



Canadian Paralympic Committee | Comité paralympique canadien

Can I play, too?

Getting children with physical disabilities off the sidelines and onto the playing field

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR PARENTS



See how sports can benefit your child

- Ability to develop new skills;
- Increase their motivation, confidence and self-esteem;
- Improve their physical and mental health;
- Enhance their quality of life; and
- **Let them have fun!**

COLETTE BOURGONJE, Paralympian having fun with kids



Photo: Pat Prokopyuk

A message to parents

Dear Parents,

Congratulations! If you are reading this, chances are good that you are considering the benefits of getting your child involved in sport.

I was born with a visual impairment. My parents got me involved in sport at a young age, so I know first hand the value of sport. I know how much confidence it can instill, and how many important life skills and lessons it can impart. I also know without a doubt that it can change a life.

It certainly changed my life; after many years of hard work and overcoming obstacles, I eventually made it to the podium at the Paralympic Games! So I can say with some authority that this may well be *the best decision you could ever make for your child*.

As part of the **Changing Minds, Changing Lives** program, we are pleased to provide you with this guide on how to get your child involved in the world of sport. As a parent, we hope to awaken within you a determination to help your child get off the sidelines and onto the playground, no matter what level of achievement may unfold. The possibilities are endless.

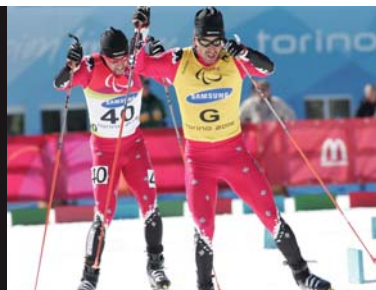
We want to work with you by giving you and your child the opportunity to feel the rush of confidence, exhilaration and achievement that comes from sport.

Come on board! You have nothing to lose but your preconceptions!

Best regards,



Carla Qualtrough, President
Canadian Paralympic Committee



Kids just want to have fun!

Regardless of their abilities or age, there are a number of things all kids have in common. They love to smile. They love to giggle and laugh out loud. They love to learn, compete—even if it's just with themselves—and achieve. But more than anything else, they love to play and have fun.

And there is no better opportunity for them to do that than through individual or team sports. By picking up this booklet, you have taken a positive first step toward bringing a new world of joy to your child through sport.

But, you are probably wondering, is it really a good idea? What about the possibility of injury? Will my child be safe? Will she get hurt in this new environment? Will he be frustrated?

These are all legitimate questions. And they are the very same questions all parents—regardless of their child's abilities—ask themselves.

Yes, there will be challenges. And frustrations. And, as in any sporting endeavour for children

with or without disabilities, the chances of injury—likely very minor—are always there.

But the life-changing benefits are enormous!

The joy of participation and the benefits of learning skills and achieving a level of fitness are obvious. But there is so much more than that. In sports, children expand their understanding of themselves and others, their knowledge of the physical world and their ability to communicate with peers and adults.

We understand your fears—and they are natural. But in our quest to protect our children, we must be careful not to overprotect them, inadvertently shielding them from the joys of life. Selecting the right activity can produce a very positive and beneficial experience for your child.

We invite you to read further and learn about not just the value of sport, but the opportunities out there for you and your child.



The true value of sport

If you are seeking out a learning environment for your child, look no further than the nearest sports centre, field or arena. The amount of learning going on there is nothing short of phenomenal, and it goes far beyond simple athletics:

- a father and son playing ice hockey at the arena—learning skills such as balance and coordination;
- kids playing with other kids in their neighbourhood, running or playing ball hockey—and gaining valuable life skills such as communication, teamwork, and honesty;
- parents at a soccer field, cheering on their kids—boosting their confidence and self-esteem;
- a mom helping her baby daughter in a learn-to-swim class—expanding her understanding of the world around her and helping her grow physically, mentally and emotionally.

The benefits derived from these activities are not confined to able-bodied children. Or even children, for that matter. Anyone, regardless of their physical or mental abilities, can go out onto the field—or ice, court, pitch or track—and enjoy these life-enhancing benefits.

There is no denying, however, that your child may be facing issues related to his or her physical and mental abilities that are not faced by able-bodied children. But they may be less of a problem than you think.

Participating and even excelling in a sport—at any level—compels them to excel in other areas of their lives. Learning to play a sport and finding success shows children with disabilities in a real way that obstacles can be overcome. It may take a lot of effort, but *success is achievable*.



“It was the best thing that ever happened to him—and to our family.”

Connie Dorion looks back and laughs as she recalls her reluctance to let her child, Marc, get involved in sports.

“I thought my little boy was too small to play a physical sport. He was born with spina bifida, a congenital defect in the spinal column. My husband, Roch, and I were worried about him getting injured. Right from the start he showed us that we had little to worry about.”

Connie recalls a story about being in the doctor's office with Marc when he was just four years old. His doctor was playing an exhibition hockey game that weekend and he asked the youngster if he was playing.

“No,” Marc replied, giving the doctor a look. “I can't walk, remember?” The doctor told him that he could surely play if he wanted to. He then explained that in sledge hockey, athletes sit on a sledge and propel themselves using just arm strength and shortened hockey sticks with picks embedded in the ends.



That weekend, they all went to the game. His dad—a hockey goalie who has always had a great influence on Marc’s love of the game—encouraged him, finding a sledge so he could try it. “He wasn’t very stable and he fell over a lot,” Marc’s mom says of her son, “but he loved it. And he has loved it ever since.”

One of the most difficult—and certainly funniest—things, Connie says, was finding him hockey pants that would fit. She remembers getting him a pair of the smallest pants they could find. “They came up around him, covering almost his entire body. They looked like clown pants,” she says with a laugh. “It was priceless—but he didn’t care. He just wanted to play.”

But it hasn’t always been easy, she admits. “At first, and for some time, I was terrified. As parents, we want to wrap our kids in cotton and protect them, whether they are able-bodied or not. I had to go on faith,”

she says. “I couldn’t eat before competitive games for fear of not being able to keep it down.”

But, Connie says, it was well worth every minute. His confidence, self-esteem and physical health have all benefited in so many ways,” she says.

Sledge hockey became such a passion for Marc that at the age of 16, he made the Team Canada sledge hockey team where he is now known for his speed and sheer fearlessness. With this team, Marc went on to win a Gold Medal at the Torino 2006 Paralympic Winter Games.

So, does Connie have any advice for other parents of kids with disabilities? You bet she does.

“Let them try different sports. Let them find their own limits—and be patient. But whatever you do, *get them involved*. It will provide benefits you just can’t buy.”

>>> Ability, Excellence, Inspiration

ROCH, MARC AND CONNIE DORION



“Basketball saved my life!”

Now 18, Shayne Smith remembers his first fling with sports—sledge hockey—at a rink near his Toronto home when he was just seven years old.

“I got strapped onto the sledge but because I have only one hand, I kept going around in circles,” he says now, with a laugh. “I’m sure it was quite a sight!”

A year later, he was hoisted into the original sport utility vehicle—a wheelchair—and took to the basketball court. It was there he found his true sporting love: shooting hoops.

At four months of age, Shayne was diagnosed with meningococcal septicaemia, a blood disorder that cost him both of his legs, all of his left hand and half of his right hand. Despite that, Shayne helped his wheelchair-basketball team make the finals at the Canada Winter Games 2007, has played in a number of international tournaments and

has his sights set on making the Paralympic Team that will take to the court in Beijing in 2008.

“Very few people besides my mother thought basketball was a good idea,” Shayne says. “Who would have thought a kid with half a hand could shoot a three-pointer?” he asks now.

Encouraging her son to get involved with organized sports was easy for Jo-ann Milner, Shayne’s mother. Their family had always been active so when she suggested Shayne try it at the tender age of seven, he was very excited.

“At that age, I was too young to see the limits of what I could or couldn’t do. I was just happy to play and have fun.”

Not everyone with disabilities can be a Paralympian, of course, but don’t tell that to Shayne.

“Basketball saved my life. It got me out playing regular sports and showed me that it’s true – I can do anything I put my mind to. It’s given me a lot of confidence and motivation!”

SHAYNE SMITH, Athlete



"I remember I was going to try out for the Ontario men's team a couple of years ago. Knowing there were guys much older than me, I didn't think I had a chance and didn't even want to try. My mom kicked me out of bed and sent me on my way. If not for that, I never would have ended up going to a tournament in Japan last year with that team. It was an unbelievable time!"

He will tell you that it was just as much fun as being the youngest member of Canada's under-23 squad at the world junior championship in England in 2005.

His advice to kids with disabilities is straightforward. "You can do anything you want if you work hard enough. Even though you have a few challenges, don't look down on yourself. And don't let anyone look down on you, either. Never give up."

SHAYNE SMITH

He has a few words of wisdom for their parents, too. "If your kids want to do it, let them try. Just be there for them and be supportive in everything they do. They might just surprise you."

They might just surprise themselves, too!





KELLY SMITH, Paralympian



I've always loved sports and being outdoors. When a rock-climbing accident in 1991 resulted in a spinal-cord injury that left me without the use of my legs, I was devastated. But despite the injury, I set my sights on continuing to live my life to the fullest and that included challenging myself through sports.

It wasn't easy, but it was the best thing I could have done. With every small achievement I gained new confidence to take on the other challenges I had in life. With every passing day, I felt better about my life path—and myself.

No matter what your child's dream, physical activity can help them achieve it. It's good for their bodies, their minds and their self-confidence.

Kelly Smith has participated in two Paralympic Summer Games and was a Silver Medalist in 2004. He has held a number of Canadian wheelchair racing records and won several wheelchair marathons.

"After my injury, I was determined to continue challenging myself through sport. I fell in love with the physical challenge—and the freedom—of the sport of wheelchair racing: just me, my racing chair, the elements and the open road. Within two years I had a coach and was knocking on the door of the National Team."

KELLY SMITH, Paralympic Athlete

On your marks...

By now, several things should be clear:

- Sport is good for your child physically, mentally and emotionally—it promotes fitness, boosts self-esteem and confidence and teaches them lessons that will be with them for life.
- Getting involved in a sport is often no more complex than simply asking to play.
- Your child is no more likely to get hurt than an able-bodied child.

Get set...

You've decided the benefits are too overwhelming to ignore. You want to involve your child in sports. What now? What is available? What would be the best choice?

Sit down with your child and explore what kinds of sports might work for him or her. Team sports or individual sports? Indoor or outdoor sports? Perhaps you want to consider a sport with a specific type of benefit: cardiovascular, strength and muscle endurance or flexibility.

Start to narrow the choice. While your child—any child—may face limitations of one sort or another, *don't* be bound by convention. You'll be surprised just what sports are available to children with disabilities.



GO!

The question isn't so much *should* you get your child involved in sport, but *how* can you get them involved so they can...

FEEL THE RUSH!

Start **right now** by visiting www.paralympic.ca/feeltherush.

You'll find lists of national, provincial and local organizations in your community that would love to help your child get in the game.



The Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC) is a not-for-profit, charitable, private organization sanctioned by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).

The CPC grows and promotes the Paralympic Movement in Canada by delivering programs that empower persons with physical disabilities through sport at all levels, including sending Canadian teams to the Summer and Winter Paralympic Games.

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