

research update



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In Their Shoes: What Girls Think About Physical Activity

As teens juggle the transition to high school and all the pressures that come with it, being physically active sometimes takes a back seat to other priorities. This is especially true for girls. However, physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up.

When it comes to remaining active, we know that social support from friends and parents as well as access to a variety of activities are important pieces of the puzzle. But we don't know a lot about what girls have to say about being active. Do they enjoy it? Is it fun for them? What would make it easier for them to be more active?

These are some of the questions we asked in this research. We wanted to understand what it's like to be in girls' shoes. If we know more about how they think and feel about being active, we can make sure we're doing as much as possible to make physical activity fun and easy for them.

WHAT WE DID

We interviewed eight girls in a Grade 6 class (ages 10 and 11) and asked them to share their thoughts and feelings about physical activity. Questions we asked them included:

- What did they like to do after school and on weekends?
- What were their favourite and least favourite memories of being active?
- What made it easy for them to be active? What made it hard?

The lead researcher spent two months doing a variety of activities with the class so that the girls could get to know her and feel comfortable talking to her. Then, the researcher interviewed each girl twice.

WHAT THE GIRLS SAID

The results tell us that both social influences and neighbourhood features play an important role in girls' physical activity.

The results showed five themes that captured what physical activity was like for these girls:

- People are key
- It's different for girls
- Physical activity lets girls shine
- Taking care of myself, inside and out
- Spaces and places

People are Key

Not surprisingly, friends, parents and teachers had a big impact on the girls' physical activity experiences.

Friends were important, as the girls said they liked to be active with people they weren't competitive with and who shared similar skills and interests.

Parents and teachers played an important role in making it easy for girls to do activities. For example, parents helped by driving the girls to lessons. Teachers helped by making sure the girls had choices they liked.

It's Different for Girls

On the other hand, the girls said that some adults made it harder for them to be active. They thought some teachers and other adults believed boys were better at sports than

girls, which meant girls didn't get as many opportunities as boys to play sports or assume leadership roles in physical activity settings.

Physical Activity Lets Girls Shine

Overall the girls said they liked being physically active, but having the opportunity to do physical activities they enjoyed was important. Some of the girls liked competitive sports and others didn't. All the girls said they liked dancing.

The girls enjoyed practising and getting better at activities and demonstrating their skills to people around them. For some girls, being good at a particular physical activity such as dancing or hockey made them feel special.

Some said they were so busy with organized lessons that they didn't have enough time to play and do other things that they liked. When they did have free time, many of the girls did active things with their friends.

Taking Care of Myself, Inside and Out

For many girls, engaging in activities such as yoga, dance and running helped them deal with stressful days and made them feel "calm inside."

The girls believed that physical activity was important for being physically healthy. They also thought they had to be skinny to be healthy, although this is not the case. Even though they were only 10 or 11 years old, they reported great pressure to be thin.

Spaces and Places

Having fun places to play was also important. Most of the girls walked to school every day and described parks and green spaces in their neighbourhoods where they could go play. They also said they liked to have interesting places to walk to.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOU

When working or dealing with girls, keep the following things in mind:

- Promote physical activity as something that's fun to do.
- Don't focus on physical appearance outcomes, and let girls know that health is not defined by body size. While physical activity is an important part of health, being skinny is not. People of a variety of weights and body shapes can be healthy.
- Avoid assumptions about boys' and girls' abilities and about what kinds of activities are right for boys and girls. Promote a wide range of activities for both.
- Free time is important. Kids need time to just be kids and do activities of their choice.
- When possible, make physical activity a part of other activities that girls like to do.

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