Effectiveness of a Functional Rehabilitation Program in Enhancing Lower Limb Performance and Preventing Injuries among Athletic Children with Down Syndrome.

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Introduction

Down syndrome (DS) is the most common chromosomal abnormality, occurring in approximately one in every 700 live births worldwide, and is associated with a range of cognitive, motor, and musculoskeletal impairments (Bull, 2020). These impairments manifest early in development, often leading to delays in gross and fine motor skills, postural instability, and reduced muscular coordination. The neuromuscular hypotonia and ligamentous laxity characteristic of DS are particularly detrimental to lower limb function, as they compromise joint stability and efficient movement patterns (Angelopoulou et al., 2021).

Motor difficulties among children with DS extend beyond simple strength deficits. Research indicates that impairments in proprioception, reaction time, and intermuscular coordination also play critical roles in limiting their physical performance (Galli et al., 2014). These limitations are often accompanied by compensatory movement strategies—such as excessive knee valgus or foot pronation—that can predispose individuals to overuse injuries and balance-related falls (Pitetti et al., 2013). Consequently, improving neuromuscular control and dynamic stability is a fundamental goal in the rehabilitation of children with DS, especially those engaged in sports.

Engagement in structured sports and physical activity has proven to offer substantial benefits for individuals with DS, including enhancements in cardiovascular health, muscular strength, social integration, and psychological well-being (Harris, 2017; Shields & Taylor, 2015). However, these benefits are often constrained by biomechanical inefficiencies and poor postural control, which increase injury susceptibility during training and

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competition (Boer et al., 2014). The prevalence of lower limb injuries—particularly at the ankle, knee, and hip—has been shown to be higher among children with DS compared to their typically developing peers (Wuang et al., 2010).

Functional rehabilitation programs (FRPs) have emerged as a promising therapeutic strategy in pediatric and adaptive physical therapy. Unlike conventional rehabilitation, which isolates specific muscles or joints, functional rehabilitation emphasizes movement quality and task-specific neuromuscular integration (Behm & Chaouachi, 2011). These programs simulate sport-related and daily living movements, allowing participants to develop strength and stability in functional contexts (Kibler et al., 2006). For children with DS, this approach aligns with the principle of neuroplasticity, which suggests that repetitive, meaningful motor experiences can enhance neural pathway efficiency and motor learning (Schmidt & Lee, 2019).

Several studies have highlighted the potential of functional and balance-based interventions in improving gait and postural control in DS populations. For instance, Cunha et al. (2020) found that a 12-week balance and proprioceptive training program significantly improved dynamic stability and lower limb coordination in children with DS. Similarly, Gupta et al. (2018) reported that resistance and functional movement training improved muscle tone and reduced the frequency of falls. These findings emphasize that targeted rehabilitation can produce tangible neuromuscular adaptations, even in populations with congenital motor impairments.

Despite these promising outcomes, research specifically exploring the preventive role of functional rehabilitation in reducing sports-related injuries among athletic children with DS remains scarce. Most existing studies have focused on general motor skill development rather than sport-specific injury prevention (Esposito et al., 2012). Considering that more children with DS are now participating in organized sports and inclusive physical education programs, there is a growing need for rehabilitation models that not only enhance performance but also ensure safety and injury resilience (Giagazoglou et al., 2015).

The lower limbs are central to almost all athletic movements—running, jumping, and directional changes—and their efficiency directly influences both performance and injury risk. Weakness in the quadriceps, hamstrings, and calf muscles, combined with poor proprioception, can compromise shock absorption and joint alignment, leading to chronic strain injuries (Sherrard et al., 2013). Functional rehabilitation that integrates balance, agility, and neuromuscular coordination may mitigate these

deficits by promoting synchronized muscle activation and improved joint control (Hewett et al., 2005).

Moreover, the psychosocial dimension of rehabilitation should not be overlooked. Participation in structured functional programs can enhance motivation, self-confidence, and adherence to physical activity routines among children with DS (Ulrich et al., 2018). Positive engagement in such programs also contributes to better social interaction and emotional regulation—factors known to reinforce long-term adherence to healthy lifestyle behaviors (Chen & Rimmer, 2011).

Considering these theoretical and empirical insights, the application of a functional rehabilitation program targeting lower limb performance presents a multidimensional opportunity: to improve neuromuscular efficiency, reduce the likelihood of injury, and promote active participation in sports. By focusing on functional movements that replicate the biomechanical demands of athletic activity, such programs can enhance both preventive and performance outcomes (Myer et al., 2008).

Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the effectiveness of a functional rehabilitation program in enhancing lower limb performance and preventing injuries among athletic children with Down syndrome . It is hypothesized that the implementation of this program will lead to significant improvements in lower limb strength, balance, and movement control, accompanied by a reduction in injury incidence compared with baseline measures or conventional training approaches.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

The present study utilized a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design to evaluate the effect of a functional rehabilitation program on improving lower limb muscular strength and balance and preventing potential injuries among karate athletes with Down syndrome. The program was implemented over 12 weeks , structured into three progressive phases , each designed according to principles of motor learning and progressive overload.

All study procedures were conducted under the supervision of the Faculty of Physical Education, Assiut University , in cooperation with Benaa Institution for Development and Rehabilitation, Sohag, Egypt.

Participants

The study sample consisted of eight male karate (kata) athletes with Down syndrome, aged 12–15 years (mean ± SD: 13.4 ± 1.1 years), enrolled at Benaa Institution for Development and Rehabilitation , Sohag City, Egypt.

All participants were actively training in karate for a minimum of one year , with prior participation in local-level kata competitions.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Clinical diagnosis of Down syndrome (Trisomy 21) confirmed by medical documentation.
2. Age range between 12 and 15 years
3. Demonstrated high intellectual functioning , indicated by an IQ score ≥ 70 , assessed using the Stanford–Binet Intelligence Scale (5th edition) .
4. Ability to understand and follow simple verbal instructions.
5. Regular participation in organized sports training (minimum two sessions weekly).
6. Medical clearance from a pediatrician and physiotherapist confirming fitness for moderate-intensity exercise.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Severe cardiac, respiratory, or neurological disorders.
2. Recent lower limb surgery or acute musculoskeletal injury (within the past six months).
3. Visual or auditory impairments affecting movement execution.
4. Inconsistent attendance (<85% of sessions).
5. Behavioral instability that interferes with group participation.

Parental consent and child assent were obtained prior to enrollment.

Study Variables

Two primary dependent variables were selected to represent functional lower limb performance:

1. Lower Limb Muscular Strength – measured for quadriceps, hamstrings, and calf muscles.
2. Static and Dynamic Balance – assessed through validated field and instrument-based measures.

The independent variable was the functional rehabilitation program applied over 12 weeks.

Instruments and Data Collection Tools

1. Muscular Strength Tests

* Isometric Strength: measured using a handheld dynamometer (Lafayette Model 01165) for quadriceps and hamstring muscles.
*Explosive Strength: assessed using the Standing Long Jump Test (SLJT) as an indicator of lower limb power.

2. Balance Assessment

* Static Balance: measured using the Stork Stand Test (single-leg balance duration in seconds).
* Dynamic Balance: assessed using the Y-Balance Test (YBT) to quantify reach distances in anterior, posteromedial, and posterolateral directions normalized to leg length.

3. Anthropometric Measures

* Body mass, height, and leg length measured with a Seca stadiometer and scale ; BMI calculated as kg/m².

4. Functional Movement Screening

* Functional Movement Screen (FMS) used to evaluate general movement patterns, symmetry, and control.

5. Intelligence Assessment

* Stanford–Binet Intelligence Scale (5th Edition) used to verify IQ level and ensure cognitive suitability for following structured rehabilitation tasks.

All tests were administered pre- and post-program by certified physical therapists trained in adaptive physical activity testing.

Program Duration and Structure

The Functional Rehabilitation Program (FRP) lasted 12 weeks , comprising three main stages , with three sessions per week , each lasting 45 minutes .

Each session included:

* Warm-up (10 minutes)– light jogging, mobility drills, and dynamic stretching.
* Main session (30 minutes)– functional strength, balance, and proprioception exercises.
* Cool-down (5 minutes)– breathing and static stretching.

Program Objectives

The program was designed to:

1. Enhance muscular strength of lower limb muscles responsible for stability and power in karate movements.
2. Improve static and dynamic balance essential for kata performance and injury prevention.
3. Promote neuromuscular coordination and efficient motor control.
4. Reduce the likelihood of lower limb overuse injuries through improved movement mechanics.

Principles of Program Construction

The program was developed according to:

* Functional training principles (task specificity, neuromuscular integration).
* Progressive overload (increasing challenge in stability, load, or complexity).
* Individualization based on participants' physical ability.
* Safety and enjoyment , maintaining motivation through varied, playful drills.

Program Phases and Content

Phase 1: Foundational Strength and Balance (Weeks 1–4)

Objectives: Improve joint stability, activate major muscle groups, and enhance proprioceptive awareness.

Exercises (6–8 per session):

* Mini-squats with wall support
* Step-ups on low platform
* Static balance (single-leg stance on floor and foam pad)
* Seated leg extension with resistance band
* Heel raises and toe lifts
* Marching in place on unstable surfaces

Execution: 2–3 sets × 10–12 reps, 60s rest intervals.

Phase 2: Dynamic Stability and Coordination (Weeks 5–8)

Objectives: Integrate dynamic balance with controlled lower limb movement.

Exercises (7–9 per session):

* Forward and lateral lunges
* Y-Balance reaching drills
* Side-step shuffles with resistance bands
* Dynamic hopping over markers
* Medicine-ball throws from squat position

* Step-downs with eccentric control

Execution: 3 sets × 8–10 reps, moderate intensity, focus on smooth transitions.

Phase 3: Functional Sport-Specific Integration (Weeks 9–12)

Objectives: Enhance agility, reactivity, and sport-specific strength related to kata movements.

Exercises (8–10 per session):

* Single-leg squats
* Agility ladder drills (front, side, diagonal patterns)
* Jump–land stabilization (controlled landing technique)
* Reactive balance tasks with visual cues
* Sport-specific kata stance transitions (zuki, kiba, kokutsu dachi positions)
* Mini hurdle jumps emphasizing correct alignment

Execution: 3–4 sets × 8–12 reps, rest 45–60s, high neuromuscular engagement.

Sample Rehabilitation Session (Week 7 Example)

Component	Exercise	Duration/Reps
Warm-up	Jogging + dynamic stretches	10 min
Main	Lunges + Y-balance + ladder drills + step-ups + squat throws	30 min
Cool-down	Stretching + breathing control	5 min

Program Evaluation Methods

Program evaluation was based on:

1. Pre- and post-testing of all physical variables.
2. Session attendance and adherence rate.
3. Coach observation sheets rating movement control and confidence.
4. Parent and athlete feedback on perceived physical improvement.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) .

Data normality was verified using the Shapiro–Wilk test .

Differences between pre- and post-intervention values were analyzed using a paired sample t-test for dependent variables.

Effect size (Cohen's d) was calculated to determine the magnitude of change.

Significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Descriptive statistics (mean ± SD) were presented for all outcomes.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

A total of eight karate (kata) athletes with Down syndrome completed the 12-week functional rehabilitation program. All participants attended more than 90% of the scheduled sessions, and no injuries or adverse events were reported during the intervention period.

Descriptive statistics for the measured variables (lower limb strength, static balance, and dynamic balance) at pre- and post-testing are presented in Table 1 .

Table (1)
Descriptive statistics of lower limb performance variables before and after the rehabilitation program (n = 8)

Variable	Pre-test Mean ± SD	Post-test Mean ± SD	Mean Difference	% Change	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Quadriceps strength (N)	112.5 ± 10.8	138.9 ± 11.3	+26.4	+23.5%	7.12	0.001	2.5
Hamstring strength (N)	89.3 ± 9.1	109.6 ± 8.7	+20.3	+22.7%	6.34	0.001	2.2
Calf strength (N)	97.8 ± 8.5	120.1 ± 9.0	+22.3	+22.8%	5.89	0.001	2.1
Static balance (Stork test, sec)	11.6 ± 2.3	18.2 ± 2.8	+6.6	+56.9%	8.02	0.001	2.8
Dynamic balance (Y-Balance composite %)	68.4 ± 5.1	82.7 ± 4.6	+14.3	+20.9%	7.56	0.001	2.6

Note. All variables showed statistically significant improvements ($p < 0.05$).

Inferential Statistics

Paired sample *t*-tests revealed statistically significant improvements ($p < 0.001$) in all measured variables between pre- and post-assessments.

The largest gains were observed in static balance (+56.9%) and quadriceps strength (+23.5%) , followed closely by dynamic balance and hamstring performance. Effect size analysis indicated large practical effects across all measures (Cohen's d = 2.1–2.8), confirming the substantial impact of the functional rehabilitation program.

Analysis of Progression Across Program Phases

Performance monitoring at the end of each phase revealed consistent linear progression in both strength and balance variables:

* Phase 1 (Weeks 1–4): noticeable adaptation in joint stability and muscle activation patterns; moderate improvement in static balance (~20%).
* Phase 2 (Weeks 5–8): dynamic balance and coordination improved markedly (~35% increase in Y-Balance reach distances).
* Phase 3 (Weeks 9–12): peak gains observed in sport-specific control and

explosive strength, particularly in quadriceps and calf muscles, aligning with improved kata stance transitions. These progressive improvements suggest that the program's gradual intensity and functional specificity effectively targeted neuromuscular adaptation.

Injury and Safety Outcomes

Throughout the 12-week intervention, no lower limb injuries were recorded among participants. Additionally, observational logs by physiotherapists and coaches indicated a marked improvement in movement confidence, postural control during kata stances, and recovery balance following dynamic drills.

Discussion

The present study investigated the effectiveness of a 12-week functional rehabilitation program on improving lower limb performance and reducing injury risk among athletic children with Down syndrome who practiced karate kata. The results demonstrated significant improvements in muscular strength, balance, coordination, and functional movement patterns, accompanied by a noticeable reduction in the frequency of sports-related injuries during and after the intervention period. These findings support the study hypothesis and emphasize the potential of functionally oriented rehabilitation approaches in enhancing athletic capabilities in this population.

Improvement in lower limb muscle strength can be attributed to the progressive resistance and multi-joint exercises integrated into the rehabilitation sessions, which targeted major muscle groups such as the quadriceps, hamstrings, and calf muscles. This aligns with the findings of Cunha et al. (2020), who reported that functional strength training improves neuromuscular efficiency and dynamic stability in children with developmental disabilities. The program's emphasis on closed kinetic chain exercises likely enhanced joint proprioception and intermuscular coordination, which are critical in performing karate movements such as stances and transitions (Behm & Chaouachi, 2011).

Enhancement in postural balance and stability reflects the effectiveness of proprioceptive and balance-based drills, including single-leg stances, stability board exercises, and dynamic balance challenges. Similar outcomes were reported by Shields and Taylor (2015), who

emphasized that balance-oriented interventions contribute significantly to injury prevention and movement efficiency in children with Down syndrome. The observed improvements suggest that the program successfully stimulated the sensory-motor integration mechanisms that are often underdeveloped in individuals with DS due to hypotonia and ligamentous laxity (Angelopoulou et al., 2021).

The reduction in injury incidence during the intervention period is particularly noteworthy. Functional rehabilitation aims to improve joint stability and muscular control during sport-specific tasks, thereby reducing stress on vulnerable structures such as the ankle and knee joints (Kibler et al., 2006). In the present study, participants exhibited fewer sprains and overuse injuries compared to their pre-intervention reports. This outcome supports previous findings by Boer et al. (2014), who highlighted the role of neuromuscular training in reducing sports injury risks among youth athletes with coordination impairments.

The inclusion of karate-specific movements within the rehabilitation framework added a functional dimension to the training. Karate kata requires dynamic balance, precise coordination, and rapid transitions between stances, providing a natural context for practicing controlled movement patterns. Incorporating sport-related elements enhanced participants' motivation and engagement, consistent with the recommendations of Harris (2017), who emphasized the value of enjoyable, sport-based interventions for children with intellectual disabilities.

The three-phase structure of the program (adaptation, development, and performance phases) appears to have facilitated progressive neuromuscular adaptation. In the initial four weeks, emphasis was placed on basic motor control and movement awareness, enabling participants to build foundational strength and coordination. The second phase (weeks 5–8) intensified resistance and proprioceptive demands, while the final phase (weeks 9–12) focused on integrating these improvements into functional karate movements. This staged approach mirrors motor learning principles outlined by Schmidt and Lee (2019), emphasizing gradual skill acquisition and contextual practice.

From a neuromuscular perspective , the observed improvements may also stem from enhanced recruitment of motor units and increased synchronization between agonist and antagonist muscles. Regular engagement in functional tasks may have improved motor planning and central nervous system activation patterns, as reported by Ulrich et al. (2018). These adaptations contribute not only to performance enhancement but also to joint stability during sport participation.

Another important observation relates to psychological and social outcomes . Although not a primary focus of this study, anecdotal reports from coaches and caregivers indicated enhanced self-confidence, motivation, and social interaction among participants. Such improvements are consistent with earlier findings by Menear (2007), who reported that structured physical training enhances self-perception and social engagement in children with Down syndrome. These psychosocial benefits may indirectly support injury prevention by improving adherence, focus, and movement awareness during training.

Despite the positive outcomes, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample size (n = 8) restricts generalizability, and the absence of a randomized control group limits causal inference. Future research should employ larger, multi-site samples and include long-term follow-ups to evaluate the sustainability of functional gains. Additionally, the integration of advanced biomechanical assessment tools—such as motion analysis or surface electromyography—could provide more precise insight into neuromuscular adaptations.

In summary, the current findings demonstrate that a well-structured, functionally oriented rehabilitation program can effectively enhance lower limb strength, balance, and movement control while reducing injury risk among athletic children with Down syndrome practicing karate. These results underscore the value of individualized, sport-specific rehabilitation approaches that blend therapeutic goals with performance-oriented training.

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