



Adolescent Girls' Motivation to Engage in Various Physical Activity Environments

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Only 4% of Canadian adolescents aged 12 to 17 years meet current physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2014).

Summary

This article summarizes a qualitative study that explored psychosocial factors related to adolescent girls' motivation to engage in physical activity within the contexts of physical education, organized sport, and leisure time.

Furthermore, there is a tendency for PA rates to decline significantly as individuals progress through childhood into adolescence, with the steepest decline occurring between the ages of 13 and 18 years (Bélanger, Gray-Donald, O'Loughlin, Paradis & Hanley, 2009). Adolescent girls, in particular, have been identified as an at risk population for declining physical activity.

Given the tremendous social, physical, and developmental benefits associated with physical activity participation during adolescence (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Holt, 2008), identifying factors that might explain the low participation for adolescent girls is a health priority.

Using the Basic Needs Theory (BNT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as a framework, individuals have three basic psychological needs that, when fulfilled, will result in high levels of motivation to engage in a behaviour, i.e., physical activity. The three basic psychological needs are defined below:

- autonomy - sense of choice and freedom from external pressures
- competence - feelings of confidence, self-efficacy, and achievement
- relatedness - need to feel belongingness and connectedness

According to BNT, the satisfaction of these three needs results in genuine enjoyment, or intrinsic motivation, which is the most optimal level of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). There are several contexts, or environments, in which adolescents have the opportunity to engage in sufficient physical activity to meet the current guidelines.

The three main contexts are as follows:

- 1) Physical education - The goals of physical education are to prepare youth for lifelong engagement in physical activity and provide them with opportunities to be active while at school.
- 2) Organized sport - Physical activities that usually include competition, rules, and the development of specific skills.
- 3) Leisure time - Also known as active play, it is defined as any unorganized physical activity in which youth may engage during recess, lunch, after school, and on weekends.

Motivation to participate in each of these contexts declines for girls more so than boys. Therefore, it is important to explore young females' perceptions of factors that may help foster psychological need satisfaction in relation to physical activity and ultimately improve intrinsic motivation.

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Methods & Results

Interviews were conducted with 10 adolescent girls (aged 13 to 17 years) to explore their perceptions of psychological need satisfaction across the three physical activity contexts. An inductive content analysis was used to identify themes in the interviews. Multiple peer reviews were conducted in order to determine consistency of transcript interpretation and coding of themes.

Results are divided by physical activity context due to girls expressing different needs within each environment.

1. Physical Education

- preference for a set lesson plan in order to maximize time spent being active
- more variety of sports or games is needed to make class more exciting
- desire to work on skill development in small groups in order to improve ability before playing as one large group
- preference for girls-only gym classes due to perceived lack of opportunity or ability to engage in physical activity when there are boys present

2. Organized Sport

- disinterest in continuing sports that had previously been chosen for them by their parents
- appreciation for coaches soliciting feedback on what the team should work on during practice
- preference for fun team games to work on skill improvement rather than constant drills

3. Leisure Time

- friends are the biggest reason for engagement in physical activity during leisure time
- lack of time and other priorities such as schoolwork or chores were reported as preventing girls from engaging in physical activity during “free time”
- low perceived physical ability or knowledge of solo activities also contributes to avoidance of physical activity

Practical Implications & Conclusion

Based on this research, here are some recommended ways to increase girls' psychological need satisfaction in various physical activity contexts:

- increase the activity options available in physical education and emphasize skill development in a small group environment
- elicit feedback from girls on what they think is important to practice with their teammates
- increase cohesion between teammates by having them engage one another in fun practice drills
- encourage activity by modeling an active lifestyle
- avoid pressuring girls to continue activities if they express disinterest; instead, foster an autonomous environment such that girls perceive activity choices as their own

Adolescent girls are particularly at risk for low levels of physical activity. Therefore, engaging girls in discussions about what they want can help parents, teachers, coaches, physical activity coordinators, and others better understand what can be done to help girls be more physically active. 🌱

Key Terms

Adolescents: Individuals aged 13 to 18 years.

Physical activity contexts: The three main environments (physical education, organized sport, and leisure time) in which adolescents have the opportunity to meet current physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day.

Basic Needs Theory: A theory of motivation suggesting that equal fulfillment of three psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) will result in optimal motivation, functioning, and health.

About the Authors

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