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# Research in Developmental Disabilities



## Participation in leisure activities: Differences between children with and without physical disabilities



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to compare varied dimensions of participation in leisure activities among school-aged children ages 10–16 with and without disabilities. The Children Leisure Activity Scale (CLASS) was administered to 294 children, 81 with and 213 without physical disability. Two-way MANCOVA revealed significant differences between the frequency of participation in leisure activities of the study groups: an effect of disability  $F(4,265) = 239.57$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.78$ ; an effect of gender  $F(4,265) = 3.35$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ ; and an interaction effect between gender and disability  $F(4,265) = 5.23$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.64$ . Children with disabilities, and mostly girls, were found at risk to participate in a narrower variety of activities that involved fewer social interactions. Using linear regressions for each group two different models were identified. Using the CLASS the study contributes evidence-based data regarding children at risk for leisure participation. In addition, the research further established the discriminate validity of the CLASS.

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## 1. Introduction

Participation is a complex concept that relates to involvement in major life areas, such as mobility, domestic life, learning and applying knowledge, productivity, and engaging in social and leisure activities. As such, it constitutes a core concept related to health and disease, ability and disability within the framework of the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health for Children and Youth (ICF-CY; WHO, 2007).

Participation in leisure activities may serve psychologists and other clinicians, educators, researchers and policy makers, as an indicator of function and health correlated with quality of life, as well as physical and emotional well-being (Shikako-Thomas et al., 2012). It is a recommended high level outcome measure since by its nature it is driven by internal motivation and involves freedom of choice and control, in contrast to other duties and roles individual are engaged in their daily life (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Neistadt & Crepeau, 1998). Leisure or play activities provide school-age children with opportunities for enjoyment, relaxation, recreation, self-enrichment, and goal achievement. Moreover, leisure is of central importance for building children's competence, self-determination, and identity as well as for social and personality development (Coastsworth et al., 2005; Passmore & French, 2003; Shikako-Thomas et al., 2012; Wilkes, Cordier, Bundy, Docking, & Munro, 2011). Furthermore, participation in meaningful leisure activities correlates with children's well-being (Adolfsson, 2011), and quality of life, if it fits the child's skills and preferences, especially in case they live with disability (Shikako-Thomas et al., 2012).

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In line with the WHO's classification mentioned above, disability was defined as 'a difficulty in functioning at the body, person or social levels, in one or more life domains, as experienced by an individual with a health condition in interactions with contextual factors' (Leonardi, Bickenbach, Ustun, Kostanjsek, & Chatterji, 2006; p. 1220). The current study focuses participation in leisure and social activities, as essential life domain of children with and without disability.

Society has a duty to facilitate the participation of children with disabilities in leisure activities (ICF-CY, 2004; McConachie, Colver, Forsyth, Jarvis, & Parkinson, 2006). Indeed, meaningful leisure participation is necessary to enable children with disabilities to learn skills, and develop self-efficacy and self-identity, while involved in meaningful occupations (Heah, Case, McGuire, & Law, 2007; Shikako-Thomas et al., 2012; Shimoni, Engel-Yeger, & Tirosh, 2010).

Participation et large, and mostly in leisure activities is a complex concept characterized along multiple dimensions, including: objective and subjective report, quantitative and qualitative measures, and the context where the participation takes place (Coster & Khetani, 2008; Palisano et al., 2011). However, previous studies comparing the participation of children and youths with and without disabilities have struggled to discover multi-dimensional phenomena. On the one hand, it is evident that children and youth with disabilities are more restricted than children without disabilities in their leisure and play participation. This manifests in less variation in activities, fewer social engagements, more time spent in quiet recreational activities at home, and less in formal organized activities (Law, Petrenchik, King, & Hurley, 2007; Palisano et al., 2011; Shimoni et al., 2010).

On the other hand, Majnemer and her colleagues (Majnemer et al., 2008) found that children with disabilities are actively involved in a wide range of informal leisure activities and experience a high level of enjoyment. In a longitudinal study among 427 children ages 6–14 with physical disabilities (50.8% with Cerebral Palsy), Law and her colleagues (2006) found that children participate in a wide range of activities. As a whole, they exhibit proportionally greater participation and greater intensity in informal activities rather than in organized/structured formal activities, in which only 60% participate once or more a week. The authors consider their findings to be of concern, given that participation in organized activities is important for the development of skills and competences, and long-term mental and physical health (Bult, Verschuren, Jongmans, Lindeman, & Ketelaar, 2011; Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, McMillen, & Brent, 2001).

Researchers investigating the factors that explain participation rates by children with disabilities found that mastery, motivation, and involvement in rehabilitation services enhance participation in leisure activities. However, cognitive and behavioral difficulties, motor limitations, and parental stress are obstacles to participation (Bult et al., 2011; Imms, Reilly, Carlin, & Dodd, 2008). The personal factors of age and gender also strongly influence participation by children with disabilities. These factors are the most significant factors explaining choice of and participation in leisure activities in children with cerebral palsy (Bult et al., 2011; Shikako-Thomas, Majnemer, Law, & Lach, 2008), which is consistent with findings for children without disability (Allison et al., 2005; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; King et al., 2007; Mota, Silva, Santos, Ribeiro, & Duarte, 2005). With respect to age, children with disabilities aged over 12 years participate less frequently and in a smaller variety of activities than younger children (Bult et al., 2011). Regarding gender, Law and her colleagues (2006) found that, among children with disabilities, girls participate in significantly more social and skill-based activities than boys, which is again consistent with findings for typically developing children (Rosenblum, Sachs, & Schreuer, 2010).

Some of the variance in the studies about play and leisure participation described above may stem from the assessment tool used in each study. Recently, the literature has increased its focus on play/leisure participation among school-aged children while implementing standardized new tools. However, comprehensive, culturally sensitive evaluations of the multi-dimensional construct of leisure participation among children with disabilities remain scarce. Indeed, only a few studies (Hackett, 2003; King et al., 2007) have been undertaken outside of North America and Europe. Such evaluations may contribute to unveiling the factors that explain the participation of children with disabilities in leisure activities in order to recommend intervention programs for improving their inclusion and enhancing their quality of life.

The Children's Leisure Activity Scale (CLASS – Rosenblum et al., 2010) was developed in response to the call to evaluate leisure participation among school-aged children in a comprehensive manner (McConachie et al., 2006) with a tool that is practical and culturally sensitive to multicultural groups in Israel. The CLASS enables us to examine participation in 40 leisure activities from a wide perspective, via *six dimensions* of participation: variety (which activities), frequency (how often), sociability (with whom), preference (how much he or she likes the activity), time consumption (how much time is invested), and desired activities (which activities are desired but not currently undertaken). Following factor analysis, the 40 activities in the CLASS were also divided into four *main factors*: instrumental indoor, outdoor, self-enrichment, and games and sports (Rosenblum et al., 2010).

The aim of the current study is to explore the multidimensional characteristics of participation in leisure activities among school-aged children with various disabilities, in comparison with typically developing children, while controlling other demographic child's characteristics (age, mean years of education of parents, socio-cultural identity and place of residence). A secondary goal is to further establish the discriminant validity of the CLASS. These aims were divided into three specific hypotheses regarding significant differences between children with and without disabilities in terms of their leisure activities, as reflected through the CLASS:

**H1.** *Differences in CLASS dimensions.* School-aged children with disabilities participate in a smaller variety of activities, less frequently, and with fewer social interactions than their peers without disabilities. These differences are significant and not attributable to the controlled demographic characteristics.

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