Children's Participation in Physical Activity: Are We Having Fun Yet?

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In recent years a tremendous amount of interest has developed toward understanding physical fitness of youth and its relation to health. For example, the June 1992 issue of Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport contained a feature section titled, "Are American Children and Youth Fit?" The lead article by Corbin and Pangrazi (3) challenged the current thinking that children today are unfit and that fitness levels are declining. Instead, the authors presented data demonstrating that using criterion-referenced health standards rather than norm-referenced standards results in different conclusions about youth fitness than originally conceptualized. Specifically, they said there is little empirical evidence that children and youth are less fit today than in previous decades. However, Blair (2) argued that approximately 20% of children are probably at risk because of low fitness and that educators should make more vigorous efforts to help these children become more active.

Freedson and Rowland (5) offered an alternative view, contending that perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the importance of physical fitness (and fitness testing) and that more attention should be given to increasing regular physical activity in children and youth. A physically active lifestyle, they argued, is likely to lead to positive health outcomes throughout childhood and adulthood. They cited data which indicates that children's habitual physical activity levels are low and, more important, that these levels decline dramatically from childhood through adolescence. These data parallel the sport psychology research on attrition from youth sport programs—that high participation frequencies in youth are followed by plummeting rates in adolescence, especially among females (11, 14). Freedson and Rowland concluded, "This possible age-related decline in physical activity level among youth in this country should be investigated, as this trend has important implications for how and when intervention programs to modify physical activity behavior are instituted" (p. 134).

This statement by Freedson and Rowland (5) alludes to the need for a motivational perspective regarding children's participation in physical activity. That is, why do some children maintain and improve their physical activity levels while others lose interest and quit? Moreover, the majority of papers addressing the need to keep children and youth physically active refer to the importance of

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having fun in activity or exercise programs—that children must have enjoyable experiences as an integral part of their involvement in order to sustain continued physical activity (e.g., 5, 7, 8, 9). In fact, Rowland and Freedson (8) strongly called for developing a lifestyle of regular physical activity in children and youth in order to maximize long-term health benefits. Doing this, they argued, means “turning children on” to physical activity by making it enjoyable so that they keep coming back because of their intrinsic motivation to be involved in physical activity.

This synopsis of recent dialogue about children’s physical fitness and activity suggests that providing enjoyable experiences and enhancing intrinsic motivation are strategies to increase activity levels in youth, improving their attitude about the value of exercise and ultimately the long-term health outcomes. But what factors will make physical activity fun for children and youth? Everybody says that children need to have enjoyable experiences, but what exactly do children find enjoyable about activity and how do we promote these factors? To date, children’s exercise and fitness have been addressed primarily as a public health concern, but rarely has a motivational perspective been applied. More specifically, what social-environmental, psychological, and individual difference factors enhance children’s interest and participation in physical activity? What specific ingredients should go into motivating children and youth to maintain and improve their physical activity levels?

The literature in pediatric sport psychology provides a strong framework for addressing questions of physical activity involvement from a motivational perspective. For example, the research on motivation to participate in sport programs consistently points to issues of competence, social relationships, fitness, and fun as major reasons affecting motivation and attrition (11, 12). Research on sources of positive affect (e.g., enjoyment) in physical activity settings indicates that perceived mastery of skills, being with and making friends, positive team interactions, support from parents and coaches, and receiving external rewards all contribute to feeling good (10). Similarly, sources of negative affect (e.g., anxiety) include perceived pressure from parents and coaches, negative interactions with teammates, perceptions of low ability, fear of failure, and fear of negative evaluations from significant others (6). Finally, a rich research base on correlates of perceived physical competence indicates that skill development, positive modeling and feedback from significant others such as parents and coaches, positive affective responses following mastery attempts, and perceptions of internal control all contribute to increased feelings of competence in the physical domain (13).

We can confidently conclude from these four major areas of sport psychology research that mastery of skills, perceptions of competence, supportive social influences, and positive affect are significant contributors to children’s motivation to initiate and sustain participation in physical activity and sport. Moreover, physiological aspects such as level of activity exertion, developmental characteristics such as cognitive and physical maturity, sociocultural factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity, and environmental influences such as the motivational climate (i.e., a focus on mastery or outcome) must also be considered in a comprehensive approach toward children’s motivation to participate in physical activity (1, 4). Each article in this special issue addresses one or more of these factors and their impact on activity levels in children and adolescents.
The first three papers focus on how parents influence their children's activity behaviors. Brustad examines how parental attitudes and behaviors in the form of modeling, importance placed on physical activity, enjoyment of exercise, and encouragement affect children's perceptions of competence and attraction toward physical activity. His results indicated that perceived competence was the strongest predictor of attraction toward physical activity, but parental enjoyment and encouragement also influenced attraction through its effects on perceived competence. McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw, and Maldonado compare children's reported motivations for participating in youth soccer with perceptions of motivations reported by their parents. Children and parents both emphasized reasons for participation such as skill mastery, affiliation, fitness, and fun, with children reporting significantly greater motivation on these reasons than parents. Finally, Duda and Hom explore the relationship between achievement goal orientations of children and their parents. Specifically, they found a significant relationship between children's level of task orientation (a focus on the mastery of skills) and perceptions of their parents' level of task orientation. Similarly, children's ego orientation (a focus on comparing favorably to others) was significantly related to perceptions of their parents' ego orientation level. The findings from these three studies suggest that parents influence their children's involvement in physical activity and sport through demonstrated behaviors (e.g., encouragement), communication of enjoyment, and an emphasis on achievement goal orientations.

The next three papers focus on the construct of perceived physical competence, either as a predictor of other variables (e.g., self-esteem) or of the sources by which children and youth come to judge how competent they are. Petlichkoff compares high school sport participants who were classified according to playing status (starters, primary substitutes, secondary substitutes) on perceived competence, achievement goal orientations, and satisfaction at pre- and postseason. Findings revealed that perceived competence was the strongest discriminating variable of the three groups; those who played more and had opportunities to learn, improve, and demonstrate skills (i.e., starters, primary substitutes) were consistently higher on perceived competence than were secondary substitutes (i.e., the benchwarmers). Ebbeck and Stuart focus on the development of self-esteem in young players and examine the influence of perceived competence and the importance (both individual and team) placed on being good in football. Perceived competence emerged as the most salient predictor of self-esteem, with individual importance placed on being good in football contributing significantly as well. For their part, Horn, Glenn, and Wentzell pose the question, If perceived competence is such an important factor in motivation to participate, how do children and adolescents judge how competent they are in the physical domain? Horn et al. extended previous research, conducted with children, to teenagers 14 through 18 who were participating in a variety of sports. Sources of information used to judge physical competence varied by age (i.e., younger vs. older adolescents) as well as by gender, illuminating both cognitive and physical developmental as well as sociocultural influences in the motivational process.

The last two papers emphasize the importance of affective experiences, both positive and negative, as predictors of motivation in physical activity settings. Scanlan, Carpenter, Lobel, and Simons examined sources of enjoyment among children and adolescents from a diverse range of race, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. They found that effort and mastery, team interactions and support, and
positive coach support and satisfaction were the most important predictors of enjoyment for this sample of youth. Gould, Wilson, Tuffey, and Lochbaum interviewed adolescents regarding sources and consequences of psychological stress in competitive sport. The good news was that youth generally do not experience high levels of psychological stress in sports, and that these levels are similar to other evaluative activities in which children participate such as public speaking or exams. The bad news is that some children are experiencing high levels of sport related anxiety and stress in certain situations. Interviewees indicated they want positive and constructive responses from parents and coaches when they make skill errors, do not want to be overloaded with information, and do not want to have their concentration broken during participation.

In response to the question “Are we having fun yet?” the papers in this special issue shed light on the factors that should enhance children’s enjoyment of physical activity and subsequently their motivation to continue being involved. To date, the motivational perspective has rarely been addressed in papers debating the importance of physical activity and fitness in children. Yet it is only by considering the myriad of social-psychological factors influencing the child and adolescent—self-perceptions, significant others’ influences, developmental characteristics, sociocultural and environmental factors, and mastery experiences—along with physiological influences and outcomes, that we can hope to inspire youngsters to adopt a positive attitude toward the value of exercise and ultimately a physically active and healthy lifestyle across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

References


