

## Exercise for Children Who Are Mentally Retarded

Recreation and exercise are important for all children, regardless of their mental capacity. A physician's recommendation about athletic activity for a mentally retarded child, as with any child, must take into account the child's size, coordination, degree of physical fitness, physical maturity, physical health, and motivation. It is also important to consider physical problems that may be specific to a child or to a child's condition (eg, atlantoaxial instability in a child with Down syndrome). In some communities, there is a tendency to exclude mentally retarded children from exercise programs. Because children who are mentally retarded frequently have poor coordination, it may be more difficult for them to be physically active in the "usual" programs. This can contribute to lassitude and excessive weight gain.

### ROLE OF PEDIATRICIAN

Parents of mentally retarded children are often confused and uncertain about what to expect from their children. Some tend to restrict their youngster from physical activities; others may push their child at too rapid a pace. Most parents are eager for guidance to help determine what is best for their child. Pediatricians are in a unique position to advise these parents. They have knowledge of the family and are aware of the emotional and personal needs and the physical capabilities of the child.

### BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

Mentally retarded children may have greater success in individual and dual sports than in team sports. Competition is often highly motivating, and

it may be a means of promoting self-satisfaction as well as developing muscles and coordination. The Special Olympics has shown that retarded children can successfully compete against each other. Regardless of their intellectual capacity, children have a wide range of athletic ability. Some mentally retarded children are well coordinated; some highly intelligent children are clumsy.

There are mutual benefits when retarded children participate in noncompetitive sports with children of normal intelligence. One important benefit is the educational opportunities for the "normal" children to learn about disabilities and their effects on their mentally retarded peers. It should be remembered when planning activities that there is some correlation between developmental level and persistence, attention span, emotional control, and understanding the rules of the game. Children who are mentally retarded usually perform best and enjoy themselves most with children of the same developmental level, not necessarily children of the same chronologic age.

Children elicit more interest in games than in simple exercises. Game rules may be changed so that most of the children are interacting most of the time; this is often necessary because retarded children may have a short attention span. In addition, participation with other children may enhance youngsters' self-esteem and help them learn cooperation. Keeping records of personal improvement, counting, and similar intellectual activity on the part of mentally retarded children may provide ancillary intellectual benefits from participation in vigorous physical efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Practical suggestions about facilities, equipment, playground markings, fitness activities, and selected exercise are available.<sup>1</sup> Information about physical activity programs for the mentally retarded is also available from the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance,<sup>2</sup> formerly known as the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation.<sup>3,4</sup> In addition, the Kennedy Foundation also

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This statement has been approved by the Council on Child and Adolescent Health. The recommendations in this statement do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.

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provides information about specific model programs, such as the Special Olympics Program (Special Olympics, Inc, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr, Foundation, 719 13th St, NW, Washington, DC 20005).

Many programs for the mentally retarded are best planned at the community level. Communities that take on this responsibility have the added opportunity to provide activities that enable retarded and nonretarded children to participate together and thus decrease some of the problems created by isolation of the mentally retarded. The general population, especially children, lacks knowledge about mental retardation and usually does not have the opportunity to develop the appropriate understanding of its mentally retarded peers. Children who are mentally retarded are sometimes rejected because they lack personal and social skills, partly as a result of their relative isolation from other children. Interacting with children of normal intelligence through sports activities helps mentally retarded children to develop these personal and social skills as well as improving their physical well-being.

## SUMMARY

Pediatricians should encourage participation in exercise and athletic programs for mentally retarded children. The right program can be a therapeutic tool resulting in better weight management, development of physical coordination, maintenance of cardiopulmonary fitness, and improved self-esteem.

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