

The Research File

Summary from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute and ParticipACTION

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Family Physical Activity Influences

It seems to be a common assumption that the dynamics and circumstances of the family impact the physical activity of its members, but what are the mechanisms at play? Which influences are positive and which are negative? Very little research has focused on family influences, but two recent studies help to shed some light. An examination of the correlates of physical activity in children and youth has found that parents have a role to play in modeling and supporting physical activity in their children. In addition, a recent study has found that being a parent is related to lower levels of physical activity involvement, when compared to non-parents. Parents are thus faced with the charge of modeling and supporting their children's physical activity at a time in their lives when they may perceive a higher level of barriers to their own activity. Parents' own physical activity, its influence on that of their children, and the activity levels of the children them-



selves are all concerns for public health practitioners. A clear understanding of the physical activity barriers and supports for both of these groups, and the interaction between them, is important for physical activity planning.

Important role of parents

A recent literature review examining correlates of physical activity in children and youth categorized the findings from 51 relevant studies into five groups: demographic and biological variables; psychological, cognitive, and emotional variables; behavioural attributes and skills; social and cultural variables; and physical environment variables. Among the studies examining social and cultural variables and children's activity, eight examined correlations with parental activity and seven examined the correlations with parental support.

A further eight studies examined associations with parental activity with the physical activity of adolescents and 15 examined the associations with family support with this age group. Findings for children included:

- a positive influence of parental physical activity on that of boys, but not that of girls; and,
- a positive association between parental support and children's physical activity.



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Findings for adolescents revealed:

- a positive association between family influences and physical activity; but,
- no association between parental activity and adolescent physical activity.

It would thus appear that the most important factor is parental encouragement and support for children and youth. In addition, being an active parent is particularly important in influencing younger boys.

The effects of parenthood

Researchers at the University of Victoria recently undertook a review of the scientific literature on parenthood and physical activity. Their search resulted in a total of 31 studies and concluded:

- parents exhibit lower levels of physical activity than non-parents, and this is especially true for mothers;
- mothers may be replacing their physical activity time with time devoted to household chores; and,
- the difference in total physical activity may be greater between mothers and fathers than between women and men in general.

While women appear to have the greatest decreases in physical activity when they become parents, men are also at risk for such inactivity with this life change. Analyses by employment status, marital situation, age and number of children and their associations with physical activity patterns in parents were inconclusive.



Greater barriers among parents

The review found that many perceived barriers common to adults in general were experienced to a higher degree among parents. Commonly stated barriers included lack of time and social support, fatigue, and obligations to childcare and other roles. Lack of money was also cited, but this varied with income. The authors suggest that these barriers are perceived to a greater degree by parents than non-parents and that social support and provision of childcare were the most important ways to allow parents, especially mothers, to address these barriers.

Limited research to date

The authors of both studies conclude that there is room for greater investigation in this area and suggest directions for future research. Bellows-Reicken and Rhodes provide some promising early themes found via qualitative studies that need to be substantiated by further research:

- The ability to cope with parenting may be improved with regular exercise.
- Healthier lifestyles may be related to greater parenting confidence in fathers and reduced stress among mothers.

As these findings become supported by further research, they may provide health promoters a means of encouraging parents to be active.

Implications for Health Promoters

Van Der Horst and colleagues conclude from intervention studies that parental support is important in promoting physical activity among children. Further they recommend multi-faceted preventive interventions that target social, psychological, and environmental factors simultaneously to help increase parental support.

More Info...

Bellows-Riecken, Kai H., Rhodes, Ryan E. A birth of inactivity? A review of physical activity and parenthood. *Preventive Medicine*. Volume 46, 2008, 99-110.
Van Der Horst, K., Chin A Paw, MJ., Twisk, JWR., Van Mechelen, W. A brief review on correlates of physical activity and sedentariness in youth. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*. 2007 Vol 39 (8): 1241-1250

What have we learned?

- *Parents have an important role to play in modeling physical activity for younger boys, and supporting the physical activity of both boys and girls, regardless of the age of their child.*
- *Support can take the form of enrolment in classes or teams, transportation, encouragement and cheering them on, and replacing sedentary choices with physically active ones.*
- *Becoming a parent is a life-changing event that can negatively impact physical activity levels.*
- *Support of other family members and friends, along with offering non-work childcare, can assist parents to overcome barriers to physical activity.*
- *Health promoters could consider offering family oriented physical activity choices that involve both parents and children or that provide an opportunity for parents to be active while their children are engaged in their own physical activities.*