

Improving social inclusion through freestyle sports

Discover how a Copenhagen skate club is improving physical activity participation and social inclusion by providing a supportive environment for freestyle sports that children can't get enough of.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

SOCIAL INCLUSION

PRIMARY PREVENTION

Mills Club is a freestyle sports community that goes beyond promoting physical activity. Its strong mentoring element encourages personal development and ensures that every child feels welcome and safe, regardless of background or ability. The club shows how freestyle sports associations can serve as powerful catalysts for positive and long-lasting change in the lives of children.





Inadequate access to physical activity: a barrier to participation and health

Access to physical activity is crucial for children and teens, especially in urban areas, where appropriate spaces, facilities and opportunities for engaging in regular physical activity are often limited. This lack of access can prevent children and teens from participating in socialised sporting activities, which are essential for their physical and mental well-being.

Globally, access to physical activity is skewed across gender, and social and special needs. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all children and adolescents between the ages of five and 17 engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity daily and in vigorous-intensity aerobic activities at least three days a week. However, only one in four boys and one in six girls meet this recommendation, and the gender gap increases with age.¹

The power of physical activity

Regular physical activity reduces stress, alleviates anxiety and depression, and fosters a positive state of mind. It is particularly important for socially disadvantaged children, who may face higher stress levels and fewer opportunities for positive mental health interventions. Establishing healthy habits during childhood and adolescence is essential for long-term well-being and health.

A tool for combatting social isolation

Physical activity is an effective tool for improving mental health and combatting social isolation, which is prevalent among children and adolescents. Skateboarding and scooting offer engaging ways for young people to connect with peers, build friendships and develop a sense of community. This sense of belonging is crucial for their overall well-being and development.

Impact of social isolation

Social isolation in childhood and adolescence has been linked to adverse immediate and long-term mental and physical health effects.² This is particularly challenging for children from difficult circumstances or minority groups and for those who feel they do not fit in at school or in sports.²

Mental health outcomes

Physical inactivity is closely linked to poorer mental health outcomes.³ Teens who do not engage in regular physical activity are more likely to experience increased anxiety and depression as well as lower self-esteem. The combination of these physical and mental health issues can profoundly impact a young person's overall well-being and prospects.⁴

Skill building

Engagement in activities that require focus and coordination, such as skateboarding, can help develop cognitive skills, leading to better academic performance. Exercise has many positive effects on the brain, with an even greater effect on developing children's brains.⁵

"Each kid is unique – but something they all have in common is that here, at the club, they feel like they belong, are welcome, and can participate at a pace and a frequency suitable for them."

– Bonny Madsen

Inclusion as a pathway to reach underserved groups

Mills Club offers more than just an opportunity to skate; it is about being part of a supportive community through freestyle sports. Activities such as skating, scooting and skateboarding are designed to be inclusive and open to participants of all backgrounds and skill levels. Many of the neighbourhoods Mills Club serves are considered socially disadvantaged areas, where

children often do not engage in mainstream sports such as football or handball. Some club members have chosen to avoid traditional sports due to a lack of confidence, a perceived lack of competence and ability, concerns about body image or shyness. Mills Club provides a safe space where they can engage in physical activity without these barriers.

Mills Club strives to provide a sense of belonging and acceptance, creating an inclusive environment that counters the alienation children and adolescents might experience in other areas of their lives. Through events and competitions, the club builds a strong and supportive network for its young members.

"Many children and teens from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those living with a mental health diagnosis, often feel marginalised or excluded from the more dominant sports, such as football or handball, and therefore miss out on sports and physical activity opportunities."

– Bonny Madsen

SPOTLIGHT

Bonny Madsen

Bonny Madsen is the founder and manager of Mills Club. A former international footballer, she is passionate about sport and its positive role in young people's lives. A pedagogue by training, Bonny has worked in orphanages and childcare in Italy and Denmark.

"As well as my professional sports career, I look back and think that as a young person, so much of my well-being, health and attitudes to work and life stem from having sports in my life."



Getting started

Freestyle sports are flexible, relatively low cost and highly adaptable to different urban settings. By providing an opportunity to participate, children who may not engage with more mainstream sports or activities have the chance to benefit from physical activity as well as find a supportive social environment. To create an inclusive skate club, consider the following when laying the groundwork.

Location and accessibility

Choose a location that is easily accessible by public transport, cycling or walking. This ensures that more

children from all parts of the city can attend. Places that need to be accessed by car or that are long distances from schools may inadvertently exclude certain groups or discourage parental or caregiver support.

Partnering with schools and engaging the community

Consider engaging with community members, parents and potential participants to understand local needs and preferences. By building partnerships and collaborating with local schools, youth organisations and social services, clubs can reach more children, especially those from underserved backgrounds or with behavioural challenges.





Empowering girls through inclusive initiatives

In Denmark, only 9% of 15-year-old girls meet the WHO recommendation of at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity daily. This figure is significantly lower than the 21% of boys the same age who meet the global recommendation.⁶

While skateboarding and scooting have traditionally been male-dominated,⁷ Mills Club has taken a creative approach to increasing female participation, and by diversifying the offering, it has achieved great success in opening up the club to more girls. Inclusive initiatives, such as disco skating classes, where more than 80% of participants are girls, help reverse the typical gender imbalance at skate parks. The club also has a girls' team led by a female instructor, with seven regular members.



ACTIVATION GUIDE

Enhancing access for girls to freestyle sports clubs

In public spaces, it is common to see more boys scooting and skating. However, it is important to consider the obstacles girls might encounter in skate parks, so that gender inclusion can be integrated into the sports offering.

Important factors to consider when designing a gender-inclusive freestyle sports initiative:

1. Do not assume that young girls are naturally less active or less interested in freestyle sports than boys. It is important to provide girls with equal opportunities and support them to be just as active.
2. Girls-only sessions can be more welcoming and supportive, especially for girls who are new to the club and freestyle sports.
3. Appointing female coaches, finding female volunteers and having teen mentors can effectively encourage girls' participation.
4. Expanding the activities offered beyond just freestyle scooting and skating, to include JamSkaters (dancing on rollerskates) and RollerDerby (a fast-paced contact sport), can help to attract more girls to participate.
5. Reassert the right to equal access and use of facilities for all members.



Engaging underserved children

Including children with invisible disabilities

The Sunflower Kids programme is Mills Club's dedicated initiative to ensure that children with invisible disabilities, such as dyslexia and autism, feel seen, understood and supported. Named after the popular sunflower lanyards, which signal that the wearer may need extra time or patience, this programme is designed to create a safe and inclusive space where every child can thrive. By fostering a nurturing community, Mills Club is transforming lives and creating a sense of belonging for all children, regardless of their challenges.

"We have dedicated sessions for children with Asperger's and autism. The best thing is all other kids here are sensitive and respectful of other people's differences."

– Bonny Madsen

Supporting children with ADHD

Many children who attend Mills Club have been diagnosed with behavioural conditions, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), one of the most common mental disorders affecting children today.⁸ Greater frequency of physical activity has been

shown to improve the health and well-being of children with behavioural challenges such as ADHD.⁹ Mills Club recognises these challenges and provides tailored support to help children with ADHD harness their energy and channel it positively through activities such as skateboarding and rollerblading.

These sports require and teach perseverance, resilience, and the importance of trial and error. Children learn that falling is just part of the process and that getting back up is what truly counts.

Engaging and supporting refugees and minority groups

Through connections with the Copenhagen municipality and charity organisations, minority groups and refugees have been invited to introductory sessions at the club.

"We've had an exceptional engagement with refugee boys from Ukraine. They've experienced trauma, and other institutions told us there were challenges around fighting – but here, at the club, they've been amazing and really integrated fantastically."

– Bonny Madsen



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Providing an inclusive and supportive environment for underserved children

Creating an inclusive and supportive environment for children with behavioural issues, such as ADHD, and young people from vulnerable groups, such as refugees, requires thoughtful planning and empathetic engagement. These children often face unique challenges that can hinder their ability to participate fully in group activities.

Children with ADHD often have boundless energy and may struggle with attention and impulsivity. However, the right strategies can ensure that they feel welcomed, supported and empowered to thrive in a sports club.

Foster a sense of belonging

Creating a welcoming environment is essential for all children, especially those from underserved backgrounds. It is important to make sure that every child feels valued and respected right from the start. This can be achieved through personalised greetings, and taking the time to personally welcome each child and their family. This simple gesture can make a significant difference to how they perceive the club. Implementing buddy systems that pair new members with existing members can help children who struggle with social skills to integrate more smoothly.

Adapt activities to meet diverse needs

Children with behavioural issues or those from underserved backgrounds may have different

levels of ability or comfort with certain activities. To accommodate them, consider offering a range of activities that cater to different skill levels and interests. For example, some children might prefer individual challenges, while others thrive in team settings.

Provide structured routines

Predictable schedules and clearly defined expectations can help children with ADHD feel more secure and focused. However, maintain flexibility so as to adjust to their changing needs.

Engage children with ADHD effectively

Short, interactive sessions may help children maintain their attention. Incorporate interactive elements to keep them engaged. Skateboarding and scooting can be excellent outlets for energy and promote focus, coordination and perseverance, which are beneficial for children with ADHD. Use encouragement and positive feedback to recognise efforts and achievements. This helps build self-esteem and motivates children to keep participating.

Seek feedback and make improvements

Inclusion is an ongoing process that requires continuous evaluation and adaptation. To maintain a supportive environment, regularly seek feedback from children, parents and staff, in order to understand what is working and where improvements can be made.



Building essential life skills

Learning to skateboard or rollerblade at Mills Club is about more than just mastering tricks – it is about developing life skills that reach beyond the skate park. Children and teens build resilience as they navigate the challenges of learning new skills, which helps them face academic and personal difficulties with confidence and determination.

“Skating activities involve a high degree of creativity and personal style. Members foster a sense of individuality and self-worth by allowing participants to express themselves in ways they might not be able to in more structured sports or activities,” says Bonny.

Club members also gain valuable social skills in a community setting. They learn conflict resolution, adhere to expected behaviour standards and support one another in various ways. These experiences are vital for personal growth, and help children with behavioural conditions thrive, both within the club and in their broader lives.

“We try to make sure all the children feel equally part of a community that understands their needs and celebrates their achievements. The supportive environment encourages children to push their limits, try new things and develop at their own pace,” explains Bonny.

By focusing on each child’s strengths and providing tailored support, Mills Club fosters an inclusive

environment where every child can shine. The skills and confidence gained through the club help prepare children for a brighter future, equipping them with the tools they need to succeed.

“The atmosphere at Mills is very special, because everybody can fit into the club. Everyone helps each other get better.”

– Jonathan, club member and coach

Pathways to employment

Mills Club exemplifies how sports clubs can foster informal learning and the development of employable skills, such as discipline, teamwork, leadership and problem-solving. The club has successfully helped adolescents attain the social skills and qualifications needed to find employment within and beyond the club.

Mills Club offers both voluntary and paid roles, allowing members to develop coaching, IT, marketing and communications skills. Members learn directly from club staff and receive help with applications to courses and schools specialised in hands-on learning. By enabling children to participate in practical roles within the club, Mills has achieved success working with underserved children to find pathways to training schemes and employment.

Coaching the next generation of scooter stars

From the age of 15, more experienced scooterers have the opportunity to volunteer as coaches. The volunteers learn responsibility and empathy, with the possibility of progressing to salaried work.

"The adults will introduce us to the kids who might need extra or different attention, and we take it from there – we want them to be comfortable and enjoy themselves as much as possible," says Max, a club member and coach.

Through the club, members can train to take an internationally recognised qualification to coach scooting.

They learn how to deliver fun, safe and engaging sessions to small or large groups, help introduce riders to safe scooting, and promote the sport. As many as 20 club members have now passed the accreditation, and enjoy the challenge and satisfaction of coaching younger club members.

Tech skills beyond smartphones

Capturing and sharing videos is an integral part of skate culture, allowing skaters to document their progress, showcase their creativity and connect with others in the community. At Mills Club, developing digital and physical skills is embraced, providing young skaters with

SPOTLIGHT

Max and Jonathan

Max and Jonathan, both aged 15, are local members and have grown through the guidance, friendships and camaraderie of Mills Club.

Members since they were 10 years old, the boys have become top scooter riders, representing the club at the Danish National Championships and competing for Denmark at international events, such as Extreme Barcelona in Spain.

When the chance came to help design, build and evolve the skate park, they were excited to have a role and take the lead. Learning craftsmanship and carpentry skills, working with computer-aided design tools and growing

in confidence and ability, the friends have helped shape and create the park, its jumps, rails and ramps together, inspiring a new cohort of up-and-coming enthusiasts.

"I've learnt how to build a skate park – how to think about the design and the flow, and then learning from a carpenter how to build structures and make them stable and safe."

– Jonathan

"To begin with, we were taught by a pro carpenter, but now we're confident and experienced and can build ramps ourselves."

– Max

the tools and skills to turn their passion for film into a creative outlet and learning opportunity.

The club is installing a network of eight action cameras, enabling members to record their skating and create films of their tricks and jumps. Members will have the opportunity to learn editing software skills, progress beyond clips to storyboarding, and make short films.

“We’ll encourage the kids to engage in courses that teach them how to use the equipment and software,

learn useful skills and use technology beyond their smartphone screens,” says Bonny.

“I really like the coaching side – I feel like I’m teaching the next generation, so they can learn things even younger than I did, which will push the sport forward.”

– Jonathan, club member and coach

ACTIVATION GUIDE

Building skills and confidence

Offer opportunities for members to develop skills beyond sports, such as leadership, event planning or digital skills such as video editing. These can help members in their future academic and career endeavours.

For older children, consider creating opportunities that foster responsibility and accountability.

Mentorship and coaching roles

Encourage older members to take on mentorship or coaching roles, helping to guide the next generation of participants. This fosters a sense of responsibility and community involvement.

Career pathways

Partner with local businesses and educational institutions to create pathways to internships or apprenticeships for older members. This helps equip them with valuable work experience and opens up future career opportunities.

About Mills Club

Located in Copenhagen, Denmark, Mills Club is a community-based freestyle scooter and skating association where children and adolescents develop the skills, confidence and resilience needed to thrive. The club offers members access to skate facilities and lessons tailored to age groups and skill levels.

Mills Club features an established outreach to children with behavioural and learning challenges and those facing social isolation, including refugees and groups from underserved communities. Mills Club provides a safe and inclusive environment for physical activity where every child feels welcomed, regardless of their abilities or background.

About Cities for Better Health

Cities for Better Health is a global public-private partnership committed to accelerating change in urban health across generations. The partnership takes a holistic view of health by prioritising prevention and promoting health equity by building impactful local partnerships to drive health promotion and prevention.

At the core of our initiatives are communities’ perspectives and experiences. Understanding their daily lives and challenges to living healthily is key to generating lasting and effective impacts on the prevention of chronic diseases.

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