Sport Empowers Disabled Youth

Insight into the current situation
Finland

About SEDY

The SEDY project aims to contribute to the increase of physical activity in children with disabilities. This is achieved by matching the demand and the supply. We are convinced that the participation of children in sport activities contributes to the social, emotional and physical development of children. The project runs from 2015 until 2017. In this period we expect to obtain more knowledge of the level of fit, between demand and supply in sport and the best ways to support disabled children. The final goal is to increase sport participation of children with disabilities, and thereby to increase the social inclusion of this group. The outcomes of the research and the SEDY tool will, in the years following the project, be used for further development and knowledge acquisition.

The research is conducted in seven countries (Lithuania, Finland, United Kingdom, Portugal, France, Italy, the Netherlands). The partners involved in the project are a mix of organisations and complement each other in both knowledge and field experience consisting of four universities, two sport federations, one pan-European organisation and two non-profit organisations.

This factsheet is part of the inventory phase. Purpose of this phase is to collect data on the current and desired situation concerning opportunities for disabled youth to do sport activities (supply) and what are their needs (demand). This factsheet provide statistical data as well as how sport youth with disabilities is organised.

Finland

In addition to the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (signed in 2007 and ratified in 2016), Finland's sport law (L390/2015) strives to promote physical activity, sports, well-being and health of the population. Also, it supports the development of children and youth through sports. One aim of the sport law is to strive for equality through physical activity (Finlex 2015-a.).

Out of Finland's 5.5 million population 1.5 million are children and youth under 24 years (Central Statistical Office of Finland 2016). The exact number of youth with disabilities is not known, but approximately 20% of children and youth are considered to have some kind of medical condition or special need (Saari 2011). Ten years ago 19% of those children with special needs studied in special schools (Laaksonen, 2007). The trend today is towards general education, where Finland has more pupils with special education needs in general education than any other European country (Vislie, 2003).

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Available statistics sport participation

Sport participation

Of those who study in general education and who reported some kind of health condition, 45 percent take part in sports for at least four times per week. 43.4% of the youth (aged 13-15) with long term illnesses or disabilities do sports at least four times per week. 21.3% do sports at least once a week. 37.1% do sports at least four hours per week and 14.9% do sports less than one hour per week (Figure 1). On average 16.6% of youth with disabilities meet the target of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous PA every day. Adolescents with motoric difficulties were the least active (Figure 2) (Ng et.al, 2014a). In reality, the exercise frequency and duration among disabled youth may be lower, since the data did not gather information from special schools and students with learning disabilities.

To fill this gap, another study on physical activity of youth in special schools was used. This study shows that 36.4% of the youth attending special schools did sports at least four times in a week and 26.1% of the youth did sports just once in a week or less. Also in special schools younger students did more sports than older ones, and boys were more physically active than girls (Laine 2014).

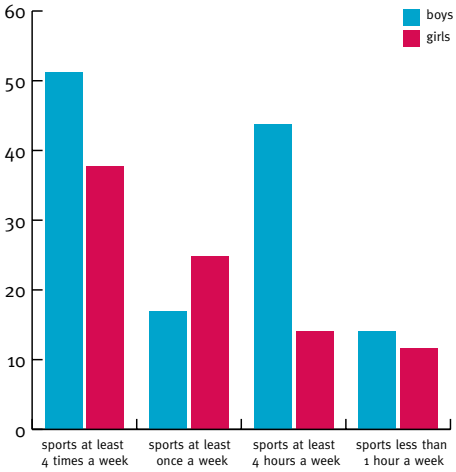

Fig. 1 Frequency and duration of participating in sport of disabled youth aged 13-15 years old

Source: Ng et.al., 2014a

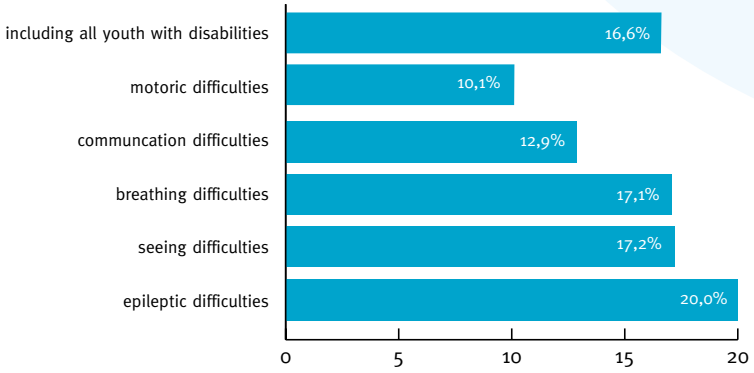

Fig. 2 Participating in sport for at least 1 hour a day sorted by functional difficulties

Source: Ng et.al., 2014a

Sport participation in sport clubs

In Finland there are nearly 9,000 sports clubs in approximately 300 municipalities. About 4,700 adapted physical activity (APA) groups are organised by the municipalities. An average of 9% of these municipality organise APA activities that are targeted for youth with disabilities or with special needs (Ala-Vähälä & Rikala, 2014). In 2009, it was estimated that there were approximately 4000 young participants with disabilities in about 423 local APA clubs (Ala-Vähälä, 2009). The youth program called "Sporttiklubi" which is organized by the Finnish Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities (VAU) gathers and delivers information on various sport camps, -events, -clubs and -competitions for young people with disabilities. There are approximately 800 members in Sporttiklubi. About 400-500 youth participate occasionally in disability sports events such as the Junior Games, which is a multiple sport event for children and youth, organised by VAU twice a year. A small minority (n=20) are members in Paralympic committee's coaching group (Mononen et al, 2014). Mainstream sports clubs are important sports providers. Children with long term illnesses or disabilities are twice more likely to adhere to PA recommendations of at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous PA if they are sports club members than those that are not members (Ng 2016). Since the Millennium, there has been an increase in the number of disabled youth participating in sports, from 38.2% in 2002 to 46.6% in 2014 (Ng et al 2016). There are no statistics available on the number of youth with severe or high support needs attending mainstream sports clubs (Saari 2011, 35-36). In estimation about 30% of sports clubs have one or more members with a disability (Saari 2015a).

Trends in sport participation among youth with disabilities

According to Ng et al (2016), the level of physical activity of youth with disabilities has increased over a 12 year period. In 2002, 13% of the boys with disabilities and 9% of the girls with disabilities were physically active for at least 60 minutes a day. By 2014 the number had increased to 27% for the boys and 16% for the girls. In 2005 municipalities had, on average 2.1 APA groups for people with disabilities for every 10.000 inhabitants. By 2009 the amount of these activities had increased to 2.9 and by 2013 to 3.7 for every 10,000 inhabitants. The majority of these groups are for young people with disabilities (Ala-Vähälä & Rikala 2014). APA-activity in the mainstream sports clubs is evolving in two opposite directions. New disability-specific groups emerge, especially in the bigger cities, which focus on team sports or health-enhancing activity. At the same time, more participants with disabilities become involved in mainstream sports clubs. The demand for inclusive sports services and participation in mainstream sports clubs rather than specially targeted APA groups has increased (Saari 2015b).

Popular Sports

Young people with disabilities like to do the same sports as able-bodied youth (National Sport Research 2010). Research from 2004 (Rintala et al) shows the most popular sports among the youth with disabilities were only not that different from non-disabled youth (Figure 3). The national sport survey 2010 showed that running, gym-training and floorball have become increasingly popular among the youth. Also dancing, figure skating and riding have increased popularity. In this research youth according to whether they have disabilities or not were not separated (National Sports Research 2010). When sports clubs were asked about services for disabled participants the sports mentioned most often were football, swimming, gymnastics and dance (Saari 2015b).

Fig. 3 Most popular sports among disabled youth in 2004

	Total disabled youth	Disabled boys	Able bodied boys	Disabled girls	Able-bodied girls
1	Walking	cycling	cycling	swimming	walking
2	Cycling	football	swimming	walking	swimming
3	Swimming	swimming	football	cycling	cycling
4	Jogging	walking	Ice-hockey	jogging	jogging
5	Football	Ice-hockey	Roller-skating	Ice-skating	Ice-skating

Source: Rintala et al, 2004

Need for equal opportunities in different skill levels

Most children with disabilities and their parents are satisfied with the prevailing opportunities in sport, but some are not. According to the feedback from the families involved in Sporttiklubi, gathered via phone interviews in June 2015 (Juntunen 2015), there is a need for:

1. More sport opportunities in rural areas, smaller towns and villages.
2. More social networks and programs to facilitate participation, since one of the most common reason not to participate in sports is the lack of companions to do sports with.
3. More sport groups for different skill levels and also more sport clubs that are truly open for all. Some youth felt they did not quite fit into adapted or mainstream sport groups, and they felt they couldn't find a sport club providing suitable challenges to them. Also some youth with high support needs felt they were dropping out from the all sport clubs because even the APA clubs were too challenging for them or they didn't get enough assistance to keep up with the others (Juntunen 2015).

System of organisation

Laws and regulations

Finland's sport law (L390/2015) strives to promote physical activity, sports, wellbeing and health of the population. Also it supports the development of children and youth through sports. One aim of the sport law is to strive for equality through physical activity. (Finlex 2015-a.) The law of land use and building (L132/1999) states about accessibility and Finnish government financially favours the sports facilities which are open for large number of people (Finlex 2015-b). The Law of disability attendance (L134/2010) promotes the equal participation of the people with disabilities in the society. It strives to reduce barriers of participation in the society and supports people with disabilities to participate in society and to recreational activities. There is, for example, financial support for people with severe disabilities and a right to have a personal assistant in recreational activity for 30 hours per month (Finlex 2015-c). As a result of the updated Finnish Non-Discrimination Act, which came into force on 1 January 2015 (Finlex 2015-d), many sports organisations started to work on discrimination in sports.

Organisation

The Finnish sports system consists of three major elements: voluntary, public and private. Volunteer associations, such as the sports clubs and the civic sector are at the centre. This sector is financially supported, and thus steered by the public sector, namely, the state, the municipalities and the political system. There are nearly 9,000 sports clubs, in over 300 municipalities and approximately 130 non-governmental sports organisations in Finland (Vehmas & Ilmanen 2013.) At the national level, the Ministry of Education and Culture guides sport policy, legislation and financing, including sports facility construction. At the local level, the municipalities offer sport services for their residents including opportunities for the young people with a disability. Out of approximately 30,000 sports facilities 75% are built and maintained by municipalities (Vehmas & Ilmanen 2013). There are approximately 100 municipal APA instructors, who organise local APA services for the residents. Many of the APA instructors also work as an important link between public and voluntary as well as a link between disability-specific and the mainstream services.

At the national level in the field of adapted physical activity and disability sports there are several non-governmental associations, such as Finnish Paralympic Committee (NPC Finland), Finnish Athletic Association of the Deaf and VAU (Finnish Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities). These focus either on competitive or recreational activities for their members, or both. VAU is the biggest of the national disability sports associations. VAU plans, executes and develops sports and physical activity for people with physical or intellectual disabilities, visual impairments or transplant organs. Special Olympics Finland is part of VAU. VAU organises in co-operation with municipalities low-level activities for children and youth with disabilities. The Finnish Federation of Adapted Physical Activity (SoveLi) promotes health enhancing physical activity focusing on the maintenance of the functional ability.

Funding

98% of the government money for sports is collected by the National Lottery (Veikkaus). Out of approximately 150 Million euros yearly sport budget the government invests about 7 Million into the adapted physical activity. That is about 5-6% of the total sport budget funded by the government.

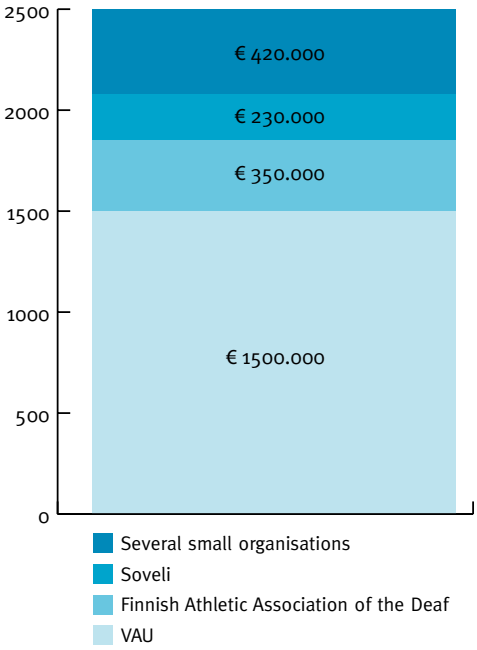

Fig. 4 Partition of € 2.5 million from Finnish government to support organisations and clubs which promote APA (exc. NPC)

Source: Valtion liikuntaneuvosto. 2015

Most of this money is directed to the municipalities where it is used for instance to APA instructors' salaries and other expenses (Rintala et al. 2012). In 2014 the government supported local and national sport clubs and organisations with more than 38 million euros. Out of that sum, 2.5 million euros was given to the organisations promoting adapted physical activity and disability sport (excluding the support for the NPC Finland). Figure 5 shows the partition of this money between different organisations.
In 2009 and 2013 the NPC Finland received about 850,000 euros yearly, but in 2014 only 270,000 euros. The total support has, however, increased, as from the 2014 on the government has been funding elite athletes with disabilities through the same system with other elite athletes.

Every year, VAU uses about 200,000 euros (15%) of the organisation's budget directly for youth sports. The money goes to organising and supporting activities for the youth through awareness raising, education/training different sports on local level. In addition, young people with disabilities are supported via other services such as grants and rental services and also indirectly via consultation and information delivery. Altogether the money spent on youth sports in VAU is close to 35%.

Infrastructure to guide disabled youth to sport

There are different ways to provide information on sport opportunities to disabled youth and their parents and family. At the national level, VAU, along with the national sport federations that have included disability sport within their scope, serve as information channels on disability spots. For example Sporttiklubi, with its quadrennial info letter, provides updated information on events and services for the youth and their families, such as sport competitions, try out days, camps and other sport events. At the regional level, VAU has employees situated in different parts of Finland providing more regional information and consultation for the youth and their families. These employees also organise try out days and work actively in the regional networks. Locally, there are about 100 educated adapted physical activity instructors in municipalities who are familiar with the local disability-specific sports opportunities as well as the mainstream sports clubs that welcome persons with disabilities. They also plan, organise and develop APA and recreational activities in municipality.

Facilitators and barriers for participating in sport

(Perceived) facilitators to participate in sport

Saari (2011) has studied families with disabled children and the factors that facilitate their participation in after-school sports clubs. The most important facilitators for participation were; a short distance between the club and the home or school, good transportation arrangements, accessibility, safety, qualified instructors and assistants, the availability of aids and equipment, small group sizes, and a good atmosphere within the group. Also personal attitudinal factors have an influence on the participation to the clubs such as; the child is self-motivated to learn new things, the parents have confidence in the instructors, families' active lifestyle and the parents trust that the child does not get teased or discriminated in the club. Ng et al. (2014b) studied the individual characteristics affecting the participation in sport of the youth with disabilities. They have found various personal factors that affect participation in physical activity. Younger children are more actively involved in sports than older people. Gender affects the amount of physical activity, boys participated more in sports than girls. Perceived fitness and physical activity intention (youth believe that they do sports when they are 20 years old) have influence on the daily physical activity of the youth. The better fitness the youth perceive to have and the more they believe to do sports when they are 20 years old the more likely they are to be physically active currently. As for the boys, the global self-esteem is also one influential factor in participation in physical activities. The boys are more physically active if they have strong global self-esteem. Among girls, the link between global self-esteem and the amount of daily physical activity was not associated. The studies point out that there are several personal aspects that can facilitate the youth with disabilities to participate in sports, one of these being good health condition. This might partially explain why children with severe disabilities participate in sport significantly less than healthy children (Karvonen 2009; Rintala et al, 2004).

(Perceived) motivators to participate in sport

Young people with disabilities have similar motives to do sports as the able-bodied youth. For 13 years old girls with disabilities or long term illness studying in general education, the three most important reasons to do sports were: 1) desire to improve their health, 2) to get in the good condition 3) to have fun. For girls aged 15 the first two reasons were the same but the third most important reason was the desire to look good. For boys aged 13 the reasons were 1) to have fun, 2) to get in the good condition 3) to see friends. For boys aged 15 the reasons were 1) the desire to improve their health, 2) to get in the good condition and 3) to have fun. (Rintala et al, 2013.) Similar results were reported for motivation factors for youth in disability sport (Karvonen, 2009). The difference was that desire to look good was important reason to do sports also for the girls aged 13. And for the boys aged 13 the most important reason to do sport was that they wanted to see their friends and the third important factor was that they wanted to have fun. It seems that looking good is more important for girls than boys and social factors like meeting friends is more important for the younger than the older youth. Karvonen (2009) also found out that the boys are more competition orientated and also want to please their parents more than girls.

(Perceived) barriers to participate in sport

There is not much information on the barriers to participation in sport faced by young people with disabilities. According to Saari (2011) children and youth with significant disabilities seldom participate in sports in the mainstream clubs or groups. They are often seen to need specially targeted activities, which in many municipalities do not exist. Students in special schools may often think they are unable do sports in the mainstream. Special school status may separate children from their local age-peers causing loneliness and isolation. The child may not have friends to go and do sports with. Parents may protect children from bullying and discrimination. The sports system, its norms and codes – based on competition, skills, rankings and excellence – serve to strengthen the exclusion. The vicious circle is complete (Saari 2011). For the sports providers in the voluntary sector (sports clubs), the biggest barrier is the lack of resources, such as coaches and other personnel, know-how and time. The clubs also lack networks and do not know how to reach potential participants or do marketing (Saari 2015b). The weak economic situations in municipalities and the lack of full time physical education instructors are the most common barriers to organise successful APA services, as well as the lack of qualified assistance, transportation and accessibility of the sport facilities (Piispanen 2010).

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