**Impact of Outdoor Play Activities on Holistic Development among**

**Children with Disabilities**

**Abstract**

Play is said to be the universal language of childhood (Berk, 2013). Children understand each other and make sense of the world around them by the means of play. It teaches a varied variety of skills such as sharing, cooperating, taking turn, self-discipline and tolerance. Play is an essential and critical part of all children’s development. It starts in the child’s infancy and ideally continues throughout his/her life. Play is how children learn to socialize, to think, to solve the problems, to mature and most importantly, to have fun and it connects children with their imagination, their environment, their parents and the world (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2006). Learning by playing is a learner centric concept and learning is not limited to cognitive development but considers the overall development of the child. Learning by playing gets closer to real life and is interactive in nature which ensures better internalization of the learned behaviour. This research paper is an attempt to find out the outcome when a child takes up learning as a natural happening by involving himself/herself in outdoor play activities like walking and getting the feel of nature, streams, birds and animals. The results revealed that the nature itself becomes a wonderful learning medium to generate, develop and enhance cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills for mainstreaming of children with disabilities (CwD’s).

**Key** **words:**

Children with Disabilities, Outdoor Play Activities, Holistic Development

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**Introduction**

Play for the children with disabilities (CwD) serve both recreational and educational purposes. It is the purest form of recreation in that they require cooperation among participants in indoor or outdoor plays. Since plays are usually conducted in informal atmospheres, the pressures to learn are not overbearing or evident to the children. Special teachers use the informality and the basic elements of outdoor play to develop academic, visual, motor, and language skills, tactile sense, and body image (Schaefer, 1985). In addition, they can be used to foster mimicry in children with language disorders. Playing outdoors is a form of exercise that promotes well-being and wholesome physical development. Children are naturally drawn to active play outdoors: it allows them to explore their environment, develop muscle strength and coordination, and gain self-confidence. Children who experience a variety of stimulating play activities have a greater chance for success in school and in life (Wilson, 2012).

In selecting or developing outdoor plays for CWD, Carlson and Gingland (1979) suggest the following guidelines;

* Play should be selected to help children gain confidence in them.
* Excessive physical or mental work competition should be avoided.
* Frustrating physical or mental work should be avoided.
* Plays in which the concentration time is appropriate to the participants’ capabilities should be selected.
* Quite active play activities should be alternated to avoid over stimulation.
* Rules and conduct of play should be flexible and adapted as per the need based
* Play activities that require participants to use perceptual and motor skills should be included.

**Review of literature**

According to Schaefer (1985) play release tensions and pent up emotions. It encourages self-discovery. It is a child’s natural medium for communication. Different cognitive, language and socio-emotional development may be enhanced by including an assortment of play activities and material available to the child.

Eifermann (1971) emphasizes primary grades children play formal and informal games with their peers like jumping, board, card and computer games. This kind of play enhances their co-ordination, and physical prowess, refines their social skills, and builds concepts such as co-operation and competition, and them to demonstrate to themselves and to others their skills, talents, and abilities.

Rubin (1977) recommended that play and the play activities should be an integral part of early childhood programmes.

Jensen (2000) conducted a study on the development of brain and proved that physical activity moving, stretching, walking, actually enhance the learning process. He also studied that recreational activities like play requiring skills with balls ropes, running and jumping may be organized into exercises that influenced learning.

Villamisar (2010) conducted a research which demonstrated a positive relationship between leisure participation and the two constructs of quality of life and stress reduction, current conceptualization of leisure as a contributor to quality of life is limited.

**Rationale of the study**

Outdoor plays are natural and enjoyable activities to children. Playing itself, without therapeutic intervention, probably facilitates emotional growth. Pleasure, in moderation, is believed to be a potent medicine for preventing and alleviating psychological disturbance (Gardner, 1969). The field of recreational therapy is built on this premise. Outdoor play provides a chance for self -expression and the intense affective involvement that commonly accompanies game playing results in expression of feelings, thoughts, and attitudes that ordinarily would not be disclosed.

It appears, then that plays are more than just a form o f amusement. They become a vehicle for dealing with a variety of real-life situations and concerns. So, based on felt need and research review the present study was undertaken.

**Objectives**

1. To find out the effect of outdoor play on the cognitive domain.
2. To understand the receptive and expressive level of CWD in the given environment.
3. To review the psychomotor maturation of CWD.

**Research Questions**

1. What is the effect of outdoor play activities on the cognitive domain of CWD?
2. Is there any change in the receptive and expressive level of CWD in the given environment?
3. What is the outcome of the learning experience on psychomotor maturation of CWD?

**Method**

Single group experimental design was used in the present study.

**Sample**

Purposing sampling under non probability method was employed in the current study. Fifty children with disabilities from the age group of 6 - 14 years were selected.

**Inclusion** **criteria**:

Irrespective of level of functioning children with Intellectual Disability (ID), Hearing Impairment (HI) and Visual Impairment (VI) without associated disabilities were included for this research study.

**Data Collection Procedure**

CWD’s were taken to a three-day residential Nature Camp at Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), Anaikatti, Coimbatore. Following are the activities given to all the selected samples.

1. Nature walk (5 kilometres within the forest)

2. Bird watch

3. Sounds of nature

4. Collection of variety of feathers, leaves and stones

5. Exposure to ‘Fruit Farm’ including herbs and medicinal plants

6. Exposure to natural tream

7. Visit to a water reservoir

8. Children’ park with swings, slides, mary-go-round etc.

9. Games i.e. nature treasure hunt, sound and seek, bark fingerprint etc.

10. Mime show

Since it was a residential camp, children were accompanied by their parents and teachers.

**Qualitative Analysis & Discussion**

Qualitative analysis of the research study uses subjective judgment based on unquantifiable information, observation, performance and feedback. As the research studies proclaim, play is a natural instinct of the children. Play has been defined to include elements such as spontaneity, intrinsic (or internal) motivation, pleasure, free joyous qualities, and self-direction. Most educators and parents agree that play is one of the most important phenomena of childhood occupation (Chandler, 1997). During and after the intervention program (A 3 day residential Nature Camp), the researchers came across numerous events although small yet had clear vision showing the ability of assimilation, accommodation, adaptation, equilibration, different choices and perception present among the CWD. Some of the observations are as follows-

1. When the CWD were taken for nature walk and bird watch, many of them tried to match and identify the already learned concepts especially bird chirping with the new and real environment.
2. During night, when it was announced that elephants might come there so lights were to be switched off and all were supposed to maintain silence, it was observed that they not only kept quiet but also made their other friends to follow the same.
3. Very soon they got accommodated with the new environment in view of following entirely different routine i.e. sleeping in especially designed tent houses, waking up early, getting refreshed, walking, collecting feathers, stones and leaves, using toilets, helping and sharing with their other friends etc.
4. They maintained harmonious relationship between their diverse needs and the environment.
5. They enjoyed the movies which were based on wild life and they were heard discussing with their friends. Also, they came forward to the stage, gave feedback, narrated their experiences and expressed their unlimited joy they had in the camp.
6. Most of the parents shared their views viz, children who were known as toe walkers earlier, in the given situation where it was not plain land only but a part of the forest with all ups and downs, mud and slippery, they placed their feet on the ground while walking and enjoyed the uneven surface. Sometimes they dragged their parents to the destination where they want to go.

**Conclusion**

The findings of the study have some distinct implications in the rehabilitation process of CWD. The knowledge gained through this study is of immense use as it declares that there is a positive impact of outdoor play especially Nature Camp as for children it served a specific, important function in development that of providing key socialization experiences throughout their school years. It provided an opportunity for social learning in several specific ways such as:

* Communication with others
* Respect of and obedience to rules
* Self-discipline
* Dealing with independence issues
* Cooperation with others
* Awareness of and responsiveness toward group norms and expectations
* Socialized competition and controlled expression of aggression

Outdoor plays improve the child’s ability to attend to a task, concentrate and remember which help him in other ways as well, including his ability to learn apart from providing enjoyment. Outdoor plays foster the development of logical reasoning and judgment also, therefore it can be stated firmly that outdoor play directly enhance the learning process of all the children irrespective of their abilities/disabilities.

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