Physical Activity Engagement in Young People with Down Syndrome: Investigating Parental Beliefs


**SUMMARY:** Physical activity may serve as a helpful avenue to promote physical and emotional well-being in individuals with Down syndrome. This study, conducted in Italy, sought to explore parents' perspectives of children (7-27 years) with Down syndrome engagement in physical activity. Findings revealed when physical activity was available and targeted to specific needs, parents saw improvements in their child's physical and emotional health.

**KEY FINDINGS:**
- Parents indicated team sports helped their child build social skills and develop a positive self-image.
- A child's regular physical activity was dependent upon family involvement (i.e., bringing child to sport, role modeling) and community resources (i.e., specialty equipment, gyms).
- Parents shared concerns about children's physical (i.e., gross motor impairment) and mental health (i.e., cognitive ability) as these limited youth's ability to engage in sports.
- A lack of Adapted Physical Activity (APA) programs and insufficiently trained coaches were the greatest barrier to physical activity engagement for children with special needs.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:**
Military professionals could:
- Collaborate with other professionals in the field about ways to build community resources (e.g., transportation) for military families of children with special needs
- Create additional opportunities that are targeted specifically to children of service members with special needs that allow them to participate in physical activity

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:**
Programs could:
- Tailor physical activities for children of military members with special needs to reduce their elevated risk of physical and emotional health problems
- Engage Service members and their children with Down syndrome in events, such as Special Olympics to increase social skills and facilitate a healthy lifestyle

**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:**
Policies could:
- Continue to support programs that are non-competitive and address the needs of children with intellectual and cognitive disabilities
- Promote regular participation in physical activity and healthy eating by families and children with special needs

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METHODS

- Parents were recruited from gyms and non-profit organizations that supported families of children with Down syndrome.
- Semi-structured interviews that lasted 25 minutes were conducted with parents to gain further understanding of children’s medical and personal history and engagement in physical activity.
- Parent’s perspectives of barriers and resources for children’s participation in physical activity were analyzed and put into themes based on the frequency of the content described.

PARTICIPANTS

- Seven mothers and six fathers (N=13 families) of children (n=9 boys, n=4 girls) with Down syndrome participated in this study.
- Parents’ average age was 52 years, while children’s ages ranged from 7-27 years.
- All children had a moderate intellectual disability and attended school with non-disabled children; most children were receiving therapy, such as speech or music therapy.

LIMITATIONS

- Interviews with parents were short in length, lasting only 25 minutes, thus the design of interviews may have limited breadth of parents’ perspectives and study findings.
- The sample only included children with Down syndrome; conclusions from this study may be difficult to generalize to all children with special needs.
- Interpretations based on the findings are limited due to only assessing parents’ concerns of their child’s level of physical activity; children’s coaches or teachers may have had different perspectives.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Further explore the lived experiences of families of children with various special needs; allowing parents to share more freely about challenges and successes
- Examine additional factors that may impact regular participation in physical activity among children with disabilities
- Develop and test evidence-based programs aimed to increase physical activity among families of children with special needs, such as the activities and the Adapted Physical Activity (APA) programs provide

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