

# A Level Playing Field for Children with Disabilities

Khushboo Singh

Harish, a 10-year-old child at our *Khushboo Special School*,<sup>i</sup> comes walking towards us, drawing our attention to his superman-themed mask. A child with cerebral palsy (CP) and intellectual disability, Harish, like all children, is eager to play, run and make conversations despite his lack of verbal skills. He shows patience as he waits for his turn. He even cheers his friends from the sidelines. Quick wins, high-fives and verbal praise motivate him to continue doing activities and not give up. This child, who used to be very quiet, had limited social interactions and needed physical support can today not only perform activities confidently but if asked to demonstrate instructions to his peers, does not shy away.

## Inclusive play philosophy

Over the years, from personal experience and observations and time spent on the field, we realised that children with disabilities (CwDs), most often, had to forgo activities such as sports and games due to environmental constraints such as the absence of proper ramps, or attitudinal constraints, such as people's lack of awareness on how to engage with them or the mindset that they simply cannot play or may slow down the game or worse, injure themselves.

An estimated eight million children (aged under 19 years) live with some form of disability in India and only one in five CwDs plays sports. Over 70 percent of parents and schools have reported that a lack of opportunities for participation of CwDs has added to their social isolation and lack of confidence.

As part of our initial research, we visited various special and inclusive schools and observed these situations:

- Many special schools did not have a sports period or a sports teacher.
- Schools that did have a sports teacher did not involve CwDs in games and usually asked them to sit and watch.
- Most teachers limited play to basic ball catches, which became boring after a while. We realised that teachers lack the skills and knowledge to

design activities and games as per children's needs.

The idea for *Umoya Sports*,<sup>ii</sup> originated from the singular belief that sports and play benefit all, equally. We celebrate the differences in our children and eliminate barriers to play, not just physical but also those of instruction and language; introducing adaptations within activities to make play more inclusive for all children.

At Umoya Sports, we have identified three specific challenges faced by CwDs. We refer to these as the 'Inclusive Education crisis':

- Lack of quality contextual programmes providing holistic development and skill development as per the disabilities and requirements for CwDs.
- Lack of social skills because of denial of participation due to social stigma and misconceptions about CwDs.
- Lack of physical activity and opportunities to engage in play/fitness, leading to physical and mental health challenges.

## Our programme

To make our programme more child-centric, we modify activities depending on the skill and ability of each CwD. We use sensory balls, balls of various sizes or children's favourite toys in our activities. We change distances and rigour depending on the strength and stamina of a child. We let children invent their own games, which builds their creativity and problem-solving skills.

We also train teachers on the basics of modifying games, encourage them to shadow our sports mentors to understand how to deliver skill-appropriate activities. We give them lesson plans which they can implement later in their classrooms. Over time, this has helped in ensuring that all children participate in sports programmes.

Our work is essentially built on Adapted Physical Education (APE), which is 'the art and science of developing, implementing and monitoring a carefully designed physical education instructional programme for a learner with a disability.'

Based on the gaps we have identified, we follow a '3C' programme philosophy to build our annual sports and play-based education programme.

### Curriculum

Our holistic sports and play-based education programmes are curated keeping in mind the needs of children with (both intellectual and locomotor) disabilities and developmental disorders and those without disabilities. The programme focuses on building foundational movement (developmental) skills in sports such as football, basketball and athletics and effective participation in society through developing life skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking and social skills, such as teamwork, confidence, and empathy.

Over the years, we have observed and also received feedback from teachers that the children have higher retention and are also more focused in class after a sports or play session. One such story from the field is of Bittoo and his grit and cognitive development. He is one of our athletes who was very shy at the beginning and was hesitant to participate in sports. Over a period of only six months, he has not only begun to love to play football and waits eagerly for the sports sessions but his cognitive skills have also improved. Recently, he surprised us all by solving one side of the Rubik's Cube. There has been immense growth in his confidence and social skills and he now aims to solve the whole cube.



### Coach

The role of a teacher or mentor is as important as a robust curriculum. We train young sports enthusiasts and physical educators as adapted sports mentors. We work closely with teachers and special educators in implementing the programme to lead a two-way learning process.

To showcase the role of a mentor in the life of a child, the story of Priyanka is a wonderful example. Priyanka is our athlete with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She was quite temperamental and would only come to the playground with the teacher's support. She also engaged in play with the support of the teacher. Our team worked with her to understand her needs and her likes and made her feel comfortable, thereby creating a safe space for her. Over time, Priyanka started to love to play and now she performs activities independently with minimal support and takes charge of her own learning. She has started taking a liking to football and repeatedly asks for dribbling, one of her favourite drills with the ball.

### Culture

Through our unique *Buddy* system, we build empathy and inclusion by bringing together children with and without disabilities to participate and play as a team. We pair a CwD with lower skills or advanced limitations with another child with or without a disability with higher skills to create an additional support system for children to encourage them to participate as *buddies*. We also provide positive reinforcement and an incentivised system to create a culture where every 'buddy pair' performing and showcasing best teamwork is rewarded with extra playtime.

We have observed how children started supporting each other not just on the field but also off it. This is an encouraging start to building an inclusive culture and an inclusive society. One such friendship is that of Dhruv's and Aman's, which gives us hope and belief in the power of change. Dhruv, an athlete who has CP, was often bullied by Aman and it was troubling him. We paired the two together in our *Buddy* system and created a structured approach with incentives for both of them. Over time, Dhruv not only built a friendship with Aman on the field but also off it. There has been an improvement in Dhruv's hand-eye coordination and confidence.

Over the years, through programme monitoring and evaluation, we have observed the following growth in our children:

- Empathy and mindset – 98 percent of our mainstream students have displayed empathy by signing up again for our inclusive programme.
- Growth over key developmental milestones - Our children have displayed a 42 percent improvement in coordination and agility and a 38 percent increase in their strength and stamina over the year.
- On average, 62 percent of the children show an increase of 1.5 points on a scale of 5 in their sports skills in football, basketball and athletics.
- Through our surveys, 85 percent of teachers have observed that children have displayed higher retention of academic skills, such as number and colour identification and recognition of objects of daily living.

### **Pandemic and the birth of Ability Spark**

The moment we think of play and sports, visuals of the outdoors, playground and nature come to mind. So, when COVID upended our lives – lockdown and its restrictions, social distancing and the closing of schools – we found ourselves in uncharted territory. It is well known that lack of physical activity, more so among individuals with disabilities, can result in functional disorders, such as obesity, cardiac diseases, attention deficit, coordination disorder and lack of strength. Further, the sudden and unexpected alterations in the learning process during the lockdown increased the burden on children as well as their parents. A new kind of stability had to be reimagined.

The pandemic further exposed the challenges and, in a way, reiterated the need to work towards an inclusive education crisis which mandates the following:

- Inclusive and accessible teaching-learning materials (TLMs).
- Structured and adapted low-cost, play-based physical education programmes.

Keeping our children’s wellbeing at the centre, we developed an online physical education programme integrated with early childhood education called *Ability Spark*, which focuses on physical and mental well-being and aims to minimise developmental losses and stress through play.

Ability Spark is an inclusive, digital-play and well-being programme with a focus on developing overall physical and mental fitness through yoga and fun outcome-based sports and physical education activities for CwDs in the age group of

3-14 years with limited or emergent development skills.

While thinking about how we could involve all children, we asked ourselves the question: How can we design physical activities and experiences which meet children at their level of skills? Our team of sports mentors curated various physical activities, breaking the developmental skills into smaller and achievable skills, suggesting adaptations that are not only fun but also intrinsically serve as the foundation for sports and exhibit the philosophy of Head-Heart-Hand.

The activities are adapted to fit the realities of homes, where resources might not be readily available. We provide an individualised approach and modified lessons for CwDs. Each activity comes with a peer-led video demonstration, lesson plan and visual cue cards. In the video, we have contextualised each activity to show its relevance to life and added visual stimulus and friendly voice reinforcements, such as, ‘Give me a high-five!’, ‘C’mon you can do it!’ to make the content friendly and relatable.

Piloting the programme first with parents and subsequently, in schools as a teacher-training model has given us an understanding of how PE can be delivered in an online setting. The programme enables teachers and parents with ready-to-use resources available at a single point, bringing play into everyday learning.

During this time when parents have become the primary educators, they were empowered with toolkits to continue their children’s learning at home. Most importantly, it facilitated the continuity of a daily routine for a child, which is an important peg to assure that progress is made in the developmental skills domain.

Ms Priyanka Gangodia of Jai Vakeel School, Mumbai, shared this, ‘Our teachers really appreciated the videos. They were quite easy to understand and simple to conduct. All the teachers feel that the activities did help them in their online classes and proved beneficial and helpful for our students to develop their skills. Teachers found gross motor activities to be very good for our students who have ASD.’

### **Our learnings**

#### *Shift of mindset through action*

At the start of the programme, parents and teachers were sceptical and feared for the safety of their children and doubted their abilities. After

about six months of their children's participation in our programme, we invited parents and teachers to participate in our activities, such as coordinated jumps or basic ball activities, along with their children. A lot of times, the parents and other neuro-typical adults were unable to do the activity that their children could. This created a realisation among them to see and focus on the potential and abilities of CwDs rather than on their limitations.

Most of the schools and centres working towards the development of CwDs, focused only on the therapy model. A child would be part of many individual therapies – speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, or writing. And though we understand the importance of these therapies, they can become tiresome for the child and can make the child feel bored or anxious. Sports and physical play are complementary and provide therapeutic benefits while engaging the child in enjoyable activities. Over the three years that we have worked with them, teachers from our partner schools are the biggest advocates of sports and encourage children to participate in sports.



#### **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank Aditya KV, Founder, Umoya Sports, for his guidance, inputs and help with co-authoring this article. Aditya founded Umoya Sports with an aim to leverage the power of sports and education to develop life skills among students with disabilities.

#### *Importance of socio-emotional and physical wellbeing through play*

Children have a natural inclination for play. Physical activities, whether online or on-ground are fun. Even the pre-work to every activity, like organising objects, measuring distance and studying the space becomes fun for children and builds their excitement. In the process of organising resources for the activities, a parent remarked, 'My child has become more aware of the surroundings; this to him is like going on a treasure hunt.'

#### **Role of sports and play in Inclusive Education**

As outlined in the NEP (National Education Policy) 2020, sports integration is another cross-curricular pedagogical approach that utilises physical activities, including sports, games and movement in pedagogical practices to help in developing skills such as collaborations, self-initiative, discipline, teamwork, responsibility etc.

Designing programmes with inclusion as an underlining and binding theme is to help develop a climate of acceptance and understanding so that all individuals get the opportunity to be physically active in schools and communities. Through our programmes, we reduce barriers by enabling a change in attitudes in non-disabled children towards those with disabilities and, at the same time, empowering CwDs with confidence and physical agility through disability simulation exercises.

We envision that our programmes supporting teachers, parents and caregivers will create a change of mindset, build their knowledge and skills to help introduce virtues of play and sports as hands-on learning and support them in nurturing an inclusive culture.

Our children like Aditya and Soni fill us with extreme hope and joy and are a source of inspiration to other students. Both these students with intellectual disabilities from our partner school (Khushboo Welfare Society) were selected for the National Floorball Camp conducted by *Special Olympics Bharat* and got the opportunity to be part of the Indian National Team.

*\*Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



#### **Endnotes**

- i Khushboo Welfare Society, set up in 1995, is an NGO based in Gurugram, Haryana. It provides multifarious services for the development, education and rehabilitation of children, adolescents and young adults with mental and multiple disabilities.
- ii Umoya Sports is a for-impact, non-profit based in New Delhi. It works towards providing holistic development to children with and without disabilities by equipping them with life skills needed to lead an enriching life and build an inclusive culture in schools and communities through sports and play-based education programmes.



**Khushboo Singh** is a consultant and supporter at Umoya Sports and a social enabler. She has a background with K-12 early-stage EdTech start-ups and specialises in programme/instructional design, content development, and communications. Currently, she is freelancing, studying the use of EdTech to make learning contextual and inclusive and supporting young social entrepreneurs and volunteers as a teacher educator. She can be contacted at [khushboo@umoyasports.com](mailto:khushboo@umoyasports.com)