports Institute and it is built as a place where children, adults and the elderly can perfect their motor skills. The objective of the assessment was to determine the kind of playground suitable for children with special needs.

Project implementation and the place of exercise

The test group included 15 children who were diagnosed with either autism or Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Both autism and AS are manifested as different communication problems and very often as motor problems that include clumsiness, poor balance, incorrect trajectories and the constant repetition of a certain movement (or movements). Autism rehabilitation pays particular attention to structure. A child in a well-structured and distinct environment is able to function with other children in the same way and, for example, perfect his or her motor skills. However, a child often begins to repeat certain movements and becomes aggressive or frustrated in an environment where no special measures have been taken to support the child. Structure also promotes learning on the part of AS children.

Guided physical exercise was organized for an 8-month period from September 2002 to April 2003. The planning, implementation and evaluation of the programme was carried out by sports instructor students (Rovaniemi Polytechnic) majoring in physical education.

The Muscle Control Studio, where the exercises took place, facilitates accurate methods of measurement. This study did not test the development of motor skills; rather, the objectives were more related to emotions (self-confidence and experiences of success) and social behaviour (cooperation and interaction). The tools used to assess the objectives were the instructors' diaries, which were based on their experiences in providing guidance.

The exercise area in the Muscle Control Studio was adapted during the period in cooperation with the Lappset Group's Research and Development Team. The project aimed at providing information that the Lappset Group could confirm through its own technological expertise and at directing the company's research and development to also take into consideration groups with special needs and at using the project to promote and support the movement and opportunities for exercise of such children who all too easily remain without guided physical exercise.

Conclusions

The playground was built in such a way that it led the children to the next activity. The children did not stay still in only one place even though the playground provided many different activities (balance, hanging and sliding). Various pictures and arrows were used to support the structure of the playground; these were left out for the AS group after four months but were retained for the autistic group throughout the period.

Children and instructors were given the opportunity to interact at the beginning and end of play, which involved the use of such things as the Sherborne Method. The interaction during the first three months was mainly from child to teacher but following this, the AS children also began to play and work together. The interaction in the autistic group was from child to teacher throughout the

entire period. The objectives for social interaction were met in full. This was especially noticeable in the children's skills of cooperation and interaction. There was also a discernable improvement in motor skills but as stated above, these were not measured.

The playground was highly suitable for children who need structure and a distinct environment to support their activities. The instructor was able to give feedback on the exercise and did not have to act only as a "policeman" who supervises behaviour. Playground planning can focus attention on structure without reducing the value of play equipment (or how much it can be used for play). In this way, a playground is within reach of more children and families.

Sources:

- Deci, E. (1995). *Why we do what we do: The dynamics of personal autonomy*. New York: Grosset/Putnam.
- Heikinaro-Johansson, P., & Kolkka, T. (1998). *Koululiikuntaa kaikille. Soveltavan liikunnanopetuksen opas*. Jyväskylä: Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy.
- Hendy, T. (2001). The Americans with Disabilities Act insures the right of every child to play. *Parks & Recreation*, 36(4), 108-118.
- Johnson, T. (1999). Better Learning Through Exercise. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 45, 7.
- Mulderij, K.J. (1997). Peer relations and friendship in physically disabled children. *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 25(3), 379-389.
- Mälkiä, E., & Rintala, P. (2002). *Uusi Erityisliikunta – Liikunnan sovellukset erityisryhmille*. Liikuntatieteellisen Seuran julkaisu nro 154. Tampere: Tammer-Paino Oy.
- Verhe, I. (1994). Esteettä luontoon liikkumaan. Ulko- ja luontoliikuntapaikkojen soveltuvuus liikkumisesteisille. Suomen Invalidien Urheiluliitto ry. Helsinki: Painatuskeskus Oy.
- Williams, W.C., & Lair, G.S. (1991). Using a person-centered approach with children who have a disability. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, 25, 194-204.

The writer graduated from the University of Jyväskylä in 1999 and serves as a lecturer in physical education on the Sports and Leisure training programme at the Rovaniemi Polytechnic.