



PLAYGROUND PERIL

When Sports Inclusion Breaks Down



By: Brenda McCarthy, B.A., RN

Springtime around my home not only means robins, daffodils and tulips. It means the annual migration of the seasonal pile of baseball bats, gloves and balls from the basement to my foyer.

Gloves are again tried on for size (do they shrink over the winter?) and new balls are purchased for those first swings of “spring training” as my husband and our 12-year-old Little Leaguer gear up for the 5-pitch season’s Opening Day. My son loves baseball just as much as his father!

We live in a small community. Local teams are filled with friends from school. Parents drape the sidelines on folding lawn chairs to cheer on the kids and socialize at the same time. Teams are open to kids of all abilities.

Five-pitch is a great sport for kids with disabilities to play with their able-bodied peers. My son has had teammates with “special needs” since he began playing three years ago.

It’s not a big deal to him. He’s had the chance to learn and grow with kids who have differences since he was in Kindergarten, and before. His elementary school has embraced inclusion and the rights of kids with special needs. He has an acute awareness of the unique needs of others as his father, an amputee, has a physical disability. Our son

goes the extra mile in school and at home to sensitively “help out” when needed.

So when he began his 2008 baseball season with teammate “Megan” – a schoolmate who needed extra attention and direction – he embraced her as did his coach and teammates. They cheered Megan on, celebrating her determination when she connected her bat with the ball. She was a part of the team. She belonged, and the kids, coaches and community understood that everyone has the right to participate regardless of ability or disability.

It was going to be a great baseball season. The older kids brought some impressive skills to the team. The younger players were developing quickly. All the kids were having a lot of fun.

One evening, a warm summer’s night, the delightful sounds of the kids’ fun-filled laughter mixed with cheers from the sidelines was interrupted. Something was wrong in the dug out. No one was sure what to do.

Maybe Megan was having a bad day. All kids do. Maybe something had upset her earlier that day. In hindsight, she may have been a bit argumentative during warm-ups. While

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waiting for her turn to bat, Megan began snatching her teammates' water bottles and drinking from them.

I watched from the sidelines as the boys and girls tried to manage the situation themselves – calmly asking her to stop, giving her feedback that what she was doing wasn't nice, and directing her to drink her own water. They instinctively made good use of three basic steps frequently used to extinguish intrusive behaviors.

But things went from bad to worse. Megan was now spitting water at the boys on the bench. Parents were beginning to notice. Grumbings from the boys were being echoed by the parents. Questions of her "right to play" were being whispered. "How much was too much for the kids to deal with," some wondered aloud. And of course, "Who was going to do something about it?"

The kids were doing their best. The coaches were busy coaching on the field. The umpire was doing his job. Megan's foster parents were distracted, chatting on their cell phone, unaware of the escalating situation. Who did that leave?

Personally I struggled. Professionally I knew what to do. I work with people who have severe behavior problems.

Quietly I approached the foster mom and asked her to provide Megan with some support and supervision. She gladly did. I offered to help if she needed it.

Her arrival on the scene gave the coaches, players, parents, and Megan what they needed: the skills to respond to Megan when things were not going well. Unfortunately, Megan did leave the game early when she was not able to regain control.

After the game, at home, I talked about the situation with my son. He expressed his frustration on a few levels – Megan, his coaches, and the parents. He had compassion and understanding for Megan. He welcomed her back at practice the following week, but worried she may "treat them badly" again.

So whose job is it to help when sports inclusion isn't working? Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in recreational activities that provide physical, social and emotional well-being. What can our communities do better to ensure that kids of all abilities are welcome? Understandably, most volunteer coaches don't have experience in managing kids with special needs. Local sport organizations are not always aware of the problems that may arise with athlete integration. And what are the responsibilities of the parents?

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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