There are many factors that triggered our interest in exploring the experiences of mothers who play team sport. For instance, mothers tend to report less physical activity than women of a similar age without children (Brown, Brown, Miller & Hansen, 2001; Bell & Lee, 2005; Pereira et al., 2007).

In addition, several studies have examined mothers' participation in exercise and found that mothers face many barriers to exercising (Brown et al., 2001; Lewis & Ridge, 2005; Miller & Brown, 2005; Dixon, 2009).

Some common barriers include:

- lack of time or a busy child's schedule;
- cost of participating in exercise and the cost of childcare; and
- feeling that it is not acceptable for them to take time away from their families to exercise (Brown et al., 2001; Lewis & Ridge, 2005; Miller & Brown, 2005; Dixon, 2009).

Sport is a form of physical activity and may provide a different experience for mothers than participating in physical activity at the gym or in their home.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore mothers' experiences related to team sport participation. The study was designed to identify how mothers overcome some of the common barriers to physical activity, and to identify benefits that may be realized through participation in sports activities.

For example, in addition to numerous health benefits, Lewis and Ridge (2005) found that active mothers said active time for themselves was beneficial to their mental health and improved their ability to parent. Participants in that study also identified other benefits from exercise, including connecting with other women, improved mood, confidence, better body image, and stress relief.

Research Methods

For our study, nine volunteers participated in two individual interviews, held three months apart. Volunteers were mothers aged 35 years and older, from two soccer teams.

Each volunteer mom had to have at least one child between six and twelve years old. The children's age range was chosen, in part, because previous exercise research has focused on mothers with children under age five and there is a lack of research examining mothers who have older children (Brown et al., 2001; Miller & Brown, 2005).
The interviews were analyzed to identify themes according to Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009). Four main themes were identified:

- positive team experiences
- emotions
- strategies for overcoming time constraints
- role modeling/encouraging others

**Summary of Findings**

Here is a brief summary of findings related to each theme.

**Positive team experiences:** The mothers emphasized that having social interactions combined with physical activity was important. Here is how one mother of two described playing soccer:

“... it’s like you kill two birds with one stone ... I think as I’ve gotten older and have less and less time to just go out on a girl’s night out or socialize with friends, with this kind of thing [soccer], you do two things at once ... ‘cause you get the exercise and the socialization. So, it kind of makes you more efficient with your time.”

**Emotions:** The mothers experienced a range of emotions before, throughout, and after a game — including anxiety, pride, and enjoyment. The mothers who were newer to the sport felt more of the nervous emotions, such as concern about letting their team down. However, once the mothers were playing in the game, those negative emotions disappeared and they could enjoy themselves.

Being able to experience positive emotions during sports activities is another way for mothers to enjoy physical activity in their lives.

**Strategies for overcoming time constraints:** An important finding is that these mothers develop strategies to overcome time constraints when the activity is important to them. Strategies included having strong spousal support, organizational strategies, and making soccer a priority.

**Role modeling/encouraging others:** Being an active role model was deemed important by the mothers because it encouraged their families to be more active together. The mothers also liked that their children got to see them play a sport and be active. They hope that their children will learn that they can continue being active as an adult.

Many of the mothers also said that just by being more active and talking about the benefits with others, they had inspired or encouraged some of their friends to be more active in sports or other activities.

**Conclusion**

The promotion of physical activity through team sport participation may be one strategy to encourage people to be active. Partly based on our findings, it seems that sport participation may be a great outlet for encouraging more mothers to be active, in fun and different ways.

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**About the Author**

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