

## **The influence of the social environment on youth physical activity**

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### **Abstract**

Research has highlighted the decline of physical activity during the last twenty years and identified adolescence as the age of the greatest decline. Despite the fact that the benefits of physical activity have been proven, many children and youth do not meet the current guidelines for sufficient physical activity. There are however various factors that influence physical activity levels amongst the youth and researchers have highlighted the links between environmental conditions and health-related behaviours such as physical inactivity. Therefore an increased emphasis exists on the role of the social and physical environment as key modifiable determinants of physical activity. The aim of this study is thus to explore the social environmental factors that influence the physical activity participation among female school-going adolescents in the Western Cape. Focus group discussions were held with 55 school-going adolescents in a selected community in the Western Cape. The discussions yielded four (4) themes: safety; financial constraints, competing responsibilities and parental support. These themes highlighted that physical activity participation was influenced by the social, economic and physical environments that these adolescents live in. Opportunities to be physically active in an enjoyable and comfortable environment are undoubtedly essential for all girls. Therefore appropriate activity interventions taking into consideration issues related to social support, safety and cost-effectiveness of activities are more likely to effectively engage and sustain participation in physical activity.

**Keywords:** Physical activity, youth, social environment.

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### **Introduction**

Sedentary behaviour has been recognized as a major public health problem worldwide and is associated with increased risk of diabetes mellitus, high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and a wide range of other chronic diseases of lifestyle (Tucker, Irwin, Gilliland, Larsen & Hess, 2009; McNeil, Kreuter & Subramanian, 2006). Risk factors associated with chronic diseases of lifestyle, such as physical inactivity, are known to establish themselves during childhood

and adolescence and continue into adulthood, placing the adult at risk of the disease (Tergerson & King, 2002). Research has highlighted the decline of physical activity during the last twenty years and identified adolescence as the age of the greatest decline (Haerens, De Bourdeneaudhuij, Maes, Cordon & Deforeche, 2007). The low levels of physical activity among children and adolescents have been documented in most parts of the world (Frantz, 2006; Al-Hazzaa, 2002). The picture of low physical activity levels in developed countries is similar in developing countries and inactivity as a major factor for childhood obesity has been found true in Africa (World Health Organization, 2003).

A physically inactive lifestyle places individuals at risk for premature decline in health plus early onset and progression of chronic illnesses. Participation in physical activity has substantial benefits for the health and wellbeing of individuals and populations. Although the general population is becoming increasingly aware of the positive links between physical activity and health, this knowledge is not reflected in the physical activity participation rates of many groups (Kahn et al., 2008). Guidelines suggested by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States state that adolescents and children should accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity on most, if not all the days of the week (Butcher, Sallis, Mayer & Woodruff, 2008).

There are however various factors that influence physical activity levels among youth and researchers have highlighted the links between environmental conditions and health-related behaviours such as physical inactivity (McNeill, Kreuter & Subramanian, 2006). Li, Fisher, Brownson and Bosworth (2005) are of the opinion that behaviour is fundamentally shaped by individuals' social environment due to the fact that most of the activities take place within the confines of families, communities and neighbourhoods. Therefore the next step in the research on physical activity or inactivity should be to pay more attention to the social environmental factors. Researchers have stated that physical activity research has tended to focus on individual-level factors and advising individuals to become more physically active without taking into consideration environmental resources and opportunities for engaging in physical activity, is unlikely to produce behaviour change (McNeill et al., 2006). Therefore an increase in emphasis exists on the role of the social and physical environment as key modifiable determinants of physical activity. The aim of this study is thus to explore the social environmental factors that influence the physical activity participation among school-going adolescents in the Western Cape.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Setting*

The present study locates itself in the Strand, Western Cape, South Africa for various reasons. All the learners from the schools come from the community, in which the schools are situated, thus enabling the researcher to investigate the contextual factors affecting physical activity. Another compelling reason for choosing this particular research setting is that it has a good distribution of different ethnic groupings living and schooling in the same environment.

### *Sample*

Permission and ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Permission was further obtained from the Western Cape Education Department, South Africa to invite the female learners enrolled at the schools to participate in the study. Subsequently, permission was then obtained from the principals and the parent-teacher associations at the respective high schools. The principals of the schools took the ethical responsibility of informing parents of the learners beforehand through the parent-teacher-associations. Parent-consent forms and learner-consent forms were distributed at the parent-teacher-association meetings at the schools. Learners returned signed parent-consent and learner consent forms to their teachers who in turn submitted them to the researcher. The final sampling frame thus consisted of those black female learners who returned the signed parent and learner consent forms.

Focus group discussions were conducted to explore and examine the socially constructed views of adolescent learners on their physical activity behaviours. Female learners spend 8 hours per day at school in classes that are mixed. That is, classrooms are not homogenous nor are they formed along predetermined socio- and or demographic grouping variables. Thus the present study incorporated focus groups that were heterogeneous (in terms of race, age, school grades and socio-demographic characteristics). To this end participants were allocated randomly to focus groups within their grade level. In an attempt to minimize disruption in the academic programme, it was decided to randomly select two classes from every school in every stratum or grade. Five focus group discussions were conducted with 55 adolescent girls. The sessions lasted approximately one hour. The moderators guided the discussion to permit and encourage full participation from all the girls. The focus groups were concluded when each learner said they could not think of anything else to add. Their responses were recorded, audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim.

### *Data analysis*

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The model of Tesch as quoted and recommended by Creswell (2003) was used to guide data analysis. All of the transcripts were carefully read through; in order to get a sense of the whole. Emerging ideas were then recorded. One transcript was then chosen for careful scrutiny and emerging thoughts about the particular transcript was then recorded. This process of individual scrutiny was followed until all transcripts were done. Emerging topics were clustered together and arranged into major topics, unique topics and left over topics. This list of topics was then compared with the data. The data were then abbreviated and coded, and the topics reduced to categories. A final decision was then made on these topics, codes and categories. Data belonging to a single category were collated in one place and a preliminary analysis performed.

An independent researcher was asked to read through the transcripts and generate themes independently to ensure trustworthiness. The developed themes from both the researchers and the independent researcher's were compared. No major differences were identified when the two lists of developed themes were compared. Finally the researchers focused on searching the most relevant explanations for the data and the linkage between the categories. Several steps were considered to build credibility: prolonged engagement and persistent observation; member checks by giving feedback of the data to participants so that they could comment on accuracy of the recordings; responses were transcribed verbatim and independent researchers were asked to read through the transcripts and generate the themes.

### **Results**

The mean age of the girls was 15.8 years (ranged between 15 and 18 years). All the girls were fully capable of participating in physical activity. Four consistent themes emerged:

- Safety
- Financial constraints
- Competing responsibilities
- Parental support

#### **Theme 1: Safety**

Participants in the focus group discussions highlighted issues related to the safety aspects in public areas such as parks and fields where they can participate in physical activities:

*"It is not always safe to use the fields".*

*"At the park there is no one to supervise....".*

Some of the issues highlighted were related to unsavoury elements hanging around the public places and fears for personal safety were expressed below:

*"In the park there are many glass and other objects that can be used as weapons.*

*Also many skollies<sup>1</sup> around".*

*"From the time the park was established, about ten children have been hurt there...".*

Other issues were specifically related to girls' participation in physical activities and their safety as illustrated below:

*"Safety is a big issue, our clothes are stolen, boys are vatterig<sup>2</sup>, and they go into girls' showers to look".*

### **Theme 2: Financial constraints**

It became clear from the discussions that even though some participants had the desire to participate in physical activities or organised sport, financial constraints kept them from it as illustrated below:

*"...I wanted to belong to this club to do sport and they asked for a lot of money, so my mother said no, it was too much for her".*

*"Money is a problem, equipment and sports gear is too expensive".*

Furthermore, despite the fact that some activities are offered at school and assumed to offer less financial constraints, participants highlighted that even at school, this was experienced as a barrier to physical activity as seen below:

*"At school you need money to take part in any physical activity, because you need money to buy gear that is needed for that particular sport".*

### **Theme 3: Competing responsibilities**

Difficulties to engage in physical activities because of other responsibilities at school or related to their family lives were highlighted by the participants. Some of these sentiments are described below:

*"We attend extramural computer classes after school".*

*"I work late shifts"*

*"Other activities take priority over physical activity such as house hold chores".*

#### **Theme 4: Parental support**

Participants of the focus group discussions express their desire for the support of their parents with regards to physical activity as illustrated below:

*“Our parents should be informed about the importance of children to take part in sport”.*

*“Our parents do not play an active role in our lives”.*

The influence of parents intersecting with cultural values was also expressed by some of the participants, as shown below:

*“Our parents do not want us to take part due to society and cultures”* (Muslim girls).

#### **Discussion**

The main aim of this study was to explore how and if the social environment of youth have an influence on their participation in physical activity. Based on the findings from the focus group discussions it was clear that physical activity participation was influenced by the social, economic and physical environments that youth live in. Factors in the social environment that influenced physical activity in this group were diverse and included issues of safety, environment, parental support, and lack of practical and material resources.

One of the factors that played a major role in the participation in physical activity of these adolescents was the fact that they felt unsafe in their environment. McNeill et al. (2006) raised the question of if we should focus on places or people when examining the health of individuals. They further raised the question whether “place” has an independent effect on health and or health choices. This study highlighted that more attention should be placed on “place” or the environment/neighbourhood characteristics when examining health behaviours such as physical activity. Research has shown the importance of accessible and safe facilities such as parks and centres in neighbourhoods in the area of physical activity participation (Tucker et al. 2009; Frank et al., 2007; Kerr, Frank, Sallis & Chapman, 2007). Moreover researchers have stated that personal safety is an important correlate of physical activity (McCormack, Rock, Toohey & Hignell, 2010). This study further highlights the importance of youth to have access to suitable recreational facilities in their neighbourhoods that appealed to parents and youth with regards to its location and perceived safety. Tucker et al. (2007) pointed out that in addition to the youth not being keen to visit areas where they feel unsafe to engage in physical activity, parents might also not allow their children to use such facilities as they can play an influential role in their choices.

This study highlighted participants' desire for more parental involvement in their choices with regards to physical activity. Other researchers have indeed shown that the involvement of parents is important in the promotion of physical activity for adolescence and youth (Figaji & Phillips, 2010; Khan et al., 2008). Furthermore, parents' attitudes towards and beliefs about physical activity will influence their children's levels of participation in physical activity. Research has consistently showed that the relationship between physical activity and support from family and friends is a positive association (Ståhl et al., 2001). Moreover it has been shown that support for physical activity is even more influential for women and girls. For parents and family to be more supportive of adolescents with regards to physical activity, it appears that they must be better informed regarding the benefits of physical activity and sport participation. Ståhl et al. (2001) suggested that strategies to promote increased participation in physical activity should focus more on making activity more "socially acceptable" in a wide range of settings. This is therefore an area that we must pay attention to when promoting physical activity amongst the youth.

Several studies have shown that those living in socio-economically disadvantaged environments are more likely to be affected by physical inactivity (Van Lenthe & Mackenbach, 2005). This study also highlighted that despite the desire to be physically active, financial constraints and competing responsibilities such as working after hours, are interfering. This is similar to the findings of Ecob and Macintyre (2000) that those in poorer socioeconomic neighbourhoods have poorer exercise and physical activity patterns as opposed to those in more advantaged neighbourhoods. These findings might be a pointer to interventions that address the socioeconomic environment of neighbourhoods. Researchers have however cautioned that these types of interventions must also take cognisance of individual psychosocial factors such as self-efficacy and attitudes (Van Lenthe et al., 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Research on the physical activity habits of the youth from marginalized communities must not be seen as simply filling a gap, rather as contributing new perspectives that can enhance our understanding of their overall health and youth development. Opportunities to be physically active in an enjoyable and comfortable environment are undoubtedly essential for all girls. Therefore appropriate activity interventions taking into consideration issues related to social support, safety and cost-effectiveness of activities are more likely to effectively engage and sustain participation in physical activity. A commitment to improving the health habits of youth is an important investment in the short and long-term status of our communities.



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### *Influence of social environment on youth physical activity 271*

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