



Marsha Forest Centre

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PLAYFAIR TEAMS (Secondary)

A DISABILITY – SOCIAL JUSTICE – INCLUSION STRATEGY

PlayFair Teams is a student leadership opportunity focused on Disability – Social Justice – Inclusion. Despite the focus on disability as an issue of social justice, PlayFair Teams is not a special education program. It is an all-student program designed to bring interested students together in equity to address issues of social justice and disability.

Equity is an important point as most programs for students with disabilities are based on a giver – receiver relationship between typical peers and students with disabilities. So long as we depend on a relationship based in a charitable approach, equity for students with disabilities will not be achieved. Students with disabilities will spend their school years on the fringes of school society. PlayFair Teams emphasizes that Team members are equal in contributing to the Team from their abilities and needs.

PlayFair Teams was developed by the Marsha Forest Centre of Toronto. You may have heard of Circle of Friends. That, and other strategies designed to support students with disabilities and being used worldwide, come from the Marsha Forest Centre. People everywhere are learning that social justice requires that we develop positive programs designed to include those with disabilities fully in society.

There is no cost involved in starting a PlayFair Team. A Teacher Advisor is needed in the same way that a teacher is needed to coach a school team, or to lead any other co-curricular program. The specific role of a PlayFair Team is to develop an activity, for instance, a presentation, which informs Team members of issues of Disability – Social Justice – Inclusion. The Team conducts its activity in schools to inform themselves, other students, and their teachers of issues of Disability – Social Justice – Inclusion. Informing others, the dynamic driving PlayFair Teams, reaches out to students and teachers in other schools, even to informing the students' families and others in their community. Reaching out is limited only by the creativity and energy of the students involved.

The Marsha Forest Centre provides guidance on initiating a PlayFair Team, a Teacher Advisor Manual, an interactive CD-ROM resource, a cap and t-shirt uniform for each PlayFair Team member, and PlayFair Teams posters,

as well as supportive professional books. Additional guidance is provided as needed as the Team is organized, though the intent is that each school takes ownership of its Team as it continues from year to year. A PlayFair Team website is available for Teams to communicate with each other and to share information on activities.

PlayFair Teams is in the early stages of being introduced to schools following a lengthy pilot phase. At this time, a number of Greater Toronto Area schools, both at the elementary and secondary levels, have begun Teams. Teams also have begun in Illinois, New Zealand, and Bahrain. A basic aspect of PlayFair Teams is that students can join a Team at the elementary school level and continue as a PlayFair Team member through the secondary school level. The sooner students begin to learn about Disability – Social Justice – Inclusion and the longer the learning, the better.

Does PlayFair Teams have an effect on the students involved? During our pilot phase we collected data on an outside elementary school audience attending a PlayFair Team presentation. Data also was collected from secondary students on their experiences as PlayFair Team members. We are gratified at the strength of student learning from both experiences. Data analysis provides evidence-based support for the value of PlayFair Teams. The data and reports from teachers and school administrators indicate that PlayFair Teams alters the relationship between typical students and their peers with disabilities, and that there is an effect beyond Team members.

As you are a secondary school, we have attached the analysis of the secondary student response. It seems that secondary students involved in a PlayFair Team find the experience to be intense. Their responses touched on many issues of Disability – Social Justice – Inclusion.

RESEARCH – BASED EVIDENCE ON PLAYFAIR TEAMS

The following provides evidence-based research information on the responses of students in to secondary schools to experiences as members of PlayFair Teams.

The PlayFair Team in one school had worked on developing a presentation on Disability – Social Justice – Inclusion around a musical theme. The second school's Team developed a skit. The two schools had come together to share presentations.

Following the presentations the students were asked to write their reflections on the presentations. Teachers did not discuss the presentations with the students and writing reflections was a voluntary activity.

Data analysis was based on a qualitative approach to grounded material, specifically the constant comparative method, to develop categories of response.

Secondary students who were members of a PlayFair Team were powerful in their voluntary reflections on the experience. This finding held both for members who were typical students and those with disabilities. The

first response category, Overall Impact of Experience", indicated that all students providing reflections indicated that they had gained in understanding. Though some initially approached membership in their PlayFair Team as an opportunity to do something for students with disabilities, in other words, as a giver-receiver, charitable activity, they soon learned that PlayFair Teams was different. PlayFair Teams was based on equity and shared respect and all learned from each other. As Michelle, a typical student said, "PlayFair has been an experience like no other." Jennifer, a student with intellectual concerns, echoed the sentiment saying that PlayFair Teams "opened my eyes a lot more".

Reflections suggest that PlayFair Teams has personal, equalizing effect. It teaches Team members about themselves and each other. A gratifying finding is that Team members became friends across the disabled-nondisabled gulf generated through most school structures and by society in general. This was no "giver-receiver" experience for the students. The Teams blended into groups that, as one student said, "Got to know, learn and grow with each other."

It is apparent in the reflections of the PlayFair Team members that the theory behind PlayFair Teams works in practice. It is possible for students with and without disabilities to relate in equitable and mutually respectful manner toward the goal of teaching themselves and others that disability need not be the barrier that is too often built through existing school special education programs.

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SECONDARY STUDENT RESPONSE CATEGORIES TO THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A PLAYFAIR TEAM MEMBER

- **OVERALL IMPACT OF EXPERIENCE**
- **PERSONAL IMPACT**
- **MEETING NEW FRIENDS**
- **BECOMING A TEAM**
- **ACCEPTING ALL TEAM MEMBERS**
- **SIGNIFICANT LESSONS LEARNED**

Note: 1: An asterisk denotes a student with disability.
2. More information on PlayFair Teams may be accessed through the Marsha Forest Centre website.

OVERALL IMPACT OF EXPERIENCE

Erica *

- Because I love play fair a lot to me.
- Play fair made me feel happy. Because it makes me laugh.

Michelle

- Playfair has been an experience like no other. It was definitely nothing like I had expected. When I was first told about the nature of Playfair, my initial thought was that as the grade 12's, we would be leading the special ed students in developing a presentation. As I soon learned, the true learning experience was for me.
- With only about one month left in my high school career, it is a fantastic feeling knowing I will leave a changed person – a change for the better.

Rosemont *

- I hope to stay in the Playfair Team at Johnson again next year.

Alvaro

- The experience at Mary Ward School was encouraging and positive.

Gregory *

- I enjoyed it very much and felt good about getting involved myself.
- I enjoyed the whole experience and look forward to maybe doing it again next year.

Eleanor

- Despite the struggles and the grueling rehearsals, all in all I think we all had a blast.

Jennifer *

- I feel that taking part in this program helps me and others at the same time, and it makes me feel great.
- I want to continue with this program because it will help me and others deal with the problems we have.
(PlayFair Teams) opened my eyes a lot more. How important PlayFair Team is. Without PlayFair Team kids would not get a chance to have as close to normal life. Everyone needs Friends, and to have Relationships with teachers. On down to other kids without disabilities that is very important to all kids.

Monika

- Our lives have turned into the wonder of Play Fair. And we came to understanding that this wonder is not just about some script we were working on. This wonder has spread through our friendship and new experiences.

Daniel

- I joined the Playfair Team one year ago because I wanted to see what this group was all about and what I can do for them. At the time when I joined I wasn't thinking that this group would change me or give me any new experiences, or perspective. I thought only that I would join and do stuff and not receive anything in return – but I did.

Megan *

- By just sitting near me or putting a smile across a couple of faces taught me that these people care about us. I mean, that means way more than anything to us.

Sonia

- Things I have seen or have happened in my life made me believe in the playfair cause. I thought it would be amazing if we could break down all these barriers, make people approach things with open arms.

Crystal *

- At the end I think everybody realized that it wasn't just about a product, what we performed, but more about the process and how we got there. All the things we have learned from each other are so much more important than we expected.

PERSONAL IMPACT

Gregory *

- It felt good to do some of the things that the other students get to do.

Michelle

- I loved telling other teachers and students about how much fun I was having as a member of the Playfair team.

Eleanor

- Despite physical and mental disabilities, the special ed students are like any other teenagers. During this experience, we talked, played, laughed, and cried.
- I've learned that a little confidence in yourself goes a long way.
- The things I've learned about the process of a presentation and about myself are lessons that'll stay with me for life.

Megan *

- All my life, I was judged, put down and left out of things just because I am physically disabled, but, for once I'm not. I guess it's true. People really have no clue how powerful they really are.
- In play fair, it gave me, as well as the others, an opportunity to meet people around the school and get to know them, people that probably wouldn't give us the time of day otherwise. I have gotten to know a lot of kids and even made best friends of them.
- These specific people may not know this but they mean the world to me. None of them judge, criticize or make fun of me and, for once, I feel accepted and I'm no longer worrying about what others think of me or my friends.

Alvaro

- We have many great ideas and plans – we just need to put them into action. The fact that there are other schools out there working on the same issues and achieving successful results gives me motivation to continue.

Jennifer *

- That day at Mary Ward High school changed my whole way of thinking about people with other abilities. I did a complete 360 in life.

Monika

- To me, it has been one of the most enriching experiences in the whole life. I like finding meaning in everything I face, but being a part of the Play Fair was something absolutely distinctive.

- From an intimidated individual back then, I have turned into someone who can make a difference.
- I've discovered new people around me, and a new person within me. Now that I got to know how to make wonderful goals and ideas come true, I can say, from the depths of my heart that I've been blessed.

Sonia

- Is that possible? To me the answer to that question seemed grim but when we arrived at Mary Ward and saw all those student just as we are, working together, it changed my whole point of view. Because now I truly believe that with presentations as powerful and inspiring as the one I was blessed with being able to witness that day, anyone could become enlightened, and would understand the importance. As I do now.

Crystal *

- I think each of us learned to get to know each other as individuals rather than just judging the first thing we see.

Daniel

- When I saw and heard stories dealing with the acceptance of people with challenging needs, it made me realize that I could relate to them so much, because of things I had gone through in my own life.

MEETING NEW FRIENDS

Erica *

- I met new people, like everybody from other grades.

Michael

- What I learned while being part of the playfair team was how to be friends with everyone. The friendships I built was my favorite part of playfair.
- I want (to) show people that we care and we should be friends with everyone.

Michelle

- I'd discovered the joy of meeting new people.
- Life's greatest lessons are from the people we meet and the lifelong friends we make.

Crystal *

- During the eight months of Playfair I had a lot of fun with my peers writing our own script as well as developing new friendships. We learned to work together as a group but more importantly I think each of us learned to get to know each other as individuals rather than just judging the first thing we see.
- I think Playfair is a great way to make friends and see each other in a new light.

Alvaro

- The PlayFair Team was a group of caring, understanding students who spent time as friends and colleagues helping each other.

Eleanor

- PlayFair gave me opportunity to meet and get to know 12 different, amazing people, all of whom has taught me something.

Megan *

- In play fair, it gave me, as well as others, an opportunity to meet people around the school and get to know them, people that probably wouldn't give us the time of day otherwise. I have gotten to know a lot of kids and even made best friends with them.

Monika

- The answer came when I met my new friends, each of them full of potential I never realized. We were preparing the project together, as a group of people who initially didn't know much about each other. We laughed together. We cried together. We've spent hours talking about what we were doing and what we were going to do.

Rosemont *

- Play friar team. I had a go day at Mary ward school and was glad to be in the team and heart space (speaks) to heart (motto of the school).
- The kids are cool and my team is fun to be with.

Jennifer *

- Before I got involved with PlayFair Team I felt very alone like an outsider. I used my music to get me through (through) the days. I felt like a outsider looking in at the kids in the school. I felt like the kids looked at me like I was different and would not include me in anything or talk to me.
- After joining PlayFair Team I found myself with friends that did not label me with a disability. They oversaw (over-looked) it and (got) to know me as a normal kid.
- What a feeling. I still have kept some of these friends till today.

BECOMING A TEAM

Eleanor

- The process and steps that needed to be taken in order for our presentation to work was by no means easy, don't get me wrong we had our fun times.

Gregory *

- I and some of the other special education students began rehearsing our playfair performances with the help of a female teacher from outside the school. We enjoyed working together as our performances got better and better.

Alvaro

- Participating in the PlayFair Team at Johnson gave me the opportunity to meet other people who shared an interest in helping to improve the social situation for persons labeled with challenging needs and people left out or labeled as outcasts. We got to know, learn and grow with each other.

Monika

- The crown of the whole struggle was joining the Play Fair event. I knew exactly what it mean to feel "unfitting", even my reason might have been somewhat different than the ones held by my new friends. I really wanted to be a part of this team, to serve, to be useful. We all decided to write a real play about our school life. And truly, it was a wonderful idea.
- And perhaps the most important lesson of it all: the role my grade 12 friends and I were supposed to carry out was to serve, to encourage, to support and to maintain a caring leadership. But we ended up being encouraged, supported, thus served by others, and becoming leaders was only possible thanks to each other's care, trust, cooperation and willingness to share the talents.

Crystal*

- As a group, we not only saw each other's strengths and weaknesses but we also learned how to incorporate everybody's talents into one skit. We realized that we needed to accommodate and help each other and everything that we accomplished was not only the work of one person but the work of everybody in the group.

Sonia

- When we arrived at Mary Ward and saw all those students just as we are, working together, it changed my whole point of view.

ACCEPTING ALL TEAM MEMBERS

Michelle

- One of the greatest things about Playfair is not just reaching out to new people, it's feeling the impact on the lives of everyone involved. When the students recognized me in the hall and said hi, they would have a huge smile on their face. A smile can make a bad mood disappear.

Jennifer *

- Being a member of the PlayFair Team at Johnson helps me to make friends, because I feel accepted and a part of the group.

Megan *

- Their kindness, compassion, understanding, and the fact that they are always there for me and treat us like a normal person means the world to me and all the other kids in play fair. They respect us and care about us and don't put us down in any way. That's a really great thing to have.

Daniel

- Now that I am part of this team which means so much to me, I am going to spread this message of acceptance to the best of my abilities because we are who we are, and everyone should be accepted regardless of any differences.

Crystal *

- I personally feel that my group did an extraordinary job displaying how important acceptance is to everyone and how everybody, no matter what age or ability level, just wants to be accepted.
- I think by the end everybody realized how much impact it could have on someone by simply accepting them. The wall of isolation can be broken and this can make such a difference to a person's self-confidence and self image.

SIGNIFICANT LESSONS LEARNED

Michelle

- Despite physical and mental disabilities, the special ed students are like any other teenagers. During this experience, we talked, played, laughed, and cried.
- If there's anything worth learning, it definitely will not be found in any textbooks.

Jennifer *

- I feel that taking part in this program helps me and others at the same time, and it makes me feel great.

Eleanor

- The things I've learned about the process of a presentation and about myself are lessons that'll stay with me for life.
- I've learned that a little confidence in yourself can go a long way.

Monika

- It touched our lives with unbelievable strength, urging to make a change. Thanks to this experience, I have discovered a hidden part of myself as well.

Alvaro

- This feels like it can be the beginning of a great thing.

Megan *

- While during play fair, I learned a lot. I learned how to be more open with people; after all, people are always more than willing to talk as long as you give them the opportunity to. The most important and perhaps the hardest thing I learned was self confidence. I have to believe I can do something and know that I may have physical challenges but it doesn't mean I'm incapable of doing things, I can do anything I set my mind to.

Sonia

- When I first joined PlayFair the ideas the committee put forth to me were great. It showed a lot about the human condition here at Johnson, because everyone has this idea that high school students especially in a locale such as Rexdale have a total disregard for others, for matters of importance. But here was this group of people who thought they could make a difference by creating awareness – it was refreshing.
- The greatest feeling in the world is getting to know someone, and seeing them better their lives.

Daniel

- We shouldn't have to disguise our true selves for anyone. We are who we are.

Crystal *

- I think one of the most important things we discovered as a group was how much little things can matter and make a difference in someone's day.