

**Presentation Transcript**

Topic: Supporting children and youths with disabilities in sports and physical activities

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Hello, everyone, my name is Su-Lynn. I want to first thank Stefanie and your organizing team for having me here. It's an honor for me to be part of this year's Inclusive Sport Conference. Just to introduce myself a little bit,

I have a younger brother with cerebral palsy so growing up with him, I have seen the strengths, the struggles that he and his other friends with disabilities go through on a daily basis. When we were much younger, there was still a lot of ignorance and a lack of awareness of disabilities and everywhere we went, he would get a lot of people staring at him. My brother attended a mainstream regular school so he had the chance to physically and socially interact with typically developing peers but there were also a lot of challenges. For example, not being able to attend some school activities, as the teachers were either not ready or not equipped to support him in outdoor camps, or not being able to go to places that were not as easily accessible. Other than schooling, he attended regular physiotherapy, and that was when he was encouraged to take up horse riding as a form of therapy. He enjoyed it, and it was something that he fell in love with, and he thought that he was very good at it. The strong family support and with the support from the community, he started competing, and then this became a strong passion for him. Now he is looking forward to taking part in his third Paralympic games this year.

Growing up in a family who are strong advocates for the disability community, I was very much influenced by my parents and I also grew to have a strong interest in special needs, that's why it came as no surprise that I wanted to pursue a career in psychology, and more specifically educational psychology. Being an educational psychologist, I specialized in the assessment and support of children with learning difficulties, and special educational needs. I wanted to contribute by helping teachers, parents and the children themselves, in seeing how they can be meaningfully integrated in to the society and to be included.

Allow me now to dive straight into the main focus of my sharing. Starting off with defining what Special Educational Needs (SEN) for short is, a child is considered to have SEN when all these three conditions are present. Diagnosed with a disability, shows greater difficulty in learning as compared to the majority of their peers of the age. For example, difficulties in their social, their language, academic or physical abilities, and requires different or additional resources beyond what is generally available for the majority of their peers.

A person with SEN may have difficulties across several areas of academic and social functioning, such as doing schoolwork, making friends, behaving appropriately in the presence of others, or learning in school due to limitations in their sight, in their hearing or their physical mobility.

Children with physical disabilities who are not cognitively impaired are integrated into the mainstream school system to undergo the same curriculum as the typically developing peers. Now, although pupils with physical disabilities are generally expected to be able to assess their curriculum content directly, some aspects of their disability may also impact their participation in various learning activities. For example, participation in physical education (PE) or CCAs, accommodations and modifications will then need to be made to support the learning of these pupils. For example, in the way teachers give instructions, and how educational activities are being carried out. The key factor in enabling children to assess a school environment will not be changes within the child but the developments in the school's ability to facilitate the assess, and in terms of forging friendships, and developing peer relations. Peers' positive attitudes towards pupils with disabilities are vital for success and integration. Literature suggests that physical inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools does not necessarily in itself develop social inclusion. Friendships, in particular, for pupils with physical disabilities, is vital in the creation of their self-identity, builds up their social competence and contributes to meaningful classroom experiences.

However, this also comes with some barriers and challenges. If adaptations to the curriculum are not made, students with physical disabilities are likely to feel exposed and frustrated, not only by the activities themselves, but also by the routine associated with them, for example, getting changed within a restricted time, following group instructions designed for the rest of the class and contributing as a part of a competitive team. Children with physical disabilities are excluded from these activities, either by choice or by the advice of the schools. In a recent American study, large class size and limited adaptive equipment were the two top barriers to teach up to students with disabilities and among the most difficult students, or rather perceived to be the most difficult students for PE instruction, students with physical disabilities ranked third after students with autism and behavioral difficulties. Lower participation in physical activities remove these children from active engagement with their classmates and this is a matter of concern as children with physical disabilities do value opportunities to gain friends and maintain friendship ties as much as typically developing peers, fewer activities with peers also results in lower social interaction and development of age-appropriate social behaviors. While these are among some of the challenges associated with including children with physical disabilities, in physical activities, CCA and school camps, it is important that children with physical disabilities are not deprived of the opportunities that these activities can provide. Low participation rates in these activities may negatively impact children's self-esteem and other peer relationships.

The development of self-esteem is fundamental for children's adaptive functioning and perceived well-being specific to children with physical disabilities, their disability involves a variety of potential stressors and challenges that could influence the physical, the cognitive and emotional and social development of the child and therefore their self-esteem. For Children with minor physical disabilities, they could have lower self-esteem of their own physical competency because they are met with larger demands from themselves, as well as the environment because they compare themselves with their typically developing peers. The Children's perceptions of themselves are primarily based on a comparison of their own abilities with those of their peers in the immediate social environment. Hence, engagement in social comparison would impact the formation of their perceived academic and physical competence, which in turn impacts their global self-esteem. In contrast, children with more severe physical disabilities were actually associated with increased self-esteem in physical appearance and global self-worth.

An explanation could be that children with major or rather more severe physical disabilities, tend to receive people's empathy and attention, and consequently get greater opportunities to receive social support. In general, from the existing literature, it appears that the impact on self-esteem is affected by both the presence and the severity of their physical disability.

In my own study, I found that the self-esteem of children with physical disabilities in Singapore not only fell within the normal range, but some of them actually rated themselves to be relatively higher than that of their typically developing peers. This suggests that the self-esteem of people with physical disabilities is not necessarily low. A possible factor that could have contributed to a higher self-esteem level could be the supportive school environment in which the child's needs are supported, creating a sense of belonging and acceptance for them.

And with more schools, now being resourced to support children with mild SEN and physical impairment, greater awareness and exposure to disabilities also created. Better support and infrastructure are also being put in place in schools, this could have led to positive effects on the self-esteem levels of the children with disabilities. In terms of academic performance, children with physical disabilities may feel more competent or accepted in the academy area because of their experiences of success in this area, and on such tasks, they find that they can achieve and be seen positively by others. Other factors that could have contributed to this finding are the presences of a supportive family environment, and the provision of support services to the children with physical disabilities.

Compared to typically developing children, the children with physical disabilities also may have poorer peer relations, which indicates an area of concern, as this may have implications on your psychosocial adjustment. Because school life for children with physical disabilities can be increasingly stressful as they progress into adolescence. They may feel conspicuous and uncomfortable as a result of always being last, never picked for sports, requiring help during recess or requiring help with self-care. As they are perceived as different. They are more likely to be ostracized, to lack friends, and even to be bullied. In a study with children with physical disabilities between the ages of 10 and 30, on the experiences of education, it was found that they struggled to develop friendships, and felt lonely and more excluded despite being integrated in a mainstream school system. Low participation rates in physical activities may result in children with physical disabilities to feel excluded, and to have a negative effect on their relationship with peers. Instead, they felt more included in situations when they experienced equal treatment, reciprocal friendships and acceptance by peers and in settings where their own abilities were matched more equally. So conversely, it is in competitive sports and recreational physical activity, which are perceived to require accommodations and involve unmatched abilities that children with physical disabilities associate with limited opportunities and feel incapable and even more separated from their peers. The lack of opportunities could make them feel more socially isolated, and this negative impact on peer relations can really be a significant issue.

Friendship is important in creating self-identity, building social competence and contributing to a meaningful classroom experience. For children with disabilities in particular, the emphasis is on their social development, and integration in inclusive education to strengthen their social problem-solving skills. Children with disabilities may have poorer social skills and may not be as well accepted by their peers, and the weaker development of social skills may be affected by reduced social opportunities, and negative stereotypes and possibly neurocognitive deficits that impact their social information processing. Other than experiencing reduced social interaction and negative stereotypes, children with disabilities may have difficulty in initiating social interaction, which then of course lead to fewer friendships, and this reinforces the psychosocial problems. Children with physical disabilities may also appear to be less pro social, for a few reasons. They have limited social interactions, and hence limited opportunities to display those pro social behaviors. And given their physical condition, they have less autonomy in organizing and introducing change by their daily lives. These tasks are which parents or caregivers often assume responsibility for. Of course, this will then limit their ability to demonstrate their pro social behaviors. Yet, there is research evidence that children with physical disabilities do have a preference for social activities, which represents a real need to connect with others in substantive and meaningful ways. Perhaps it is in receiving friendship and forging strong peer relationships that children and youth typically developing or otherwise acquire pro social skills. The situation has led some to advocate for social skills training, social emotional learning, as an important means of promoting positive social behavior, social acceptance, and successful inclusion. The quality of interactions is important that it is central to the educational, the social and the emotional development of all pupils, and should be a priority in inclusive settings.

What then are the implications for practice? First, within and beyond the classroom, teachers can structure opportunities for social interaction, such as adopting a cooperative learning framework that has the potential of fostering the habit of group accountability for learning and success for all members. Children with special needs, can actually be seen as full members of their classroom, where teachers actively teach our pupils how to be supportive of peers who are different from themselves. Teachers can also consider giving opportunities to children with disabilities to assume lead roles in class-wide programme or in projects in which our strengths can be tapped on. More can be done to equip teachers with knowledge and skills about the management and support of children with special needs and disabilities. For example, matching the ability of the child to the task given so that they can participate and contribute on an equal basis, or to allow broader access to PE, CCAs as well as social activities.

Rather than expecting children with disabilities to fit into the existing structures, schools will need to work at removing barriers and increasing support systems that will allow them to participate more fully in school and to develop their potential.

Moving on now to discuss the quality traits of a good coach and an educator, especially in working with children and youth with disabilities, which I know that many of you already possess. First is understanding, understand that emotional reading actions and in many cases, fewer desirable behaviors are coping mechanisms triggered by the stress generated by the frustration and the fear of what a child sees as inevitable failure. The educator or the coach does not use this understanding to excuse or to allow the student to excuse their own behavior, but instead to help explain it and to work through with the child. The educator also understands that many of these less desirable or negative emotions and troubling behaviors go away when the student feels competent, and safe and successful. Next is awareness. Being aware of the strengths and difficulties of the child and making modifications when necessary, to support the child's learning. Then we have child-focused, being guided and energized by finding out what facilitates effective learning, and also what gets in the way. The focus of teaching is then to minimize the barriers by educating the learner about their own cognitive style, modifying the curriculum without lowering standards, and creating a learning space in which the students can feel safe and competent. Demonstrating the ability to expose students to a variety of stimuli and knowing when students are connected emotionally and cognitively to their experiences.

Create success, give students the opportunity to demonstrate ways that they have learnt in a variety of ways and publicly value these alternative ways to display knowledge and skills. Praise the process that the students use, as often as possible, more than the product because the product may be substandard, whether it's in a child's own perception, or in reality, even if the process is right. So, it's very important to actually praise the process more than the actual outcome. Now, the hybrid educator will also ask the child what strategies they have used in the past to be successful in any kind of learning, whether it's in school or outside of school, and help to translate that skill, and recreate the positive learning experiences in the classroom or the field of play.

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Take risks, be willing to take a risk when it comes to advocating for the student or the child, taking the courage to step up and to take a stand for what kind of support is required for the child. You may want to examine your own classroom practices or your own coaching practices to identify what works and what doesn't, it's always after all, an ongoing learning process and a self-reflection journey.

Last but not least, to honor the child for just being who they are, to embrace and celebrate little successes, and to celebrate your own success too.

In conclusion, I just want to say that successful integration of children with disabilities is not simply determined by within child factors, but also by the school environment, and in particular structure teaching, appropriate support and a positive culture. Now, the strongest support for integration is the positive attitude of all stakeholders towards improving the outcomes of children with disabilities. With the appropriate mindset, and active involvement of the relevant stakeholders and everyone around the child, we all can play a part in enabling them. Children with a range of disabilities to benefit physically, academically and socially. Another special group of people that contributes to the support of people with disabilities, it's actually the awesome pool of volunteers. In exploring what is meaningful for me, I was reminded of my own passion for sports, and my own interest in special needs and that was actually how I even got into starting to volunteer more regularly with disability sports,

For example, I was involved in the Playability Program. And I also assisted in some learn to swim programs for children with autism, and also with down syndrome. What made me very happy is actually to see the joy of seeing the smiles on their faces, even in the simplest of things like just being in the water. What we take for granted on a daily basis means a lot more to them. I got to experience for myself firsthand, the benefits of engaging in sports and physical activities for these people with disabilities and this brought me back again to the importance of how the process of exercise or physical activity can actually be so much more enjoyable. It's about enjoying the process as opposed to the deliverables and the performance outcome. I've learned to adopt this to be a philosophy in my own personal life.

I thought that I would end up with some of my own personal reflections, which can be summed up in four C's. First is Challenge, helping children or young people, especially those disadvantaged by personal circumstances, disabilities, or learning social emotional difficulties, requires knowledge, requires compassion, and strong interpersonal skills. And after more than 12 years being in MOE and another two more years in private practice so far, I still feel I have so much more to learn about the best approaches, and provisions to support these children's learning and development.

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Through volunteering, I have actually learned even more, and through sharing my own experiences, I gained even more experience. Second is Children, I find it a great joy each time I meet the children, both the younger ones, and also the older youth. I'm not just referring to the physical child, but also the child in every one of us. Gaining an insight into the child's thoughts and how they feel about themselves, their family and their school experiences makes me see even more clearly who they are as a whole child, and what their unique strengths are. Third is Celebration. For Children with SEN and other emotional, social or behavioral difficulties. every little step forward that they take is a cause for celebration, seeing the effort that he put in, and the smiles on their faces, makes me feel so honored to be able to share in that experience of making small steps force success. Forth is Camaraderie, whether it's my full-time job, or voluntary work it is a company of like-minded individuals that makes all of this so much more meaningful and enjoyable.

I just want to end off my presentation by saying that being involved as a para-sport volunteer for programs under the Disability Sports Master Plan has really been one of the most rewarding experiences for me, it has been an honor for me to be part of this conference and also it's been an honor to have worked with many of you. I look forward to even more meaningful and rewarding experiences with all of you.

1Thank you so much for having me here, if you would like to chat with me further on this topic, or if there's anything else you'd like to discuss about, feel free to contact me here at this email address. This is after all, a topic that's very close to my heart so I'll be more than happy to chat more with all of you. Thank you so much.