



## Social Inclusion and Sports: Strategies to Promote Participation of People with Disabilities (Last 10 years)

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### ABSTRACT

This review study examines strategies developed to increase the social integration of individuals with disabilities and enhance their participation in sports. The inclusion of people with disabilities in sport and physical activity represents a significant public health and social imperative. Through analysis of existing literature, this study synthesizes guidance to support individuals with disabilities in discovering their athletic potential and facilitating social integration. Research indicates that sports participation can enhance self-confidence and quality of life among individuals with disabilities while promoting social acceptance and strengthening interpersonal relationships. This review provides a comprehensive analysis of how sport can be utilized as a tool for disability inclusion. The literature demonstrates that engagement in sports activities contributes to improved physical and mental health outcomes while fostering a more inclusive social environment. Based on the reviewed evidence, developing and implementing strategies to ensure equitable participation of individuals with disabilities remains crucial. While societal support is essential for overcoming barriers to participation, this review aims to serve as a resource for advancing disability inclusion through sports engagement.

**Keywords:** *individuals with disabilities, accessibility, sports policies, social integration*

### INTRODUCTION

Social integration through sport participation has emerged as a critical pathway for enhancing the societal engagement of individuals with disabilities. This literature review synthesizes research from the past decade examining strategies to promote social inclusion of people with disabilities through sporting activities.

Kissow (2013) investigated the impact of physical activity on the social participation of individuals with physical disabilities. The findings demonstrate that engagement in sport enhances social visibility and accessibility of participation opportunities, fostering more positive societal attitudes. Additionally, the research



highlighted that athletes with disabilities who engage in high-level team sports develop strong community bonds that facilitate broader social integration. Scifo et al. (2019) evaluated sport intervention programs designed for individuals with intellectual disabilities, focusing on health outcomes and social integration. Their research revealed that structured sporting activities contribute to holistic development and expand opportunities for social engagement. The authors emphasized the need for government initiatives to ensure equitable access across disability groups and highlighted how well-designed sports programs can catalyze lifestyle changes. The study underscored the importance of considering both disability-specific and social-familial factors when implementing intervention programs.

In a systematic review of sports injuries among athletes with disabilities, Çevik (2023) noted that while individuals with disabilities often maintain sedentary lifestyles, regular physical activity yields significant psychological and social benefits. However, the research identified that sports-related injuries pose unique challenges for this population, particularly regarding healthcare access. The study emphasized the critical need for improved injury surveillance and epidemiological research to develop effective prevention strategies.

This literature review identifies key strategies for enhancing social integration of individuals with disabilities through sport participation, demonstrating positive outcomes at both individual and societal levels.

Bayındır and Uysal (2023) examined gender dynamics in Paralympic sports, focusing on advantages, disadvantages, and inequalities experienced by female athletes. Their qualitative study analyzed the experiences of 17 female Paralympic athletes competing professionally across seven individual and team sports. Using snowball sampling and descriptive analysis, the research revealed that women with disabilities face dual exclusion from sports - being perceived as outside both "normality" and "robustness" norms. The findings highlighted how gender inequalities contribute to reduced encouragement and support for sports participation among women with disabilities. Çil, Yılmaz, and İlhan (2023) investigated perspectives of physically disabled athletes regarding sports participation among individuals with special needs. Their findings indicated that sports engagement generates motivation, happiness, and pride among participants. The study emphasized how active athletes with special needs serve as role models for their peers, while participation in sports fosters self-realization and optimism among practitioners. Işık Afacan (2023) explored disability within sports sociology to enhance participation and awareness. The research identified multiple dimensions of disability sports, including performance athletics, physical education, rehabilitation, and recreational activities. Time constraints emerged as a significant barrier to participation. The study concluded that increasing sports accessibility for



disabled citizens requires macro-level state intervention through social services, both domestically and internationally.

Karadaş and Çetiner (2022) analyzed the impact of disability sport policies on Turkish Paralympic athletes' participation and performance. Their findings demonstrated that the development, implementation, and continuity of disability sport policies in Turkey correlated with increased Paralympic participation and success. The research emphasized that sports policies supporting active participation of individuals with disabilities play a crucial role in social integration and adaptation. Additionally, the study identified sports and recreational activities as essential components of therapeutic recreation for enhancing the overall well-being of individuals with disabilities. Erbaş (2022) investigated motivational factors influencing sports participation among individuals with disabilities in Turkey. The research revealed significant variations in motivation based on disability type, gender, sport preference, and family size.

Argan, Gürbüz, Koçak, and Atıcı (2021) examined barriers to sports participation among physically disabled individuals in Turkey through a socio-ecological lens. Their analysis identified personal, social, environmental, institutional, and political factors affecting athletic experiences. Personal barriers primarily stemmed from wheelchair sports adaptation challenges and disability-related issues, while social barriers manifested through prosocial behavior limitations and stigmatization. Özispa and Arabelen (2020) evaluated transportation accessibility strategies for individuals with physical disabilities. Their research indicated that global transportation accessibility measures inadequately address disability needs. The study highlighted Turkey's successful mobility improvement initiatives while suggesting that emerging technologies could position the nation as an exemplar in disability transportation services through targeted accessibility strategies. Koç, Kaya, and Kaya (2020) investigated participation motivations and expectation fulfillment among university students with disabilities at special sports centers. Their findings indicated that membership successfully met multiple expectations, including physical activity engagement, fitness maintenance, weight management, social networking, leisure utilization, stress reduction, self-esteem enhancement, and novel experience acquisition. However, health-related expectations remained unfulfilled. The researchers recommended employing disability-specialized professionals to address health outcome expectations. Demir (2020) analyzed the Wheelchair Dance Project's role in facilitating socialization and bodily reconstruction as a daily life strategy for individuals with disabilities. The research demonstrated that dance functions as a transformative catalyst, enabling participants to reconstruct their social identities and bodies. The project exemplified how dance serves as a strategic tool for social integration and personal identity development among individuals with disabilities.

Emamvirdi, İlhan, and Çolakoğlu (2020) examined psychological flexibility and sports participation motivation among physically disabled athletes. While sports



participation motivation showed no significant gender differences, female participants demonstrated higher psychological flexibility. The study revealed that university students exhibited greater intrinsic motivation compared to high school students. Additionally, national team athletes displayed higher extrinsic motivation, lower amotivation, and enhanced psychological flexibility compared to non-national team athletes. Şahin and Şahin (2020) investigated the impact of sports participation on social skills development among children with intellectual disabilities. Their research revealed that these children experience social adaptation challenges due to comparatively lower social skills than typically developing peers. These social skill deficits negatively impact their social, academic, and future occupational functioning. The study demonstrated that team sports participation positively influences social skill development in children with intellectual disabilities.

Looking at similar studies conducted in 2019, Demir and İlhan (2019) examined sports participation motivation among athletes with various disabilities. Their findings revealed highest general motivation levels among physically disabled athletes, followed by those with visual and hearing impairments. National athletes demonstrated significantly higher extrinsic motivation compared to non-national athletes, while motivation levels decreased with age. Among deaf athletes, females exhibited significantly higher intrinsic and extrinsic motivation than males. In a separate study, Demir and İlhan (2019) analyzed sports participation motivation among visually impaired athletes across different sports. Visually impaired judo practitioners showed significantly higher intrinsic motivation compared to weightlifters, while goalball players demonstrated higher extrinsic motivation. The research identified moderate positive correlations between age and intrinsic motivation, and strong positive correlations between sports experience and all motivation types, including amotivation. Çeviker, Mumcu, Şekeroğlu, and Bayrak (2018) conducted a systematic literature review examining UNICEF-designated disadvantaged groups in Turkey, including individuals with disabilities, street-involved youth, economically disadvantaged populations, Roma communities, non-Turkish speakers, and refugee populations. UNICEF findings emphasized sports participation as crucial for social integration of disadvantaged groups in Turkey. While programs targeting international migrants showed positive outcomes, the study concluded that comprehensive sports-based social integration initiatives remain insufficient across all disadvantaged populations. Ferreira et al. (2018) investigated the role of adapted sports in fostering the social integration of individuals with disabilities. Their findings indicate that participation in adapted sports significantly enhances autonomy and promotes active engagement in social life. The study underscores the potential of adapted sports to improve quality of life, enhance social functioning, and facilitate independence, thereby enabling individuals with disabilities to assume more active and autonomous roles within society.



Accessibility challenges remain a significant barrier to social integration. Tiyek, Eryiğit, and Baş (2016) assessed the accessibility and usability of public transportation systems for individuals with disabilities in the Zeytinburnu district of Istanbul. Their research revealed substantial deficiencies in accessibility and usability, failing to meet established standards. This lack of accessible infrastructure impedes the full participation of individuals with disabilities in community life. Comparative policy analyses further highlight the persistent challenges in achieving social inclusion. Çaha (2015) examined policies aimed at promoting social participation for individuals with disabilities in Turkey, the United States, and Japan. Despite advancements, the study concluded that efforts to dismantle barriers to social inclusion remain inadequate across all three nations. Most importantly, similar societal attitudes and behaviors towards individuals with disabilities were observed in Turkey and Japan. While regulatory frameworks promoting inclusive policies exist, the effective implementation of these policies continues to be a critical challenge. Recognizing the crucial link between employment and social integration, Aslan and Altıntaş (2014) proposed a model to enhance the participation of individuals with disabilities in the workforce. Their research revealed a significantly low rate of employment among individuals with disabilities, hindering their broader social integration. To address this issue, the authors advocate for the establishment of an expert group tasked with facilitating employment opportunities. This group would fulfill a dual role: (1) providing comprehensive case management and advocacy, ensuring informed decision-making for individuals with disabilities; and (2) combating prejudice through targeted awareness campaigns and rights advocacy. This model aims to address both systemic and attitudinal barriers to employment and social integration.

Esatbeyoğlu and Karahan (2014) investigated the perceived barriers to physical activity participation among individuals with disabilities. Their findings revealed that both environmental and individual barriers significantly impede participation. Environmental barriers encompassed social and physical factors, while individual barriers included economic constraints, disability status, and psychological factors. The authors emphasized the shared responsibility of governmental bodies, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, disability sports federations, and the media in mitigating these barriers. Çevik and Kabasakal (2013) examined the impact of sports activities on the social skills and socialization of individuals with disabilities. Their study indicated that a substantial portion of participants lacked prior sports engagement and exhibited deficits in social interaction and family decision-making. However, an eight-week training program for children aged 9-12 with educable intellectual disabilities yielded statistically significant improvements in social skills, as demonstrated by the sign test, and these improvements were also visually observable. This highlights the potential of structured sports programs to enhance socialization in this population. Çınarlı and Ersöz (2010) explored the critical role of sponsorship and tax regulations in the development of disability sports services in Turkey. They argued that sports can serve as a potent



mechanism for promoting the equitable social participation of individuals with disabilities. However, they identified a significant deficit in financial support for disability sports participation, organizations, and facilities in Turkey. The authors concluded that securing financial resources, particularly through sponsorship, is crucial for overcoming obstacles in disability sports.

Kissow (2013), in a literature review titled "Participation in physical activity and the everyday life of people with physical disabilities," comprehensively addressed the effects of physical activity participation on social integration. Kissow identified a significant gap in research concerning inclusive activities where individuals with and without disabilities participate together. This omission represents a critical deficiency in understanding and promoting effective social integration through physical activity. Kissow (2013) posits that physical activity positively influences disability management, arguing that the increased visibility of disabled athletes fosters a more inclusive societal attitude. This underscores the potential of sports as a strategic tool for enhancing the participation of individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, Kissow concludes that sports facilitate social acceptance and improve accessibility to participation opportunities. A critical aspect of social integration is the sense of belonging fostered by team sports. High-level participation in team sports cultivates a feeling of cultural affiliation and community membership, enabling individuals with disabilities to assume more active societal roles. Moreover, the enhanced physical competence and fitness derived from physical activity are prerequisites for engagement in broader social practices. Weiler, Mechelen, Fuller, and Verhagen (2016), in their systematic review, "Sport Injuries Sustained by Athletes with Disability," address the critical issue of injury rates and prevention methods. This study emphasizes the need for targeted strategies to mitigate injury risks and thereby increase sport participation among individuals with disabilities. While sports offer significant health benefits, including improved physical and psychological well-being, disabled athletes face heightened challenges, with injuries compounding existing limitations.

The paper emphasizes the opportunities offered by sport for people with disabilities to adopt a healthy lifestyle by increasing their physical activity levels. It is stated that regular physical activity contributes to the psychological and social well-being of individuals by increasing their physical fitness. However, it is stated that the difficulties and obstacles faced by disabled athletes in sports participation are more than general athletes. In this context, sports injuries pose additional problems for disabled athletes, making their already limited lifestyles even more difficult.

The review addresses issues such as how injuries affect the activities of daily living of people with disabilities and the difficulty of accessing health services after injury. It is emphasized that the injury risk factors of disabled athletes vary according to their level of disability, which should be considered in the development of injury





prevention strategies. The authors suggest that determining the extent of the injury problem through injury monitoring and epidemiology will help to understand the etiology and mechanisms of injury and this information will contribute to the development of injury prevention strategies. Scifo et al. (2019), in their systematic review, "Sport Intervention Programs (SIPs) to Improve Health and Social Inclusion in People with Intellectual Disabilities," underscore the efficacy of SIPs in enhancing health and social inclusion. Sports-based interventions, by promoting movement, contribute to the holistic development of individuals with intellectual disabilities, improving both mental and physical health. The authors advocate for equitable access to sports opportunities, emphasizing the importance of government programs that ensure parity between individuals with intellectual disabilities and typically developing individuals. SIPs are identified as a promising tool for promoting social integration, offering opportunities to modify lifestyles and accommodate individual differences.

The review's findings have significant implications for the development of evidence-based programs in educational and clinical settings. The authors stress the need for disability-specific and socio-familial considerations in program implementation, crucial for the development and sustainability of daily living skills. Furthermore, they highlight the necessity for research that measures both short- and long-term program effectiveness.

## CONCLUSION

In the last decade, research on sport strategies to increase the social integration of people with disabilities has provided important findings on strengthening their social participation through sport. A key finding is that participation in sporting activities enhances social visibility, promotes positive societal attitudes, and improves accessibility to participation opportunities (Kissow, 2013). This aligns with a growing body of literature highlighting the multifaceted benefits of sports participation for individuals with disabilities, encompassing physical and mental health (Kaya & Algin, 2022; Algin, Yesilbas, & Kantek, 2024; Pekgor et al., 2024; Algin, 2024). Athletes with disabilities who participate in high-level team sports feel themselves as part of a special community and this facilitates participation in social practices (Kissow, 2013).

Systematic reviews on sports injuries of people with disabilities reveal that these individuals tend to lead a sedentary lifestyle, but also emphasize the positive effects of regular physical activity on their psychological and social well-being (Kissow, 2013). It is stated that sports injuries create additional difficulties for individuals with disabilities and there are difficulties in accessing health services. In this context, the importance of injury monitoring and epidemiology studies for the development of injury prevention strategies is emphasized (Kissow, 2013).



Sports intervention programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities play an important role in increasing health and social integration. Sport activities contribute to the overall development of people with intellectual disabilities and increase opportunities for social integration (Kissow, 2013). It is emphasized that government programs should provide equal opportunities among different disability groups and that high-quality sports programs can help individuals to change their lifestyles (Kissow, 2013). Furthermore, the importance of considering disability and social/family factors in the implementation of intervention programs is also noted.

In conclusion, promoting sports participation among individuals with disabilities offers a multifaceted approach to enhancing social integration. By increasing social visibility, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing opportunities for personal development, sports can empower individuals with disabilities to actively participate in society. However, it is essential to address the challenges associated with sports participation, such as injury risk and access to healthcare, and to ensure equitable access to high-quality sports programs. Ultimately, a comprehensive approach that combines individual empowerment with societal change is essential for realizing the full potential of sports in promoting social integration.

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