Fun, fitness and friendship!

By Benny Thomas

For many parents, watching their children play in a team or join in an activity is as Australian as eating a Vegemite sandwich but sometimes, for our little people, it is not always possible to access the sort of sport your young child would like to play. This can be due to their physical ability, lack of correct supervision or an issue with distance. Whatever that barrier may be, it can be frustrating and deflating as we know one of the really important areas for our children is to strengthen that muscle tone, get that coordination happening, enjoy the camaraderie of other kids and just to be involved!

We have discovered, however, that there are plenty of organisations that offer a variety of activities that are either inclusive or are specifically designed for children with an intellectual disability. Here are some organisations that might appeal to you, but please always check that your child is assessed by your GP or Occupational Health professional to ensure that it is safe for them to undertake your chosen sporting program.

Now you don’t have to be a super star athlete to enjoy sport and nor do you need to be totally co-ordinated – it’s about having fun and joining in!

MiniRoos

AIA Vitality MiniRoos is designed for kids of all abilities, aged between 6 and 11 years old, however some grassroots clubs offer preschool kids the opportunity to play as well. MiniRoos is a nationwide initiative which uses short, game-based sessions to introduce the sport of football to newcomers in an inclusive way. It focuses on learning new skills, being active and making life-long friends.

We asked Rob Fitzgerald, Football NSW Game Development Officer, for some information about MiniRoos, and although the information provided below is NSW based, Rob has said: “Football NSW is the peak body for football in the state of NSW so therefore we can only speak on behalf of football in NSW, however other member federations are also conducting similar programmes across the nation.” He added that: “I can confidently say that other states’ football bodies also provide Athlete with Disabilities (AWD) programmes.”

Finally we asked Rob if there are any medical requirements for children with Down syndrome, he replied, “No, however the safety of players is paramount and all necessary precautions and considerations must be taken into account to provide the best duty of care possible for the individual.”

Their inclusion policy states that they promote playing opportunities for all, conducting school programmes, club development programmes and gala days which highlight this. These are the main participation based activities provided:

- The local grass roots clubs and associations that affiliate to FNSW provide community football opportunities for all primary school aged individuals regardless of ability.
- FNSW also operates a number of school based programmes that are highly inclusive and cater for all forms of special needs.
- FNSW also provides the Football4All initiative, which fosters the formation of special needs specific programmes at grass roots level in clubs and associations.
- The programme provides a safe, fun and inclusive environment for individuals with special needs to participate in footballing activities. The programme acts as a highly accessible and non-confronting first exposure to football. Many individuals gain valuable skills and confidence from their time in Football4All, often transferring into non special needs specific programmes.

Grace loves playing football
**AFL Auskick and AFL Victoria**

Dale Wain is Access All Abilities (AAA) Auskick Development Coordinator, based at AFL Victorian Headquarters. There is also NAB AFL Auskick, which is the nationally run program. The organisation is keen to have as many children as possible playing Auskick and Dale says “AFL Victoria aims to make Australian Football the most accessible sport in Victoria and is committed to including all children regardless of their background.” AAA want to encourage not just the youngsters to play, but also to have full family participation, either as a coach or just helping out with the team.

When I asked Dale about the health benefits of playing Auskick she commented that “Auskick helps children get fit and active while learning the skills of Australian Football. However, the social benefits for children with disabilities often outweigh the physical benefits of involvement. Having the opportunity to engage with the community and be included just like everyone else gives the children involved in AAA Auskick a real self-esteem boost and the flow on effects are huge.”

The children need to be 5 years of age or over and do not have to have a medical certificate to play, although it is always best to check with your GP. To ensure that your local centre can cater for your needs, give them a ring and check out the website for NAB AFL Auskick has all the state and territory clubs at:

www.aflauskick.com.au

**Riding for the Disabled Association of Australia (RDAA)**

RDAA offers a selection of riding programmes that are safe, a little challenging and mostly, rewarding. I spoke with their Executive Officer, Karen Aspery, regarding RDAA’s work with children and adults with Down syndrome and the type of adjustments the association makes to ensure that the riders are safe and get the most out of their experience.

Children can join as young as 3 years of age, but given the understandable concern about Atlantoaxial Instability (AAI), you will need to have this checked. Every rider needs to get a doctor to fill out a consent form verifying that it is safe for them to ride. Riding a horse has many benefits and Karen knows how important it is for people with Down syndrome to get the maximum benefits. She says that “riding a horse really helps with low muscle tone and upright posture helps build core strength.”

Rider with Horse and helpers

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www.rda.org.au

**Sailability**

The philosophy behind Sailability is so refreshing in terms of the scope of its inclusion policy and Yachting Australia should be applauded for the thoughtfulness it has put into it. If you have the time it is worth a read.


Clearly Sailability is a little difficult if you don’t live close to the sea, but those of you who are near lakes and rivers may also find a programme that works for you.

Graeme Adam, from Sailability, kindly answered some questions for me as I really wanted to better understand the scope of the programme.
He said that in terms of level of involvement: “Some tens of thousands of sailing experiences each year.” Although there are no statistics on classifications, Graeme believes it is fair to say that a significant proportion of sailors with Sailability have intellectual disability including Down syndrome.

Generally folk with intellectual disability sail mid-week with teams of volunteers/instructors who are trained at getting people into boats. For instance Sailability at Mooloolaba Yacht Club in Queensland puts over one hundred sailors out on the water in any week.

With Sailability there are no medical requirements, but the sailors usually come with carers who brief Sailability volunteers on their individual situation.

So how many centres are there? Graeme informed me that there are “65 programmes around the country, most integrated into mainstream sailing clubs as part of the society’s (and government’s) push toward inclusiveness. Sailability Australia is a sub-committee of Yachting Australia and there are 8 state associations, and through them, the individual programmes. It is very much a grassroots organisation with 99% of personnel being volunteers. 2015 is the twentieth year Sailability has been in operation in Australia.”

I naturally wondered if it is a seasonal sport and therefore only really available all year round if you are lucky to live in a warm climate, but apparently the programme still operates in winter although not when it is very cold.

Finally I asked Graeme about the benefits of participating in Sailability, to which he replied that sailing is for everyone, regardless of their level of physical or intellectual ability. “No one is excluded. For those with more profound disabilities, it can be an effective form of diversional therapy. Many become adept at skippering the boat, sailing on specially adapted Hansa sailcraft, usually with a volunteer who is a competent sailor. The experience for someone who is restricted in so many ways is one of freedom, exhilaration, being in control, having fun, sensing the wind, the sun and the water.”


SPORTING SCHOOLS

Sporting Schools is a $100 million federally funded programme available for primary schools across Australia, aiming to reach over 850,000 students.

Sporting Schools is a really exciting initiative that encourages all children, regardless of their ability, to maintain a healthy body and healthy mind and to foster a life-long respect to keep fit and well. With the focus on being active, engaged and having fun!

As the website says ‘Funding is available to schools to link up with quality coaches locally and to deliver the sporting programmes developed by the partners of Sporting Schools — more than 30 of Australia’s leading National Sporting Organisations.’

The programme is available before, during and after-school, and your school needs to register to get the funding for various sports.

The programme offers:

- annual funding for NSO-endorsed sports programmes that can be delivered during any three terms of a school year
- easy access to quality online sporting resources and lesson plans
- opportunity for schools to decide when sport activities and games are run — before, during and/or after school
- connection with the Playing for Life philosophy, where children are encouraged to have fun by focusing on ‘skills not drills’
- coaches access to details about schools within their local community
- teachers access to a range of resources to help them run activities
- a greater variety of sports for children to experience at more schools
- stronger links between children and local sporting clubs
- professional development opportunities for all coaches

There is a lot of information on the Sporting Schools website and I encourage you to have a look as it is really a fabulous opportunity to get your schools involved and up and running!...And most importantly a really wonderful opportunity for your children to enjoy sports with their school classmates, get involved at the grassroots and have respected coaches and teachers help them achieve their potential!