

## Dignity of Risk in Physical Education for Students with Visual Impairments

Lindsay Ball\*, Lauren J Lieberman and Pamela Haibach-Beach

*The State University of New York at Brockport, New York, United States*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Lindsay Ball, The State University of New York at Brockport, New York, United States.

**Received:** January 21, 2020; **Published:** February 27, 2021

### Abstract

This article aims to introduce and define the concept of dignity of risk and how it impacts children with visual impairments in physical education. Children no matter their perceived abilities must learn to make informed decisions about reasonable risk. Physical education is a setting where risk may be significant but students with visual impairments must be exposed to reasonable risk so they can have the same experiences as their peers. Sheltering children from activities because of perceived risk can have lasting effects such as a lack of self-determination and independence. Professionals such as Ophthalmologists can encourage teachers and parents to take precautions that promote safety as well as participation and achievement in physical education activities for students with visual impairments.

**Keywords:** *Inclusion; Blindness; Self-Determination; Quality of Life; Independence*

One of my most vivid memories from elementary physical education is with the floor hockey unit, not because it was so much fun, but because I was never allowed to play. You may be asking yourself why? The reason was because I have a visual impairment, so my physical education teacher deemed the activity unsafe for me to play. Rather than participate in a fun sport with my peers, I was instructed to stay away from the game to practice passing with a small audible playground ball, hockey sticks, and a peer, which quickly became boring for both of us. Once my peer re-entered the game, I was relegated to “helping” to keep score on the sidelines, although I was never taught the rules of the game. When I asked my physical education teacher if I could join a team and participate in game play, I was told that the game was not safe for me, and that I should not play. It was and still is unclear to me what led my teacher to make the decision to exclude me from playing floor hockey with my peers. Likely he was concerned that I would get hurt during game play or that he just did not think that playing floor hockey would benefit me in any way because of my visual impairment. It is perhaps even more unfortunate that this experience is not uncommon for children and adolescents with visual impairments. Many individuals with visual impairments have had similar experiences where they were unable to participate in physical education activities because a teacher deemed the activity was unsafe [10,13,14,16].

Many team sports are considered too dangerous or risky for students with visual impairments often leaving them to sit on the sidelines or ride an exercise bike rather than participate with the class playing a sport or activity. Some Teachers may think that this is the correct decision because they are reducing the risk of injury, but this type of exclusion causes students with visual impairments to miss out on many of the aspects of physical education. Physical education teachers are well meaning, yet they are marginalizing their students with visual impairments out of fear of injury or liability. Students with visual impairments report being bullied often in physical education [17]. Reasoning for the increase in bullying may be because peers notice differences more when the student with a visual impairment is excluded from activities [6]. In some cases, teachers are extra cautious when their students are in physical education, but a main goal for physical education should be to encourage self-determination and encourage all students to be part of the lesson [4]. Modifications and variations

to activities can be made to promote involvement by students with visual impairments yet keep them safe while they take reasonable risks. The purpose of this article is to bring awareness to the “Dignity of Risk” to professionals such as Ophthalmologists who can promote this and to provide strategies and resources to encourage physical activity participation of children and youth with visual impairments.

### Dignity of risk promotes self-determination

Students with disabilities have the right to self-determination an individual with control and conscious choice over their life and their actions [32]. Dignity of risk, defined as “the principle of allowing an individual the dignity afforded by risk-taking, with subsequent enhancement of personal growth and quality of life” ([19], p. 189), is necessary for self-determination [31]. In other words, the belief in dignity of risk means that regardless of age or ability, all individuals have the right to self-determination and to take reasonable risks. This right is essential to individuals’ dignity and sense of self. An individual with a disability should not be prevented from opportunities to participate in activities that others deem “risky” because taking away that risk devalues their human dignity. Risk is an essential and important aspect of life [31]. Individuals with visual impairments have the right to a future where they have access to all physical activity opportunities [20]. In order to accomplish this, students with visual impairments must understand the risk associated with each activity equivalent to their sighted peers.

Dignity of risk is necessary for children with visual impairments to develop life-long skills that will aid in decision making and independence. The concept of dignity of risk emphasizes that life experiences come with risk, and individuals, no matter their age or ability, should be supported to experience success and failure [19]. Often times, professional instincts to protect students with disabilities is displayed by having the children avoid all risks in an effort to keep them safe [10,13,14,16]. A balance must be determined between keeping students with visual impairments safe and allowing them to participate in physical activities that may have reasonable risk. There is a need for individuals with disabilities to be encouraged to make their own informed choices to develop autonomy and become self-determined. Recognizing this need for choice making may foster a positive relationship between the child with a visual impairment and their teacher of the visually impaired, orientation and mobility specialist, physical education teacher and/or paraprofessional.

### Barriers to dignity of risk

The main barriers impeding the dignity of risk are 1) lack of awareness of dignity of risk and 2) implementation of allowing students to analyze risk to maintain a sense of dignity [25]. Micro barriers to dignity of risk include constraints encountered by teachers and students with visual impairments daily, such as the visual impairment itself due to the low incidence rates. According to the American Printing House for the Blind [1], there were 63,357 school-age children with legal blindness in the United States. This means that about three percent of children under the age of eighteen are legally blind and physical education teachers do not often encounter students with a visual impairment in their class and may not be aware of or comfortable with how to accommodate the student’s needs. Perhaps the largest issue is the lack of training for physical educators [2,33], teachers of the visually impaired, orientation and mobility specialists and paraprofessionals [11] as it relates to how to best include students with visual impairments in physical education. Lirgg and colleagues [24], as well as Fiorini and Manzini [7] found that current physical education teachers identified visual impairment as one of the more difficult disabilities to incorporate into a physical education class. Often physical education teachers’ have reported that one adapted physical education course they took and a field experience during undergraduate education is not enough to adequately prepare them to include students with visual impairments in their class [5,7,24]. This lack of preparation forces physical education teachers to be overcautious when it comes to including students with visual impairments in physical activities because they never learned how to appropriately accommodate students with unique learning needs.

Another contributing factor related to lack of promotion of dignity of risk is that, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) students with disabilities must participate in physical education [24]. Professionals and teachers working with students with visual impairments may have anxiety about their participation, the possibility of the student getting hurt, something going wrong,

and the associated liability [10,15,16]. The anxiety or fear is a micro barrier to dignity of risk [19]. Some professionals may fear backlash from parents if a child with a visual impairment is exposed to risk [19]. Parents of children with visual impairments often have difficulty finding a balance between overprotection of their child due to safety concerns and encouragement of participation in activities that are challenging and may have more risk [26]. Teachers and other professionals may be unsure of how a parent may react to finding out their child was participating in an activity that the parent finds “risky”.

### Long term effects of dignity of risk

Long-term exclusion from physical education activities for any reason can have lasting impacts on students with visual impairments. Overprotection or exclusion from physical activities limits the child’s physical experiences in their environment [26]. Children and youth with visual impairments have been found to be more sedentary than their sighted peers [8], which may in part be due to overprotection. In addition, over protection leads to lowered expectations and decreased independence for students with visual impairments [26]. Individuals with visual impairments should be held to appropriate expectations so that they can meet their potential and this should be no different in terms of physical activity expectations. With reduced opportunities to participate in physical activity and lowered expectations, it is not surprising that children with visual impairments also perform significantly lower than their peers without disabilities in fundamental motor skills [18]. Reduced opportunities to participate in physical activities and lower motor competence leads to reduced health-indices, such as obesity [28,29]. If provided developmentally appropriate supports, individuals with visual impairments have the potential to match and perhaps even perform better than their sighted peers related to movement and motor skills [3,23].

### Practical considerations

As a professional working with a child with a visual impairment, Ophthalmologists can support parents and teachers to encourage them to ensure children and adolescents with visual impairments are provided the dignity of risk. It is important for professionals to share that in a physical activity setting, there are measures that should be taken to maintain safety while allowing the child to have the experience and participate with reasonable risk. The first step is to analyze the activity or situation for potential risks. Once the potential risks have been identified, the second step is for the instructor to brainstorm possible ways to limit or control the risk [27]. When appropriate, include the student with the visual impairment in the brainstorming process [21,23]. Individual students may have recommendations for adaptations or modifications that can be made that will aid in their participation. Including individuals in the learning process can increase motivation to participate [30,31]. The third step is to provide the student with a visual impairment with a clear and concise explanation of the activity and the potential risks [27]. This will allow the student to make an informed decision about their participation. Having the opportunity to make such decisions will provide the student with a sense of autonomy and guide them toward being a self-determined independent individual. Lastly, one can take universal precautions to ensure everyone’s safety. The best way to accomplish this is by universally designing all lessons [22]. Using this approach with the floor hockey example, choices and modifications could have been made to encourage my participation. Equipment could be modified such as, brightly colored or audible hockey pucks or balls can be available and used during skill practice and game play for all students. Floor hockey is a fast-paced game that has reasonable risk for all that play. Possible ways to control the risk for a student with a visual impairment is to have them team up with a peer tutor that acts as their eyes and assists during game play. The pace of the game can be modified by using an auditory frisbee instead of a puck to provide the student with more time to react and be successful during the game. If space and teaching support allows, two games can be played at once, a recreational and a competitive game. This gives all students a choice of where they are most comfortable playing. The bottom line is to thoroughly plan and promote inclusion of students with visual impairments in physical education activities.

### Conclusion

Students with visual impairments should be provided the opportunity to make their own decisions when it comes to assessing risk. Vision specialists and/or physical educators, can make precautions to ensure adequate safety for the student with a visual impairment. If

children with visual impairments learn that they are unable to participate in physical education at a young age, they will become aware of their differences as compared to their peers [14,16].

Due to the lack of involvement in activities, individuals with visual impairments report feelings of invisibility, worthlessness, and being ignored [9,12]. If exclusion from physical activity is supported by teachers and other influential people in a child's life, the message to the child is that exclusion from such activities is acceptable and even desirable [12].

The effort and time required to ensure every child experiences the dignity of risk in physical education can be extensive. For some great resources to encourage the participation of students with visual impairments in physical education and physical activity please see [www.campabilities.org](http://www.campabilities.org) under Instructional Materials. Every child deserves the time and effort necessary to encourage physical activity involvement and participation as this can enhance their quality of life and self-determination for their lifetime.

### Bibliography

1. American Printing House for the Blind, 'Annual Report 2017: Distribution of Eligible Students Based on the Federal Quota Census of (2016).
2. Beamer JA and Yun J. "Physical educators' beliefs and self-reported behaviors toward including students with autism spectrum disorder". *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 31 (2014): 362-376.
3. Brian A., et al. "The effects of ecologically valid intervention strategies on the locomotor skills of children with visual impairments". *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 37 (2020): 177-192.
4. Cmar JL and Markoski K. "Promoting self-determination for students with visual impairments: A review of the literature". *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness* 113.2 (2019): 100-113.
5. Conroy P. "Supporting students with visual impairments in physical education". *Insight: Research and Practice in Visual Impairment and Blindness* 5.1 (2012): 3-10.
6. De Schipper T., et al. "Kids like me we go lightly on the head: Experiences of children with a visual impairment on the physical self-concept". *British Journal of Visual Impairment* 35.1 (2017): 55-68.
7. Fiorini MLS and Manzini EJ. "Strategies of physical education teachers to promote the participation of students with hearing impairment in classrooms". *Revista Brasileira de Educação Especial* 24 (2018): 183-198.
8. Haegele JA., et al. "Physical activity, body mass index, and health status among youth severe visual impairments aged 13-17 years in the United States". *Disability and Health Journal* 12.1 (2019): 24-28.
9. Haegele JA., et al. "Understanding the inclusiveness of integrated physical education from the perspectives of adults with visual impairments". *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 37.2 (2020): 141-159.
10. Haegele JA and Kirk TN. "Experiences in physical education: exploring the intersection of visual impairment and maleness". *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 35.2 (2018): 196-213.
11. Haegele JA., et al. "Paraeducator support in integrated physical education as reflected by adults with visual impairments". *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 36.1 (2019): 91-108.
12. Haegele JA and Sutherland S. "Perspectives of students with disabilities toward physical education: A qualitative inquiry review". *Quest* 67.3 (2015): 255-273.

13. Haegele JA, *et al.* "Females with visual impairments in physical education: Exploring the intersection of disability and gender identities". *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 89.3 (2018): 298-308.
14. Haegele JA and Zhu X. "Experiences of individuals with visual impairments in integrated physical education: A retrospective study". *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 88.4 (2017): 425-435.
15. Haegele JA, *et al.* "The meaning of physical education and sport among elite athletes with visual impairments". *European Physical Education Review* 23.4 (2017): 375-391.
16. Haegele JA, *et al.* "Exploring the intersection between disability and overweightness in physical education among females with visual impairments". *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 90.3 (2019): 344-354.
17. Haegele JA, *et al.* "School-based bullying experiences as reflected by adults with visual impairments". *Psychology in the Schools* 57 (2020): 296-309.
18. Haibach PS, *et al.* "Determinants of gross motor skill performance in children with visual impairments". *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 35 (2014): 2577-2584.
19. Ibrahim JE and Davis MC. "Impediments to applying the 'dignity of Risk' principle in residential aged care services". *Australasian Journal of Aging* 32.3 (2013): 188-193.
20. Kirk TN, *et al.* "Physical education position statement. Council for Exceptional Children-Division of Visual Impairment and Deafblindness.
21. Lieberman LJ and Childs R. "Steps to success: A sports focused self-advocacy program for children with visual impairments". *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness* (2020).
22. Lieberman LJ, *et al.* "Universal design in physical education". Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics (2020).
23. Lieberman LJ, *et al.* "Physical education for children with visual impairment or blindness". *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 90.1 (2019): 30-38.
24. Lirgg CD, *et al.* "Exploring challenges in teaching physical education to students with disabilities". *Palaestra* 31.2 (2017): 13-18.
25. McDougall T. "The Dignity of Risk". *Mental Health Practice* 8.7 (2005): 33-34.
26. Munro MP, *et al.* "Parental perceptions of independence and efficacy of their children with visual impairments". *Journal of Human Services, Training, Research and Practice* 1.1 (2016): 3.
27. Pennington CG and Webb L. "Enhancing physical education for students with vision impairment and preventing retinal detachment". *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 91.3 (2020): 53-54.
28. Robinson LE, *et al.* "Motor competence and its effect on positive developmental trajectories of health". *Sports Medicine* 45.9 (2015): 1273-1284.
29. Stodden DF, *et al.* "A Developmental Perspective on the Role of Motor Skill Competence in Physical Activity: An Emergent Relationship". *Quest* 60.2 (2008): 290-306.
30. Ulstad SO, *et al.* "Motivational predictors of learning strategies, participation, exertion and performance in physical education: A randomized controlled trial". *Motivation and Emotion* 42.4 (2018): 497-512.
31. Ward MJ. "An historical perspective of self-determination in special education: accomplishments and challenges". *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 30.3 (2005): 108-112.

32. Wehmeyer ML. "Strengths-based approaches to educating all learners with disabilities". New York: Teachers College Press (2019).
33. Wilson W., *et al.* "We are asking teachers to do more with less: perspectives on least restrictive environment implementation in physical education". *Sport, Education and Society* (2019).

**Volume 12 Issue 3 March 2021**

**©All rights reserved by Lindsay Ball., *et al.***