Social participation and friendship among school-aged children with disabilities

Jill Massey, MS, OT, Shannon Hardy, Xiaomin Luo, Carolyn Liu, Perri VanderClock, Sarah Gilmore & Gary Bedell, Ph.D., OTR/L
Tufts University – Department of Occupational Therapy

Background

• Social participation is “taking part, involvement, engagement, doing or being with others.”
• Greater participation is positively associated with overall health and well-being, especially in those with disability.
• Children with disabilities participate in fewer social and recreational activities than their typically developing peers.
• Children with disabilities are more likely to report physical and social environmental factors affecting their participation.
• Children with disabilities report a lower number of reciprocal friends and are less likely to have a best friend.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine patterns of social participation and friendship among school-aged children with identified disabilities.

Research Questions

• What are the effects of age, sex, and income on social participation and friendship among children with identified disabilities?
• What are the associations between environmental supports and barriers and social participation and friendship among children with identified disabilities?
• What are the effects of severity of impairment on social participation and friendship among children with identified disabilities?

Measurement Tool

Main outcome measure: Participant and Environment Measure for Children and Youth (PROM-CY)
• Parent-reported measure to examine participation of children and youth and the impact of the environment on participation.
• Measures participation frequency and extent of involvement with desire for change.
• 3 domains (environment):
  • Home
  • School
  • Community
• 5-17 years old
• Evidence of reliability and validity

Data Collection & Analyses

• Existing data from web-based parent survey
• Selected items chosen for analysis
• Environment (home, school, community)
• Impairment type:
  • Cognitive
  • Physical
  • Psychological
• De-identified data collected in USA and Canada
• ANOVAs, t tests, and chi square analyses used to compare children with disabilities with children and youth without physical disabilities.

Participants

• Parents of 282 children with identified disabilities
• Child's sex: male (58.9%), female (41.1%)
• Child's age: <12 (49.6%), >12 (50.4%)
• Family income: <$80,000 (43.3%), ≥$80,000 (56.7%)
• Race/ethnicity:
  • Caucasian (80.1%)
  • Asian/Southeast Asian (3.1%)
  • Black (3.1%)
  • Other (7.7%)
• A variety of health conditions were reported; the two most reported impairments were developmental delay (n=71; 25.2%) and orthopedic-movement disorder (n=53; 18.8%)

Results

• Significant differences found in social participation and friendship between psychological impairment extremes (Figure 1).
• Significant differences found in social participation and friendship between cognitive impairment extremes (Figure 2).
• Significant differences found in social participation and friendship between physical impairment extremes (Figure 3).
• Environmental barriers were significantly (p < 0.01) negatively correlated with social participation involvement (r = 0.31) and frequency (r = 0.45), and friendship frequency (r = 0.43).
• Environmental supports were positively correlated with social participation (r = 0.19, p < 0.05) and friendship frequency (r = 0.30; p < 0.01), but not social participation involvement (r = 0.09).
• Significant differences (p < 0.05) in social participation involvement found between income groups, but not for social participation frequency and friendship frequency.
• Social participation and friendship among children with identified disabilities:
  • More children with "no impairment" rating reported having at least one friend than children with "big impairment" rating.

Discussion

• Differences were found between severity of impairment and impairment type with social participation and friendship.
• Findings add to previous research, which found differences in social participation with sex and age.
• Significant differences in the physical impairment group and frequencies may reflect less stigma and physical environmental problems in this impairment category.
• Greater likelihood of identifying at least one good friend among children from lower income households may be explained by greater access to friends.
• No significant findings in "little problem" group for all impairment categories may be attributed to lack of exposure. Since this population may show less outward signs of a disability, they may be afforded less opportunities for participation.
• There is a need for increased environmental supports and reduced environmental barriers to optimize opportunities for social participation.

Limitations

• Missing data (particularly for social participation involvement score)
• Unequal impairment subgroups may influence ability to detect significant differences across subgroups
• Multiple impairments not identified in children
• Parent-report measure may impact accuracy of results as child perspective not represented
• Results cannot be generalized due to study design limitations (small sample, lack of diversity in race/ethnicity, family income, geographic location)

Future Research

• Investigate the differences in social participation and friendship between children with high family income and children with low family income
• Compare children with disabilities with children without disabilities

References