

# Family Sport as a Positive Approach to Life: Concept, Reality and Experience

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**Abstract:** Inclusion starts in the family, but families with disabled children often live with the experience to be handicapped. Therefore, in 1982, the Institute of Sport Science at the State University of Würzburg in Germany started the project Family Sport as a weekly event in cooperation with an organization founded by parents called “Lebenshilfe”. From 1985 on, vacation activities both in summer and winter have been organized as well. After nearly 30 years, 79 participating families out of three cities took the chance to report on their experiences and benefits which they gained in and with the project via a questionnaire. The project was carried out as a long-term pilot study (project leader: P. Kapustin) on the basis of an action research approach.

**Key words:** Family life with disabled children, inclusion, adaption, weekly workouts and vacation activities, experiences.

## 1. Introduction

In 1982, the Institute of Sport Science at the State University of Würzburg in Germany started a program in cooperation with the local “Lebenshilfe” Organization which was very unique and innovative concerning the standards at that time: 12 families with retarded and multi-handicapped children along with non-handicapped siblings started a weekly family sport program. This idea was completely new, as this mixed target group did not appear anywhere in specialized literature or in sport practice. Considering the understanding of sport at that time, the family group was too heterogeneous for sport activities, since sport was focused on competition in various disciplines with norms and rules, and practiced in special facilities. However, in order to widen the development of sport, it was and still is necessary to consider three main dimensions: (1) type of sport; (2) target group; (3) aims and motivation.

With these three dimensions in mind, family sport is a situation-oriented, creative modification of sport

with suitable activities and group dynamics in gyms, playgrounds, pools, forests, beaches, winter landscapes, etc. Together with the pioneer families, a suitable concept was developed based on a long-term action research process, and the family group steadily increased in size until 1987 with up to 40 families and more than 100 members. At this time, a positive first evaluation of the group led to the foundation of the first Family Sport Club in Germany. Since then, additional partner family sport clubs have been founded in Nürnberg (Bavaria), Suhl (Thüringen) and other cities in Germany. These sport clubs are both non-profit and non-governmental organizations managed by volunteers.

In addition, annual family vacations for 1-2 weeks have been organized since 1985 as a particular family sport event in summer and winter (with destinations in Bavaria, Austria or Italy). Often families with retarded and/or handicapped children feel isolated and even “handicapped” themselves, in terms of life within the social community and leisure time. For these families, the family sport program means much more than physical activity; family sport offers a way out of social isolation into integration and finally inclusion:

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it supports and enriches family life, makes family friendships possible, combines physical activities with emotional experiences and humor, is good for health and offers ideas for sport and recreation activities in each family. These are not just ideas and aims: they became reality for most of the participating families.

After 28 years, the project initiator (and author of this report) finished his engagement with the project in a final evaluation. The evaluation study involved a questionnaire with closed and open questions distributed to 84 member families in three cities. 79 families responded—an excellent quota of 94%. The results confirm the first evaluation from 1987 and the initial personal expectations. Indeed, the families perceive the family sport club experience to be far more than just a physical activity. Nobody wanted to miss this part of family life, the friendship between the participating families and this experience of healthy and integrative sport.

## 2. Family Sport as a Positive Approach to Life

### 2.1 *Motto*

People do not need to adapt themselves to sport, but sport rather needs to be adapted to people!

### 2.2 *Target Group*

Families with retarded and multi-handicapped children along with non-handicapped siblings.

There is no doubt that this target group is a minority in our societies and in Sport for All programs.

Sports Science and Physical Education students of Würzburg University were integrated in project planning, realization and permanent evaluation.

### 2.3 *Experiences as Impulse for the Project*

Family life with disabled children is often an isolated life with a reduction in its quality.

Parents with disabled children are often too shy to be present as a family in the public life “arena”.

Opportunities for families to be active in Sport for All together are very rare.

Special sport programs for physically or/and mentally handicapped people are known (Paralympics, Special Olympics), but an integrative family sport concept has not been developed yet [1, 2].

### 2.4 *Concept*

The purpose of this project was and still is [3, 4]:

- to help “handicapped” families out of the social shadow;
- to encourage the target families to be together and with other families active in various kinds of sport—weekly and in vacation times—in clubs, public playgrounds and sport facilities;
- to enrich the quality of family lifestyle;
- to widen the network of family friendships via leisure and sport activities;
- to enrich the world of Sport for All;
- to adapt the variety of sport cultures to this special target group.

12 families with retarded and multi-handicapped children along with non-handicapped siblings had started a weekly family sport program in 1982 as a project at the University of Würzburg in Germany. Meanwhile more than 80 families are members of founded family sport clubs in the cities of Würzburg, Nürnberg and Suhl in Germany.

The outdoor and indoor activities (depending on the weather) are adapted to the abilities of the participants with flexible norms, rules and coaching methods, with creativity and humor—finally causing group dynamics.

Since 1985, family vacations with sport activities in summer and winter time have been organized including hiking, swimming, dancing, tobogganing, playing games, different kinds of gymnastics and fitness activities, discovering the nature and local culture.

To implement all those activities, networking between families, kindergarten, schools, sport clubs and social institutions was and still is necessary.

2.5 Aims

The aims are [5]:

There should be real chances in Sport for All for this special heterogeneous target group, but with the homogeneous desire to start and continue sport activities together.

Sport for All in the family should be a self-evident reality regarding the health aspect, self-confidence and learning by doing.

Sport for All as a family activity offers valuable chances regarding the social aspect, the sense of family and the quality of family life.

Sport for All within a family group is for sure more than just a physical activity—regarding the social aspect, motivation and model learning, family friendships: “Together we are strong!”

For some families with “handicaps”, Sport for All is a kind of family therapy without naming it as “therapy”!

2.6 Selected Evaluation Results after the Period of a Whole Generation (> 25 Years)

84 target families with a membership in family sport clubs were asked by a questionnaire about their experiences with the family sport concept that they partly developed themselves: 79 families answered (quota = 94%).

**How did you become aware of the family sport group in your city?**

Friends, neighbors	39%
Institution “Lebenshilfe”	31%
(Clubsystem founded by parents since 1960 to educate children with mental retardation, to facilitate their life in workshops, homes, etc.)	
School teachers	11%
Founding families	10%
Media/Internet	6%
University reports	2%
Public health center	1%

**What are primary benefits and most important aspects of the family sport program offered by**

**your family sport club for you as a single person?**

Being active in Sport for All	61%
Being integrated in the family group	48%
Having fun, enjoying the pleasure	44%
Exchanging life experiences	18%
Relaxation	11%
Readiness to help	9%
Discovering my child in a group atmosphere	2%

**What are primary benefits and most important aspects of the family sport program offered by your family sport club for you as a family?**

Being active in the family sport program	59%
Finding friends and setting up a family network	39%
Exchanging life experiences	32%
Being accepted and integrated	14%
Having a fixed date in the week	10%
Feeling well and successful	10%
Positive effects on the own family life	
Any effects on the own family life (only in Nürnberg)	1%
Critical comments (only in Nürnberg)	3%

**What are primary benefits and most important aspects of vacations (one or two weeks in winter or summer) for you as a family?**

Community spirit, being integrated, friendship	65%
Being active in different varieties of Sport for All	22%
Relaxation, recovery from daily stress at home, fun and feeling good-humored	21%
This kind of vacation wouldn’t be possible as a single family	10%
Experience of nature	9%

**3. Conclusions**

Family Sport is one well-tried possibility to open social and cultural life for parents with disabled children at all ages. Weekly workouts in gyms and outdoor—if possible in the nature—as well as

vacation activities within a family group are both chances for the quality of family life, for health and fitness, for cultural experiences and for happiness in social integration on the way to inclusion. After 30 years, 79 participating families proved their positive experiences and their long-term satisfaction. Family Sport in groups should be one serious option in the Sport for All movement. SPECIAL OLYMPICS and TAFISA (The Association For International Sport for All) are two appropriate examples for worldwide organizations to promote Family Sport as a possible way to the inclusion of children and families with impairment in our societies.

The different project family groups in Würzburg, in Nürnberg and Suhl are still existing and they work permanent on animating and inviting young families in similar situations. Meanwhile, the idea and the concept of offering and organizing family sport activities with social-integrative, health orientated and cultural aspects are accepted and realized by sport federations in Germany, both on a regional and national level. Even “non-handicapped” families became members of the pilot family sport groups.

Politicians on a local, regional and national level as well as the media take notice of this kind of family sport concept and they support the idea as well as the media. The concept and the project “Family sport group” at the University of Würzburg were both decorated by the Bavarian State Government and presented in public shows and on TV. The experiences will be shared with tourism organizations as well.

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