

Adolescent girls' perceptions of physical activity: A focus group study

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Abstract

Low levels of physical activity among adolescent girls are a cause for concern. Examining girls' physical activity perceptions and motivations through in-depth qualitative research allows for greater understanding of the reasons behind their physical activity-related choices. Forty-seven girls aged 14 to 16 years participated in exploratory focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was carried out in which data were analysed inductively using a constant comparison method. The findings illustrate the extent to which adolescent girls' physical activity participation is affected by social influences and perceived societal norms. Furthermore, changing priorities throughout adolescence mean that physical activity is deprioritized, with many girls stating that they cannot be bothered to take part. Recommendations to increase participation include encouraging parental support, introducing peer mentoring schemes involving girls who enjoy and regularly participate in physical activity and providing activities for adolescent girls that are fun, informal in nature and involve participation with friends.

Key-words: adolescent girls • physical activity • qualitative

Introduction

Young people's participation in physical activity has been a topic of interest for many years. Although there are difficulties showing clear health-enhancing effects of physical activity in this age group (Riddoch, 1998), it is now widely acknowledged that a greater understanding of physical activity in youth is necessary (Biddle et al., 2004).

Research has shown that, prior to the ages of 11 and 12 years, the vast majority of children look forward to their school physical education (PE) classes or taking part in recreational physical activities. Data are highly consistent, however, in showing that young people's participation in physical activity declines across their teenage years. Although some studies have found this decline to be greater in males than females (Caspersen et al., 2000; Telama and Yang, 2000; Van Mechelen et al., 2000), while others report it to be particularly obvious in girls (Armstrong and Welsman,

1997; Broderson et al., 2007; Pratt et al., 1999), it seems to be the case that girls' activity levels are lower than boys' prior to the onset of adolescence and hence, even if the decline is steeper in boys, girls still engage in less physical activity than boys during and by the end of their adolescent years.

This decline in activity in youth is cause for concern. Evidence shows obesity in young people to be on the increase (Chinn and Rona, 2001; Fehily, 1999; Strauss and Pollack, 2001). Many youngsters have been shown to possess at least one modifiable coronary heart disease risk factor (Baranowski et al., 1992) and many have symptoms of psychological distress (Klint and Weiss, 1987). Added to this is the view that youth are becoming more sedentary as new technologies become more widely available, with national campaigns highlighting youth inactivity as a public health problem (British Heart Foundation, 2000).

In the UK current recommendations are that children and adolescents should achieve a total of at least 60 minutes of at least moderate intensity activity each day (Department of Health, 2004). Despite this, the 2002 Health Survey for England found that only about a half of girls aged 12–15 achieved at least 60 minutes of physical activity on all seven days before the survey, with around one in three achieving less than 30 minutes activity per day (Sproston and Primates, 2003). These findings indicate that it is important to understand more about adolescent girls' physical activity participation, and attitudes towards physical activity among this group.

A recent systematic review identified several variables that have been found to be associated with adolescent girls' physical activity participation (Biddle et al., 2005). However, many of these variables had been studied on only a handful of occasions, meaning that only tentative conclusions could be drawn. Furthermore, a general bias in this area towards North American research precludes firm conclusions being drawn regarding adolescent girls in the UK. The majority of the studies identified by the review were also cross-sectional in design, meaning that although we understand a variable to be associated with physical activity participation, we are unable to differentiate the factors that encourage the adoption of physical activity from those that help maintain or increase involvement, and those that cause involvement to decrease or even cease. Examining girls' motivations through in-depth qualitative research allows us to examine the reasons behind their behavioural choices, and therefore to understand better their motives for their physical activity-related decisions.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to start to build a comprehensive picture of physical activity as it relates to adolescent girls. An open-ended approach to the study was adopted to allow an in-depth understanding not only of factors perceived to relate to physical activity, but also of the reasons why these factors were felt to be influential in decisions over whether or not to participate. Participants representing a range of activity levels were included, so that differences in opinion according to activity level could be examined. A decision was also taken to focus on older adolescents, since research consistently shows increased age to be associated with lower levels of physical activity among young people (Biddle et al., 2005; Sallis et al., 2000).

Method

Participants

Focus group interviews were carried out with 47 girls aged 14 to 16 years at an upper school/community college in a village in the county of Leicestershire, UK. Of these girls, 13 were studying GCSE Physical Education (a nationally recognized public examination; the subject of PE is optional at this level as an examination subject and is separate from compulsory 'core' PE lessons) and were interviewed in separate groups to those who chose not to select PE as an examination subject. The girls were predominantly white European. Socioeconomic status was not measured but the school recruits students from a wide catchment area, including local towns and villages varying in socioeconomic status.

Procedure

Eight focus groups were conducted, each with five to seven participants. The participants were selected randomly in association with two of the college's PE teachers. They were told that the interviews would be tape-recorded but that any information they gave was confidential, and that they were free to leave the room at any time to return to their class. They were then asked to sign consent forms and the sessions then commenced. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes. The topics for discussion were derived primarily from the gaps in current knowledge identified by reviewing the literature. Since the focus groups were designed to be exploratory in their nature, however, the questions and subject areas were devised to be used for guidance only, and a strict order of questioning was not followed. The participants were also asked to self-report their physical activity levels, so that differences in opinion according to activity level could be examined. At the end of each discussion participants were asked if there was anything they would like to add or if there was anything we should have discussed but had not. All focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was granted and ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society were adhered to throughout.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis (Joffe and Yardley, 2004) was carried out in which the data were analysed inductively. First the transcripts were read and reread. Using an iterative process, meaningful quotes were then identified. A constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was implemented in which quotes were continually compared with one another. Quotes considered to represent the same meaning were clustered together and assigned a label, while quotes considered to represent a different concept were given a new label. All of the data were searched until all meaningful data had been identified, clustered and labelled. The resulting labels were then scrutinized and organized into themes, each theme comprising labels considered to be conceptually similar. Following the recommendation of Tesch (1990), the whole

process remained flexible, meaning that labels and themes could be modified and refined until the most 'reasonable' reconstruction of the data had been developed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Findings and discussion

Seven main themes were identified in which differences in opinion arose according to physical activity level. These were labelled 'Perceptions of femininity', 'Self-presentational concerns', 'Changing priorities', 'Lack of motivation versus appreciation of the benefits', 'The desired structure of physical activity', 'Parental support' and 'Enjoyment'. Each theme will now be discussed in more detail.

Perceptions of femininity

Many of the less active girls held very strong stereotypical views regarding what constituted feminine or unfeminine appearance and actions amongst themselves and their peers. Feminine girls, they stated, were more concerned with appearance and clothes than exercise or physical activity. These girls would not embrace the idea of being active and 'ruining' their appearances and, in instances where they were active, they would be reluctant to become overly involved and would be scared of the 'rough and tumble' of more physical activities. Less feminine girls were seen as being more active, less self-conscious about their appearance, while being active, muscular and interested in sports traditionally perceived as being masculine, such as rugby or football (soccer):

Well you don't want to play rugby or something coz you get all muddy.

I've got a mate that I tried getting into rugby and she was like 'oh I'll break a nail' and it was just like (*makes groaning noise*).

Many of the girls were reluctant to be active in case it negatively influenced their feminine images. In particular, they did not want to get sweaty during physical activity and were concerned with their appearances afterwards – many girls commented on their concerns regarding messy hair, ruined make-up and generally looking untidy. A common complaint regarding school activity was that showering facilities were inadequate and not enough time was allocated at the end of PE classes for the girls to tend to their appearances:

They don't give us time to get ready and there's no hairdryers or anything so . . . It's annoying coz you're all sweaty afterwards and you've got like the rest of the day to just be like, totally disgusting.

In my group, all the girls after they've been swimming, they're all moaning that their hair was going curly and they had no make-up on and all this stuff like that.

These findings echo those of previous studies. Cockerill and Hardy (1987) found similar physical activity-related differences between feminine and so-called 'unfeminine' girls, while a qualitative study of African American and Latino adolescent girls found concerns about hair and make-up and a dislike of sweating to act as barriers to being physically active (Taylor et al., 1999). More recently, Dwyer et al. (2006) reported that participants in their study felt that it was not possible to wear make-up to look good for others and be physically active at the same time. In our study, however, a difference arose between active and inactive girls whereby the more active girls were prepared to challenge these stereotypes and not be governed by the prescribed norms of how to behave. Many of these girls felt that it was possible to be both sporty and feminine at the same time, and challenged other people's stereotypes of them as less feminine just because they were active:

Coz I play rugby, it's supposedly a man's sport, I get called like 'manbeast' and things like that and you get that off all the boys . . . I'm not that bothered but I have seen girls that have got really bothered and self conscious about it and they've stopped playing rugby and it's like letting themselves down coz of other people . . . I used to be going dancing on a Saturday and playing rugby on a Sunday and everyone thought that was weird because I was doing a girly sport and a man's sport.

One possible explanation for this difference between the more and less active girls lies in the concept of androgyny, which suggests that it is possible to possess both masculine and feminine personality traits (Henderson et al., 1988). According to Woodhill and Samuels (2004),

. . . the androgynous person can best be seen as one who can engage freely in both feminine and masculine behaviours and as one who is equally capable of both feminine and masculine tasks and does not prefer one above the other. Androgynous people are sensitive to feminine and masculine cues in their social environment and can engage in whatever behaviour seems most effective in any given situation. Gender stereotyped people, on the other hand, may be seriously restricted in the range of behaviours available to them as they move from situation to situation throughout their daily activities. So androgynous people can competently perform tasks associated with either sex.

Support for this concept in relation to sport participation comes from Salminen (1990), who found that androgynous and masculine girls aged 10 to 16 years participated in sports traditionally seen as male-appropriate more often than feminine girls.

To promote physical activity to adolescent girls, those who were more active suggested that it may be useful to identify positive feminine role models in the media who were widely perceived to be 'attractive' as well as being physically active. Identification of such role models, they felt, might encourage less active girls to question their predefined ideas regarding femininity, thereby realizing that to be active would be acceptable for them:

Yeah but it's like, it's hard, but you know Julia Roberts? She had an interview and like look how perfect a figure she's got yeah? And she goes to the gym, like, nearly every day and like, you don't have to do weights or owt but just, oh yeah, she's perfect, she's just, and she's had to work at being like that.

Recent research has identified that wanting to look like popular media figures is associated with higher levels of physical activity (Taveras et al., 2004). As the authors of this research point out, however, it is vital if role models are going to be promoted in this way that media industries take great care to promote realistic and healthy norms of physical activity and body image instead of unattainable ideals that could prove counter-productive to youngsters' motivation and well-being. Indeed, Berry and Howe (2004) found that appearance-based exercise advertising had negative effects on non-exercisers' attitudes towards exercise, while a meta-analysis conducted by Groesz et al. (2002) also revealed that media representations of thin women can negatively influence body image. For this reason, Field et al. (1999) recommend the media should refrain from relying on models who are severely underweight, and should instead print more articles on the benefits of physical activity. Clearly a balance must be sought whereby potential role models emphasize the benefits of being physically active in positive terms aside from an unachievable thin ideal.

Self-presentational concerns

Self-presentation has been defined as the ways in which people attempt to control the impressions they make on others (Leary and Kowalski, 1995). Self-presentational concerns may be associated with either *increased* or *decreased* exercise behaviour (Leary, 1992). For some people exercise may be prompted by self-presentational concerns such as the desire for a fit and lean physique while for others, self-presentational concerns about being perceived as overweight, uncoordinated or unfit may deter exercise participation (Hausenblas et al., 2004). Self-presentation can be influential in decisions over whether or not to be physically active through social physique anxiety (Hart et al., 1989), that is, the fear that one's body will be negatively evaluated, or through concerns that one will be unable to make the desired impression owing to a lack of skills or strength required to perform the task at hand (Leary, 1992). Consistent with these definitions, self-presentational issues in the present study were seen to be influential through both appearance-related and ability-related concerns.

Appearance-related self-presentational concerns operated in various ways for the less active girls in this study. First, many of the girls spoke of feeling self-conscious and comparing themselves to others they considered to be 'skinnier' or more beautiful than themselves, both when changing for physical activity and when wearing PE kit. Being seen in a swimming costume was extremely threatening to these girls, especially when boys were present, and many avoided swimming altogether so as not to have to cope with such an unpleasant experience. Those who did swim had devised

various strategies to overcome their discomfort, such as wearing a t-shirt over their swimming costume or running and jumping into the pool as quickly as possible:

I'm alright once I'm in the water, it's just like walking out with just your swimming costume on when you've got a whole row of people sitting watching . . .

I just run and jump in straight away don't I? With a towel wrapped round me.

Many of the girls also felt concern over their weight, and this acted as both a motivator and a barrier to physical activity. While many of the more active girls spoke of their overweight friends being too embarrassed to be active, being active as a means of avoiding becoming overweight was mentioned many times throughout the conversations. Additionally, some girls did speak of being spurred on to become more active if they noticed they had gained some weight. It was clear that the issue of weight was very important to these girls; as one girl stated, 'nobody wants to be fat', and for those who did perceive themselves to be overweight, hiding away so as not to draw attention to themselves seemed to be their best option.

Appearance-related self-presentational concerns among adolescent girls are well documented elsewhere. For example, participants in Sleaf and Wormald's (2001) study reported feeling embarrassed when showering in front of others, and worrying about the size of their legs when wearing shorts. James (2000) found that Australian girls felt discomfort when they thought they were being watched by other people at the swimming pool, and when wearing only their swimming costumes in front of boys. Many compared their bodies unfavourably with others, and many had developed coping strategies to make their swimming experiences more bearable. Similarly, Sabiston et al. (2007) reported that participants in their study employed coping strategies such as staying at home when others went to the beach or pool, wearing oversized or baggy clothing, and wrapping a towel around themselves when at the beach. Discomfort in front of boys when wearing only swimming costumes or short games skirts was also reported by Flintoff and Scraton (2001). Some of the girls in this study had successfully negotiated with their PE teachers to be able to wear leggings or track-suit trousers instead of short games skirts, while those who still wore compulsory PE kit expressed a preference for single-sex PE where the boys could not see their bodies.

Concerns over weight are also well documented in the literature, with Zabinski et al. (2003) reporting that overweight girls reported higher body-related barriers to physical activity than did non-overweight girls. Ingledew and Sullivan (2002) found female adolescents to be more motivated to be active by weight management concerns than males, especially if they perceived themselves to be overweight and if they wanted to be slimmer. Similarly, in a prospective survey of American adolescent females, Saxena et al. (2002) found trying to lose weight to be significantly associated with regular vigorous exercise.

Again in the present study, those who enjoyed physical activity expressed less appearance-related concerns than those who did not. These girls spoke of 'being

prepared to give it a go' and overcoming their concerns, and seemed to be happy to get on with the task at hand, regardless of how they thought they looked:

Well I think it's fun, I don't really, I'm not really bothered about what people think. I think some people are a bit bothered about how they look in front of some people but I don't really mind that much about what people think of me so that's why I probably like it.

I don't think it matters because you just feel self-conscious in the beginning and then after you start enjoying it you don't care.

Differences also arose between the more and less active girls in that those who were less active frequently expressed concerns regarding a lack of ability, many of them claiming to worry about what others thought of them when engaged in activities they considered themselves to be less competent at: 'Yeah coz you get embarrassed and you think everyone's looking at you and laughing about what you've just done and stuff.'

Several of the less active girls also made normative references to other, more able, girls, believing that greater ability would make for a lower level of self-consciousness: 'You enjoy it more if you are better at it coz you don't feel as self conscious then about everyone watching you when you're doing bad.' Again these concerns were not felt by the more active girls, who appeared to be more prepared to just 'give it a go', and seemed to enjoy themselves in most activities regardless of their ability level.

Changing priorities

Biscomb et al. (2000) identified among their participants 'teenage reasons' to not participate in physical activity. These included going out more, spending more time with friends and spending Saturday afternoon in town. Similarly, Dwyer et al. (2006) reported that both friends and boyfriends could influence the amount of time spent in physical activity, with friends often pressuring participants to spend time with them instead of choosing to play sports. In our study, all of the girls spoke of the increasing importance of their social lives as they moved through their teenage years. Spending time with friends and boyfriends, watching films, going shopping and going out in the evenings were all activities that the girls were becoming more involved in. Differences arose between the more and less active girls, however, in terms of how they dealt with this increased social activity and how sport and physical activity now fitted into their lives. The less active girls tended not to consider physical activity and there was a general feeling that, for these girls at least, being physically active did not fit in with what teenage girls do and thus contradicted their teenage female identity. The more active girls, on the other hand, still made time to be active and ensured that this remained a priority. This did not mean that the active girls made no time to follow the more social pursuits, and indeed many of them complained of the pressures of fitting both physical activity and socializing into their lives:

. . . and sometimes your friends, coz they're not always as sporty as you they just don't want to do it so you just like, do what they want to do . . . Yeah coz sometimes you do want to do sport but there's a film you want to watch or something and your friend wants to watch the film rather than doing sport so you have to watch the film.

It's a bit like that with my boyfriend as well isn't it? . . . He's like 'oh don't go training tonight, come round mine' . . . and you're like 'no, I've gotta, I wanna go training'. As much as you wanna see your boyfriend, you've got, 'hang on, which is gonna be for life?' You know what I mean? . . . With a boyfriend you don't know if it's gonna be for life or not do you?

These active girls, however, were simply not prepared to sacrifice the sports and activities that they enjoyed so much simply because it was expected that they would now participate more in other activities. Of course, this may have simply reflected individual differences and preferences. Indeed, both active and inactive girls spoke of how some people might prefer to do other things, such as playing the piano or painting. It was clear, however, that while many of the girls were starting to question the place of sport and physical activity in their lives now, those who remained active did so simply because it was what they had always done. It may be the case, therefore, that the personal importance attached to physical activity upon entering the adolescent years is a determining factor in whether girls will continue to be active or will, instead, choose to conform to the more common norms attached to being a teenage girl whereby physical activity is not considered to be important.

Lack of motivation versus appreciation of the benefits

While certain benefits of being physically active were outlined by the more active girls, those who were less active spoke instead of a lack of motivation and a feeling of physical activity not being for them. The active girls highlighted the positive feelings that arose from personal achievement and improvement, and many also discussed how participation in certain activities had led to an increase in their day-to-day confidence. Some also stated that they found physical activity to be relaxing after a hard day. Finally, these more active girls spoke of the social benefits of being active and how pursuing their chosen interests allowed them to mix with like-minded individuals. None of these benefits were identified by the less active girls. Instead, these girls highlighted several reasons for not being physically active. These reasons included not enjoying participation, a perception of not being good at physical activity and simply feeling that 'it's not for me':

I sometimes think I should do more but I don't really do anything because I don't like it . . . I probably would, if I did enjoy it I would take up more things out of school but . . . I just don't, I just don't like exercise . . . It just doesn't really appeal to me, it's just never . . . it's being bothered and I'm a pretty lazy person

so . . . I don't know, they'd have to force me quite a bit . . . so . . . I just don't like it because it's not me.

Some of the girls reported often being too tired to be physically active. For the most part, however, it seemed that they simply could not be bothered:

I always wish I was better at things like that but I can never be bothered to start doing stuff.

I have done coz I always think 'oh I'll do this and I'll get fit' and then I just don't do it. I just can't be bothered really.

These feelings of a lack of motivation were expressed as common barriers to physical activity by girls in a recent American study (Robbins et al., 2003). Saxena et al. (2002) also found self-reported laziness to be a common reason for not exercising amongst American adolescent females not getting regular exercise.

It is interesting to note that very few girls at all identified health benefits related to being physically active. The main benefit identified was that being active could help with weight management, although it is most likely that for these girls weight management was considered more from an aesthetic than a health point of view. A small handful also spoke of having a healthy heart, a feeling of psychological well-being and benefits later in life. Aside from these few benefits, however, no other health benefits were mentioned and the general impression was that being active to improve one's health was not something that these girls felt to be important. Sleaf and Wormald (2001) noted that, while there was a great appreciation of benefits such as improved appearance, weight loss and feeling good, there was little concern for health problems such as heart disease, osteoporosis or loss of mobility. Biddle et al. (1998) also concluded that young women are much more interested in the short-term benefits of being active, such as weight loss, fitness and a sense of well-being, than the long-term health benefits. A small number of cross-sectional surveys, however, have identified positive links between physical activity involvement and a perception of health and fitness benefits associated with this involvement (McGuire et al., 2002; Viira and Raudsepp, 2000; Weinberg et al., 2000).

The desired structure of physical activity

While the more intrinsically motivated girls were content to carry on their sports and physical activity regardless of the environment around them, if the less active girls were to be persuaded to be active, there were certain conditions that had to be met. Most importantly, it was crucial that they had their friends around them. Not only did their friends provide comfort in times of insecurity, but they also helped to make the activity itself more enjoyable. Indeed, several of the girls spoke of how much more fun physical activity was when their friends were with them, and how boring it was to participate alone:

It makes it loads more fun if you do it with your mates, so you can have a laugh with them and do exercise at the same time.

Oh I wouldn't be able to exercise without mates, it's so boring.

In addition, several girls pointed out that their friends would encourage them to keep going if a sport or activity was becoming tough. It was generally acknowledged that the closer the friend the better, but in the absence of a friend, the knowledge that other girls of a similar age would be participating was often enough to make these girls feel comfortable. The thought of being active without friends or peers, however, was extremely threatening to these girls and many simply would not entertain the idea of being active in such an environment:

Yeah I wouldn't want to go on my own I don't think. I'd run around trying to find someone to come with me.

I don't know, I just wouldn't feel as good without someone there that you know? You're like by yourself and you don't know anybody, you're just watching in case you get something wrong or make a mistake and like, you don't know anyone and just . . . that.

The importance of friends to adolescent girls' physical activity participation has been well documented. Flintoff and Scraton (2001) found that participation for many young women was dependent on having either same-sex friends or mothers to go with. Biscomb et al. (2000) reported that, if a friend did drop out, this could threaten the 'stability and commitment of the individual's participation', a finding replicated more recently by Dwyer et al. (2006). Participants in Taylor et al.'s (1999) study reported spending most of their free time with friends, with their friends' attitudes and behaviours having a great influence on whether or not they chose to exercise.

The second factor that the less active girls identified as being crucial to their participation was that any physical activity should be fun, informal and unstructured in its nature, a finding in line with that of Petlichkof (1992), who reported fun to be a key reason for youth participation in physical activity. The girls did not want to work too hard and wanted to feel that any physical activity they were doing was purely for enjoyment's sake. They were generally not concerned with whether physical activity was good for them and certainly did not care for the repetitive nature of fitness-enhancing activities. For them the ideal activity simply involved having fun with their friends, and if they happened to be increasing their fitness at the same time, then that was an incidental side effect of what they were doing:

Kind of knowing that you're exercising but not putting hard work into it . . . But not stuff like having to jog on the spot for like, half an hour. When it's like star jump, star jump, it's boring.

If you get into a game, say a basketball game, if you get into it and you're having fun then that's great coz you don't want to stop. I always feel really fit after I've had a basketball game.

Girls in Sleep and Wormald's (2001) study were also reported to dislike activities involving exertion and effort. Many were reported to dread PE lessons owing to feelings of being pushed too hard and made to do activities they found difficult. Based on his findings, Fairclough (2003) proposed that engaging students in team games may be beneficial as the enjoyment they experience during this type of activity may be great enough to detract from the unpleasant feelings associated with higher levels of exertion.

Parental support

The role of parents in adolescent girls' physical activity motivation and participation has been widely researched, and evidence suggests that parents of active females initiate more physical activity involvement than parents of inactive females (Robertson-Wilson et al., 2003). Consistent with data from a recent systematic review of correlates of adolescent girls' physical activity participation (Biddle et al., 2005), it was noted in the present study that more active girls received more parental encouragement than their less active counterparts, with many parents involving their daughters in physical activity from a young age. By the time these girls reached their teenage years, therefore, being active was more habitual and so not something that they needed to necessarily question:

My mum sort of like told me to start doing gymnastics when I was little, and dancing, I used to do rock climbing as well, when I was like 10, but now I just like doing the dancing.

My mum got me into dancing coz she used to like it when she was young so I started when I was quite young.

Although some of the less active girls spoke of their parents trying unsuccessfully to encourage them to be more active, most stated that their parents really made very little effort at all and just left them to their own devices: 'My mum always wants me to do more but she never actually does anything about it, she just says that I should do more.'

It seemed difficult to establish whether there was any relationship between parents' own activity levels and that of their daughter a finding that is again consistent with data from the recent systematic review (Biddle et al., 2005). Some of the active girls spoke of their parents being active with them, and how this helped with their motivation:

My dad'll take me out running and stuff . . . My mum's more interested in my dancing and my dad's just interested in me keeping fit . . . So yeah, she pushes me with my dancing but then my dad's like, he looks at it on the other side . . . Yeah, he's like 'go on, go round the block a couple of times' . . . Yeah coz my dad takes me out training every night and if he didn't take me training I wouldn't have the motivation to do it myself coz when you're on your own it's just not as good.

Others stated that their parents were inactive. It also tended to be the case that the majority of parents of the inactive girls were inactive themselves. Future research should examine further the contributions to girls' activity levels of both parental encouragement and parents' own activity levels, as well as identifying any differences that may exist between the role of the mother and that of the father.

Enjoyment

Although enjoyment has been mentioned in relation to several other influential factors, its importance is such that it merits a separate discussion. Enjoyment emerged as a common theme running throughout the discussions and seemed to be the one single factor that independently influenced how active these girls chose to be. Level of enjoyment of a given activity was identified as the major difference between those who chose to do it or not. The more active girls often stated that enjoyment was their main reason for pursuing a sporting or active interest, and these girls spoke of how those who did not enjoy physical activity were simply not going to do it:

I just don't think they enjoy it so they just don't do it . . . coz you can't really force them into doing sport if they're not going to enjoy it coz it's just a waste of time for the teachers and for them.

This finding is echoed in research into children's participation in competitive sport which suggests that the degree to which children enjoy sport is almost always found to be one of their primary reasons for participating or dropping out (Gill et al., 1983; Gould et al., 1982, 1985). More recently, Dishman et al. (2005) carried out a randomized controlled trial that linked increased enjoyment with increased physical activity among adolescent girls, and a systematic review found there to be a strong association between enjoyment and adolescent girls' physical activity participation (Biddle et al., 2005).

It seemed to be the case that those who were more active got a 'buzz' out of doing it and it was this 'buzz' that made it enjoyable and made them want to continue participating. It was unclear from these discussions, however, what it was about the sport or physical activity that caused this 'buzz' to come about. As stated by Kimiecik and Harris (1996), although we know that enjoyment is very important to youngsters' sport participation, we do not know what they mean when they talk about enjoying or not enjoying sports and exercise. Future research should examine this area further with a view to understanding further the nature of enjoyment for adolescent girls. Although enjoyment has traditionally remained an elusive concept for sport and exercise psychologists (Biddle, 1999), two approaches to enjoyment may prove promising in this area.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) argued that motivation seemed highest when the difficulty of the task was matched by the individual's personal abilities and skills. This matching led to a state of 'flow', or supreme enjoyment and engagement in the task. A mismatch can either lead to boredom, where ability is high but challenge is low, or anxiety, where challenge is high but ability is low. A fruitful line of enquiry might

well be to investigate the differences in adolescent girls' perceived difficulty and ability according to activity level. If a mismatch was found amongst less active girls between their abilities and the difficulty of the task, research could establish what steps might be taken to attempt to achieve a balance to make sport and physical activity more enjoyable.

Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1986) studied 9–14-year-old American male youth sport participants and proposed a preliminary model of sport enjoyment based on the two continua of intrinsic–extrinsic and achievement–non-achievement. Predictors of enjoyment in the intrinsic achievement quadrant refer to personal perceptions of mastery and competence: in the intrinsic non-achievement quadrant to physical movement sensations and excitement; in the extrinsic achievement quadrant predictors refer to perceptions of competence derived from others, for example, social approval; in the extrinsic non-achievement quadrant they refer to non-performance-related factors, such as affiliation (Biddle and Mutrie, 2001). Again, research could examine how adolescent girls differ according to activity level in terms of their intrinsic–extrinsic and achievement–non-achievement continua with a view to determining if physical activity should be promoted differently to different subgroups of girls. This should be linked to contemporary approaches in motivation, such as self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2002), and its inclusion of intrinsic motivation and satisfaction of psychological needs (Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2007).

Summary and conclusions

This study highlights that many of the issues identified by adolescent girls in relation to their physical activity participation stem from social and social psychological influences. Many girls have rigid notions of femininity and are unwilling to look or act in such a way as to undermine their femininity. Their acceptance of the prescribed norms that seem to exist in today's society relating to the 'thin ideal' or 'body beautiful' means that they feel embarrassed putting themselves 'on show' during sport or physical activity and do not like others to see them lest they do not measure up to the ideal body. Furthermore, their changing priorities upon entering their adolescent years mean that the sports and activities that once might have been considered to be fun and enjoyable are now abandoned in favour of pursuits deemed more suitable to those who are becoming young women. These problems are consolidated by the fact that by their own admission many girls simply cannot be bothered to take part in physical activity of any kind. Promoting an active lifestyle to many adolescent girls is clearly going to be an uphill struggle, and may require careful consideration of adolescent girls' activity preferences with a view to reassessing choices that are made available to them.

Evidence from the more active girls, however, does suggest that at least some of the obstacles to being physically active are not insurmountable. The suggestion of showing healthy role models in the media who do incorporate physical activity into their lives is certainly worthy of follow-up. It may also be beneficial for peer mentoring type schemes to be implemented whereby girls who consider themselves to be

both active and feminine, and who successfully deal with pressure to take part in other activities, act as role models for less active girls, and discuss with them the benefits they gain from being physically active.

Issues regarding parental support can also be addressed. The evidence from this study suggests that parental support, and possibly parents' own activity levels, influence adolescent girls' activity levels. One pilot study in the USA, encouraging daughters and mothers to exercise together, has been found to be effective in both home- and community-based settings (Ransdell et al., 2003). Given the current emphasis on leading a healthy lifestyle across all ages, it would seem sensible to encourage family units to take physical activity together, and to educate parents in the importance of encouraging their daughters to be active from an early age.

Regarding the structure of physical activity, the strong consensus was that activity must be fun, informal in nature and must involve participation with friends. Providers of sport and physical activity should be made aware of the importance of these factors to help to create opportunities for adolescent girls to participate in physical activity in an enjoyable and non-threatening environment. Provision of the previously mentioned peer mentoring scheme, whereby active girls encourage those who are less confident in their abilities, might prove helpful in this area.

A final note of caution must be sounded regarding the topic of enjoyment. All of the girls, regardless of activity level, acknowledged that participation is unlikely unless a given activity is enjoyable. While this may seem like an obvious finding, unless a greater understanding of this concept as it relates to adolescent girls can be gained, it seems likely that increasing physical activity amongst those who do not enjoy it will remain difficult.

Although the focus groups provided a great deal of rich data, the study was not without its limitations. The focus group situation was clearly threatening for a minority of girls, with some of the quieter girls struggling to cope with the group dynamics and make themselves heard. For these girls an interview with perhaps only one close friend present may have been more appropriate. Further problems could potentially exist when taking participants for each group from the same class. Although the intention was that by being surrounded by friends the girls would feel more comfortable to talk openly, it may equally have been the case that group dynamics led to the girls voicing a peer group opinion, as opposed to that which could truly be considered their own. Those with alternative viewpoints may have also been reluctant to voice them for fear of being mocked or teased by friends.

It is also acknowledged that asking the participants to self-report their physical activity levels does not constitute a valid measure. General physical activity levels were estimated based on the girls' verbal reports of their hobbies and interests, and how active they considered themselves to be. It is not intended that assessing physical activity in this way will provide an accurate picture of activity levels of the girls involved in the study. It is hoped, however, that the participants' self-reported levels will provide a general indication of their activity levels, thus enabling the viewpoints of girls of a range of activity levels to be represented.

As with any qualitative research of this nature, it is acknowledged that the findings are specific to the participants in this study and cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the population as a whole. In as much as the girls in this study seemed typical of many girls in British society today, however, it is reasonable to expect that their collective opinions were generally representative of those of other adolescent girls in a similar situation. These findings can, therefore, be reasonably expected to be informative and useful both in guiding future research and in informing physical activity providers of the requirements of adolescent girls.

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Résumé

Les perceptions des adolescentes de l'activité physique : une étude de groupe de ciblée

Le manque de pratique d'activité physique chez les adolescentes est aujourd'hui devenu inquiétant. Une étude qualitative fine de la manière dont les adolescentes perçoivent l'activité physique et de leurs motivations permet d'identifier et de comprendre les raisons inhérentes à ces choix. Quarante-sept filles âgées de 14 à 16 ans ont participé, dans le cadre de cette étude, à discussions collectives. L'analyse thématique des *verbatim* a été réalisée à partir d'une méthode de comparaison inductive. Les résultats montrent que la pratique d'une activité physique par les adolescentes subit l'influence sociale et est étroitement liée à leur perception des normes de la société. En outre, les modifications de priorités liées à l'adolescence conduisent à un désintérêt pour l'activité physique, beaucoup de filles déclarant tout simplement qu'elles ne souhaitent pas pratiquer. Afin d'augmenter l'engagement des filles dans les activités physiques, nous préconisons, le soutien parental, le mentoring par des pairs – c'est-à-dire des adolescentes aimant les activités physiques et pratiquant régulièrement – et la promotion d'activités attractives pour les adolescentes – c'est-à-dire amusantes, peu codifiées, en milieu naturel et impliquant une pratique avec des ami(e)s.

Resumen

Percepciones de la actividad física en las adolescentes: Estudio de un grupo de discusión

Los bajos niveles de actividad física entre las adolescentes son una causa de preocupación. Analizar las percepciones y las motivaciones de la actividad física de las chicas a través de una investigación cualitativa en profundidad nos permitirá comprender mejor las razones que subyacen a las opciones que toman en relación con su actividad física. En los debates de los grupos de discusión exploratorios participaron cuarenta y siete chicas de entre 14 y 16 años. Se llevó a cabo un análisis temático en el cual se analizaron los datos inductivamente, usando un método de comparación constante. Los resultados ilustran hasta qué punto la participación en actividades físicas de las chicas se ven afectadas por influencias sociales y

normas sociales percibidas. Además, el cambio de prioridades a lo largo de la adolescencia provoca que la actividad física llegue a desvalorizarse, y muchas chicas declaran que no les apetece tomar parte en ella. Entre las recomendaciones destinadas a incrementar la participación estarían el fomento del apoyo de los padres, la introducción de planes de tutelaje entre iguales, involucrando a chicas que disfrutaban de las actividades físicas y participan regularmente en ellas, y la oferta de actividades divertidas e informales que impliquen la participación de los amigos.

Zusammenfassung

Die Wahrnehmung der körperlichen Aktivität bei jugendlichen Mädchen: Eine Zielgruppenanalyse

Das geringe Niveau von körperlicher Aktivität bei jugendlichen Mädchen ist ein Grund zur Besorgnis. Die Wahrnehmung der eigenen Bewegungsaktivität und die Motivationen von Mädchen wurden in eingehenden qualitativen Studien untersucht und ermöglichen so ein größeres Verständnis für die Gründe ihrer Wahl der Aktivitäten. An den untersuchten Gruppendiskussionen haben siebenundvierzig Mädchen im Alter von 14 bis 16 Jahren teilgenommen. Es wurde eine thematische Analyse durchgeführt, bei der die Daten durch die Benutzung einer konstanten Vergleichsmethode induktiv analysiert wurden.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen das Ausmaß, in dem die Teilnahme heranwachsender Mädchen an Sport und Bewegung durch soziale Einflüsse und wahrgenommene gesellschaftliche Normen beeinträchtigt wird.

Weiterhin bedeutet die während der Adoleszenz auftretende Verschiebung der Prioritäten, dass sie körperliche Aktivität weniger bevorzugen. Viele Mädchen gaben an, dass sie sich nicht dazu überwinden können, teilzunehmen. Empfehlungen, um die Teilnahme zu erhöhen, beinhalten unter anderem auch die Stärkung der elterlichen Unterstützung sowie die Vorstellung von Mentorenprogrammen mit Gleichaltrigen, in denen Mädchen mit einbezogen werden, die körperliche Bewegung genießen und regelmäßig daran teilnehmen. Darüber hinaus wird angeregt, den heranwachsenden Mädchen zwanglose Aktivitäten anzubieten, die Spaß machen, und an denen sie mit ihren Freunden zusammen teilnehmen können.

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