



## The extent, context and experience of participation in out-of-school activities among children with disability



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** A growing literature describes the participation of children with disability, but less is known about the effect of disability type, severity and environmental factors on participation.

**Aim:** To investigate the extent, context, experience and preferences for participation in out-of-school activities among children with disability in Victoria, Australia.

**Methods and procedures:** Two-hundred and eighty-six children (177 boys, 109 girls; mean age 11.5 years) with physical ( $n = 77$ ), intellectual ( $n = 67$ ), multiple ( $n = 93$ ), and other disabilities ( $n = 49$ ) took part. Data were collected using the Children's Assessment of Participation and Enjoyment (CAPE) and Preferences for Activities of Children (PAC) questionnaires.

**Outcomes and results:** Children with disability participated in 28 out of 55 activities (SD 6 activities), 2–3 times per month, on average. Preference was the most important predictor of participation diversity for all activity types. Disability type was a predictor of participation diversity in active-physical activities only. Severity was a predictor of participation diversity overall, and of participation in formal and informal activities. Age, severity and preference accounted for almost 50% of the variance of diversity of recreational activities.

**Conclusions and implications:** These results underscore the importance of taking a child's activity preferences into account when implementing interventions to increase participation in out-of-school activities.

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**What this paper adds:**

Previous research on the participation of children with disability in out-of-school activities has focused on children with physical disability. Less is known about the effect of disability type, severity and environmental factors on the participation of children with disability. This study builds on this literature by investigating the participation (extent, context, experience and preferences) of children with disability (all types), and the influence of personal (age, sex, type and severity of disability, preferences) and environmental (school type, socioeconomic status, living location) factors on the diversity of their participation. Our research found that children with disability participated in 28 out of 55 activities (SD 6 activities), 2–3 times per month, on average. Their participation was lowest in active-physical and skill-based activities. Preference was the most important predictor of participation diversity for all activity types. Disability type was a predictor of the diversity of participation in active-physical activities only. The severity of disability was a predictor of total participation diversity, and of participation in formal, informal, recreational and self-improvement activities. Age, severity of disability and preference accounted for almost 50% of the variance of diversity of recreational activities for children with disability.

**1. Introduction**

Participation in physical, leisure, recreational and self-improvement activities has important developmental, health and social benefits for all children, including children with disability (Law et al., 2006). These benefits include the acquisition of motor skills, building friendships and developing personal identity, optimising physical growth including body composition, and increasing psychological wellbeing (Murphy & Carbone, 2008). Children with disability may have reduced motor, communication and social skills compared to their typically developing peers and as a result are at risk of having fewer opportunities to participate in outside-of-school activities (Shields, Synnot, & Barr, 2012). This may ultimately lead to the sedentary behaviour and social isolation commonly reported among this group (Rimmer, Rowland, & Yamaki, 2007).

There is a growing evidence base describing the participation patterns of children with disability including children with physical, intellectual and sensory disabilities (King, Law, Hurley, Petrenchik, & Schwellnusb, 2010; King, Shields, Imms, Black, & Ardern, 2013; Longo, Badia, & Orgaz, 2013; Noreau et al., 2007; Potvin, Snider, P, Kehayia, & Wood-Dauphinee, 2013). Many of these studies suggest the participation of children with disability in out-of-school activities is less diverse and less frequent compared to their peers with typical development (King et al., 2010; King, Shields, et al., 2013). Children with physical disability are reported to be more likely to engage in informal activities (less structured, more child driven), completed alone and based in their home (Imms, 2008a; Klaas, Kelly, Gorzkowski, Homko, & Vogel, 2010; Law et al., 2006). Children with physical disabilities are also reported to have less variety in their societal participation, including attending fewer social engagements than children without disability (Law et al., 2006).

Previous studies have reported the participation patterns of children with physical disability, intellectual disability and sensory disabilities separately. Much less is known about the participation patterns of children with intellectual disability (Shields, King, Corbett, & Imms, 2014) and children with multiple disabilities that include an intellectual disability. These children are often excluded from studies (e.g. Law et al., 2006) or it is not reported if children participating in studies had an intellectual disability (e.g. Ullenhag et al., 2012). Few studies have reported the effect of disability type and severity on patterns of participation. There is some evidence to suggest that participation is even less diverse and less intense among children with severe cerebral palsy compared to those with mild cerebral palsy (Imms, 2008a). Therefore, further research investigating the effect of disability type and severity on participation in children is warranted.

The reasons why children with disability may not participate in out-of-school activities are multifactorial (King et al., 2003). Environmental, attitudinal and economic barriers have been reported, some of which are generic to all children and some which are specific to children with disability (Shields et al., 2012). The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) emphasises that participation occurs within a context (World Health Organisation, 2001), so it is important to consider the influence of personal (e.g. age, severity of disability, preference) and environmental (e.g. socioeconomic status, geographical location) factors. Studies in children with cerebral palsy have shown that the personal factors of age, gender and activity preference can predict participation in out-of-school activities but relatively little is known about the role of the environment on participation in children with disability including what factors may promote greater involvement in this group (King, Imms, et al., 2013). Exploring the influence that environmental factors have on participation may facilitate deeper understanding of the barriers to participation. Understanding the patterns of participation of children with mixed disability including the extent (diversity, frequency), context (companionship, location) and experience (enjoyment, preference), may also be valuable from a health service perspective, as education and health professionals often work in clinics that manage children with different types or multiple disabilities, rather than specialist services for children with specific conditions (e.g. cerebral palsy). Such knowledge may be used to implement strategies to reduce social isolation, and facilitate participation in the community at a service level.

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