

Aija Saari

Valtti pilot project was a success

Over 50% of children with special needs found a new hobby and became more physically active

Aija Saari

Finnish Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities

Summary

The aim of the Valtti project was to increase physical activity among disabled children and young people and to help them find a physical hobby. During 2016, a model in which a personal consultant or an instructor, a PAPAI (a personal adapted physical activity instructor, or in Finnish a *Valtti*), assists a child or a young person with special needs to engage in hobby was tested in Finland. 19 schools across Finland, with about 300 children and the same number of PAPAI students participated in the pilot. 54% of those who participated in the hobby try-out found a new hobby and 61% are now more physically active than before. This article is a summary of the implementation and results of the 2016 pilot project. The text is based on the Finnish-language report *Lisääntykö liike, löytyikö harrastus?* (more action, new hobbies?), put together by Aija Saari and Heidi Skantz in March 2017.



Why Valtti?

The Valtti pilot was a part of the Sports Empowers Disabled Youth Project (SEDY), supported by the EU's Erasmus+ Programme, in which seven countries and nine project partners look for means of reducing exclusion of disabled children and young people from physical activity. SEDY (2015–2017) is coordinated by Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, School of Sports & Nutrition and has nine partners from seven countries (Netherlands, Finland, UK, Italy, France, Lithuania, Portugal). The Finnish partner in the project is the Finnish Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities (VAU).

The Valtti method developed by VAU was used to help tackle the lack of physical exercise among disabled children. The idea is that having a hobby acts as a kind of social glue, preventing exclusion. According to European studies, disabled children and young people, and those with long-term illnesses, are physically less active and do less regular exercise than their able-bodied peers. There are many reasons for this. Traditionally, exercise for those with special needs is organised as part of rehabilitation and in segregated groups. Many instructors and parents may still think that instructing disabled children or young people requires special medical skills. Some parents may think that a disabled child will not manage in a mainstream group or a sports team. Families don't know which sports or what kinds of exercises suit their child, where to find facilities, how to get to them and if their child will be accepted. In the SEDY project, this is represented as an issue of demand and supply.

The lack of participation of disabled children compared to others is also an equality issue. According to the Finnish Sports Act and the Non-Discrimination Act, physical activity providers are expected to offer equal opportunities. In addition, the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) requires that people with mobility and other functional disabilities can themselves choose where and when they exercise or participate in hobbies. Moreover, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child also requires that children must be heard in matters affecting them.

How does the Valtti programme work?

The Valtti model is based on personal physical activity guidance and instruction; in the model students of health and social care, sports and leisure management or education act as personal adapted physical activity instructors (PAPAI) for children or young people with special needs. For their involvement, students can get study credits, for example, in adapted physical activity. You can also become a PAPAI volunteer.

A PAPAI learns about the situation and wishes of the participant, designs a hobby try-out plan, contacts providers and agrees on and carries out the try-outs, documents them together with the participant and carries out a feedback session. Guidance for making the first contact and forms for planning the try-outs and documenting the experiences (hobby try-out diary) have been designed to support the PAPAI. In addition, PAPAI are encouraged to participate in a variety of adapted physical activity trainings. In addition to Finnish, the materials are available in Swedish and in English. PAPAI are not paid but VAU covers the expenses of participating students and volunteers. Schools are responsible for providing insurance to their students and VAU to the volunteers.

Valtti coordinators are sought in key towns to support families, PAPAI and sports clubs, and to act as links between schools and VAU. Valtti coordinators are usually advanced students and future professionals interested in adapted physical activity. Valtti coordinators receive a small compensation for their work.

The application process for the programme is in the spring. There is a separate process for children and young people, and students wishing to become PAPAI. Participation for children and young people with disabilities is free of charge, but they must pay one's insurance, travel- and other costs during try outs. VAU trainers provide a short Valtti information session or a longer training of several hours to the students. The try-outs will mainly take place in the autumn. Some PAPAI carried out the try-outs already during the summer, and some did their try-outs with a pair. At the end of the try-outs, a PAPAI presented their participant with a diploma, sent an invoice for their travel expenses to VAU and filled in a feedback form. The Valtti coordinator collected the try-out diaries and photos.

Who applied to the programme in 2016?

The online Valtti application process was open in the spring and many schools organised information events to recruit PAPAI. 367 children and young people between 5 and 21 years of age sought for their own PAPAI. After registration, applicants and students were matched to make up Valtti pairs. Due to the high demand, some applicants did not get their PAPAI, particularly in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Furthermore, some applicants living in remote areas with no participating school nearby did not get a PAPAI.

Lack of hobbies and social reasons were given special attention in the selection process. 47 of the selected 288 children and young people cancelled or dropped out. The most common reasons for this were problems in finding suitable times for both parties, illness or the participant had already found a hobby before the try-out started.

Two thirds (67%) of the total of 367 applicants were boys, and the average age was 12. Instead of their diagnosis, applicants were asked to assess their abilities in the application form. The majority had difficulties in social interaction, with about a third finding it very difficult to concentrate or to communicate, and 25% had problems with taking care of themselves. 13% of applicants had a severe physical disability, 7% were visually impaired and 3% had a hearing impairment. Almost 50% had to take regular medication and a third needed mobility aids. Two thirds had regular therapy and 85% felt that they needed an assistant to participate in hobbies.

In the beginning, there were a total of 335 students and volunteers applying to become PAPAI, but due to residential moves, illnesses and changes in life situations, about 250 people completed the programme in the end.



Results of the Valtti pilot phase

A total of 367 children or young people with special needs applied for their own PAPAI, 237 of whom carried out their hobby try-outs in the autumn of 2016. 155 children or young people submitted the feedback form. 54% of them said that they had found a physical hobby and 61% said that their physical activity had increased. The children and young people had tried 37 different forms of physical exercise. The most popular physical hobbies found included different forms of combat sports, such as judo and taekwondo, and dance, basketball, horse riding, attending diverse exercise clubs, swimming and going to the gym. Those who had not yet found their own form of exercise during the autumn said that they had received new ideas for physical activity and become more confident to try new forms of exercise. At its best, the Valtti programme had encouraged the whole family to move.

201 students and volunteers submitted the feedback form. For the vast majority, the programme had been a positive learning experience, with 87% reporting that they had learned useful things for their future career, and 85% said that they would recommend becoming a PAPAI to their fellow students. Scheduling the meetings, identifying hobbies and contacts with the families of participants had caused the biggest difficulties. Some of the PAPAI's found part-time employment as a child's personal assistant.

Elements of success

The most important element of success in the programme was that the Valtti programme was looking for answers to real problems. Everybody involved – VAU, the families, the sports clubs, the local authorities, students, schools, the society etc. – benefitted from the success of the programme. This helped those involved to commit to the goals of the programme.

The Valtti programme was exactly what vocational training providers of today are looking for. At the same time, students get an important work contact with local networks, support from VAU, experience of adapted physical activity and a chance to operate within cross-sectoral networks.

Valtti also steers sports provision towards inclusion. Contacts with PAPAI show sports clubs in a concrete way that there is demand for these kinds of activities. Activity providers (afternoon clubs in schools, sports clubs and other organisations, other clubs for children with special needs) need to think about the accessibility of their activities. The Valtti programme in an extra pair of hands to APA-instructors in municipalities.

Participation in the Valtti programme was an inexpensive intervention providing physical activity for the families of children and youth with special needs. The PAPAI gets involved in the everyday activities of the families but will not do things on their behalf. Families themselves are responsible for participation fees, organisation of the assistant and transport to the venue. The idea behind sharing the responsibilities is to ensure that an activity began promisingly will not end after the hobby try-out. The total cost of the pilot phase of the project, including staff costs, was about 70,000 euros. The cost of individual activity try-outs were about 300 euros. A small price to pay for preventing exclusion of a child.

One of the key elements of success was to show respect to children and young people by listening to their opinions and voices. Disabled children may not have been used to having been listened to when it comes to choice of physical activities. PAPAI were instructed to ask about the wishes and interests of the participants. At the end of each meeting, they collected feedback in their try-out diaries and photos.

The programme continues and the model will be spread to Europe

From the very beginning, there was a need for the Valtti model both in Finland and the partner countries in the SEDY project. A PAPAI handbook in English was produced as part of the pilot project, to help test the model in the Netherlands, Lithuania and Portugal, too.

The new Valtti round is already on the way. VAU received a grant from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture to continue and establish the Valtti programme from 2017 to 2019. VAU will develop and expand its service to find sports clubs so that it will be easier to find venues for adapted physical activity in the future.

Futher information

Aija Saari, Research Manager (Doctor of Sport and Health Sciences)

Finnish Sports Association for Persons with Disabilities (VAU)

- Radiokatu 20, 00240 Helsinki
- tel +358 (0)40 506 4208
- email aija.saari@vammaisurheilu.fi
- www.vammaisurheilu.fi/ajankohtaista/valtti/in-english

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