Maintaining participation in physical activity during the transition from adolescence to adulthood: a mixed methods study

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Abstract

Background: Levels of PA commonly decline during adolescence. Some individuals do remain active through adolescence into young adulthood (16-25 years); however, the factors supporting their ongoing participation during this transitional life stage are poorly understood. A greater understanding of the factors that facilitate maintenance of PA levels during this life stage will make a valuable contribution to the fields of public health and PA studies and aid in the development of health promotion activities that promote regular participation in PA by young people.

Aims: This Australian study examines the role of PA in the lives of young people, particularly those who remain engaged in regular PA as they transitioned from adolescence to adulthood. It explores the influence of childhood factors as well as current life circumstances on participation levels.

Methods: This is a multiphase mixed methods study. Phase one used data from the Childhood Determinants of Adulthood Study (CDAH), an Australian population based prospective cohort, to examine the associations between sociodemographic, behavioural, sociocultural, psychological, emotional, cognitive and physical factors measured in childhood and adolescence with PA behavior during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Focus groups were conducted with fifty young people aged 16 – 26 years to explore how young people speak about PA and changes since leaving high school. In phase two, following analysis of CDAH and focus group data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 young people aged 16 - 25 years. Interviewees also completed the International PA Questionnaire and were asked to complete a weekly pedometer diary.

Results: The most common pattern of PA behaviour was one of fluctuating participation. Childhood factors such as sports competency and cardiorespiratory fitness as well as sociocultural factors predicted maintenance of PA for males and females. Two distinct subgroups of PA maintainers were identified, with one group characterised by above average childhood competency and diversity of childhood PA experiences. PA was central to members of this groups’ sense of identity. The second group were characterised by supportive sociocultural factors and current life circumstances. Maintenance of PA for
both groups was concomitant with valuing PA for a combination of extrinsic (relationships, health/fitness) and intrinsic (physical challenge, time out) factors. These values were consistent with this transitional life stage, but also fluid and dynamic, altering according to the type of activity undertaken and with changes to life circumstances.

Sex differences were found across all elements of the study, including childhood predictors of PA, perceptions of PA and type of PA undertaken, but no clear patterns were discernible for socioeconomic status or education. Geographic location impacted the type of activities undertaken as well as the frequency.

**Conclusion:** The value placed on participation appeared critical for maintenance of PA during this transitional life stage. Competency, social support from family, friends and other adults as well as opportunities provided by schools and colleges also contributed to maintenance of PA.
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