

Sports for De-Addiction

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Play is an integral part of human life. It has many benefits for children in terms of physical, emotional, and social development. I am sharing an experience of how I introduced the game of *Ultimate Frisbee* to a group of adolescent boys who were addicted to alcohol and how it helped them to overcome the habit.

The transitioning from childhood to adulthood and becoming young adults is a time fraught with many challenges – physical and emotional. This is also a time when teens may adopt undesirable behaviour and habits due to peer pressure or the thrill of taking risks. In a school I worked with there was a group of adolescents, who would routinely consume alcohol in one corner of the school grounds. I decided to engage them in the game of Ultimate Frisbee.

Ultimate Frisbee is a mixed-gender, non-contact team sport. It is self-refereed, and the spirit of the game is given the utmost importance. Each player is responsible for his/her own actions and responses. The rules are a mix of the rules for basketball and rugby. The spirit of the game is its most attractive feature. It is played in a field half the size of the football field and the game consists of seven players on each playing side. It requires physical agility, teamwork and focus.

When I first approached this group of teenagers and asked them if they would like to throw the disc, they thought it was an easy thing to do. But when they tried and could not throw it correctly, they felt challenged and started asking questions about how to throw it and how the game is played. I explained it to them.

Overcoming initial challenges

In the beginning, they were not willing to play with the others; they were comfortable only with their own set of friends. No one was ready to discuss the strategy or the game plan, they played the way they wanted to. They also completely ignored working on their fitness, which is the core of any sport. There were misunderstandings among the players and fights would break out over small issues. It

took more than six months for them to start playing with each other and listening to each other. Their aggression came under control and there were no more fights on the field.

Their fitness levels were very poor in the beginning and they could not run because of which they showed reluctance to play, even though they came to play regularly. Gradually, they started to realise the importance of fitness in the sport and began working towards it.

Although Ultimate Frisbee is a mixed-gender sport, the boys refused to pass the disc to the girls. They did not think of the girls as equal partners in the game. They believed that the girls would not be able to catch or pass the disc. It took almost 10-12 months for the boys to accept the fact that girls could play as well as boys.

Results

Slowly, one could see the positive changes in the boys. Most of them had played individual sports earlier but playing this team sport, Ultimate Frisbee, was a challenge for them. The main change, which was visible over a period, was the complete change in their behaviour towards others and the approach to all the challenges presented during the game. Their confidence levels increased a lot, and their collaborative skills improved manifold.

Their aggression was also under control and they were displaying a lot of patience both on and off the field. They were also willing to include anyone in the game and were open to learning and teaching.

Long conversations and discussions on alcohol addiction helped them reduce its consumption. Over the period of one year, they were able to play without getting tired.

I am happy to note that almost two years after I initiated them into this game, they are still playing as a team. They do not consume alcohol anymore and are doing well and working hard in their careers. They have also introduced the sport to their friends. Some of them have represented our country in different tournaments organised across

the globe. All these changes occurred over a period because of the rigour of the sport which demanded an immense level of commitment from them towards the game.

Conclusion

Play is an important strategy to meet the developmental and learning needs of young children as much as for the older ones. The experience mentioned above was with a group of adolescent children. I have subsequently, introduced Ultimate Frisbee to younger children in schools and met with an equally good response. There has been a positive behavioural change in these children. Among other things, one can observe improved collaborative skills, closeness, being sensitive towards oneself and others, honesty, listening to other opinions and ideas, leading the team and strategising before the game and conflict management.

During play, one gets to meet and interact with many people, which helps to widen one's perspective and breaks open any conservative mindset, re-examines biases, stereotypes, and barriers. We

saw how this group of boys that I worked with had initially ignored the girls because of their ingrained gender biases.

Playing allows for experiential learning and helps children understand their strengths and limitations: while strengths can be leveraged to full potential, limitations are not one's weaknesses. Play builds a strong bond amongst all players in a team and helps in decision-making. Decision-making is an act of choice, we need to decide only when there are options, it is a conscious approach to solve a problem one is faced with.

Playing a sport relieves stress and tension and can develop emotional and physical strength, especially when young adults (or children) are frustrated, angry, sad, or nervous. It promotes positive attitudes: being happy with who one is, continuing to grow and improve oneself in all aspects, while also encouraging others. From the example above, it is clear that the sport presented the boys with an opportunity to prove themselves and the physical activity induced happiness and a sense of achievement.



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