

The FUN KIT- Toolkit on Leisure Participation

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Why the FUN KIT?

The FUN KIT is a toolkit on leisure participation to help children PLAY! It is a toolkit for families of autistic children and/or children with an intellectual disability to use when thinking about leisure activities for their children.

Using the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health for Children and Youth (ICF-CY) created by the World Health Organization as the foundation, the FUN KIT presents leisure participation as a dynamic interaction between the characteristics of the child, the environment of the child, and the leisure activity itself.



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1. Introduction to the FUN KIT

What is leisure?

Leisure refers to the time designated for freely chosen activities that are performed outside school or personal care/hygiene activities like eating, sleeping, or bathing ^[1, 2]. This means that it is anything that a child chooses to do for FUN, a time designated for play! It can be involvement in formal activities such as team sports and classes, or informal activities such as free playing, doing crafts, or hanging out with friends.

The activities can be done alone, with others and/or virtually/online. With the COVID-19 pandemic, online activities have become more popular and more important; they have made it possible for children and youth to play with their friends while staying safe.

What's so important about leisure?

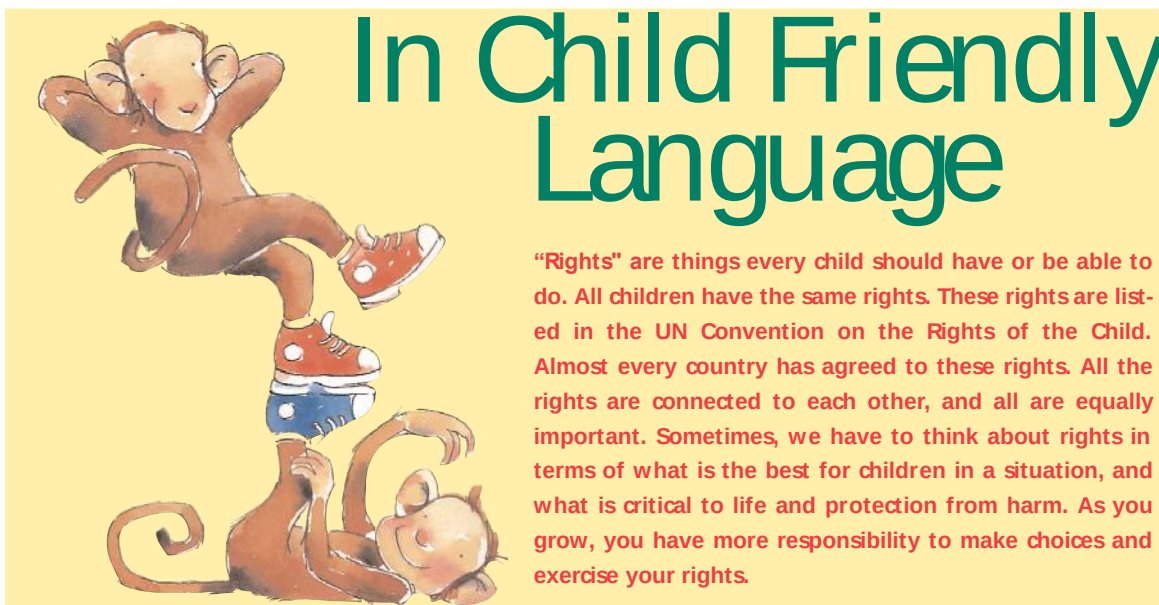
By playing and having fun through participation in leisure activities, children develop skills and learn about themselves while improving their physical and mental health ^[2-7]! They are able to socialize with peers, explore personal interests, express their creativity, and simply ENJOY LIFE.

Did you know?

Research shows that participation in leisure activities has both physical and mental health benefits for children; it can also improve the child's expression, confidence, and well-being! ^[2-7]

What else?

Playing and having fun is a HUMAN RIGHT. The United Nations (UN) Conventions on the Rights of the Children states that all children have the right to PLAY! (Article 31) ^[8]. This is highlighted again by the UN Conventions on the Rights of Persons with disabilities stating that children with disabilities must have equal opportunities to play and participate in recreation and leisure activities just like other children. (Article 30) ^[9].



UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child

<https://sites.unicef.org/rightsite/files/uncrcchildfriendlylanguage.pdf>

What about autistic children and children with intellectual disabilities?

Children with disabilities, including autistic children and children with intellectual disabilities, are at a higher risk of exclusion in leisure activities ^[10, 11]. There can be a variety of reasons for this exclusion, including cost, lack of opportunities, lack of knowledge about disabilities by staff/program directors, lack of accessibility, and a lack of access to transportation. Studies have shown that autistic children participate less than their peers in leisure activities, and the activities performed are mostly in the home setting, primarily alone, or with family members ^[12]. Participation in leisure activities

decreases even more as children grow older into adolescence. With adolescence and as engagement in activities decreases, there is an increased risk for children to develop sedentary behavior and/or to be more socially isolated which could lead to physical and mental health issues. This is why we must actively consider the developmental stages, and find ways to help children play and have fun, and provide resources to support ongoing participation in a variety of activities across the life span.

2. Child Considerations

When thinking about leisure and recreation for your child, their Capacity, Age, and Preferences should be taken into consideration. Always remember your **CAP** when playing and having fun!



Capacity

Your child's capacity, that is, what your child is able to do (e.g. your child has the ability to verbally communicate) does not determine IF they can participate in a certain activity – everybody CAN participate. However, the characteristics of your child and her/his capacity will play a role in HOW they participate.

i) Physical Capacity/Literacy

Physical literacy is defined as “*the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life*” ^[13].

There are 4 key components to physical literacy ^[13]:

1. Motivation and Confidence
2. Physical Competence
3. Knowledge and Understanding
4. Engagement in physical activities for life

Your child's physical capacity plays a role in each of the 4 components of physical literacy. Having the capacity to perform a certain activity builds confidence and motivates your child to improve. This, in turn, gives your child the opportunity to develop their skills and physical competence, while learning more about the activity and the

skills involved, adding to their knowledge and understanding. Finally, this allows your child to engage in that specific leisure activity and to draw on those experiences and apply them to others – engagement in leisure activities for life.

Your child's physical capacity plays a big role in making it easier or harder to participate in leisure activities ^[12]. If the activity is too hard for your child, this may have a negative effect on the 4 components of physical literacy. For example, lowering your child's confidence, and subsequently their motivation. However, with the right amount of challenge within their capacities (including any necessary modifications/adaptations), your child will be able to participate in an activity while enjoying it. Your child also will be challenged to learn new skills and try new things, building on their confidence and motivation, and potentially feeling inspired to keep practicing physical activities for life.

ii) Sensory Processing

Sensory processing refers to the way your child experiences, organizes, and understands different sensory information from the environment. Processing this information plays a role in your child's ability to participate ^[14]. Many autistic children and children with intellectual disabilities have different ways to process sensory information, and this can influence the way they engage in leisure activities ^[15].

There are 4 different ways of processing this information ^[16].

1. Sensation Seeking: Children tend to energetically perform actions that provides sensory input in their bodies. Some clues that your child may be seeking sensory experiences can include clapping, climbing, jumping, spinning, swinging, touching a variety of surfaces/textures, or turning themselves upside down.
2. Sensation Avoiding: Children tend to avoid certain sensations and often feel threatened by specific sensations such as clothing tags, water drops, and sand. Some clues that your child may be sensation avoiding can include an avoidance of loud or bright environments, swings, climbing or jumping.
3. Sensation Reactivity: Children tend to respond to sensations faster, with more intensity, or for a longer time. Your child may react in a negative, impulsive or aggressive manner; or become withdrawn, passive, or avoid the sensations when triggered.
4. Low Registration: Children tend not to notice changes in sensations or sensory situations. Your child may seem to not be bothered by extreme heat, cold, or injuries.

It is important to consider how your child is experiencing the world around them to better understand which sensations your child prefers and those that should be avoided. Leisure activities and the environments in which they are performed are filled with sensory information – the capacity to process this information may make it easier or harder to participate. For more information on Sensory Processing, refer to the Sensory Processing Differences Toolkit (<https://aidecanada.ca/learn/asd-id-core-knowledge/sensory-processing-differences-toolkit>).

iii) Cognitive/Behavioural Functioning

Cognitive capacity refers to the ability of your child to understand the situation, to read environmental cues, and to engage meaningfully and comfortably in the activity at hand [17]. The demands of certain activities such as rules in a game, turn-taking, or sequencing of activities may make activities hard for some kids to participate. Similar to physical literacy, your child's ability to participate in an activity can play a role in their motivation and confidence, and their enjoyment of the activity. It can also influence the way they behave if they cannot understand or cope with what is happening.

Behavioral functioning refers to the ability of your child to respond to environmental and other demands around them (for example, social demands). If your child starts showing challenging behaviours during certain leisure activities, it may be an indication that the environment needs to be altered to be more accessible (see below).



Age

As children get older, their interests, preferences, and abilities can change. Their preferences also may change as your child understands their likes/dislikes better [18]. Their self-awareness of their identity and abilities may also increase which can affect their behaviour, personality, and confidence. As a result, this may make it easier or harder for your child to participate in certain activities.

For example, this is what research tells us about autistic children and children with intellectual disability:

- Preschool children (3 to 6 years old) often face challenges participating in leisure activities, particularly when a child presents behaviors that may be challenging. However, these children are more likely to participate in more active leisure than older children [19].
→ This is the age to explore as many activities as possible! Let your child discover their interests, and explore new activities across various of settings (e.g. community, home).
- School-aged children (7 to 17 years old) usually prefer sedentary/passive (inactive) leisure activities done by themselves or with their family [20].
→ However, this is the age to develop skills and improve abilities, build the blocks for physical literacy, communication, and socialization. It is also when there are more activities available in after-school programs and within familiar environments, so your child may be more keen and comfortable to explore beyond their usual comfort zone.
- Adolescents transitioning into adulthood tend to participate in activities that they have already tried and experienced, usually with family and/or peers that they are already familiar with [21].

→ This is the time to consolidate previously learned activities, to gain more depth into activities of their interest, to improve performance, and make sure they stay active and engaged in a variety of activities for life.



Preference

Preference is having the opportunity to choose between different activities that are most satisfying and enjoyable for your child. It is linked to your child's motivation, and with more motivation comes a greater likelihood of meaningful participation ^[22].

When children have the ability to choose the activity they want to do, they are more likely to participate, to be engaged, and to be interested ^[23]. Research shows that children enjoy doing leisure activities more when they are able to choose and decide which activity they want to do ^[24].

Although preferences differ for each child, research shows that children with developmental disabilities often do not engage in activities of their choosing, either because they are not available in an accessible format, or because they don't have the chance to explore and develop these preferences ^[25].

Studies have shown that autistic children and children with intellectual disabilities often prefer ^[22]:

- Playing computer or video games
- Watching TV or a movie
- Playing board or card games
- Going to the movies
- Playing with toys/things
- Doing crafts, drawing, colouring
- Playing with pets
- Visiting others (family or friends)
- Going to a party (e.g. birthday party of someone they are close to)

However, they have fewer opportunities to attend parties and visit friends and others (e.g. sleep overs or other informal visits with friends and extended family) ^[22].

Familiarity and comfort with the activity and the people that the activity is being done with is important for autistic children and children with intellectual disabilities ^[26].

→ But it is also important to encourage your child to be engaged in a variety of activities, so they are able to discover new preferences!

3. Environmental Considerations

WHERE we do things is just as important as WHAT we are doing. When thinking about leisure participation, we must consider where that participation is taking place. This is the environment where your child can play and have fun. There are different types of

environments we must consider including Social, Physical, Attitudinal, and Cultural environments. When thinking about the environment, we must think about the **SPACE** where the fun happens!



Did you know?

The Social Model of Disability suggests that limitations are created by the environment. The way in which society is structured: policies, places and attitudes, creates disabling environments – not necessarily the child's condition. ^[27]



Social

The Social environment is made up of the people that surround your child when participating in leisure activities. This includes family and friends, the staff providing the activities and working in the facilities where activities happen, teachers, coordinators, and even neighbors. These community members can help create a welcoming environment and foster a sense of belonging.

- Family: The support of parents and siblings strongly helps and encourages children when participating in leisure activities. It adds to their enjoyment and confidence ^[12].
- Peers/Friends: Engaging in activities with friends with and without disabilities can add to the enjoyment, making it easier for your child to have fun and to have role models ^[23].
- Staff: Having staff who understand the specific needs and abilities of your child can make it easier for both the families and children ^[12]. All the staff involved in activities such as monitors, front desk staff, and the community at large should learn about the needs of autistic children and those with intellectual disabilities.



Physical

The physical environment refers to the physical space, building, or location where your child participates in leisure. It also refers to the physical environment at large like the neighborhood, the city, the province, and the country where your child lives and plays!

If and when the physical environment is *safe, accessible, and inclusive* to the specific needs and abilities of autistic children and children with intellectual disabilities, it can make it easier for your child to participate (e.g., adequate lighting, automatic doors, ramps, etc.). The physical environment also includes equipment in the environment (e.g., playground or gymnastics equipment) which can be used by all children.

Inclusive physical environments include:

- Buildings/Spaces that are accessible (e.g., ramps, elevators, automatic doors)
- Instructions/Directions that are easy to understand when navigating the building or using the equipment (e.g., Braille, child-friendly language, visual aids, large text, lighting, verbal instructions, video, support staff trained to give directions or guidance)
- Space/Equipment that have different sensory elements (e.g., tactile wall, music station, quiet room)



Attitudinal

The Attitudinal environment refers to the attitudes of the surrounding people and the community toward your child. Negative attitudes can affect your child's confidence and desire to participate in leisure while positive attitudes from others can encourage and support your child and the family to continue participating ^[28].

Health and education professionals can help, and they should work with parents, who are the specialists when it comes to their own children. This does not mean the burden to educate others should only be placed on families. Professionals should work together with families so they can contribute to educating others and raising awareness by talking about a child's needs, making expectations clear, explaining the particular interests of a child and the best ways to communicate and integrate them ^[29]. Family members, education and health professionals, and community members in general

should collectively contribute to learn and exchange together, to create spaces where collective knowledge and understanding is the norm.

Building community can also help in advocating for accommodations necessary for your child and inform policies related to leisure: the more people know about an issue, the more they can come together to help!

Specific policies can support leisure participation. Examples include: individual funding support to have a companion/shadow/help in community activities and camps, funding or programs to acquire adapted bikes, training about children with disabilities for public servants or other community service providers (e.g., elected officials, municipal and public staff working in front line services such as reception or information desks, and first responders), and program funding for adapting facilities, creating inclusive playgrounds, and more ^[30]! Some examples of specific policies in this area are listed at the end of this toolkit.



Cultural

The definition of 'leisure' may be different from one culture to the next, and the types of activities children engage in will likely depend a lot on their ethnic and cultural background. Playing is also a way to learn about one's culture and internalize social norms ^[31]. In a multi-cultural context like the one we have in Canada, it is important to understand one's family and community culture and values, and what type of social activities are most valuable and accessible. It is important to remember that all children have the right to play and have fun!

It is also important to acknowledge that culture is dynamic, and it changes with time! Leisure for children can be very different from that of the generation of their parents. Computer games, social media, and YouTube vlogs can now be forms of leisure that children enjoy, which may not have been the case in the past. It is important to be able to accommodate for the current preferences and cultural/societal norms while also striving for a balance between passive (e.g., playing on a mobile phone) and active (e.g. doing sports) activities. Also remember to add variety whenever possible: arts and crafts, dance, outdoor activities, structured team sports and classes, nature, and free play.



Environment

The environment is a very important factor to consider when thinking about leisure participation. WHERE children engage in an activity can have a big impact of HOW they engage.

Think of ways your child can engage and find enjoyment in their environment: the school, the neighborhood, public parks, playgrounds and recreation centers, local museums, movie theaters, restaurants, etc. Plan the activity beforehand considering what are the aspects of the environment that can help (e.g., a noise-reduced movie session, a time of the day where the playground is less crowded) or hinder (e.g., rush hour, weather, noisy activities) your child's participation, and then engage in informing the people responsible for this activity (e.g. the municipality's elected officials, the ombudsperson's office, the accessibility office, the human rights commission, the member of parliament in your riding) on what is good about it, and what can be improved to help your child participate. We are all collectively responsible for making environments accessible. Parents, caregivers, and individuals with disabilities should be consulted by decision-makers so they can help shape public policies, programs, and planning to create inclusive, healthy communities! (Example of a parent-led initiative include: stroller parking, reviews of playgrounds, parks, and splash pads; <http://strollerparking.ca>)

4. Types of Leisure/Play

In this section, we will provide some examples of FUN activities your child can engage in! Activities can be individual and/or informal activities like reading, listening to music, or visiting a friend. The following list provides an overview of the types of programs available and what they propose. For a list of over 3000 activities across Canada, including information on how to register for these activities, you can consult the Jooay website (<http://jooay.com/>) or download the Jooay App (<http://jooay.com/>).

You can also find suggestions of informal activities for your child to engage with on their own or with family and friends on the ParticipACTION website (<https://www.participaction.com/en-ca>) or the ParticipACTION App (<https://www.participaction.com/en-ca/programs/app>), including suggestions to adapt these activities to the needs of your child.

The FUN KIT categorizes formal activities (activities that often have an instructor, rules, group) as **Arts**, **Camps**, **Sports**, and **Others** such as life skills, respite, or money management programs.

Did you know?

The Jooay App has over 3000 adapted and inclusive leisure opportunities across Canada, in all 10 provinces and 2 territories (YK,NT)
[jooay.com]



Arts

Examples of accessible arts programs for children include but are not limited to music, visual arts, and theater programs.

Online

For example, online theater classes for children may be led by a drama therapist and supported by a co-teacher staff. The players are engaged in discussion, photo sharing, and storytelling while learning vocal and speech techniques. The program could run twice a week at a scheduled time on the online Zoom platform. Participation in this program would allow children to use their imagination and spontaneity, develop emotional expression through voice and body awareness of self and others, and improve their understanding of group dynamics.

In-person

Art therapy is an example of an inclusive in-person art program for children. Art therapy may take place as an individual or group program. Within a safe, supportive environment, the child is given the opportunity to explore issues and emotions through the use of chosen art materials. The child is then given the opportunity to discuss the artwork with the therapist in order to assist in the child's process of bringing personal meaning and insight to their artwork.



Camps

There are many different types of camp programs available in either an in-person or online format.

Online

Online format camp programs help kids stay active and engaged with educational and fun activities. This may take the form of pre-recorded YouTube videos posted on the organization's website. Each week of camp will have a different theme, and a video is posted to mark each day of the week. Camp themes could include arts and crafts, adventure skills, outdoor cooking, environmental education, or character development. Camp activities in each video could include identifying plants and wildlife for adventure skills, or tips on goal setting for character development.

YCamp Activities

With the closure of many camp programs last summer, the YMCA launched YCamp, a free virtual camp program for children and youth across Canada. YCamp can keep your kids active and engaged with educational and fun activities. Delivered by YMCA camp staff all across the country.

[Back to all Family Activities](#)

[YCamp Overview](#) **Week One** [Week Two](#) [Week Three](#) [Week Four](#) [Week Five](#) [Week Six](#) [Week Seven](#) [Week Eight](#)



WEEK ONE OVERVIEW

Y YCamp 01:29



ADVENTURE & SURVIVAL SKILLS: MINDFULNESS PROGRAM

Y YCamp 14:43



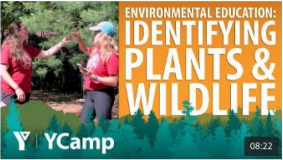
ARTS & CRAFTS: NATURE MASKS

Y YCamp 12:32



CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT: DISCOVERING LEADERSHIP

Y YCamp 10:37



ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION: IDENTIFYING PLANTS & WILDLIFE

Y YCamp 08:22



CAMPFIRE COOKING: GRILLED CHEESE

Y YCamp 12:05



WEEK ONE WRAP-UP

Y YCamp 01:08

In-person

In-person camps include day camps or overnight camps that are designed specifically for autistic children and children with intellectual disability. An example of a summer day camp at an inclusive horseback riding centre might allow campers to learn the basics of horse care and horsemanship through activities, lessons, and hands-on learning. Campers are encouraged to build on their own strengths as well as recognize and appreciate the strengths of others.



Sports

There are a variety of inclusive sports programs available for children including, but not limited to, physical fitness, yoga, outdoor activities, dance, swimming and soccer. These sport programs may be offered through an in-person or online format.

Online

Online sports programs have a primary goal of encouraging participants to have fun while being physically active. Participants learn new skills as they are encouraged to take part in several different forms of physical activity. Online dance programs, for example, encourage participants to try several different dance styles and are taught by a dance instructor. In addition, online yoga programs encourage physical activity while promoting breathing, stretching, and mindfulness practices. Online sports programs often increase children's mobility and allow them to explore different activities in a non-competitive environment, with competitive options available if the child is interested.



In-person

An example of popular in-person sports program is Challenger Baseball (<https://www.mlb.com/bluejays/community/jays-care/challenger-baseball>). Challenger Baseball is designed to empower children and youth living with physical and/or cognitive disabilities. This program provides adaptive equipment and baseball gear which allows children and youth to play organized baseball. Implementers are given extensive training and coaching resources. This program teaches these children and youth teamwork, communication, determination, resiliency, inclusion, independence, confidence, self-esteem, social skills, and courage, and gives them the opportunities to make new friends.



Others

Aside from sports, camps, and arts programs, there are numerous other leisure programs available to children.

Online

Online activities of this type may have the goal of encouraging participants to learn something new, or relax and recharge. These could include science from home activities, stories from space, online board games, or on the other hand, guided meditation or five-finger breathing exercises. These online programs give participants opportunities for social connections or learning new skills.

In-person

In-person activities promote social connection and the development of important skills, for example, a life skills group for teens or pre-teens. With certain organizations, these groups may be led by an occupational therapist. Life skills groups meet multiple times a week and work to build the social skills, executive functioning skills, and specific skills of the participants. Other in-person programs in this category may focus on providing opportunities for participants to socialize by watching a movie together, or work on a specific skill such as cooking, handwriting, or reading. Respite support is another important leisure opportunity that is offered by many organizations with caregivers in mind.

5. Supports to facilitate leisure

Having limited access to information about existing resources and opportunities for children with disabilities has made it difficult for children with disabilities and families to find and participate in leisure activities.

The Jooay App (<https://jooay.com>) was launched in Spring 2015 to overcome this gap. This mobile-health (m-health) solution lists inclusive and adapted leisure activities across Canada, providing free, crowd-sourced information about the characteristics of leisure activities offered, based on geographic location. Additionally, Childhood Disability LINK (Link Information and New Knowledge to families and service providers) (<https://www.childhooddisability.ca>) provides reliable information about different types of childhood disabilities, rehabilitation and medical interventions, policies supporting participation of children with disabilities, and resources to support parents and families.

Several policies in Canada exist to support your child's participation! Knowing about what the federal, provincial and municipal governments are doing can help you access opportunities available to you and your family, and advocate for your child.

The Royal Society of Canada offers some research-based considerations for children with intellectual disabilities following the COVID-19 pandemic, including aspects related to leisure and play:

<https://rsc-src.ca/en/covid-19-policy-briefing/time-to-be-counted-covid-19-and-intellectual-and-developmental-disabilities>

The Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences are working on recommendations for the National Autism Strategy, which also include play:

<https://cahs-acss.ca/autism-assessment/>

Here are some examples of provincial policies that talk about different aspects of play and list supports available for families. Please note that not all provinces have such policies or resources in place.

- Provincial support
 - QC
 - Politique À part entière
<https://www.ophq.gouv.qc.ca/loi-et-politiques/politique-a-part-entiere.html>
 - SK
 - People before systems: Transforming the experience of disability in Saskatchewan
<https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/73517>
 - ON
 - Pathways to Recreation: Learning about Ontario's Accessibility Standard for the Design of Public Spaces
<https://accessibilitycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Pathways-to-Recreation.pdf>
 - Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act
<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05a11>
 - Parks and Recreation Ontario: Framework for Recreation in Canada
<https://www.prontario.org/policy/framework>
 - Policies governing sport and exercise for people with disabilities in Canada
<http://www.disabilitypolicyalliance.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Sport-Policy-Scan-July-2017.pdf>

Other online resources where you can find more information and educational materials about participation in leisure and play for children with diverse types of disabilities and needs!

- High Five
<https://www.highfive.org/>
- Ability Online

<https://abilityonline.org/>

- Active Living Alliance
<https://ala.ca/>
- National Center for Health, Physical Activity and Disability
<https://www.nchpad.org/Articles/10/Fun~and~~Leisure>
- CanChild Participation Knowledge Hub
<https://www.canchild.ca/en/research-in-practice/participation-knowledge-hub>
- **And some autism-specific resources:**
 - Autism Parenting Magazine
<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/>
 - Autism Speaks Canada
<https://www.autismspeaks.ca/>
 - The Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorder Alliance (CASDA)
<https://www.casda.ca/>
 - Autism and/or Intellectual Disabilities Knowledge Exchange Network (AIDE Canada)
<https://aidecanada.ca/>
 - UN CRC – Child-friendly language
<https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/media/1421/file/ZAF-UN-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child-child-friendly-2009.pdf>

Whoever you are,
Whatever you decide to do,
Whenever it may be,
Wherever it is,
However you decide to do it...

PLAY and HAVE FUN!

Why?

Because **YOU CAN!**

Now it's your turn!

The following can be completed by the child and the parent to make a pledge with a goal to participate in fun and leisure activities!

Child

My goal is to _____.

To do this I will take these steps:

Parent

To help my child achieve this goal, I will:

Child Signature:

Date:

Parent Signature:

Date:

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