

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

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

Alesi, M., & Pepi, A. (2015). Physical activity engagement in young people with Down syndrome: Investigating parental beliefs. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 30(1), 71-83. doi:10.1111/jar.12220

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

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



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

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>